

Rage is a Bright Star
Translation by Anne Posten

We didn't know how far it was. The ice, the ropes, how harpoons would be pulled out of the bodies as from melted butter. That it would be the vastness of the polar sea, a spout, the hunt, weeks at sea. Fishing boats with German names, the huge whales used as fenders along the ship's side. The great blueness, the pancake ice sluggish, the way it packs together more and more, the machines on board precise and quick. Meter-high walls of ice. Weeks at sea. And there is Jaan, my brother, he beats the harpoons straight, he is the smith, he looks into the fire.

1933

What are these rats stuffing themselves with? Bananas, coffee, grain, scraps of fish, they say they're clever enough to avoid the poison set out for them.

Arthur's sent us. He himself wouldn't set foot here anymore, he has his people for that—the Jays, who hang about on Charlottenstraße, always happy for some little job. All you have to do is whistle. At least that's how it always used to be.

I walk next to Henry, it's strange to see him on the street in broad daylight, the big shape of him, the sharp chin with bits of reddish stubble. His gait isn't made for these alleys. He looks as if some slow music is still playing that only he can hear. As if we weren't in the Gängeviertel, buildings like rotten teeth, narrower than our stage, decaying windows, old wood and over everything the smell of silt and Elbe water, flowing brackish through the canals.

He walks the way one walks among the tables at night, when the music's playing and the girls transform the whole world, or when the wrong person tries to go upstairs, to Arthur, to the séparée, his private box. That's the way Henry moves, as if music is still quietly playing.

Even though it's the middle of the day, it feels like the light doesn't reach all the way down to us. Little Moscow, grungy. A plague den, they call it; we call it Fort Hunger. We leave the Neumarkt behind us, take a couple of turns toward Herrengraben.

It's all far too familiar. When I come back to the old streets, I get punishing looks: you've ventured too far, little girl, now there's a price to pay. But since March we're all paying, and there's a silence as if none of it existed, not me, not Henry, not the looks that follow us from out of the low, dark, rooms. A few last posters on the buildings hang like rags. Leftover bits of red and slogans that could now cost you your head.

It smells of damp coal and cheap fat, laundry hangs gray and threadbare from the windows in spite of the cold.

Henry walks calmly, but I feel the looks. It's something you have to learn: they let you know that the ground you stand on has shifted, me and the other girls, as if we had to pay for something. For the fine scent, maybe, that you can't find anywhere around here, for the bit of rouge. Or for a pair of shoes with eyelets too fine for anyone here to afford.

I keep close to Henry's side. He's pulled his pork pie down over his face, the narrow brim on his big skull. He parries the looks that follow us like a boxer who knows every feint, who's just too good to be caught. If you want something from him, you'd better have a good reason. Until recently, he wouldn't have gone out himself on an errand like this. And I feel how the ground wants to give way, how something is starting to suck downwards again, the same ground that's held me like a nice smooth dance floor since I've been with Arthur, so smooth that the lights shine on it—but now the old streets give way, they're ready to swallow you, just as they always were. Shsh. Arthur's sent us, he needs people he can count on now. We need food for Eddy and Fred.

On Friday the delivery didn't come, and for the next three days too no one came, no meat for Eddy and Fred. Arthur sent one of his men to the slaughterhouse, but not as he usually would have asked—this time one of the Jays went, but unarmed, and this time there was no rabbit, no beef offal, nothing.

Get lost, the butcher snarled at him.

No one speaks to Arthur's people that way. But now the city has turned into a tank of morays, even in broad daylight, and we're all standing close to the edge. He doesn't ask a

second time. The slaughterhouse, they say, is completely under their control. Whoever it was that delivered to us won't do it anymore. And the Jays are no longer in the position to lay down the law.

There was never any question that Eddy and Fred need to eat—even when the ships lay moored in the harbor, when we cooked out bones until they were white as chalk and nothing tasted of anything, even then there was rabbit and meat for them because that's how Arthur wanted it. No one would go on stage with them if they hadn't eaten.

Henry walks next to me, imperturbable, maybe he always sensed that we'd be back here one day. He knows who we have to turn to now. He carries a couple of sacks, and cudgels, heavy enough to beat someone to death with.

Now it's payng off that he scraped his way through here for all those years, before Arthur really made it with the Alkazar. He knows who you can still count on, he knows the bargemen and the people from the harbor, he knows their stories, he knows who's still there and who's been picked up.

Suddenly Henry stops.

Hedda, he says softly, pointing to the door, c'mlong. You just stay calm, he says, I'll do the talking.

And he takes me by the shoulder and shoves me in front of him into the dark stairwell.

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The glass of the window has cracks, on the inside paper keeps out the cold air. The building we step into is unheated and cold. Eight little ghosts with big rings under their eyes crouch around a big canon-shaped stove. Henry goes over to the woman who must be their mother. She shakes her head for a long time.

No, she says. 'E isn't. Y'kin see that yourself.

She presses her lips together and breathes audibly in and out through her nose, looks at the children.

Henry nods. Then he presses something into her hand. She hesitates, looks at the little ones who squat in front of the stove in their thick knitted hats. Then she shines the coin on her apron. Finally she juts her chin at the three oldest ones, two boys and a girl.

Fine, she says.

The three stand up. They look at Henry and then back at their mother.

Well g'won then, she says.

On me, the young thing, she doesn't spare a glance.

