



Alena Schröder

Young Woman, Standing by the Window, Evening Light, Blue Dress

Original title: *Junge Frau, am Fenster stehend, Abendlicht, blaues Kleid*
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Outline

Berlin, 2017: 27-year-old Hannah finds a letter from a lawyer, identifying her grandmother and her as possible heirs to a Jewish art collection which had been confiscated under the Nazi regime. However, this is the first time the young student hears anything about possible Jewish roots. And why has her beloved grandmother Evelyn, her only living relative, never lost a word about the past?

Rostock, 1924: 18 year-old Senta Köhler unintentionally falls pregnant by a highly decorated war hero from WWI. They do get married but the marriage fails within two years. In the end, Senta's husband will only agree to a divorce if Senta leaves their daughter, Evelyn, with him, thus forcing her to decide between her freedom and her child.

Berlin 1927: The metropolis is the hub of life itself and more specifically of a new life for Senta who has found work at a newspaper and quickly rises from typist to journalist. She marries a Jewish colleague, Julius Goldmann, whose father is a respected art dealer and enters Berlin's vibrant art and culture scene. When the Nazis rise to power, Senta and her husband decide to flee abroad, leaving everything behind ... their family as well as priceless pieces of art. The *Young Woman, Standing by the Window, Evening Light, Blue Dress* by Vermeer becomes the epitome of loss for Senta, as she will not see any of them ever again.

Interweaving the fate of these women, Alena Schröder empathically traces the question of how we deal with our personal history and the legacy of our ancestors.

- A page-turning read for the fans of Dörte Hansen and Annette Hess
- An exciting setting well-known and beloved from the series *Babylon Berlin*.

Alena Schröder is a freelance journalist and author, living in Berlin. She studied History, Political Science and Latin American Studies in Berlin and San Diego and attended the renowned Henri Nannen School for journalism. Alena Schröder is the author of several non-fiction titles. She has previously also published fiction under a pseudonym.



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Sample Translation

by Imogen Taylor

Young Woman at a Window

1

Before her grandmother could get on with dying, Hannah had to sort out the blind.

Her weekly visits to the old folks' home always ended in the same depressing ritual; Evelyn seemed to feel the need to prove to herself that Hannah was incapable of even the simplest task—that she couldn't get anything right first time round. Oh well, Hannah thought, never mind, she knew how to be generous. Nothing easier than to give a gloomy old woman a brief sense of superiority.

Slumped in a leather armchair that curved around her bent back like a tortoise shell, Evelyn watched her granddaughter with growing frustration, her outstretched finger trembling as she issued instructions on the correct position of the blind.

'Lower! No, not that low! And now tilt it. Tilt it more! Good lord, child!'

Hannah fumbled with the strings and the plastic rod until just enough autumn sun shone through the white plastic slats to produce the required degree of gloom. In this mid-grey murk, Evelyn would sit out the day, listening to her clocks ticking or watching telly as she waited for death, intermittently sucking vitamin lozenges and knocking back the life-prolonging pills and powders that Hannah brought her from the chemist.

If Hannah was honest with herself, this mix of morbidity and survival instinct was the main reason she kept up the weekly visits to her grandmother. She recognised something of herself in Evelyn's ambivalence, though the difference between them was that Hannah let the days drift by as if she were looking at the world through frosted glass, while ninety-two-year-old Evelyn clung to life as if it owed her something—fierce, defiant, disgruntled.

Hannah made the journey to the far west of Berlin every Tuesday; it was some years since her grandmother had moved into the home. Tuesday was the one day a week she could leave the

library early, without having to prolong the pretence of working on her PhD. Instead of staring at the blank document entitled 'PhD_draft1.doc' into the evening, she could pack her bags in the early afternoon and set off with a clean conscience and a clear goal.

She crossed Potsdamer Platz, took the underground to Theodor Heuss Platz, went in the chemist next to the florist, bought Double Heart Active, folic acid tablets, vitamin lozenges and ginseng capsules, then got on the bus out of town and abandoned herself to the routine choreography of her visit.

'Seniors Palace' was a little way down Heerstrasse, between the River Havel and the soldiers' cemetery, and did its best to look like a suburban hotel rather than an old folks' home. The entrance to the three-storey purpose-built home was overhung with a glass canopy and adorned with seasonal flower arrangements and ornamental rustic-style implements— the October display consisted of a dozen gourds and an old milk churn. Another batch of gourds was decoratively arranged on the grand piano in the foyer, where a pianist was playing the usual medley of easy-listening classics. Hannah said hello to him, smiled at two elderly ladies who were listening to his tinkling and grabbed a flyer from the reception desk—the programme of weekly activities and events, designed especially to set Seniors Palace a notch above your average old folks' home: piano concerts and academic lectures in the in-house auditorium, choir practice led by a retired cathedral choirmaster, watercolour classes, reading clubs, aqua-aerobics in the therapy pool.

Evelyn never availed herself of any of these offers, out of a kind of defiance, just as, despite her wealth, she had once proudly refused to heat her flat. Taking part in any of the activities would have felt like a capitulation to her, a cheap distraction from the challenge of existence. It was enough for her that the food was pretty much edible and that she was addressed by the staff as 'Dr Borowski'; she needed no further justification for the monthly rent she paid for her room in Seniors Palace.

Hannah took the lift to the second floor; it smelt of urine, disinfectant and canteen food. It was amazing, she thought, just how far you could go in an old folks' home with a bit of rustic décor and some good-quality furniture, but there was no covering up the wretched institutional smell. She walked down the corridor to the last door, rang the bell and listened. She could hear her grandmother moaning and groaning on the other side as she pushed herself up from her armchair on her stick to come to the door.

