

THE HISTORY
OF HISTORY

A N o v e l o f B e r l i n

Ida Hattemer-Higgins

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To the disappeared.

*Скажите мне, друзья, в какой Валгалле
Мы вместе с вами щёлкали орехи?*

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PART I

Flesh



*The coming awakening stands like the Greeks' wooden horse
in the Troy of dream.*

—WALTER BENJAMIN

ONE • The Persistence of Documents

The oceans rose and the clouds washed over the sky; the tide of humanity came revolving in love and betrayal, in skyscrapers and ruins, through walls breached and children conjured, and soon it was the year 2002. On an early morning in September of that year, in a forest outside Berlin, a young woman woke from a short sleep not knowing where she was. Several months of her life had gone missing from her mind, and she was as fresh as a child.

She sat upright. Her hair was long, her clothes made for a man: stiff trousers, a slouch hat, and a long woolen overcoat, although underneath she wore a pair of high-heeled boots.

South of her chin was the body of a harem girl—a luxurious body moving lithely, ripe with the knowledge of its strength, youth, and loping good health. Her face, on the other hand, was the face of a mandarin, overcome with sensitivity and perpetual nervous fatigue. The dirty postcards of the French *fin de siècle* sometimes show women of this kind: even while offering their bodies with abandon, such females wear faces charged with the pathos of intellect, growing kittenish with leery, fragile, world-weary grins. All in all, Margaret looked like someone who would find trouble, or in any case already had.

The night hung low. Margaret cast her eyes about and saw the birches. She reached for her bag—a leather briefcase lying slack beside the tree she leaned against—and noticed in the movement that her hand ached. Both her hands hurt, and she did not know why.

For want of a better idea, she stood up and began to walk. Twigs cracked under her high-heeled boots. The sound startled her.

She came to a brook and put the bag on her shoulder and her hands down on the stones and picked her way across on all fours. The woolen overcoat dragged in the water. She saw by the aging moonlight that came through a break in the young pines that her palms and fingers were rubbed deeply with dirt, so deeply it looked as though they were tattooed with it, although the skin of her wrists was clean and shining.

Margaret found the edge of the forest as the day came, as the air

turned grey and smoky. The slash of birdcall was shrill; it blotted out her thoughts for a while, and she stopped wondering what had happened in the night.

She found a dirt road, and then asphalt, villas, green awnings, slate roofs, wheelbarrows and hibernating rosebushes, and finally Grunewald Station.

By the time she was riding the train homeward into the city, Margaret was becoming afraid again, but after a new style. No longer did the threat sit at her throat. Now it lay in the marrow of things. She saw a perfectly miniaturized beech leaf pasted with wetness on her sleeve, and it seemed a souvenir of bad and mysterious things. She looked at her dirt-printed palms and did not know why the dirt. She shifted her body on the plastic seat and felt the drag of wet fabric, pulled aside the overcoat and heavy red scarf. She saw her clothes patched with bluish pine needles sticking to the wetness, and on the hem a displaced ladybug made its slow way, and she did not know why there was evidence of so much nature, of so much disorder.

The roofers, the chimney sweeps, the deliverymen on the early morning train—they looked at Margaret's windswept face and saw an expression rarely seen. There she was in her heavy wool, her face with its broken parts even heavier, and you could almost see it: she was crushing under the strain, trying to modernize herself to match the day. Some fine imperative had gone missing.

The S-Bahn train pulled into Zoo Station and paused. The cold air rushed through the open doors. With a heave of strength and puffed screech, an intercity train came to a halt on the neighboring track, and a platform clock struck six with an audible spasm of the minute hand. There was a chime over the loudspeaker: the announcement of departures to Lyon, to Trieste, even to Amsterdam, and the crowd on the platform shifted like a hive.

The doors shut and the train slipped into motion. Margaret looked out through the milky graffiti scratched in the window. There was the glory of the morning city, and soon, intermittent through the trees, the gilded angel in the park caught the light. A woman walked under the bridge in the Tiergarten, on cobblestones the same color as the automatic pigeons picking between them. She wore a narrow white scarf and pushed a pram, and her hair blew up toward the sky with the wind.

