

Night

Petra was soaking in the bath, reading the newspaper, when she called out from the bathroom: “Manfred! You simply won’t believe it!”

This was at the farmhouse, our hub for political organizing, thirty kilometres southwest of Bonn. The house was just outside a village whose name was never important to us. Picture a few desultory cows. A pile of tires in the field next door, unmoved for the five years we occupied the space. We were here for the cheap rent and the large kitchen under heavy blackened beams. The thick walls smelled of yeast and were cool even in the height of summer. We organized, talked, yelled sometimes; the bedrooms were often covered in mattresses for the itinerant activists who came and went as we built our movement.

I was bent over my cast-iron skillet like an old grandmother in a fairy tale, cooking a lamb stew. I’d browned the cubes of meat, adding wine, then stock and vegetables, scraping the good bits from the bottom. A piece of mushroom had found its way into my beard. When Petra called, I glanced up to see frost on the window. It looked like a towered city capped by blazing stars.

That city of frost has stayed with me long after other memories have died. Ice is important to this story. Petra, when she finally decided to flee, would flee to a land of ice. But in my memory it

is mixed with another image: that night I wore an apron that Katrina (ex-girlfriend) had left behind when she stormed from the house, banging the walls, kicking the door with her big black boots. It showed a jovial chef brandishing a barbecue fork on which was affixed a beaded bratwurst sausage. He himself wore an apron with another chef also brandishing a bratwurst, and so on and so on, the chefs and their sausages becoming tinier and tinier, to infinity.

January 1980. Exactly two months after the announcement that rocked Europe. NATO planned to station intermediate-range nuclear missiles in West Germany. An ultimatum to the East, to Russia and its satellite states: remove your own nuclear missiles, the SS-20s, from East Germany, or in less than three years we roll ours in. A faceoff across the Iron Curtain; the United States spoke of fighting a “limited nuclear war” in Europe; everyone was afraid for the state of the world. As now, it was hard to think about the future without feeling a profound sense of Total Despair. These nuclear weapons were like sick boxes of death, each one full of a firepower that could destroy the world a hundred times over. The esteemed *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set its nuclear clock two minutes closer to midnight.

But at the centre of this dangerous world, our little band of sisters and brothers—led by the charismatic Petra Kelly—had a counterplan. It focused on the new political party we were building.

The stew was bubbling. I stirred in a bit more broth, and then picked my way through the many shoes in the hallway to the bathroom.

I should say that Petra and I hadn’t been lovers for over a year. This wasn’t my choice, and I still had hopes. In the last year, the Irish trade unionist had fallen away (too possessive), and the Hamburg artist had been tasted and dismissed (his art was

minimalist, but he was a cluttered mess of needs and recriminations), and it was me, Manfred Schwartz, pushing open the bathroom door. Petra shook the newspaper at me. The pads of her fingers had softened from the water. Her short, wet hair lay flat against her face.

“Just listen to what this NATO general has done!”

Gone from her face was what I thought of as her scissors look—pinched and pale, stripped of humour. She started to hand me the newspaper, then grabbed it back and read out loud: “*Commander of the 12th Panzer Division of the Bundeswehr!*”

The gist was this: at a much-publicized Rifle Club banquet in Marbach the night before, a NATO general had made a scene. “A black-tie event! You can imagine! The women must have all been in long gloves, gowns covered in sequins. But here—listen. There’s a tradition in the club of bringing a massive roasted pig into the hall, a *Spanferkel* on a platter, with an apple in its mouth, while the military band strikes up a ceremonial march. Well, the military band chose to play the ‘Badenweiler Marsch.’”

She looked at me pointedly, and yes, I understood. This was Hitler’s march, played whenever he entered a public rally. This fact was well known to us, and it underlined, without further words, how fused the present Bonn elite was to the old system—ancient Nazis recycled and turned into judges and politicians. For non-Germans it might have been possible to listen to the “Badenweiler Marsch,” with its whistles of flutes and piccolos followed by the three distinctive horns, and not hear the darker resonance of Nazism, but not for people of my age, children of the Nazi generation.