'You're late,' was Evelyn's curt greeting. Over the years she had perfected a strident manner, if only to distract from the rather different things her eyes were saying.

Hannah knew how much the weekly visits meant to her grandmother—how much she looked forward to them and enjoyed them, even if she did act like royalty granting an audience. Hannah kissed her on the cheek, slipped an arm through hers and led her back to the armchair. Then she put the bag of goodies from the chemist on the coffee table, took off her coat and settled down opposite Evelyn for the weekly harangue.

'I've had enough, child, I can't go on. I don't know why this misery can't come to an end. I'm sick and tired of it all. I don't even watch the news any more. Nothing but rubbish.'

Hannah smiled at her, hoping to convey sympathy and confidence. She was touched to see that Evelyn had smartened herself up for her visit. The mobile hairdresser had blow-dried her thin white hair into shape and fixed it with hairspray—there was no mistaking the smell—and the nurses

had dressed her in the coral-coloured blouse that Hannah had once bought in KaDeWe. Around Evelyn's gold ginkgo-leaf brooch, the blouse was spattered with a constellation of gravy stains, and Hannah amused herself by imagining one of the earnest young volunteers trying to get Evelyn to tie her napkin round her neck and being put in his place by one of her glares—a woman like Dr Evelyn Borowski was not going to have a bib put on her like a baby.

'There's a new nurse, a terrible chatterbox, you wouldn't believe it. As if I needed talking to. I wish they'd just let me die in peace—what do they think I pay them for? Why didn't you bring me the folic acid tablets with the Vitamin B12? They usually have those combo capsules.'

'They were out of stock, Granny. I've brought you the activities programme.'

'You needn't have bothered. What do you expect me to do? Sing and make things like in nursery school, with all those old people. It's bad enough having to see them at mealtimes. Have you finished your PhD?'

'I'm still working on it, Granny. It's going to take me a while.'

Some time ago Evelyn had asked Hannah what she was writing about and reluctantly Hannah had told her: 'Transcendence and Utopia in the Early Work of Hans-Georg Distelkamp'. Evelyn had given a slight snort; she thought the subject ridiculous. In fact, she thought the whole enterprise ludicrous. Spending years crawling around in libraries and archives to be a doctor of anything other than medicine seemed to her like a waste of time. Secretly Hannah agreed; it was ridiculous and pointless. But at the same time, it was better than nothing. It was also the easiest way of remaining a part of her supervisor's life. She had slept with him once and, if the whole thing weren't so horribly complicated, she'd happily do so again.

Evelyn's lament, her inspection of the chemist's bag, her brief inquiry about the PhD—all checked off. That left the winding of her five clocks, the watering of the row of orchids on her windowsill, and the grand finale, the last battle—the blind.

After that, Hannah's visit was basically over. On any other day, she'd have given her grandmother a quick hug and pulled the door shut behind her with a mixture of relief and trepidation. But today, Hannah's gaze came to rest on the little glass table next to Evelyn's armchair. Sticking out like a bookmark from the inevitable TV listings magazine, was a letter with foreign-looking stamps and a Hebrew postmark.

'Who's written to you from Israel, Granny?'

'No one.'

'What do you mean, *no one*? Haven't you read the letter?'

'Oh yes, I've read it.'

'Well? What does it say?'

'Old stuff.'

'What kind of stuff?'

'I don't want anything to do with it.'

'Why not?'

'Put the telly on for me.'

'Granny, what kind of stuff?'

Evelyn stared at Hannah for a moment, wearily pondering. She wished she'd simply chucked the thing—but it was too late now; Hannah wasn't going to drop the matter. Well, let her deal with that old muck then—the rubble heap of memories that she had so carefully planted over the years, covering it with grass and flowers and trees, like the council did with the world-war debris of 'Devil's Hill', whose peak she could see from her window on a clear day, bristling with the white domes of the US bugging system.

'The telly, child.'

Hannah realised that Evelyn was proposing a deal. She pressed the ON button of the remote control and zapped through the stations until she found a documentary on baby animals in the Berlin zoos.

'See you next week. Stay alive till then, okay?' she whispered into Evelyn's ear, putting the remote control on her lap and taking the letter in return. Evelyn stared, unmoved, at the polar-bear cubs and zebra foals flickering on the flat screen, but as Hannah turned to leave, she put up the volume so she wouldn't hear her granddaughter close the door behind her.

2

Warnemünde 1923

A September afternoon of brutal beauty, the sky blue, the sea oily and billowing, the seagulls a scornful choir.

'Offshore wind,' Senta thought. 'Serves me right.'

She had just vomited for the second time in the lee of their wicker beach chair and, until the wind changed, she was going to have to breathe the sour smell of her misery rather than the salty, seaweedy tang of the sea air.

Ulrich had, of course, meant well when he rented the awful wicker contraption for her on Warnemünde promenade. She had protested dully, but in his chivalrous way he had waved this aside, as if she had been modestly declining a generous offer rather than trying to tell him what she didn't want. A lady—a pregnant lady at that, and what's more, his fiancée, was not to sit—and certainly not to lie—on the ground; she must sit upright, arrange her concealing summer dress neatly about her and enjoy the good sea air. In a beach chair. Because that's the kind of man he was, thoughtful and noble-minded. A great catch.

What luck, Senta thought dully.

But how unhappy she felt.