Margaret looked away. She looked down at her knee. She saw the red and black insect crawling there. She frowned. Her lips turned

under. She felt a fury and an envy and a sense of starvation. She reached down, and with two fingers, she lifted the checkered insect and held it in her hand.

She closed her eyes, but there was no escape.

She hauled her eyes open again. Sleep frightened her as well. She looked out the window through smarting eyes, her right hand cradling the crawling beetle, and then she saw, but now in the far distance, the woman with the white scarf, and again the wind lifted the woman's hair toward the sky, and it was like a scream.

All it took was a tightening—the red and black beetle became a streak of syrup on her hand.

She could not help it: Margaret slept, sinking deeper toward the window, her knees nudging the knees of the woman opposite, the membranes of her eyelids so pale they were translucent to the shock of the sun. She dreamt terrible dreams.

She woke up at the end of the line at Ahrensfelde, in the grasses and trees again, but the morning was no longer in its early tooth, and she was on the eastern edge of Berlin instead of the west. She had slept through her transfer at Friedrichstrasse. It was a train employee who woke her. He asked to see her ticket. Margaret jerked her head up. She reached into the breast pocket of her heavy man's overcoat and found an American passport, soaked through and reeking. She fingered the pocket on the other side and found a laminated student ID with its semester train ticket.

When she got home to her apartment in Schöneberg, she was so light that, moving toward the bedroom, she hardly had to walk, lifted by a wave and thrown against the surf.

One Margaret, then, a more solid one, pulled herself under the covers and slept hungrily, and another one, a shadow of the sleeping girl, went into the wardrobe and took everything out. She carried it all down to the courtyard and heaved the clumps of clothing indiscriminately into the trash. She came back up to the bedroom, where she slipped in with the sleeping Margaret again, and they were one.

When the reunified Margaret awoke from the third sleep, it was a new planet. On this new planet, she went back to her old life.

TWO • The Glass Globe

Margaret Taub was her name, and she worked at Hello, Berlin! as a walking-tour guide. Every day she marched a gaggle of tourists across the length of Berlin—around Hackescher Markt and over the Museum Island, in single file down Unter den Linden, through the Brandenburg Gate, south beyond the dust-white construction sites, and along the path of the disappeared Wall. Later they cut through vacant lots to the remains of the Nazi ministries, and ended finally sometimes at the buried bunker of Adolf Hitler, sometimes at Checkpoint Charlie. It all depended on the tour's theme.

Along the way, Margaret told the customers about the comedies and tragedies of Berlin: the erstwhile cabarets on the Friedrichstrasse and the tirades of Honecker; the night in 1989 when the Wall fell and the night in 1938 when the synagogues burned; the afternoon in 1967 when the students came out for the Shah's visit; the night in 1919 when Freikorps soldiers clubbed Rosa Luxemburg with rifle butts and threw her into the canal to die.

In the weeks after her emergence from the Grunewald forest, Margaret gave the tours as she always had, and in some ways it was like old times. But the days grew colder, the trees wept their leaves, and—who could say why—she grew strange. She no longer made eye contact with her customers. And whereas before, if she had avoided their gaze, it was because she was either cocky or the reverse of cocky, something like a child frightened of its own precocity, now the inner mechanism had changed. When Margaret's eyes slid off toward the far horizon these days, it was without a trace of flirtation.

The fact was this—she was entering a kind of trance. Walking the city, she encouraged the events she spoke of to crowd up against her eyes, and everything glimmered. Flames blackened the Reichstag when she looked over to it; on Friedrichstrasse there were nothing but dancing girls in nude tableaux; at the Pergamon, day after day, Peter

Weiss was creeping in on his way to clandestine meetings with his fellow socialists, and it was all vivid, and it was all a balm.

Even the so-called present was unnaturally animated. On the street once called Hermann-Görling-Strasse, they were clearing a site for a giant memorial during the months of her “convalescence,” and every time she went by it with the tourists, the site had changed a little and seemed to be growing like a garden. All the pictures of the stages of its growth came together as she walked along its flank, and played before her eyes with the whirring breeze of a flip book.

