

**GRETE WEIL**

**The Journey to the Border**

Sample translated by Alexandra Roesch

**KLAUS**

I.

1.

The next day did not diminish the power of the storm. Smiling with satisfaction, Monika noted that no-one would leave the house in this weather. She was up early this morning; she fired up the stove and took sleepy Andreas a steaming cup of soup to his bedside.

Later, she directed him to the spot in the armchair while she squatted on a stool not far from him. She had to look up to speak to him; his narrow boy's face was silhouetted in front of her; only his fair hair was lit up by the candlelight. He was barely visible. Monika began to speak to him and, while she formed the sentences hesitantly at first, but then ever faster, while she told her story, related the facts and yet had to conceal the reality, the skeleton of her words was filled out as she recalled her life as it had been, and as it would always remain for her, who loved life.

While Monika began her story: "It was a few years after the war when my cousin Klaus came back to Munich for the first time ..." she was transformed back into the difficult and spoilt sixteen-year-old who faced life full of proud, fierce demands and had no other credo than that happiness was the only virtue.

Once again, the day she picks up her cousin, whom she doesn't really know, to take him to the big trade show, is not a happy one, for in this time of transition between child and young woman, one is not interested in one's peers; hungry eyes seek out the twenty-year-olds with life experience who have come out of the war mature, sceptical and with a superior, imperious attitude, even if there is a sense of something interesting about Klaus, or rather his father: this uncle, the brother of her own father, went to Switzerland before the war, wrote a book opposing the German Kaiser – it was not always pleasant to bear the same name –

and shot himself in the heart in 1919 out of disgust and dissatisfaction over the bad peace agreement, which threatened to destroy the long-desired German democracy. His widow, Aunt Beatrix, had already come to Munich the previous year; hesitantly welcomed by Monika's parents and with much reserve, she became the object of the deepest admiration and tenderest love for her little niece from the very first hour; never before had Monika seen such a beautiful, proud, elegant woman, who hid her burdensome fate behind a smiling coolness; no other woman wore ever new, infinitely flattering clothes like her, no other woman knew how to put on make-up in such a way that the intentions were recognisable, but never obtrusive. No-one, not man nor woman, listened to the adolescent girl as intently as Beatrix, who listened to Monika's words with serious, round cow eyes and slightly open lips. It soon turned out that she not only knew the works of the poets the girl loved, but also knew the poets personally, which made her seem even more unbelievably attractive. Beatrix adhered to the strict ideas that her dead husband had shown her in a serene and unwavering manner and, even if she did not have a sharp, astute intellect, she did have a broad humanity, which had been able to develop all the more fully and freely because she had spent the terrible years of the war in Switzerland, untouched by national propaganda. No-one knew exactly where she came from, she spoke a little sloppily, with an Austrian inflection; she didn't seem to have a family or was not on good terms with them. Uncle had seen her play Nora as a very young girl in a small provincial town where he had gone to give a lecture; her flawless beauty, her charm and her helpless lack of talent had moved and overwhelmed him in equal measure; enraptured, he married her on the spot and brought her to Munich as his wife, where he pursued his philosophical and political studies in a small flat on the outskirts.

What Monika knew was distorted and vague. She recalled love- and hate-drawn images from adult conversations, and memories of a dark-haired boy, to whom she had felt infinitely superior, because she always managed to defeat him in their scuffles and throw him to the ground.

Then, a year ago, Beatrix came floating down from heaven like a goddess and destroyed all talk with her gracious reality. She had said goodbye to Monika with a kiss, a tender motherly embrace, into which the girl sank in a cloud of fragrance and bliss, and smilingly promised to visit her next summer.

Now she has sent her sixteen-year-old son ahead – she herself will not be here for a few days - and Monika, wearing a white and red striped silk dress and a large, boldly bobbing

Florentine hat, is standing in front of the house in Prinzregentenstraße where the cousin is staying alone in a boarding house; she finds the smell of the lime trees overpowering, and she thinks a little sadly that the strange boy will not recognise the efforts she made to look well-groomed; moreover, it is rather pointless to come to him looking elegant, how pathetically ugly she is next to Beatrix; it would have been wiser to appear hatless in the blue magical bird dress.

She looks up and down the street, the tarmac is hot from the blazing sun, the meadows in the English Garden, still unmown, stand tall and thick, the white heads of the fading dandelions stand out from the lush green. Is there any other city in which the landscape touches you so directly, is there anywhere left in the world where north and south fuse in the air, the smell of glaciers and sweet blossoms, a hint of the Mediterranean, blue skies, with soft fleecy clouds, tanned people dressed as they please, elegant and fashionable, in dirndl dresses, loden skirts and leather trousers, as if in a second carnival has moved onto the streets, which makes the inhabitants seem pleasantly light and removed from class distinctions?