Petra shook the paper straight and continued to read: “*No sooner had the band struck up the tune, then General Emil Gerhardt, Commander, etcetera, etcetera, pushed back his chair, crossed the room and tapped the conductor on the shoulder. ‘I would prefer it,’ said*

the general, 'if that particular march was not played. Neither here nor on any occasion.'"

I could picture it: the banqueting generals surrounded by their jewelled wives, the room fat with satisfaction; two men holding aloft the pig, basted in dark beer and with an apple in its mouth, a display of headcheese, pomegranates and roasted peaches around its haunches and cloven feet. A yelp of appreciation bursting from the grey beards in the room, and then this general requesting the conductor's attention, while he glares in surprise and keeps waving his baton, and the tuba and the bassoonist begin, with mounting discord, to lose control of the music, until at last the whole thing founders with a final bleat of the trumpets. "I say," says the general, "would it be possible for you to play another song?"

Petra dropped the paper on the floor and stood, sloshing water. "Pass me a towel, Manfred. I'm going to write him a letter." She was dripping; little breasts so pretty, hip bones framing the dark patch of hair.

"No, you are not! That's ridiculous."

"I am."

I handed her the towel and she began to dry herself vigorously. "He could be an important ally."

"Unlikely."

"Yes, is that so? You know the mind of this general already?"

"I know he can't help us, if that's what you mean."

I went back to the kitchen, where the stew had cooked down too much. Bits of potato and lamb were stuck to the frying pan. I poured in some wine, but the whole thing now had a slight burnt flavour.

Petra came in towelling her hair and wearing her customary loose pink sweatpants and a T-shirt—SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES. She tossed the towel onto the back of a chair, went to her room and came back with a couple of postcards, one of Rosa

Luxemburg, the other an innocuous vision of the Rhine in springtime. She chose the latter, sat down and scribbled quickly, then read aloud: “*Dear General Gerhardt, I heard of your act of conscientious objection to call attention to Hitler’s odious march. Well done! If you have other values of this sort, come! Be part of our movement! Join the Green Party of West Germany! What do you think?*”

I placed a bowl of stew in front of her. “It got burnt,” I said. “It smells good.”

As I handed her a spoon, she took hold of my hand and kissed the back of it. “We need everyone,” she said.

I sat.

“We must believe in human goodness—isn’t that our job, as people on this earth?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re angry with me,” she said.

“Why would I be?”

She was silent, chewing a piece of meat. “We need more allies from the centre.”

“A NATO general? Is that the centre?”

She shrugged.

“And what? You will write him a postcard and tame him? Gentle the general?”

Watch out, I wanted to say. *He’s old enough to be your father*. She had a father thing; it was well known. She and I even occasionally laughed about it: her proclivity for older men. Her father had disappeared when she was five, without a word or note. He left her with a father-shaped gap in her chest, a place where the wind blew in, and a Pez container he’d bargained for in the American sector, shaped like Mickey Mouse.

Watch out for fathers, I wanted to say. But I didn’t.

Strangers from Another Time

This was West Germany, 1980. In other words, you couldn't throw a stone on any university campus without hitting students who felt like they were carrying the ghosts of Auschwitz on their backs. And the silence of our parents' generation, up on our backs, alongside the ghosts. They handed us their abominations without a word, in homes soaked with the good smells of apple pie cooling on the windowsills, happy times in front of the fire. They just forgot to mention the piles of bones, the whitened corpses buried in the backyard behind the trees, and we, detectives and prosecutors, had to dig them up ourselves.

What's this, Daddy? Holding out a collarbone, a breastbone. I found it behind the shed.

A metaphor. But it felt like this, just under the skin of our daily lives.

At the Freie Universität Berlin in the late sixties, my friends and I had spent hours in mental agony: Who were these people, our parents? We knew them intimately and yet we feared them, and we distrusted ourselves, because we were their offspring.