We go back down to the alley. Just Henry and I and the three children, Pauli's age, little go-getters who look at his purse as he counts out the pennies. A girl with two fat buns over her ears and a clever face, two boys with dirty knee-socks, short pants, and snotty noses, their legs thin as drumsticks.

I wanted to forget all of that; I want to be able to say that three years with Arthur are enough. But it's all too familiar, and I growl at the children, who pull faces behind my back on the way down, pouts, as if I were a fine lady. Scram, youse. They look at me and they understand.

And Henry, he lays out the sacks in front of them and speaks softly. He knows how you talk to someone when you really want something from them. Elsa, the girl says, and the boys mumble their names after her.

They have to be healthy, Henry says, you can't use poison. It's easiest if you drown them.

The children crouch next to him, they stare at the cudgels. We need eight big rats. And then the same again in the second sack. You know where to find them?

The children look perplexed. Any place grain and general cargo are loaded is teeming with the beasts. And when the tide is out and the canals low you can see them dancing on sandbanks all over the city.

My feet are cold, and the children seem to have understood that that's it. You can come by tomorrow at four. Reeperbahn 106, hard to miss, Henry says, and grins.

They have to be fresh. Can't have 'em kickin' it from eatin' some old rat. No poison, y'hear?

The oldest one tilts his head as if he's been to our show a hundred times. As if he knew all about it: Chinese gymnasts, acrobats, striptease. Arthur up high in his séparée, as if it were all just for him. The stars are ours for the taking, all we have to do is reach. Why do I hear Arthur's voice in my head while we're here haggling with the children?

Don't say anything, not to anyone, Henry says.

What do you want with that many rats?

The boy looks at Henry, his voice is barely audible. His adam's apple is a little trident under his skin, and he's pale. He must be the oldest. Henry looks at him.

You'll see, he says.

The boy nods slowly. The hairs that peek out from under the edge of his hat are flaxen. Can you tell your father something for me, Henry asks, but the boy looks at the ground and presses his lips together.

He keem nich wedder no huus, he says softly.

And I see his knobby knuckles and think of the girls, how we sit behind the stage and say the same kinds of things. If you whisper, maybe it's not true after all.

Chinnup. 'E'll be back, Henry says, and gives the boy another penny. He's still shaking his head as we walk back.

Picked up, just like that, he says, but he doesn't look at me.

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There's a pool beneath the stage for the aquatic act. From there, a narrow passage leads to the room where the shellfish are stored with the ice. Eddy and Fred doze there in the cold before the show; it keeps them looking good and moving slowly. But today we just got them out to try the rats.

I didn't go down with him. Henry checked the rats, whether they were fresh, whether they'd eaten poison, a chisel between their yellow teeth—I didn't need to see more than that. They seem to have eaten them.

They wolf down whatever you put in front of them, I wish we could give them something better. Eddy and Fred, little marvels that came to us out of some jungle. Someone owed Arthur something and brought them back, a little souvenir from South America. Do

something with them, Arthur had said to me, a cute little jungle act, and you're in. And that's how it was. When I swing over their snouts, the audience is wide awake. The lights flicker over their cool skin, the whole night is meant to be one big dance.

They ate the rats. The boy glows with pride when he takes the penny. He's Pauli's age, but Pauli just likes coins for their color, or when they jingle. This one will know what to do with it. The girl looks at me furtively, waves shyly in my direction as she follows her brothers out.

To her, the girls and I must look like the best of friends. She can't see it—so many of them have left since March. I miss the little acrobat whose stage name was Myrtile, the way she sat next to me and whispered: a swan, frozen into a pond in Bremen, its icy feathers, the last time she went home. White feathers, and the way it lay its long neck on the ice. Stories like that, that when you go on stage you have a friend sitting in front of the big mirror and waiting for you to come back, I feel warm just thinking of it. Why do I keep thinking of the swan now that the girls are gone?

I used to be able to bring Pauli when mother was too tired, and no one had to worry about him. But now it's different. Pauli doesn't get why he's not allowed to come anymore. His little stool has sat empty for weeks. Who can take better care of my little brother than the girls, who coddle him and brush his hair, paint red circles on his cheeks?

Pauli. We had to hold him down like a piece of wood in a clamp so he wouldn't run off, onto the stage, into the light, toward the spotlights. The big stage of the Alkazar, the rotating lights, all the electric bulbs, there was nothing he liked better. They watched over him, petted him, did his hair in front of the big makeup mirrors, he was their darling, a boy, a little light, he applauded when they came back from the stage as if every evening were the first, as if he'd never seen any of these creatures before.

Pauli, on his little stool behind the curtain, he clapped his hands over his gaping mouth in excitement when I whooshed down the rope above the cool, shiny snouts of Eddy and Fred on a night like the tropics, two black caimans, right in the middle of Hamburg.

Henry next to me, he waits with me before we take them out. He shoves the heavy crates out of the shellfish room, I stand next to him, and we wait until the other number is over, Cilly del Rei, beauty queen, another fresh new sprout. Arthur's about to go on stage and announce a night in the jungle, the rope will turn into a vine, the whole bit—I move closer to Henry.

What did you mean earlier, I ask quietly—but he just waves me off.

Leave it, he says, you're on in a second.

Nothing more about the boy's father—just what one hears, Wittmoor, where they cut peat with shovels, all strong, upstanding fellows. The rumors blow everything out of proportion.