Monika walks back and forth, dissatisfied with herself, but satisfied and happy with her surroundings. She knows a lot of the passers-by, nods with a smile to the limping flower seller with his basket of violets, greets a few elderly gentlemen, her father's doctor colleagues, who thank her a little absentmindedly and with astonishment; one of them, with a full white beard, then turns around and waves his hand, he has only now recognised the Merton child by her resemblance to her father. She exchanges a few words with a tall, slender lady whom she calls aunt; it is her mother's friend, Countess Konstanze Khefermüller, who kindly remarks how pretty and delightful Monika looks. The girl's self-confidence rises a little, then immediately collapses again. Why did Ernst Rosenberg, the young socialist criminal defence lawyer, nod so haughtily and dismissively, as if to show her that she is nothing to him, that to him she is like a small, young goose? Yet he is the companion of many of her dreams, for she finds him as clever as he is courageous, and she likes to look at his pale intellectual face with the beautiful, short-sighted eyes behind the sharp glasses.

With all this going on, it has become late; being on time is such a matter of course for Monika that she frowns and impatiently wants to ring the bell again, when the door opens and boy stands on the threshold, tall, slim, with long grey trousers and a blue jacket; his dark, narrow head rises above his white, open shirt, the face of an Arab boy with beautifully curved

lips and a fine, strongly curved nose; with brown animal eyes and an already masculine forehead, into which his black, sometimes slightly copper-toned hair curls. His skin is so brown that he could hardly be mistaken for a European and, even before he approaches Monika and greets her with the kindness inherited from his mother, before he shows her the most beautiful thing he possesses, his gleaming white, strong teeth, she has noticed that she likes him very much, that she likes him immensely and, even if he seems younger and more unfinished than she had expected – the brown skin of his slender neck is quite boyishly delicate – he is nevertheless to be accepted like a brother.

He seems to feel like one too; without hesitation, turning towards her with a gesture of tenderness, he slips his arm under hers and, in his still somewhat brittle boyish voice, sends her warmest greetings from Beatrix. He calls his mother by her first name, and Monika is almost shocked by the barely restrained passion with which he says it. Beatrix is everything to him: mother, playmate, comforter and guide, he lives and feels in her atmosphere; what she approves of, he also accepts, what she rejects finds no mercy in his eyes, and her great beauty is the standard by which he measures things. It is not long before the girl, who is far superior to him in sounding people out, has found out that Beatrix also brings him pain. He suffers to the point of self-destructive agony from the awareness of her mortality; he lies awake for hours at night, his heart pounding, thinking of his mother sleeping in the room next to him; sometimes he is so shaken by fear, by a panic as to whether she is still breathing at this very moment, that he runs to her and only slowly allows himself to be calmed when she turns her tender, sleep-drunk face towards him and he feels her living warmth with passionate kisses.

It is not easy to draw all this out of him; he is still very prim and stubbornly pure; but Monika listens well and intently – more because he brings her news of the woman she is fond of than for his own sake; she notes with satisfaction how many grown women's glances follow him in the exhibition park.

They walk arm in arm through the halls, looking around curiously and talking and, as they do so, they notice and laughingly comment on how often they like the same thing, how they say the same thing at exactly the same moment. Well, they are the children of two brothers and, even if they grew up under very different circumstances, they are both southern people, but this sameness of vision that begins on this day, that increases through habituation and attachment and that never leaves them even in troublesome times, stems from more

profound depths than from blood relationship and affection. It is magic and enchantment, an eternally flowing source of happiness that remains true to them, no matter whether they are walking through landscapes or museums, whether in the bright moonlit night on the Grande Place in Brussels impressed by an unfamiliar splendour, or whether they, surrendered to their own landscape, wander through the marshy meadows that surround the temples of Paestum and caress the shiny necks of the heavy white oxen, or whether they drink wine on a small terrace on the Moselle, completely oblivious to other people, or stroll through Marseille's labyrinthine harbour district, lusting and addicted to the beauty of other people's bodies, and make strange acquaintances in dark, disreputable bars; or whether, passionate about theatre and film, they love the delicate gesture, the smile or the sadness on an actor's face; whether it be a tree, a rock or an animal that they turn to – their eyes alight on, desire and love the same object at the same moment and it always allows them to experience themselves and the world anew through the other.

They know almost nothing of this on the first day; they like each other and consider it a good coincidence that they have met.