Lying on the sand, that was the best. Down by the water, far from the beach chairs, flat on your belly, without a rug. One ear in the wind and the other pressed into the warm sand, listening to the sound of the shifting grains, digging your toes into the cold bit where the sun doesn't reach. She used to lie by the sea like that with Lotte, back in the times when a day without her best friend—and certainly a day out at the seaside—was unthinkable, when their lives and thoughts were still so

inextricably interwoven that they couldn't imagine ever being apart. On the unsurfaced roads of their childhood on the edge of Rostock, not far from the dockyards, where the brick tenements stopped and the low suburban houses began, they had both grown up without fathers. Senta's had died of the flu; Lotte's had drowned fishing. And they had been the only two girls with dark hair—the only two ravens in a pack of little towheads.

'You two were sired by the same gypsy!' old Strehlow had yelled after them once when he'd caught them stealing currants in his garden. And rather than anger or shame at his outburst, they had felt a tingling sense of joy at the thought that he might be right; they might really be sisters.

But today, Lotte had taken the train to Berlin, on her own, without Senta. She had with her a small travelling bag, her typewriter case, her savings—and, in her head, the address of the elderly lady who was going to let her a room near Hallesches Tor.

The first thing she would do when she arrived, she had told Senta, was to have her hair shingled. She had promised to come back in a few weeks for Senta's wedding, if she managed to earn enough money for the train ticket.

Senta hadn't seen her off at the station. She had felt too miserable, and the thought of seeing Lotte leave in the train without her was too awful. Instead, Ulrich had taken her in his open-topped Adler to Warnemünde, where he was meeting an old fighter-pilot mate on the beach. The drive and the fresh air would do her good, he had said, and more important, it would do his son good. There was no doubt in his mind that the baby in Senta's belly was a boy. A man like him, flying ace and war hero, bearer of the Iron Cross and member of the Ordre Pour le Mérite, loyal patriot and son of noble Prussian stock—a man like him sired boys. Senta's weeks of nausea and vomiting were an unequivocal sign that there was a sturdy male babe growing in her eighteen-year-old body. That was what his sister had told him, and she ought to know.

The drive over the bumpy road to the coast had been torture for Senta. The jolting and the smell of petrol that she had once loved exacerbated her nausea, and they had to stop twice to wait for her stomach to settle. Ulrich, usually a confident, laidback driver, was nervous and irritable; he drove the gears home furiously as if to punish the engine for the tension between him and Senta. To think that not long ago these drives had given them both such pleasure. Senta had thrilled at the speed, the wind in her hair, the sweeping bends, the sight of the blond, confident man at her side. 'You should have seen me fly, little one,' he had said, seeing her eyes on him.

She'd liked that too.

Little one.

No one had ever called her that before. She'd always been the big one, the eldest of five sisters, a head taller than the other girls in her class, the 'beanpole' with the high cheekbones, the 'raven'.

Nothing about Senta was small or doll-like or even girlish, and she had got into the habit of walking with a slight stoop, head pulled in, shoulders drooping, so as not to stick out. 'Stand up straight!' her mother would call out after her when she left the house. And she did, sometimes. She stood up straight, head held high, when she imagined the life she would lead one day, once she and Lotte were finished with school and could go and live in Berlin together. They would earn money. They wouldn't have to smoke behind the henhouse any more so that her little sisters didn't see. Oh, no, in the big city they would smoke with a flourish, in full view of everyone. She pictured herself and

Lotte in the cafés and salons, wearing those trouser suits they had seen in the papers, their dark hair shingled. They would learn to shimmy and do all the things that people turned their noses up at in Rostock. No one would call them ‘ravens’ in Berlin; they would be two young women with a moody, mysterious aura; they would talk art and politics, and on sunny days they would stroll down Kurfürstendamm or go to the races. For a while they would work as office girls—their mothers had saved up for a long time to buy them a typewriter each so they could teach themselves to type. But eventually they would become writers. Or actresses. Or both. Just dreaming these dreams of her future self made Senta stretch her body and raise her chin; sometimes, without realising what she was doing, she even took a drag on an imaginary cigarette, her arm at just the right angle, her fingers slightly spread, her gaze fixed dramatically on a point in the distance, like someone on a photograph.

That must have been how Ulrich first saw her, in an absent moment after two or three advocaats, at the New Year’s Eve party in Navy Hall. Two schoolmates with family in the Navy had invited Senta and Lotte to go with them, and their mothers had protested only faintly—and more on principle than from conviction. It was New Year’s Eve, after all. Why shouldn’t the girls have a good time—especially in such good company? They had dressed up, helped each other put up their hair and put on too much rouge. The young men accompanying them, more interested in booze than girls, were soon shaken off, and they stood and listened to the band that was playing popular tunes and was said to play jazz too—perhaps later, if they were lucky.

A drunk boy in a sailor’s uniform made a feeble show of flirting with them. They had been ignoring him for some time when Ulrich marched up to them in his slightly stiff, soldierly way, chest out, chin up, and asked if ‘the ladies’ were being ‘inconvenienced’, then pushed the fellow aside, without even waiting for a reply. The lad had been boring Lotte and Senta with tales of wartime adventure that he was far too young to have experienced at first hand.

Ulrich, they soon realised, was different; he knew the war. And not only that, he was a hero—one of the few whose services to the fatherland shone brightly enough to eclipse the pain of defeat. A flock of young men and women soon appeared behind him, took Senta and Lotte into their circle and clamoured for Ulrich to tell them again about being a pilot in the Richthofen Squadron and fighting in the big air battles over Flanders. Modestly, he refused—he didn’t want to ‘bore the ladies’—but this was met with hilarity—he was *too funny*. Who could be bored, when an ace, a hero, a comrade-in-arms of the Red Baron, told of his victories, of the thirty-and-more planes he had shot down and how he was one of the last to receive the Pour le Mérite from the Kaiser himself.