As for her customers—not looking at them, it became possible not to notice a single one. Sometimes a bolder of their number, usually a gregarious Australian, would trot beside Margaret from site to site, and ask what she, Margaret, an American, was doing in Berlin. It was not that Margaret failed to answer, but these days she replied by rote, almost as if it were part of the official tour script. She had moved to Berlin six years ago to study history at the Freie Universität, she would say. No, she never went back to her native New York. To which the customer would show surprise. She was so young, never going home—what about her family? Didn’t they miss her?

At this, a strange transaction would occur. Margaret would fix the customer with a gaze of the profoundest curiosity and pity, as if the customer had not asked a question but rather confessed to some rare and grotesque character trait. A moment later, her face would change very abruptly again, and it would become apparent that the look of curiosity had been an act. Although there was no hint of malignance or mockery in the deception, the piece of theater would strike the customer, who had merely been trying to be friendly, as somehow cruel. This was the only sort of unkindness that Margaret ever served up, but it was something she did more and more.

And the customer, downright uncomfortable then, because after the disappearance of all expression from Margaret’s face, her gaze was likely traveling—with a bird as it crossed the sky, or flipping back and forth together with a flag at the top of a ministry as it rattled in an oceanic wind—the customer might continue to chatter, voluble and embarrassed, still banging on the same pot. But oh, were her parents still in New York? Didn’t she go home for the holidays at least? No, she would reply, somewhat dreamily. She never went “home” (you could hear the quotation marks in her voice); she did not get along with her mother. And her brothers and sisters? She did not have any.

At which point, if it had reached such a point, Margaret would turn and pull back, her face white, and make a quick head count before leading the group further on to the next site, or beginning to lecture in her large, artificial voice.

If there had ever been a time when the customers might have made another type of miscalculation and assumed Margaret was one of those alert and artistic young expatriates of the kind that showed up in such numbers in Berlin in the 1990s—to open galleries in bombed-out ruins, found clubs under manhole covers, form neo-glam bands and squat in abandoned apartment houses as the ill-used city rose capersome, a recovered invalid, from its long stay in the hospital bed of the twentieth century—there was something about the smell of Margaret Taub, something sour and somnolent and quieted out, that suggested that she, no—this one had never belonged to that happy swelling. And she knew it, and they knew it, and maybe she even knew that they knew it.

Should Margaret have tried to discover what sinister chain had wrapped her life?

Perhaps she should have, but she did not.

The night in the forest and everything around it was an elementary blank. If pressed (of course, she was never pressed), she might have simply said: “Lately, I’m a little uneasy.” With no one did she mention how the city’s past was dancing before her eyes, nor any of her more alarming symptoms, which had begun to pop up, one after the other.

Margaret returned to her classes at the university in these weeks, but there she did not speak to anyone either. She rode the U-Bahn down to the dying meadows of the Freie Universität and sat by herself in the library. She wore an assortment of men’s dress clothing: moth-eaten woolen trousers and broadcloth shirts grown stiff with age, and always a particular grease-smearred topcoat that looked to be several decades older than the rest. And she wore a felt hat—perhaps to disguise that she was not in the habit of washing her hair. The effect belonged to no subculture anyone knew of, and gradually rebuffed the other students.

Margaret did not mind. During lectures she sat well away from them, deep in her own thoughts, taking methodical notes from her perch at the back of the hall—notes which, not long after having been made, their blue, reptilian ink already fading, seemed foreign to her, not of her own hand. She memorized dates, causes and effects, uprisings and assassinations, theories and countertheories—this was for the

sake of the tours in the city, where, if the customers quizzed her, it was distasteful to be caught out.

But she did not register for examinations that might propel her toward a degree, nor make any other frantic efforts on behalf of semester deadlines. She ignored the early notes she had made for her master's thesis, which had been on the topic of Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacists.

Margaret was leaving something behind. She no longer suffered from ambition. Information was fodder for the tours, nothing more. She studied avidly but always remaining in place, and the university was large and remote as an unjealous god, and took no notice of her treadmill existence.

And though the calendar appeared to be continuing its slow plod whenever she checked it, Margaret was dogged by a peculiar sensation. She felt that somehow, somewhere along the way when she had not been paying careful attention (and how could she have been so heedless?), time had come to an end. Now it was only a matter of a short interval before the world faded out entirely. Sometimes she was even gripped by a strange suspicion, unlikely as it seemed, that every last thing was already gone. All that now met her ears and eyes was a vestigial flare or after-impression, like the shape of the sun burnt on the retina.