They spend the longest time in front of the book stalls; they are both bookworms, but while Monika reads everything she can get her hands on, classics and detective novels, historical and art-historical treatises as well as sentimental kitsch, Klaus is familiar only with works that are selected with taste and purpose; some by Goethe, many romantic fairy tales, Shakespeare, Byron and an astonishing number of modern poets. The word Expressionism sounds passionate and respectful in his mouth; he explains to his astonished friend what is meant by it and how lucky they must be to live in the time of such a great, strong and new movement. She knows almost nothing about it; he shows her and explains to her by means of the book covers, by the décor of the hall, how everywhere the same will behind things is perceptible – to find the strongest valid expression with a complete renunciation of reality. He drags her in front of the set models: yes, she should just open her eyes and see how closed and sparingly theatre is played in Berlin and Frankfurt. Here Werfel's *'Spiegelmensch'*, there Reinhard Goering's *'Seeschlacht'*, nothing more than the inside of a turret on an armoured vessel, a grey, curving space. Monika doesn't quite understand what it is all about, but she feels the fire of the boy at her side, and for his sake she doesn't want to reject this unfamiliar art.

But she does feel better when they are outdoors again, where they revert back into being two children; they start to joke with one another, silly and tender, shorten and twist their names, invent professions for people who pass by, and finally end up in the amusement park at the big roller coaster.

Monika is afraid of the speeding carts, but when Klaus pleads enticingly: 'Come on, don't be boring, it's much more fun together,' she overcomes her fears and gets on with him. They sit pressed next to each other, like the many couples in front of and behind them, and the boy places his arm protectively around her shoulder like a manly defender. It begins gently and merrily, slowly the conveyance rises, pulled by an invisible force, it rolls up the inclined plane, at the top it speeds up a little and is already leaning into a curve, Monika's heart beats full of anxious expectation, but at that moment she sees the entire Alpine chain on the horizon, shining silver, a wide arc of beckoning promise, and this sudden and unexpected vision shocks and overwhelms her so that she wants to cry out with happiness. What an abundance of strength flows to her from this sight, she feels so exuberant and strong that she wants to lift the world off its hinges, and at the same time she knows how young she is, how uncommitted, still entirely a vessel into which beauty pours. No, more than beauty, it is the inconceivable, it is her God who speaks to her in this jagged, flaming glory.

But before she becomes aware of this, she is hurled down into a thundering abyss, it is as if a terrible force were squeezing her insides. The cart races down, no, it falls into immeasurable depths, with shrieks and crashes as if wood and bones were splintering. But this mad ride does not only lead downwards; with the same force, the vehicle drives upwards, and in the end it is impossible to tell which direction it is going; it is a whirl of painful, frightening, but at the same time exhilarating, pleasurable movement. When things have calmed for a single moment, Monika feels herself leaning against Klaus' side, his arm around her shoulder. How sweet and reassuring this human closeness is; she leans in close to him, for the witches' sabbath begins anew.

All thoughts, but also all feelings have been pressed out of her heart and brain, but when it is finally over and they stand on the ground again with soft, trembling knees, it is Monika who quickly regains her equilibrium. She brushes her short-cropped hair out of her forehead and puts back on the large hat that hangs on a ribbon over her arm. Klaus is leaning against a wooden post, pale, with his eyes closed, his face is olive-green, he doesn't look the least bit pretty in this moment of faintness, but Monika would like to take him in her arms

and stroke him so that he regains his senses; but because she doesn't dare, she runs her hand softly and carefully through his damp, thick hair.

They go for a walk in the park, have dinner in a small restaurant – Klaus has Swiss francs, can buy half of Munich with them and is quite determined to spend the day like an adult.

He has bought two tickets for 'Romeo and Juliet', which is being performed in the exhibition theatre, and it is not long before the two children are sitting next to each other, listening together to the sweetest, most intimate words of love ever spoken. Monika is already a little older than the fair Capulet girl, but for all the longing and impatience that she feels, she has to admit that Juliet is incomparably more skilful, devious and devoted than she is. She explains this by saying that no Romeo has yet come for her and probably never will; she does not have the wide register of grace, courage, prudence and chaste sacrifice of the Veronese child.

It remains strange that she relates all the tenderness that resounds on the stage to herself, and that she feels Shakespeare's words to be quite pure and detached from the somewhat voluptuous actress who speaks the verses in a mature way without any fire. But it is quite different with Romeo, who stands out entirely from the frame of the stiff performance; he is a passionate young man, twenty years old, with a full, resonant voice that can flatter, threaten and cry. A wide, brown lock of his own hair falls into his forehead; large, glowing, black eyes, shaded and accentuated by make-up, look out of his gaunt face.