And so Ulrich had told them about flying—about the icy wind in his face, about getting into tailspins and getting out of them again. He told them about the tense moments when he heard the creak and rattle of the opponents’ machine guns behind him, and about the euphoria he felt when he shot down a plane—the bloody French or English within range at last, one hand on the joystick, the other on the machine gun of his Fokker. And he described the roar of the engine when the enemy aircraft nosedived, bursting into flame, disappearing beneath him, and the relief he felt when he had got all his men back to the ground safe and sound. ‘A toast to our brave German soldiers,’ somebody cried and they all raised their glasses.

Lotte discreetly rolled her eyes a few times and tried to drag Senta away; she didn’t fancy listening to soldiers’ stories. But Senta ignored her, drunk on advocaat and Ulrich’s kitschy pilot’s stories of sunsets over the clouds and the lights of the cities on night flights. Afterwards they danced and Senta felt the other girls looking at her and relished the feeling. Why her? Why did she get to dance with the flying ace? That evening, Senta took her mother’s advice. She stood up straight,

threw back her shoulders and, head held high, she let Ulrich steer her slightly stiffly over the dancefloor.

It wasn't until everyone went outside just before midnight to watch the fireworks that Senta realised Lotte had disappeared. Looking back on that evening afterwards, she was ashamed that she hadn't cared more. But the most desirable man of the party had chosen *her*—the 'raven', the 'beanpole'. She stood beside him, he put his arm around her and saw in 1923 with her, then offered to drive her home. 'We can do this again, little one,' he said when they parted. 'I'd like that,' she said, and so it was decided.

After that, Ulrich often came to fetch her in the Adler—green bodywork polished to a shine, red leather seats, killingly stylish. He'd gone into partnership with a car dealer in Rostock after the war; after all, a pilot couldn't be expected to drive anything less than an Adler and a salesman had to identify with his product.

They went on long drives to the sea and kissed in the dunes, and Senta forgot all about Berlin and Lotte and their plans, because she liked the thought of being the 'little one' for a man like Ulrich. At first, Lotte asked how she was getting on with her 'flying ace', but Senta didn't like her mocking tones; she accused Lotte of jealousy, and after that, Lotte kept out of her way. That was fine by Senta, who had no desire to justify herself or feel guilty; all she wanted was the thrill of seeing the big eyes everyone made when Ulrich drove up to the house in his smart car—and the satisfaction of knowing that the women next door were talking about her, no doubt wondering what the flight lieutenant saw in that beanpole of a girl.

And then, on one of their days out by the sea, one of the first proper warm spring days, she asked Ulrich what had made him choose to join the Airforce. A strange look came into his eyes and he cleared his throat several times, as if the words were stuck in his chest and he couldn't get them out. Then, slowly, he began to talk. He told her about his first months on the front. At first they'd refused to let him enlist because he was only sixteen, too young to fight for the fatherland, but his dad put in a word for him with an officer friend and they took him on as a gunner. So there he'd been, lying in the mud, soaked through, his feet wounded and sore from marching, and all around him rats gnawed at the dead bodies that lay unburied on the field. One night, he'd been on watch duty and seen a wild dog with a man's arm in its mouth. There was a signet ring on one finger and he'd thought to himself, *hope the poor dog doesn't choke on the ring*. And when the machine guns fired, he heard the young men call for their mothers, and saw them stare in disbelief at their burst bellies and clutch their guts, and he longed to get away from the muck and the mire and the massacre—longed to be up in the air, as far away from the muddy, bloody, stinking chaos as possible.

And his chance came. A kind officer who knew his father recommended him to the Airforce and he became a distinguished flying ace. But all the time he felt like a coward.

'The ones who died down there in the muck, they're the real heroes, little one. I flew right over all that and if I'd been gunned down, it would have been over quickly and I'd have been buried with military honours, not tossed into a mass grave somewhere.' His voice cracked and he choked back a sob and Senta couldn't help herself; she threw herself into his arms and held him tight. God, how she despised herself afterwards for that impulse, for the icky sentimentality that came over her just because this hero of a man had opened up to her and wept male tears at her throat. He wanted comfort and soon he was thrusting his hands assertively under her summer frock and they were falling into the sandy dunes, tugging awkwardly at each other's clothes, and everything was warm and soft and then tight and hot and urgent. Senta stared at the blades of marram grass so as not to

have to look into Ulrich's strained, tearstained face. So this is it, she said to herself, this is what everyone makes such a fuss about. For something so forbidden and of such enormity, it wasn't particularly overwhelming.

When Senta got home that evening, her mother slapped her round the face for the first time ever. Senta's ears rang and Baltic sand trickled out of her mussed-up bun onto the floorboards and she wondered how her mother had known—as if it were written on her face.

When Senta's period didn't come and it began to dawn on her what that meant, she wept with Lotte behind the compost heap. She'd been stupid, stupid, stupid—and now it was too late. Lotte had heard of potions you could brew to get rid of the baby—castor oil, scouring powder and peppermint—but you had to get the quantities right or you'd end up poisoning yourself. She also knew of a woman who could help out, but she charged a lot of money and some women bled to death. It wasn't worth the risk. She'd tell Ulrich and, who knows, maybe he'd marry her. But she wouldn't get to Berlin now. Lotte would have to go without her.