But for Petra Kelly it was different. She'd moved to the States when she was twelve, after her mother married Commander Kelly, a US soldier, and stayed there until her mid-twenties. This long sojourn away protected her from the self-disgust. She was

from the land of Coca-Cola, had campaigned for Robert Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey and had marched on Washington for civil rights.

These things made her clean, made her attractive to our movement.

She didn't have a Marxist bone in her body, and the politics of the sixty-eighters—the ardent politicized students of Germany, with our fury at the duplicity of our parents—was quite foreign to her.

We are all interconnected. This was what she loved to say, loved to think. And she'd quote from Gregory Bateson: "What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all four of them to me?"

As for the use of force, she opposed it utterly, because (I hear her voice speaking) *we all have a core of goodness in us.* This is what she thought. Even the most unhallowed criminals. Even the man who sits in the pit of the missile silo with his finger flexed on the button. My Marxist self would take umbrage at her belief in human goodness. *But him?* Petra would say. *Why, he's just a child following orders!*

And what about the man who gives the orders? I would ask her. *And the man who gives the orders to the man who gives the orders?* There they were, lined up like the chefs on my apron, one inside the other, and yes, according to Petra, they were all interconnected, and all redeemable.

The only real evil in this world came from reducing a person to the status of evil. That was what Petra Kelly thought.

A memory. Petra shared this with me after we rode my motorcycle to Günzburg together, to see the place where she'd grown up. Later, in bed, she told me this story.

She was five years old, crossing a barley field, brushing the palms of her hands against the feathery heads. Her father walked beside her. Tall, brown-eyed. He kept warning her to watch for snakes. Then, for some reason she couldn't recall, he began to tell her about how one day the sun would burn out. He was probably the sort of man who enjoyed his bits of knowledge, but Petra was horrified. She absolutely couldn't believe it. Such absence of light, such monstrous blackness! She ran from him and hid behind a millstone beside the Danube.

"I was sobbing and sobbing, but I also kept thinking, 'Will he find me? Will he know how to find me?' I suppose I had doubts even then about his commitment. Anyway, I didn't move an inch. And as I sat there, I began to make an elaborate plan. *I would save the sun! With a large lasso, or some such thing. A rope and pulley. It would be up to me.*"

"And did he find you? Down by the river?"

She smiled. "Oh yes. He did."

But not long after, he was gone for good, disappearing one night or early morning, a vagabond father running for the train—that was how she pictured him, with a kerchief sack tied to a stick, like the hobos in American comic strips.

"Sometimes I really do believe he left me a note." She turned to me in the half-dark. "I can imagine what it said. *I'm leaving her*—my mother, that is—*but I'm not leaving you*. Maybe he was just going for a little while, maybe he wanted to make good—isn't that what people do? They strike off because they can't bear to be poor, to be nothing, but they want to return to their loved ones, their little girls, with gold in their pockets. I think he meant to do that with me. But then something terrible happened."

I waited, and she said, "I used to imagine he got struck by lightning. I know—an unlikely scenario."

"Poor Petra," I murmured. She had her head on my arm.

I leaned over and kissed her hair. “And stopping the sun from burning out. Did this continue to be your job?”

“From the earliest age. Yes.” She met my eyes, and I could see the child inside her, ardent and fierce, already committed to an impossible task.

As for me, I had issues with my father as well. Mine, Konrad Schwartz, had been a POW, shot down over Britain and then transported to Canada. He had, in other words, missed the worst of the war. He never wanted to speak about it, except to say that his family, a conservative Catholic one, had feared and distrusted Hitler.