"You see, this is theatre. This Peter Kleist has it in him," Klaus says to Monika in the interval, "he's going to make a name for himself."

After this somewhat precocious remark, he goes on to talk about the actor, describing in a quiet, enthusiastic voice his movements, his gait, his figure, putting into clear words what Monika has seen and vaguely experienced, and making it a thousand times more lovable to her. What a magician this boy is, how well this tender boy's voice describes things, how cleverly he interprets what he has seen, his well-formed sentences giving away his passionate devotion to people. Monika begins to love, but she herself does not know whether it is Peter Kleist or Romeo to whom her heart is turned; she is restless and excited, caught up in vague desires. Is it the living actor, or is it the eternal, immortal figure of the young man from Verona that she desires, that she cannot get away from? It is as if she is under a spell, as if she has the potion in her body that makes any man seem desirable to her. Any man, but certainly not

a boy - it is impossible and does not occur to her for a moment; only years later does she come to realise that in this pause in the play she loves not Shakespeare's youth nor his beautiful actor, but only Klaus; that at this moment she has fallen for him with all her ardour and all her passion for time and eternity.

The curtain rises anew; fate plays with the lovers in an ever darker and more miserable way, and the children watch breathlessly, frozen with pity as the dreadful fate unfolds. Monika has to force herself not to shout loud warnings to Romeo that he must understand that Juliet is alive; but she knows it is in vain, for what is happening here is not only a chain of errors and misunderstandings – this exuberance cannot and must not be fulfilled, such unspeakable desire will not be satisfied, this love that knows no measure and no bounds, that presumptuously wants to make a unity out of what must eternally remain two, is doomed to die.

Klaus and Monika have tears in their eyes when the lights come back on, but they look at each other and smile.

On the way home, the girl denies what she has just clearly felt; she attacks the poet harshly, saying that he has worked too much with unhappy coincidences. Why does Juliet not find another way out of the city; why does the foolish Romeo not notice that she is still breathing, why can the quarrel between the houses not be settled earlier?

Klaus tries in vain to explain to her what she does not want to know, that even the happiest life is close to death. She resists with all her lively strength, saying that it is clumsy not to be able to master happiness, that there are enough unlucky people, but she, Monika, believes in her star. Suddenly she has moved on from the tragedy to herself, and now Klaus concedes, but he says a little hesitantly that he himself might be a very unlucky person; he hated school and didn't know what to do after it. Without any real talent or obsession for work, he also felt a deep disgust for the inactive young gentleman; he disliked everything that was fun for other boys, skiing, hiking, community life. It was nice to lie on the Mediterranean, to look into the water, to think and play with the round stones; but that was probably not a sufficient occupation and certainly not one in which one can earn money.

Yes, Klaus racks his brains about earning money, thought that have never occurred to Monika. She has no worries and is convinced that from somewhere, from an unknown but certain source, there will always be what she needs, and if it doesn't come from anyone else,

then she will make it herself. With what? She doesn't know but there are so many possibilities that seem as easy to her to seize as they seem impossible to Klaus.

She could become a doctor and help her father, she could start a dog breeding farm, be an actress, but most of all she would like to write books, make up stories, pass on stories, draw on people and destinies from around the world - that is more meaningful and enticing than anything else. If all that fails, then she could damn well type or sell books or sew clothes or nurse babies. Doesn't Klaus know that it doesn't matter what you do, it's how you do it that is important, the intensity of the doing?

She yearns for the experience, she is still a blank slate. To her the only sin seems to be omission. If the fairy godmother wanted to grant her a wish at this moment, she would choose adventure and madness; she would decide without sense or reason, just like Hans in Luck.

Klaus is more understanding and hesitant, he does not know what he wants and doubts himself deeply.

"Don't you see how good we have it?" she urges, "The war is over once and for all, we can build a new, better world."

He doesn't even know that for sure; his father's death has made him sceptical. But perhaps the girl is right.

They are standing on a bridge over the Isar, leaning against the stone parapet and looking into the swift water that glistens in the moonlight. A mighty south wind blows from the mountains into the plain, stroking their faces in a cool, refreshing way.

Monika says softly: "I want to be outside tonight and show you my mountains, we keep wasting hours like this in the city."

He laughs at the self-indulgent girl who is never satisfied with what she has. And soothingly he leans towards her and kisses her on the cheek.

She looks at him seriously and sadly: why isn't he older, why is she being kissed by a sixteen-year-old, why isn't there a man standing next to her now, taking her in his arms?

She caresses his head softly, the way one caresses a dog; she dreams of the future and doesn't know that her fate has been decided.