So Senta told Ulrich she was pregnant and he turned away from her without a word and walked off, leaving her all by herself on the edge of Doberaner Platz. She wasn't surprised. She'd just have to get used to the idea that she wasn't his 'little one' any more, and although it would have been reasonable to feel desperate, she didn't really feel much at all. Nor did she feel any sense of relief when the green Adler with the red seats stopped outside the house three days later and Ulrich got out, very serious and dressed in a suit, to call on Senta's mother and ask for Senta's hand.

'If it's what the girl wants,' Senta's mother said.

'It is,' Ulrich said, and Senta nodded mutely. Of course it was what she wanted; she had no choice, with the baby in her belly. Her mother had guessed everything without having to be told, and taken it calmly. She had raised five daughters on her meagre widow's pension and various casual jobs, and managed—thanks to her talent for speculation—to get them all through the years of inflation without too much privation. One fatherless child more or less was no big deal.

'My poor, silly girl,' she said to Senta that night, stroking her cheek. 'Are you properly in love, at least?'

But Senta wasn't so sure. She was in love with the way Ulrich looked at her. It had been nice to be looked at the way a part of her wanted to be. It had been nice to have the feeling that she could choose between two lives. A life with Lotte, free and answerable only to herself. And a life in the passenger seat, with all the complicated and difficult things taken care of by the man at her side. Now she had no choice and, worse still, she would be for ever in his debt. He could have made a better match, but instead he was doing the decent, manly thing and taking responsibility for his actions, resigning himself to his fate. How lucky she was. Luckier than she deserved. And everyone could see: the 'raven' had caught herself a war hero. A war hero who was unscathed and still in one piece, and who had sat her here in a wicker beach chair like a doll to watch him and his mate horse around on the beach. Two grown men throwing stones at the seagulls and playing at fighter pilots like a couple of kids, their arms outstretched.

At last the wind changed. Senta closed her eyes and tasted the mild salt of the Baltic. She thought of Lotte who must have reached Berlin by now and would soon vanish into the bustle of the big city, be swallowed up by a mysterious new world. She would throw herself into her work, and something told Senta that she wouldn't come back for the wedding which was to take place in only

three weeks, before Senta's belly was too big to hide. Soon, Lotte would have forgotten all about Senta; they would live two different lives and no one would understand how much Senta envied Lotte hers—after all, she was the one with all the luck.

Senta felt the baby inside her, like a goldfish knocking against the side of its glass bowl. She sucked the sea air deep into her lungs, fighting another wave of grief and nausea. 'Why are you pulling such a face, little one?' she heard Ulrich ask, as he bounded towards her, happy and out of breath, barefoot, his trousers rolled up to his knees. 'Is it because of the dress? Fretting about the wedding dress, are you? It'll all be ready in time, don't you worry your little head over it. And now come along, time to go home.'

3

Hannah took out the letter in the lift and was so engrossed that she missed the ground floor and went all the way down to the underground car park, looking up only when the pungent smell of rubber and petrol came in at the open doors. The letter was from an Israeli lawyer in Tel Aviv who wrote, in elegant English, to offer his services to Dr Evelyn Borowski in a case of restitution. While investigating expropriated Jewish art dealers, his firm had come across the Goldmann art collection, whose owner, Itzig Goldmann, had been deported and murdered by the Nazis in 1942. Dr Evelyn Borowski was the only living heir of his confiscated—and currently missing—art collection. If she would sign the enclosed contract, officially charging the law firm with handling the restitution, they would continue their research. The firm acted at its own financial risk; a commission was only payable if an artwork was found and returned.

*With best regards,
Igor Cohen.*

The lift doors slid shut again and Hannah pressed the button for the ground floor. For a moment she thought about marching straight back to her grandmother and asking if this was some weird joke. Jewish art dealers? Evelyn, heir to Nazi looted art? If it wasn't a joke, it must be some kind of mistake—but wouldn't Evelyn have thrown the letter straight in the bin in that case? Evelyn never let anyone pull her leg or con her into anything. Hannah had once been in Morocco with her mother and grandmother as a child. It was supposed to be a journey of reconciliation; Hannah's mother had insisted on choosing where they went, and Evelyn had paid for everything. And while, in the souks of Marrakech, Hannah and Silvia had been besieged by sellers, trying to get them to buy scarves, carpets, jewellery, bags and mixed spices, Evelyn strode unmolested through the narrow market, like a queen who would have bitten off the head of anyone who dared accost her.

If Evelyn had kept this letter from Israel and only reluctantly shown it to Hannah, it meant that there was possibly some truth in what Igor Cohen had written.

On the bus back to Theodor Heuss Platz, Hannah pulled her phone out of her bag to see what Andreas was up to. She opened WhatsApp and tapped on his profile image—a big typewritten A. Hannah was a little annoyed that her supervisor Andreas Sonthausen, a distinguished German professor and something of an authority in literary theory, should have chosen such a pretentious profile pic for his WhatsApp account.

A for Andreas, Alpha male, Achiever, Avoid-me-at-your-peril.

What Hannah really wanted, though, was a photo of Andreas she could stare at on the bus. It would have made it easier to remember him over her—the thinning, greyish brown hair worn slightly too long which she had run her fingers through; the face that had looked surprisingly youthful without the usual black-rimmed glasses. The whole thing had been something of a surprise. Not only had she somehow managed to stumble into her supervisor’s hotel bed, but she had actually liked it—and she’d liked *him*, too, though he wasn’t really her type physically, and way off her age spectrum (he was in his late forties). No comparison with the boys she sometimes picked up in bars and clubs and took back to her tidy flat to bring a bit of physical chaos into her sterile life—those nameless, after-shaved start-up lads with their projects and illusions and clean-trimmed beards—boys who saw sex as a cardio exercise and only messaged Hannah a couple of times afterwards, before going on with their plans to sell themselves to Google and get super rich.