Good luck, Henry says, he pushes the crate toward the back side of the curtain and I climb up, first they're supposed to see me in the spotlight, then the caimans below me.

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Then the light, and you're hanging on the rope in a front split, you spin on your axis and slip up and down the rope like a fan, like something beautiful and Chinese, the shells you saw in the shop window on Schmuckstraße, cords and fans made of silk, the steam from the laundries, the world is so big. So different. Shh. Now they open the crates, for a moment I cling to the curtain as if they've startled me too, as if I were scared. I peek around the heavy red velvet at the audience.

The Alkazar is full. The band plays, and I want to think it's as beautiful as ever, the hall glows red and gold, the painted ceiling, the smoke. As if there were no Ritas in the boxes, the

shining parts in the men's hair, the fabric of uniforms, the walking sticks that they furtively tuck in a corner. I know the weight of their bodies, and I know their collars aren't clean.

It used to be that when I saw one of them, a man in uniform, or a thug, I'd flex my toes and do frog-kicks on the rope on my way up. Then Arthur would know something wasn't right.

But now they come in the front door, so who am I supposed to warn? I swim through the blue background, and the music begins. It's hard to pull yourself up with your arms alone, it requires strength and has to look easy, as if you were underwater, and none of the Ritas can do it.

From up here I stare down as if into a dark swamp, the drumroll grows louder. Slowly, I slide down, stop, the caimans below me, the audience. They see my throat, my arms, then I let myself fall, fast, spinning, toward them, I twirl around and around and then stop, horizontal in the air, my arms stretched all the way to the tips of my fingers. Applause: a night in the jungle, the girl shinnies back up the rope, spins, I spin, it's all so easy.

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The show is almost over when I see him. He stands back on the righthand side by the gambling tables. The light there is dim, as if under a blanket. But Carsten doesn't belong here, he's not part of this world. He stands there with his arms crossed and looks at me, his cap in his hands. And then he nods, and I know to meet him at the exit, he has no flowers, he's not clapping. Just Carsten, looking up at me. I see the white of his skin between chin and throat, and I know how tired he is, as if it never left him—the smoke, tween decks at the shipyard. I nod to Henry, who stands by the crates, maybe he's glad not to have to talk anymore today.

Carsten is pale, it's only the freckles on his nose that make me think of everything that doesn't belong here. Summer, Altes Land, butter cake. He started out with my brother at the meat grinder, they trained on rivet forges at the shipyard. Only Carsten still works at the port. I can see Waterkant written in his face, even if no one else is supposed to.

Carsten, his jug ears, the rough shoes. He looks thin. The person in me who knows him from back then reaches out her hand and asks: What's happened? But I don't want to know.

C'mlong, Heddamusch, he says now, his voice almost toneless. Carsten, I follow him, his wide gait, and I want to go back to the night, to the ceiling, to the rope, I don't want to walk on this ground anymore. I don't want to know, but something in him, his shoulders, his pale skin and the way he digs his thumb into his arm, tells me everything.

He stands in the rain without his cap. In one hand his pipe, in the other nothing, just cold air.

It's about Kuddel, he says. I see he has a hard time getting it out.

I couldn't come sooner, he says, I found out last night.

And there's Carsten with his stick-out ears, and the rain lies in gleaming drops on his jacket, and I try not to listen to his singsong, the Plattdeutsch he's picked up since he's been alone at the port, without my brother. There's no getting the old Carsten back, or the old me. Where is she, that girl into whose mouth he tossed pieces of cake like glowing rivets? And his laugh, Carsten? I've heard stories, the whole crew reporting for the Führer's speech. Stalwart fellows, trapped there like in a playpen. No. Now it moves me to see him, he takes my hand, the neon shines so prettily.

He's gone, Hedda.

They picked him up.

He looks at me, but he also stares into the puddles on the ground, the light flickers, the wind.

They found lists, somewhere in Berlin. Red Sport.

His name was on it.

Kuddel.

I know, Carsten starts. But he doesn't go on.

And we stand like that, and the wind is cold and powerful.

Where to? I say.

And he shrugs, just as later the night shrugs its shoulders, when I leave, and no one is there, and there is no where to. How long did we stand there? Carsten, strangely shrunken. It's raining, the neon signs shimmer. I watch him go, I look down the Reeperbahn. The lights, the flashing funnel at the Trichter.

The show continues: Two Bartons, floor acrobats, *a sensation every 15 minutes*, but everything moves as in a shadow play, distant and surreally quiet. I go up the stairs to Arthur's box, quickly, but the little séparée with the leather armchairs and big desk is dark. For a moment I lean on the glass and feel how cold it is. I need to talk to Arthur. The audience downstairs, pointy elbows in long gloves, everything so smart, the curls, the collar patches. To take someone like Kuddel. Haul him away. Shsh. And where to.

For a moment I listen to the two step dancers on stage, they sound like fish tossed on land.

Then it's quiet again. I walk down the runner, at the end of which Tubby, the vending man, stands with his hawker's tray. It's his spot, from here you can look down onto the Reeperbahn and over to the boxes, the men's shining parts.

I send myself over as a Rita, unhurried, a girl like me who doesn't feel the cold, who can talk with Tubby, even now. He acts surprised to see me standing there, though he saw the whole thing. The way Carsten awkwardly put his arm around me. The cold wind, the old familiarity.