So in that case, the logical (and yet also illogical) conclusion was this: the more she looked, the less there was left to see. To observe was to eat. She had to ration.

This was difficult, as everything burned terribly brightly. The Berlin street came shining to her, whore for attention that it was, offering up this face, that reference, and it was all a magic lantern show, cheap and profligate. She began to feel, in a hallucinatory kind of way, that brightness and time were competing siblings, tugging resentfully at one another's realms. Brightness was winning. The brighter the city burned, the more time as a linear ray exhausted its last dregs and died. And conversely, the more time narrowed and dropped off for reasons of its own, the brighter everything became.

It all filled Margaret with dread. She tried to control the terror of the conquering brightness. First with the tours in the mornings, in this period of convalescence, the twinkling past was an opiate. But afterward, in the afternoons, the dread returned, and she was forced to distract herself.

Distract herself she did. She bought flowers for the side table in the

long hallway of her cavernous, echoing apartment in Schöneberg. She cooked lentils. She went for a beer now and then, sat outside during the last of the lukewarm days, and as it grew colder, in smoky corners of pubs. Sundays, she walked around the Berliner flea markets, buying this or that or anything at all—a chalky pot for the kitchen, a flower box for the sill.

After that strange and terrible night in the Grunewald forest, the weeks went by and became months. And then the months flew by and became *two years*. Time will pass very quickly, if you are convinced it is already over. Two years rolled away, never to be seen again.

By the time autumn of 2004 pulled around, Margaret was so solitary, she was an almost unrecognizable version of herself.

She had used the purgatory well, however. The dread that had been her constant companion—it was close to gone. At the end of two years, the terror was swaddled and buried; it hardly had a heartbeat. A mirror to the lips of the sleeper clouded so slightly, it might be thought nothing at all.

And this is where the real story begins.

THREE • Time, Flowers

In November 2004, there was an event, and it is best to describe precisely how it happened. Right from the start, it was a ruinous development. Margaret came home from the university one afternoon when the final leaves were yellow, and found a letter in her mailbox, standing like a flag of surrender.

It had been a long time since Margaret last received a letter. The upstart scrap of intimacy—for she saw it as an intimacy from the beginning—surged at her, a gust of wind. Merely the sight of the handwritten address, and she felt herself begin to tilt.

When she looked at the letter more closely, however, she found that, no, in fact it was not addressed to her. She was Margaret Taub, but this was for a Margaret Täubner. And then she checked the return address, and it too was unfamiliar. The letter must have come to her in error. Perhaps someone searched out an address on the Internet and tangled the rows of names.

But even though it was not addressed to her, Margaret opened the letter. For some reason she could not name, she was excited. On this yellow autumn day, Margaret Taub became more excited than she had been in a very long time.

The letter turned out to be nothing but a formality—a medical doctor summoning this other Margaret T. to an appointment. Margaret's face fell, although only the *Hausmeister* raking leaves in the courtyard garden was there to observe the plunge.

The wording, however, struck Margaret as unique and it is worth reproducing it here in full.

Very honored Frau Margaret Täubner,

Belatedly I have scheduled an appointment for you on Tuesday afternoon, November 16, 2004, at 15:00. Please come to my office in the Schwäbische Strasse and bring your insurance card.

I would also like to add, in case you are concerned: let it be known

that, although you and I have not always seen eye to eye, I remain interested in your fate.

With friendly greetings,
Dr. Gudrun Arabscheilis

Margaret glanced over it, and then over it once again. The strange show of familiarity in the second paragraph puzzled her. "You and I have not always seen eye to eye." More perhaps than a medical doctor was in the habit of expressing to a patient.

Margaret took the letter up into her apartment.

She went to make tea, but waiting for the water to boil, pushed by an unseen hand, she came back almost instantly to the whispering letter. She reread it, tracing its grain with her fingertip. The letter gave off a gentle warmth, an oddly bright iridescence. She noticed too, in the letterhead, a telephone number. She took up the phone and dialed.

The answering voice was brittle, feminine.

"I'm afraid I received a letter from your office in error," Margaret began. "A letter meant for a Margaret Täubner. But I'm Margaret Taub."