Andreas had sent precisely one message after the thing in Marbach two months ago—a cryptic inscription under that stupid A: *well, fancy that*.

Hannah was already back in her own bed when he sent it the following morning, and for the rest of the trip, he’d acted as if nothing had happened.

Fuck you! Hannah thought, every time she looked at the speech bubble. *Well, fancy that*. What was that supposed to mean?

Goodness, I don’t usually sleep with my students—don’t know how that happened? (Yeah, right...)

Hey, that was great, let’s do it again some time? (But if that was what he wanted to say, wouldn’t he have just said it?)

Hmm, interesting episode yesterday, but not worth dwelling on, please don’t make a scene? (She wasn’t planning to—she hadn’t even messaged him back.)

God, I’m overwhelmed, I’m going to have to let this sink in a bit? (Oh, fuck you.)

Hannah had admired Andreas Sonthausen from her first semester, but she had no designs on him. She admired his melancholy sense of humour, the way he worked himself into a frenzy when he lectured, his infectious enthusiasm for his subject. She admired the amused condescension with which he put down creeps and windbags; she liked the way he smoothed his eyebrows with his ring and middle fingers when he was thinking. And she liked the friendly interest he took in her. She was hazy about what to do after graduation, but when she half-heartedly contemplated the prospects of a PhD, he encouraged her. Half-heartedness, of course, was lethal to a PhD project—Hannah knew that and Andreas certainly knew it, but he wrote her a glowing reference for a grant all the same. And although her chances of becoming his research assistant were extremely slim—she was neither the most assertive nor the brightest of his post-grad students—he gave her the job.

Andreas Sonthausen had never said anything suggestive; he had never looked at Hannah provocatively and she had never thought of him as anything but her supervisor. Everything was completely innocent, until she accompanied him on the trip to Marbach. Andreas had things he wanted to look at in the archives and had been asked to give a lecture, and when a colleague cried off at the last minute, he suggested to Hannah that she join him—the second hotel room couldn’t be cancelled and presumably she could do with some time in the archives too.

On the first evening, they had a drink in the hotel bar. Andreas had been absent and silent all day, but now he began to talk—about his latest book that was giving him some trouble, about the

time-consuming funding applications he had to write, and about the envy he sometimes felt towards his wife who exhibited young, hip artists in her gallery in Auguststrasse and was so much closer to life and the living than he was with his dead authors and theories.

After three gin and tonics, Hannah helped him carry documents up to his room—and then Andreas gave her this look. A different look. A look so deep and so sad, which Hannah returned for far longer than she should have done. And when Andreas took a step towards her—or perhaps he only wanted to hold the door open for her; afterwards, she couldn't be sure—she kissed him. Or he kissed her. She wasn't sure about that either, but somehow they slipped into each other and for a moment it felt good enough to forget that it wasn't really a good idea at all.

For a while they stood and snogged in the hotel corridor. Then Hannah began to unbutton his black shirt and he pulled her jumper over her head—and they both laughed because Hannah tried to slip out of her trousers before taking off her basketball shoes and got herself in a twist. Andreas knelt down in front of her and untied her laces. Very tenderly.

Why couldn't spontaneous sex in hotel rooms be like in the movies, Hannah wondered. The actors disposed of their clothes, casually and elegantly, somewhere between lift and bed, and they never got their trousers stuck over their shoes or broke their fingernails on belt buckles. But it didn't matter in the end; they made it to the bed more or less naked, the fan roaring in the bathroom, the TV screensaver showing photos of the hotel lobby and the breakfast buffet. Hannah lay on her back. The gin made her head feel light and airy, and Andreas was doing something around her belly button which felt good.

In the weeks that followed, Andreas had treated Hannah with the same friendly but distanced interest as ever. As if nothing had happened. No knowing looks, no hints—he didn't even go to the trouble of avoiding her. That fucking message on her phone was the only evidence Hannah had that she hadn't imagined the night with Andreas. It drove her crazy. She began to stalk him on the web, looking to see when he was online on WhatsApp, googling his name, trying to find out as much as she could—but avoiding reports about the private views in his wife's gallery. She got hold of long-out-of-print texts from his early years in academia, and stayed late in her little office at the German faculty, in the hope that he might one day poke his head round the door—which he never did. She put twice as much effort as usual into her research-seminar papers and then tried to find allusions or messages in Andreas's comments—but without success.

Hannah hated herself for her obsessiveness. She thought of him at night as she was going to sleep; she thought of him on the underground, in the library, at home at the kitchen table in front of her blank Word document. She even thought of him on Saturday nights when she went clubbing down by the Spree, hoping to soak up the bass and empty her mind.

And now, on her way home from Evelyn's—on the bus, on the underground to Kreuzberg, on the short walk from the station to her second-floor flat on Oranienstrasse—a plan took shape inside her. She had this letter in her bag and before she confronted Evelyn, she wanted to discuss it with somebody else—right now, if possible. Somebody grown-up. More grown-up than her, anyway. She hadn't spoken to her father since she was six and it was no good talking to her mum's grave—she needed answers, advice. She unlocked the door to her flat, took her phone from her coat pocket, crossed the white floorboards into the sitting room and pulled the curtains shut as if she were about to do something forbidden. Then she sat down on her white Ikea sofa, took a deep breath, said one last *Fuck you* and pressed the green receiver beside Andreas's name.

Well, well, well. Fancy that.