Got a five-center? I say, looking in his tray, a case lined with blue velvet. By day he sells metal toys in the Colonnaden for children from well-off families, tin frogs, by night it's cigarettes, pictures of Anita Berber, postcards and the thing that's now the most important currency: from up here he can see everything.

He comes into our dressing rooms, delivering flowers while the gentlemen wait at the back entrance. He knows what it means when a girl buys a cigarette at this hour. But all that's left are Trommlers and Ovas—the Three Arrows cigarettes and the Ligas, the red brands, have silently disappeared from his assortment.

Tubby looks at me. As if no cars pulled up today that he can tell me about, curved fenders, long noses, everything so spacious and shiny. Opel with V-radiator, Horch with spring shaft, the new Wanderer. He just needs a glance to match the models to the guests, it's good for tips.

Is he already off? I ask

I want to see him, Arthur. It's not like it used to be, when so many people wanted something from him that you'd be lucky to get a glimpse. The Jays lurking at his side, and who would ever ask him for something directly? Nobody talks to Arthur just like that. It cost half a month's wages just to find out where you could meet him. Where a girl like me could meet him. Shsh. It's different now.

Tubby looks at me.

Did he leave anything for me? And my voice betrays me, brittle like the cracked eggs we buy by the dozen, the shells battered, the delicate yolk running out. I don't want to think of Kuddel.

He fishes out the cigarette laboriously and shrugs.

'E's gone already. He hett nix för di doa lotten, Mädchen. Didn't leave anything for you. Here, the match is on me.

But how is he looking at me? He saw me with Carsten: red banners, Russian matches, hammer and sickle, upstanding and proud, even if he no longer wears the badge.

He's not quite on the level anymore, Tubby, who was it that said that? 'E's like a crab in brackish water, not quite sweet, not quite salty.

He just gives me that look and smirks, taut and bulging in his suspenders. Gives me the lit cigarette as if it were a damn victory. Over what.

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And Kuddel—I can't think further than his tiger, the tattoo, slanting across his chest. I see the blood on their high boots and no, I want to be wrong. They take delight in having him as an opponent, a man like Kuddel, middleweight champion, red sport—Karl Johann August Hacker, shining, let him shine, I can't do it, can't think further than his tiger. Watch out, be careful. I hear them coming.

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The rats are creeping through the cabaret again, and I'm invisible, I'm not even there—I'm just a shimmer in the halls, I have no voice, no face. They don't see me.

I'm something leftover in the Rita, a spark they can't place, the Rita does her job well. She's unconcerned, she doesn't mention Arthur, doesn't show the slightest speck of missing him, she didn't see Arthur's trembling hands, his voice: It's not enough, no matter what I give them it's not enough, they devour us hair and all, that's the truth. He's angry but he's also unusually still. He no longer looks like the old Arthur. Everything has to shine bright as day in their black light, what are the stars doing there? Arthur, with sparkling snow on his shoes, sleigh bells, frozen lakes, someone hands him a fur to keep him warm, why not? I can hope; from here it's a nice dream.

Why do you think he's in Sils, missy?

Because anything else is too hard to bear. This Auxpo, what does he want from me? He's torn the postcard from my mirror, horse-drawn sleighs on frozen lakes, white slopes, waiters with white gloves, they glide over the ice, skating over with a silver tray. Let him be there.

The postcard is old, the rat says, when did you last see him?

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We ride in a Green August, and something clatters like a stork. Next to me are the other girls, like me they're under suspicion, unprotected. They take us to headquarters, the Stadthaus—those with venereal diseases and the illegals and the ones like me that they shook out of the streets like bugs off a leaf.

Did they find something after all? A shoe, some bit of the short factory owner?

Something clatters on the ride like a blind, or an open shutter. A few women cry.

The van is cold. The girls sit with their legs drawn up, their shoulders hunched, makeup smeared, the blue of our veins on our pitifully white skin. That you have to scrape your way through. That something clatters in the Green August like a stork. They pick us up.

But I listen to the clattering of the storks with Pauli, early, an outing to the Altes Land, to the big farmsteads on the other side of the Elbe. The hunger buzzes, the way you can trace the edge of an empty glass with a wet finger, but soundlessly, silently, his warm hand is in mine.

You can tell by looking at us where we come from: townies, gray tenements, we stand in the farmyard like pale ghosts. Every farmhand looks plump compared to us. I hear storks clattering, we ride, a stork stands in front of us on the gable of an old half-timbered house, throws its head back and clatters, clatters, this strange, fast rhythm, the early green of the meadows and the fruit trees with their first hesitant blossoms—it's absurd, here of all places I think of the storks.

A little wooden scooter; he tried, Pauli, with his crooked leg, and a farm woman at the roadside saw it and clapped, as if he could do it just as well as any other kid. Just stood there and clapped and was happy for him—maybe that was the first time I realized that no one else ever did. There was spring. The clattering of storks. And Pauli, who for once, wasn't ashamed.

The women have huddled closer together, we drive more slowly, you can hear barking outside, then the van rolls onward. There's a bench on either side, each with five women in handcuffs.

They turn off the motor. I sense where we are and a few of the girls are already whispering it: Hohe Bleichen, a girl with a hairband and a long amulet around her neck that she keeps twisting, she stares at the wall. Whad've we got ta do with this? she cries out suddenly. But she winces into silence when someone bangs the metal wall with a stick. Quiet!