He ran an oculist’s shop in Freiburg, and we—my father, my mother and I—lived in the apartment upstairs. There was a stairwell to the second floor with thick walls, and once, at around age six, I flicked my jacket against the whitewashed wall and coal dust rose to the surface like a black blush. I came into the kitchen and showed my father my stained jacket. *Look*, I said, *there’s coal inside the walls*, and he said, *How did this happen?* and I said (afraid now), *I hit my coat against it, Father*, and he said, *You shouldn’t have done that*, and something in the way he spoke, the shiver of compression that touched his mouth, made me realize that he had only barely suppressed the urge to hit me.

I remember one truly terrible beating. The rest were harsh, but this one was awful. One afternoon, I took off my clothes at the urging of the next-door girl, Gabriele, and so did she. Then we adorned ourselves in my mother’s scarves, pretending we were gypsy slaves. Such fun we were having! I tied Gabi to the wooden post that held up the ceiling in my bedroom, and I was delighting in the sensations of dominant pleasure brought on by her captive self, and so was she. However, Father happened to close the shop early and come upstairs, appearing suddenly at the door. We must

have been a picture of terror as we tried to flee out the window and across the roof. Gabi made it (she was a year older and faster), but Father caught me and laid me across his lap and whipped me with his belt, leaving streaks and welts on my buttocks and legs, which Mother later treated with butter.

He hardly ever spoke of the war, but I knew he'd been shot down over northern England. I've always pictured a slow falling out of the sky, plenty of time to realize he was going to be captured, and perhaps shot in the head. But the British didn't shoot him. They shipped him off to Canada, to a POW work camp in the Alberta prairies. There he met my mother, Esther Blodgett, who delivered milk from her family's dairy.

One day, so she told me, he was standing by the wire fence and he asked her for a cup of milk. She blushed and stammered, and then poured him some in a metal cup. He drank it back, a lonely figure of great handsomeness caught behind the wire.

After awhile, the POWs were dispatched to work on nearby farms. He ended up on my grandfather's dairy and beet farm. I imagine the scar on his cheek caught the light as he ate dinners with the family, making my mother's heart catch too, as though the scar were the mark of a Heidelberg sword and he a silent hero chained by a system that had left him meek and imprisoned. Like their large horse, Fred, who could kick you dead, but who instead was yoked each morning to the truck to deliver the steel cans of milk and cream.

Poor Mother! She expected to feel this complex mix of pity and love forever. She didn't realize how quickly everything would change once she had married him and he had brought her back to Germany to set up a new life in Freiburg.

One day when I was ten, on a field trip to a neighbouring town, I saw my father in the square, eating lunch with a woman I'd never

seen. I saw him take a forkful of omelette and hold it out for her, and I realized that he was different. He seemed light. I didn't approach. But later I thought a great deal about seeing him like that, and I began to wonder if the man I'd seen had even *been* my father.

This memory has a strange emulsive sheen, like the scar on my father's face.

By twelve I'd figured things out. I heard my parents arguing in the bedroom, his voice hard and loud, and hers so sad, patiently lapping at the spaces in between, like a tide against rocks. *Lap, lap, lap*. You see, her job had been to liberate him—to witness him step from behind the prison fence. But now here was the consequence of freedom: endless affairs.

If I was going to draw a picture of loneliness, it would be my mother reading Shakespeare in the armchair by the window, in that town she didn't like, with its language she couldn't master. I believe that reading quietly in that upstairs room, listening to the ticking clock, she felt like a prisoner.

At fifteen I crossed the courtyard behind the shop, near the cages where my father kept his hawks. Glancing down, I felt my father imprinted in the face of the stones. Not his personality or self, but something akin to his essence—his juice. I felt it in the cobbles: his way of seeing things, his absolute prosaic silent darkness, his lies to my mother, his going downstairs to work Monday to Friday, his profession of helping people to see, fixing their glasses, his precise instruments and his blindness to her suffering. I felt that he had leached into the cobbles, and that he was capable of seeping into the geraniums in their pots, stopping their growth—tethering every piece of vegetation to himself, as he had tethered the spindly apple tree to the wall, espaliered its slender limbs in the one spot of backyard sun.

As he had captured everything.