6

Rostock — Berlin 1926

Who would have thought that the Deutsche Reichsbahn trains would make such a good place to cry? They could make a business venture out of it, Senta thought—special trains that rattled through the countryside, letting you cry your eyes out with no one to stare at you. The sway and hiss and clatter of the train and the sight of the countryside rolling past loosened something inside her and all the guilt and relief came pouring out in an endless stream. It wasn't pretty, ladylike weeping, of the kind that invited polite enquiry. On the contrary—a middle-aged couple got up and moved away. Anyone who could cry so relentlessly must be so guilty as to be beyond pity.

It was true too. She was a mother who was leaving her little girl behind, a woman who was abandoning a man who was the envy of her friends. Their marriage may have been rushed into, but it hadn't been loveless. Not at first, anyway. They could have sorted something out. Any other woman would have managed. Any other woman would have settled down to married life, learnt to take pride and pleasure in running the household. Washing, cleaning, ironing, cooking—it was easy enough, if you didn't make a silly fuss like Senta. But there had been Evelyn too, a mute witness of her failure, an indictment made flesh. All through pregnancy, Senta had hoped that the joys of motherhood would come unasked—that maternal knowledge would spring upon her when her milk came in. Instead, she had felt afraid of Evelyn—afraid of her own daughter, of the baby's need for her constant presence and attention, of the little screwed-up face that cried and cried, inconsolable, until old Mrs Strohmeyer banged her broom against the ceiling and Senta's head was so dark and empty that Evelyn's hoarse cries seemed to echo inside it.

She stopped crying when Trude dropped in. Trude had a no-nonsense attitude to babies and a sixth sense for what Evelyn needed. She knew when she wanted picking up and when she wanted her tummy massaged and she knew, too, when to stop. Everything came so much more naturally to her, and Evelyn reached out her little arms for her auntie even when Senta was standing right beside her. This pained Senta, but at the same time it made life easier for her. I'm not enough for her, she'd think. I don't give her enough love; she needs more, but I don't have any more to give.

Senta knew that Trude thought the same; she made no bones about telling her. She was such a disappointment, couldn't get anything right—not even the most natural thing in the world.

'You're holding her wrong.'

'The child's too thin, Senta, you don't feed her enough.'

'She'll be cold in that; you must wrap her up.'

'Why don't you knit her something?'

Senta had hated herself for feeling tired and sad on those days alone with Evelyn, hated herself for her dread of the endless monotony. Even when Evelyn was old enough to sit and play quietly with her fingers and toes, Senta stood about at a loose end, unable to start anything meaningful. There was so much that needed doing, but just the thought of all the chores made her hang her shoulders. A thick layer of dust settled on the furniture, broken only by the occasional

finger marks. Some of these were made by Evelyn, on one of her rare exploratory crawls; the others by Trude who went on secret patrols of the flat to gauge the miserable depths of her darling brother's marriage.

When Ulrich came home in the early evening, Senta forced herself to be bright and cheerful, if only to counter his churlish silence. He wasn't happy either. Life as a civilian didn't suit him, the car business wasn't really taking off and his hero's glow was slowly fading. Money was short and everything seemed like too much hard work. In the end, Senta thought, Ulrich felt just as trapped as her. He was only happy after his evenings out with fellow ex-army men—evenings spent wallowing in memories (and avoiding all mention of the humiliation of retreat). At first these evenings took place once a month, but soon there were two a week—or at least that was what Ulrich said and Senta didn't object; she was glad when he was out. On her evenings alone, she took her typewriter out of the cupboard as soon as Evelyn was asleep, and resumed her typing exercises or wrote to Lotte. Afterwards, she would take Lotte's letters from the drawer in her bedside table and read them over and over again. How exciting Lotte's life sounded. How free she was, answerable to no one, as long as she earned enough money to pay the rent. She wrote about various affairs and about having to repel her boss's advances, although he was actually very nice. She wrote of nights spent dancing, of restaurants and cabarets, a coat trimmed with fur she had been saving up for, and a boy who was crazy about her and had promised to teach her to drive.

When Ulrich came back from his evenings out, he smelt of schnapps and Senta feigned sleep and wondered why he wouldn't teach her to drive. She'd asked him often enough, but he didn't think it proper for a woman. And where exactly was she thinking of driving? Was she planning to run away from him? Did she have another man? Did she really think she was capable of handling such a complex machine when she couldn't even iron his shirts properly? How dare she? Did she think he had time for such nonsense? What times they lived in—women were so keen on being like men that they forgot how to do womanly things. Like cooking, for instance—and he pushed away his plate with the sorry remains of Senta's failed stew. She stared in shame at the edge of the table—because really, who could be so stupid as to spoil a stew?

Sometimes, when Trude came to visit and saw the chaos in the kitchen and Evelyn sitting in a sopping wet nappy, she would shake her head and ask Senta, 'Didn't your mother teach you anything?'

Of course she did, Senta thought defiantly. She taught me how to slaughter a chicken and chop wood and mend a gutter and kill a rat. She taught me to give the boy next door a thrashing if he put his hand up my little sister's skirt. She taught me how to get by on very little money and how to keep accounts and how to put a little bit aside, just in case, because you could never depend on anything or anyone, and certainly not on men. She taught me how to march into a bank, head held high, with a tiny widow's pension in your pocket, and invest it in stocks and shares, and she taught me not to wither beneath the gaze of the man behind the counter who doesn't think a woman with five children capable of following the stock market. But she didn't teach me how to be a good wife. My sisters could cook and wash and mend. I can do other things.