We sit in the half-light, it's a strange silence, deep breaths. A few whisper, quietly, about who's been taken where. I say nothing, I don't look at them. Even though it's ice cold, a note of sour sweat hangs in the air. A woman with a bit of a goiter takes her neighbor's hand, we see everything, want to reassure ourselves before they throw the door open and then slam another door behind us, anything's possible. Her hands say all that.

Hands that betray us, hands of women who have to work, hands with which one can't sit at their tables. Even Raabe, who flutters so dreamily with her feathery fan, has hands like us. We recognize each other. Shsh, leave Raabe out of it, let her be happy and light and make me a mokka when I'm back. Shsh. From a distance, outside, I hear voices, someone shouts, issues commands, not yet, we're still here, with our beautiful rough hands that tell of life, of touch, of everything that they now keep us from.

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They open the door a crack, and there he lies, the wild boar, the yard glows so blue, barred windows, they call us up, I hear the eels snapping. Out. Out. Out.

There's no night. I sit in the basement of the Stadthaus under glaring lights. I don't exist. That's why we're here: so they can erase everything we say. Shsh.

He stands in the locker room next to the big mirror, Kuddel, the simple collarless fisherman's shirt, he puts something in my hand, black and shiny. May I, he says, the stones are cold on my skin. He may, he's there every night. Perhaps he alone sees what it costs me, the strain, to hold myself horizontal on the rope, the light, the smile, keep going. He knew, Kuddel: no one else can do it for you. There are people who want to see you hit the canvas—that doesn't matter. You have to love it, your world up there Hedda, you hear? He's there every night, watching, I hold onto the rope, pull myself up, always toward him.

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And I'm strong, I've always been strong, I hold these heavy books under my arm, hold them tight. The heavy Hamburg address books. I'm just supposed to come up with a single address, and then I can go home.

If they want you, Arthur, they'll have to follow your tracks on the water. Shsh.

Here's the shorter of the two, whose face seems familiar, but from where, small yellow teeth like the creatures from the harbor, the rats that we give Eddy and Fred to eat. Small ears, naked tails, and those sharp yellow teeth in their massive rat bodies. Rats that look like harbor crime lords. Are they fresh? Henry asks, he's been asking for weeks. The slim paws and the gums, pink as baby cheeks.

So here it is again, this yellow from the gutter. The short one with the crooked smile shoves the two address books under my arms, one on each side, heavy as long woolen coats that have been sitting in water. Says: hold them, hold them tight. And grins, just like the animal had seemed to grin back then.

Why am I air, even though they're talking to me?

In the time before, when you could still say anything, gentlemen spoke unhurriedly. They're never in a hurry, but now that every sentence could cost your life, you wish they'd be a bit less easy. They spoke of boathooks as they stood up there, at the dance on the Süllberg. Every collar was special, elegant, I wanted to forget everything else. The fine world, as if it were possible for us. They spoke cheerfully, calmly, about the boys who jumped from ice floe to ice floe, on the flowing Elbe, with long boathooks. It was a game, a dance, some of them brought back butter cake from the Altes Land, crossed the Elbe on the drifting ice. Only one, they said, didn't make it. Fell into the current, and his heavy coat soaked up the water, dragged him down.

This coat drags, drags.

The light, so bright. And I hold the coats under my arms, I feel their full weight and how they grow soaked, I hold them and I'm strong. Just hold out a bit. We have to get out of here together, for Pauli.

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It'll go better for you if you tell us everything. He calls me *du*, the informal, the same way the rats seemed to address me with their pinched eyes. I think of him as a rat, the way they do, as if it were no longer a person sitting across from them. I've seen rats in the canals, city rats, their fur matted with oil and sewage—but even they seemed more alive than him. This one is just a thug hoping to make it.

Any messes you've made will be forgiven, that's why you're here. What does he want to hear? Are they going to bring in someone who recognizes me? That gal, I seener with the owner of the rubber comb factory? Shsh.

I'm supposed to be a dainty ringlet, an admiring broad.

There's a plot hatching behind that brow.

And then he smiles. The rat. Just his yellow teeth, no other part of him smiles.

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It must be early, beyond the bars it's already getting light. He comes and takes the address books, brings me a chair. Here, sit, he says.

I made it. Something in me wants to soften. Come on, take a load off.

But then I hear his laugh. I'm lying on the concrete.

He's still holding the back of the chair. Holding the chair that I was supposed to sit on up in the air. Not even a rat sounds so mean, so crude. He looks down at me. The pain is dull.

Tears come, my tailbone hurts. Dirty bastard! but I don't stay on the ground. The way I brush my hands off, they can see they have no power, not over me.

Or didn't I stand up? Did something else happen that no one ever talked about?

It's not too late, things are still up for grabs in the new Reich, you can still fight for your spot.

He says it, and he doesn't know what he's saying.

It's not about the factory owner. Just about the examinations, the girls. That we don't obey Frau Sugar Beet, with her thin mouth. That we do everything for Arthur. But what they ask for is a joke! Herr Clubfoot came up with some idea of what a girl is. Ridiculous. I smile. Fine, have it your way! I send the Rita.

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Rage keeps me awake, it glows.

You hold onto the rope with your own strength alone, no one can do it for you. The rat has hitched his wagon, he has his new uniform, and he knows how to do that nifty salute. Men like him come backstage, with flowers and polished boots. The girls want so much to believe them. Right now it's easier than ever.

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Outside there's a cold moon, and I don't exist.

That means: still, a part of me is still here, lurking, trembling, in its own night.

The moon is bright, the clouds have gray runners that they ride on
way up high.

The earth is a pebble that's flying and flying,
and I want to fly, but only with you.

I see him before me. His thin wrists.

I talk to Pauli as if his bed stood next to mine in the cell. Next to the narrow cot.

!

I hear the glass sing. Screams come through the walls at night. A sound like that goes through every twist and turn of the ear. The body is an instrument on which they play their song of fear. It's a sound that makes the glass shake. Intensified interrogation. And I lie there as if I were a membrane myself: something in me is stretched, listening, and something else is no longer there. I lie there and lie there.

The girl from before is silent too, with her golden eyes.

The interrogation cell is dark except for the lamp on the table. But there in the dark, in the corner, is something else, something lies there in the dark and stares at me and looks satisfied, I know it, it already had eyes on me before, the wild boar.

I have to keep my wits about me, I can't tell them anything. Arthur doesn't exist, our world doesn't exist. Everything I say in this cell will be forgotten, I know it.

I think these fine gentlemen don't even notice it. They think they're alone in the room with me, they don't know that behind them something is lying that's much more powerful, that's controlling everything. They're its marionettes. It has bad taste, they're ugly little men, in a puppet show they'd be the ones locked up by the policeman and clever Kasper with his red cap.

But they've knocked off our red caps and our heads along with them. The axe of Wandsbek, they lay the boys on the block like chickens, Shsh.

The Rita sits before them and says how much she values the serious life, which, due to unfortunate circumstances, has always been beyond her reach. She says it without tears, since tears are like blood: once they start flowing, they'll always want more. Hunters call blood sweat, Gray taught me that, told me about hunting. The boar is in its element. I mustn't excite it, it's best if it dozes, so I can save my strength.

It reassures him when I play a Rita, and I'm good at it. I've studied them, every night from my rope, high over the audience, I know how the Ritas talk and what they dream of. How practical it would be if that's actually how the world were. A soft carpet, and everything has its place. The Ritas, like the men, take great interest in fertility.

I send her, a Rita who knows nothing of me, the pale version who takes no risks. A useful little woman, that Rita, and she always looks so smart.

I'm afraid my voice is weak, the wet coats are dragging me down, but I have no time for that now. It's only a lamp that's directed at me, and these two men; the boar is asleep. I mustn't wake him. But why do I hear the janitor now in my mind, why do I see us swaying at the edge of the stage?

Now we have to hurry, move aside, says the Rita in me as she steps into a limo, she rides ahead. I watch her go, no, I sit next to her in the back seat with my dirty shoes, but she doesn't notice me. She has the same hair as me, she's pulled it back and slicked down the curls, her mouth is sharply outlined with lipstick, it's a bit thinner than mine.

She takes no notice of the city passing by. Silent. She mustn't hear me. The Rita sits next to me and our sleigh hurtles, hurtles on. We're driven by a man in a black uniform with a skull on his collar. Of course. She sits very straight, she's me, but a better version. She did it right. There's probably a ring under her gloves, or several, several on each finger.

What's going on? she says, and she sounds edgy, her voice thin, and the Black Wind shrugs in apology. I'm sure it's just routine, he says. Everyone's a bit nervous, with the Führer coming for a visit.

She looks out and notices the flags along the Alsterdamm, they hurtle through the night: beautiful, these lights.

Is she cold? No. She has a fox fur around her shoulders. She's not older than me, of course not, but she knows where she stands in the world. It's cold, I'm cold next to the Rita, but we keep driving. What else? The driver stops at Hohe Bleichen, the door is opened for her.

It's the same splendid rotunda, everyone stands erect as she walks across the linoleum, her heels clack. Heil Hilter, she says, dismissing our driver. He delivers us to a good-natured official who leads us up the stairs, then comes a short man who walks in front of us with his arms crossed at his back. He has a touch of the lord of the manor about him, showing off his territory, his great halls and the silver lamps and the table set for twenty-four. Staff scurry by. Shadows that we don't see. A hunting lodge: sport, pleasure when there's none elsewhere.

He presents his estates and the antler room with his trophies, he says words like Rominte Heath and Schorf Heath and one nods, discreetly, since everyone knows who's allowed to go after the big sixteen-pointers. All evening he'll speak politely and not too loud, from his seat at the head of the table. He wears a ring with two stag's teeth, slightly discolored, set with silver vines or oak, yes, oak, something lovely like that. Does he know his own teeth are just as yellow?

He stands up at the head of the table, a toast that he sends out into the night, his glass, the ring shimmers as if it knew more than the man who wears it, shimmers into the room against the deep darkness of the night.

¶

There are twenty-four doors, and the Rita follows him as if it were a castle instead of an interrogation cell. Maybe she doesn't hear the stifled screams that I hear, though maybe it's nothing but nerves.

Quiet now. I adjust the length of my steps and arch my back the way she does. I know posture's no small thing. She looks like she was born with these pearls around her neck. That's no small thing either. The lord of the manor stops. Heil. She puts up her arm too, then the door opens, the arm goes up again, but Schulz and the short man quickly put theirs back down again. They see that she's a Rita, so the greeting is brief, and she sits down slowly, takes a bit of time and straightens her skirt before she sits down, in my place.