And then the day came when Ulrich couldn't give her the weekly housekeeping money. 'You'll have to get everything on credit,' he mumbled as he left the flat that morning. For weeks, they'd only discussed the bare minimum. When they were at home together, a big black storm cloud hung beneath the ceiling, rumbling menacingly. Ulrich was tense and bad-tempered and, from what

little Senta could glean, she gathered that business wasn't good and that he'd made a bad investment in a particularly costly type of tyre.

A week later he arrived home in a rage and hurled his hat into the corner, narrowly missing Evelyn. 'Where did you get the money?' he hissed, gripping Senta's arm. 'Are you trying to make a fool of me? Come on, spit it out, where did you get the money?'

Senta hadn't had to get anything on credit in the grocer's shop. Over the months she had secretly been putting aside a little of her housekeeping money every week. It had felt good to know that she had some reserves in her little needle case—especially once it was enough for a train ticket to Berlin and she knew that she could go and visit Lotte some time. It was a nice thought.

And when there was no money and the store cupboard was empty and Evelyn needed to be fed, Senta had felt bad at the thought of getting things on credit at Schrader's when she could pay with her savings; she hated being in debt and what was the money for if not for hard times like these?

But now Ulrich had spoken to old Schrader and Schrader had told him that his wife hadn't needed credit.

'Where did you get the money, Senta?' he asked, in a voice that was so calm and controlled that it gave Senta gooseflesh.

'I saved it.'

'From what?'

'The housekeeping money.'

'And what for? What were you saving for, Senta?'

'For hard times.'

'Hard times? What hard times, Senta? Have you ever wanted for anything? Don't you have everything you need? Isn't all this enough for you?'

'Yes, but...'

'So every week you put aside some of my hard-earned money? Without a word to me?'

'I wanted...'

'Or do you get the money somewhere else? Do you go and earn it yourself, down by the harbour? Where your old friends stand and make eyes at the workers? Hmm? Is that it?'

'No, I...'

'You want to get away from here, don't you? You want to go and join your little friend in Berlin. I hear you on the phone to her. You're saving my money so you can up and leave one of these days.'

Ulrich's voice was sharper now and his grip on Senta's arm tighter. Evelyn sat quietly in her corner, watching her parents. They looked like a bad photograph of themselves, a blurred picture, taken in motion. Senta and Ulrich, their eyes locked. Perhaps it was the first time that they really looked at each other.

'All right,' Senta said after a while, all at once very calm and very clear-headed. 'You're right. That's exactly how it is. I want to get away from here. I've had enough.'

She expected a slap in the face, but it didn't come. Instead, Ulrich's grip suddenly slackened. He let go of her arm, turned on his heel and left, and he stayed away for four days and four nights.

Then he came back, but not alone. He brought with him an old schoolmate who was now a solicitor. After formal introductions, the man spread papers on the table and asked Senta to sign them. Divorce papers.

'If you want to go, then go,' Ulrich said. 'Get out of Rostock. Sign this and you're a free woman.'

'And Evelyn?' Senta asked.

'She'll stay with me. I won't let you near my daughter. Trude will take care of her; it'll be the best thing for everyone.'

And Senta had signed. She signed a paper in which she confessed to have acted 'dishonourably and indecently' and relinquished her rights to everything—her daughter, her husband's money, even his name. One signature, and the last two and a half years were simply blotted out. It was wrong; it was awful. But at the same time, it was enticing, like an open door, slowly falling shut, but still wide enough to escape through, if she were quick.

Another sob choked Senta at the memory of setting her name on the line with the solicitor's scratchy fountain pen, and she had to rummage in her coat pockets for another handkerchief. She had been foresighted enough to put in two.

'I'm sorry, my darling. I'll come and fetch you some day, I promise,' she had whispered in Evelyn's ear, though she knew it was a lie. Evelyn would soon have forgotten her and she'd be well looked after with Trude. What kind of a life could Senta give her daughter now, if she hadn't managed to look after her properly before?

Evelyn had laughed blithely and flung her arms around her aunt's neck. Trude had closed the flat door and left Senta standing outside with her suitcase, a free woman, feeling relieved and sad and confused.

She had rung Lotte from a phone box on Neuer Markt. 'Of course you can come; you can stay with me until we've found you a room. There's plenty of work, Senta, come tomorrow, I'll meet you at Gesundbrunnen.' Senta's mother hadn't said much, but as usual, she'd known everything without having to be told. She had sat her daughter at the kitchen table and given her tea and told her sisters not to ask any questions. And before she went to bed, she'd taken a little bundle of banknotes out of the old tea tin at the top of the dresser and put it in Senta's coat pocket. 'Get it right this time, child,' she had said.

Whatever that means, Senta thought. *Get it right.* She wished she could go on and on travelling on this train; that way, she could do nothing wrong and maybe that was right enough. But now the countryside was fraying out, more and more densely populated; the barns and cottages were giving way to abandoned warehouses and little factories puffing white cotton-wool smoke. Then came allotments with creeper-covered sheds, and eventually proper four storey-buildings with grey façades and flower pots on the balconies. The train slowed, hissed, screeched, jolted. Gesundbrunnen Station, Berlin.

And there was Lotte on the platform, in a long coat, her hat at an angle on her head, her short hair close to her chin, a broad laugh on her face.

'Goodness, girl, look at the sight of you. You've been crying. Come here!' She hugged Senta tight and held her for a long time and Senta felt light and empty after all the crying and very much at home on Lotte's shoulder in the familiar smell of powder and hair—and another new, exciting smell she couldn't put her finger on—the smell of Berlin.