She crosses her legs and looks at Schulz. Her look asks why she's been called here, but she doesn't ask. She lets him come to her. That too is a strength of the Ritas. Not to defend herself too soon—these gentlemen can be glad she showed up at all.

So, Schulz begins slowly. And she smiles. I smile, slightly. Her eyes look at him, almost carelessly, like a child who's been naughty.

And now tell me, Schulz says, what you know about Herr Wittkowski. You were close to him, I've heard? It seems—

The Rita raises her eyebrows in alarm. I wouldn't say that, she says, I say. You do know what kind of man we're talking about here? The Rita leans forward—one could never say a word against him before, but it's really high time.

Schulz raises his eyebrows in surprise. He likes the Rita, but it's his job to get to the truth. He's good at it, he has his riding crop. The Rita leans back a bit. How can I be of assistance in the matter?

She seems truly not to know what the two gentlemen want of her. You did work for him? He says it very seriously, almost barking. But she waits and looks at him, then the Rita laughs.

Well, one does have to think of oneself, don't you think? At the end of the day there's no better stage to dance on.

She dangles her foot a bit. The wild boar sleeps. The conversation is in her hands. Schulz and Igor understand her plight completely.

That's all changed now, of course. She gives a demure little cough.

How do you mean?

Oh, I've been planning to leave anyway. May I confide in you? The Rita gives her little smile again. Now Schulz smiles too.

You see, several things, fundamental things, in my life—the Rita pauses and looks him straight in the eye—have changed.

Oh? Schulz gives her the space to unfold her story, he doesn't shout, he's one of those men whose voices sound as if they're being pressed through a sieve when they shout, slobbering like a goat, and she's heard him shouting, through the wall, she's heard men roaring in pain, but that's not how it is now, the two wet coats are gone, and the Rita straightens up.

I assume you'll be pleased for me. She smiles again, she knows how to do it, she knows how to graze a man with her eyes, casually, unambiguously, but as if she herself doesn't notice she's doing it.

It's still a secret, really.

Now she straightens up, almost clapping, as she could hardly believe it herself.

You see, Herr—Schulz, Schulz says—my brother, he's going to the polar sea for the Führer, he's going whaling.

She gives him a moment, her fingers move slightly, as if she were fanning herself, but she stops again, looks at him. Urgently.

We'll be able to build a decent life for ourselves from his wages.

Again she pauses. Schulz, who clearly knows nothing about it, stares at her. Germany is going into whaling, the first German whaling company is based here, in Hamburg. Do you have any idea how much fat there is in a whale? Now she sinks down into her chair again, makes herself small.

I'm sorry, it's just—it's so thrilling! How could we ever have dreamed of such a thing?

She can't let slip now that she knew all the dockworkers. No, she has to concentrate. She smiles again. And there's her leg. It takes over for a moment.

Everything's ready. My brother—she turns on the enthusiasm again—he's going to forge the harpoons on board, he's going to make the weapons!

Schulz seems pleased. He looks the little woman up and down. But aren't you afraid?

His voice is a bit deeper now, he looks at her full of goodwill, like a concerned uncle. This is the Rita's big moment. She opens her eyes wider, and her eyebrows stretch above them like two thin rainbows.

Afraid? Am I afraid for him?

Well of course, it's very dangerous, it's a great sacrifice that he's making, he might pay with his life! She pauses. For a moment they both see her brother, dead in the polar sea, just an outline, and the boar turns over in his sleep. She sighs. But that's what he wants. For us. For the Reich. Her voice has grown softer.

The fox fur is draped playfully around her shoulders, and where the fur isn't now lies Schulz's warm hand.

You must be cold, sweetheart. He walks with me over the laid tables, we stride over the twenty-four silver place settings, and I kick the lobster away with my foot: I don't need it, I'm a Rita. And I'm free.

Hedda Möller - narrator

Jaan - her brother, journeyman in Joist's smithy

Arthur Wittkowsky - owner of the Alkazar, founded the cabaret after the First World War

Henry - was with Arthur in Belgium during the First World War, Arthur's closest confidant and right-hand man

Pauli - younger brother of Hedda and Jaan, has difficulty walking due to Rickets, slightly autistic

Joist - blacksmith, uncle, older brother of Hedda and Jaan's mother, fought in the First World War. Secures a job for Jaan on the whaler through old contacts

Kuball - master glazier, Joist's neighbor, makes the stained glass windows for the Nazi Hall of Honor in Buchholz

Carsten - longtime friend of the siblings, riveter at Blohm & Voss, communist in the Wasserkante district

Kuddel - Karl Johann August Hacker - boxer, Hedda's crush, heating mechanic, murdered on November 23, 1933 in Fuhlsbüttel

Raabe - singer at the cabaret, Arthur's confidante, tough beauty

Leni - girl with whom Hedda shares a room, prostitute

Gray - formerly in the Imperial Schutztruppe for German South West Africa, Hedda's only john, wealthy, owns a villa on the Outer Alster Lake

Eddy and Fred - two black caimans with whom Hedda performs

Brown Wind - Hedda's father, disappeared for a time and returns in an SA uniform

Frau Grubemüller - a neighbor who looks after Pauli for money until she weasels her way up to the position of block warden

The Jays (Finken) - Kalle, Micha, Eugen, Henner, petty criminals, named after a flophouse on Finkenstraße, manage everything for Arthur

Dancers - Rieke, Myrtile, Elsi, Livia, also known as the girls

The trumpeter - musician at the Alkazar, introduces Hedda to the circus, could no longer perform because of his non-Aryan descent after the Reich Chamber of Culture Act came into force in 1933

Herr Tinsel - Göring, Prime Minister of Prussia, named after the song by Claire Waldoff ("Tinsel to the right, tinsel to the left, and the belly grows fatter and fatter ...")

Maks - close childhood friend of Hedda's, with whom she was in the Fichte Altona workers' gymnastics club, works as a stablehand in Klein Flottbek

The Rubber Comb Man - Hamburg manufacturer of rubber products, owns a plantation in the Southwest

Max Emden - Jewish merchant, art collector, owner of the polo club grounds in Klein Flottbek, popularly known as the Department Store Baron. Emden emigrated to the Isole di Brissago near Ascona in 1935

Boris - ship's steward who offers his services to foreign gentlemen, arrested in Dec. 1933

Fräulein Thamm - Pauli's teacher, who protects him for a long time

Thea - Hedda's mother, works in the Reemtsma cigarette factory

Aunt Friede - runs the brothel on Talstrasse where Leni works

Schulz and Igor - the rats - policemen, interrogate Hedda at the Stadthaus after Arthur disappears

Klaas - works in a dairy, close friend, helps Carsten hide from the Gestapo

Einar - bouncer and cleaner at the Alkazar

Lazi - petite dancer, called the Dove, teaches Hedda her first moves and tricks on the rope

Andrés - harbor diver with whom Jaan borrows equipment for the whaling journey

Margarethe, von und zu - deceased wife of Gray, leaves behind a large supply of opiates

Frau Petersen - Dr. Käthe Petersen, works for the Hamburg Social Administration as a

“collective carer” or guardian. Responsible for the sterilization and partial legal incapacitation of 1100 people.

Max Schmeling - heavyweight boxer, fought in the world championship fight in Hamburg in 1935 against Steven Hamas

Georg Leopold - NSDAP party member, new “manager” who takes over the Alkazar after the fire and ran it until the 1960s

The Gymnastics Rita - formerly in Hedda's workers' gymnastics club, later girlfriend of a Black Wind (SS).

Elsa - sister of the rat boys, comes from a poor background in Neustadt, father disappears to the Wittmoor concentration camp

Ole and Karl - work in the woodworking shop where Jaan stays

Etkar André - politician, communist, leader of the Red Front Fighters' League, arrested on March 5, 1933 and repeatedly severely tortured during his three and a half years in custody, ultimately beheaded on November 4, 1936

Ernst Henning - communist politician, shot by SA men on March 14, 1931 in a case of mistaken identity: the perpetrators were targeting Etkar André. Henning's funeral turned into a mourning procession of 30,000 people. His murderers were pardoned in 1933 and appointed to new offices

Kaufmann - Karl Kaufmann, Gauleiter of Hamburg, advocated execution by axe and opened the first camps, including the Wittmoor concentration camp and the Fuhlsbüttel concentration camp. Owned a private hunting ground, the Duvenstedter Brook, which he later sold to the city of Hamburg

Richter - Alfred Richter, Hamburg Chief of Police, former head of the SA riding school, makes polo his prestige project. After 1945, member of the Lower Saxony state parliament

Eurico Caruso - celebrated opera singer, sang at the Budge Palais in Hamburg

Claire Waldoff - popular 1930s singer-songwriter

Alkazar - cabaret theater on the Reeperbahn, later renamed Allotria

The Factory - cooperative store where Hedda works before she joins Arthur

Auxpo (Hipo) - auxiliary police - starting in March 1933, unskilled fighters were deployed on the streets as police. Their training lasted 3 days. Unlike in other German cities, the auxiliary police continued to be deployed in Hamburg after 1934

Kommando zbV - special commando led by Alfred Richter, notorious for its violence

Stadthaus - notorious police headquarters in Hamburg with interrogation rooms and detention cells in Hohe Bleichen

Thingspiele - National Socialist movement choirs meant to embody the new human ideal, often using gigantic emblems, eagles, or swastikas, torches and open fires

Wittmoor - one of the first German concentration camps, closed October 1933

Fuhlsbüttel - former penal institution, opened in September 1933 as a concentration camp. Nearly 500 men and women died there and in the subcamps by May 1945, many of the effects of abuse

Max Brauer - Mayor of Altona, expatriated in 1934

Katharina Corleis - collects funds for the SPD underground. On June 25, 1935, news of her alleged suicide in Fuhlsbüttel is published

Wissmann - commander of the Wissmann Force in German East Africa, stylized by the Nazis as a pioneer of German imperialism. His memorial in front of the University of Hamburg was a quasi holy site during the Nazi era

Sönke Nissen - German engineer, built the Usambara Railway in German South West Africa. Well over 1000 Herero, Nama and Ovambo forced laborers were killed in the process. Found diamonds near Lüderitz and used the money to dike and drain the land that bears his name.

Hall of Honor in Buchholz - important National Socialist site in Buchholz for meetings, propaganda, cultural events

Jan Wellem - German whaling mother ship, sets sail on 6.9.1936

Desert Brown - SA

Black Wind - SS

The Chicken Farmer - Himmler, Reichsführer SS, former profession: farmer

Telschow - Gauleiter of Lower Saxony, based in Lüneburg

Herr Moustache - Adolf Hitler

Herr Clubfoot - Reich Propaganda Minister Goebbels