The woman commanded Margaret to hold. Footfalls went clapping—heels against wooden floors, echoes against high ceilings, slamming doors. There was a swish and the phone was taken up again. Margaret found she had been holding her breath.

"Doctor Arabscheilis has instructed me to tell you—if you are the Margaret who lives at Grunewaldstrasse 88—" The woman cleared her throat: "Are you Margaret at Grunewaldstrasse 88?"

"Yes, I am," Margaret said.

"In that case, she said to tell you expressly that your family name is of no interest to her. She'll expect you on Tuesday the ninth."

Margaret was astonished.

"I don't know the doctor," she said.

"Better you come here and work it out with her yourself." The woman was businesslike in the usual way.

"No, but thank you, I—" Margaret felt the muscles of her back tightening.

"You'll discuss it with the Frau Doktor when you're here," the woman cut her off. "*Auf Wiederhören.*" The line went dead.

Margaret did not call back. She sat with the lifeless receiver in her hand for a good ten minutes, maybe more.

By Tuesday the sixteenth, Margaret had in fact decided to appear at the appointment. Since the call to the doctor's office, the flowers of time had been blossoming, cracking open slowly instead of racing toward death. The key, she thought, was that it had been such a long time since anyone had paid any attention to her, even mistaken attention, and, truly, it must be admitted that despite everything, Margaret was lonely. Now here was this doctor: "interested in" her "fate." She did not yet suspect nor wish for anything more than companionship.

FOUR • The Speculum

When she arrived at the doctor's address on Tuesday, she found she already knew the place by sight. Outside, a small gold plaque screwed to the entryway shone in the sun, and Margaret recognized it. Often when the day was bright and she rode her bicycle north to Wittenbergplatz, the gold of that plaque caught her eye.

The building itself was patrician *Gründerzeit*, with balconies heavily filigreed, and a cool, damp, white façade.

Margaret came into the courtyard and looked about. The walls were close around the quiet garden, looming and corpulent. But as for an entrance to a doctor's practice, there was none to be seen. Margaret wandered about the instantly claustrophobic courtyard, her feet sinking into the mossy ground.

At the last moment before she turned about in frustration and went home, she spied a small green door, only as high as her shoulder and almost disappearing in the ivy that climbed the southern wall. Beside it was a sign, also caught in the ivy:

DR. GUDRUN ARABSCHILIS
Gynaekologie und Geburtshilfe, 3.OG
Sprechzeiten ganztätiglich

Dr. Gudrun Arabschilis
Gynecology and Obstetrics, 3rd Floor
Doctor's hours all day

Margaret's eyes glided over the specialties. Funny, she thought. These had not been included on the letterhead. Her eyes flitted over the sign a second time. She thought of running away.

But then—there was something about the wax on the surface of the ivy, something about the damp moss catching its green against her

shoes, something about the smell of the wet stucco (it had recently rained) that made Margaret press the buzzer after all, made her even a little light-headed.

The door chimed, and the lock sprang open with no comment from the intercom. Margaret ducked low to get through. She began to climb the stairs leading to the office.

In the stairwell, a familiar aroma overcame her, a smell she could not describe but which she knew well. At first she thought the smell came from the polished wood of the banister. It smelled of long-ago hardened varnish and dirt, like the smell of human skin after a day outside in the summer city. She heard her feet plodding beneath her and dipped her nose down toward the banister. All in a rush it came upon her: no, the scent did not come from the stairs, nor from the stairwell, nor even from the banister. It came from something within Margaret. It came from the experience of climbing the stairs. It wasn't the emotion that was triggered by the smell, but the smell running out of the emotion within her. For a moment she forgot the doctor entirely and had a rampant euphoria.

At the top of the stairs she came into an empty waiting room. There was a rubber plant in the corner. The plastic chairs were bright, and white paneling lined the walls. A nurse-receptionist with hair drawn tightly back from her brow sat behind a counter so high, Margaret could not see her face.

"Name, please," the nurse said.

Margaret had not yet caught her breath. "Margaret," she said.

"*Family* name," the woman corrected.

"Taub," Margaret said. She went close on tiptoe and peered over the counter.

"Taub?" The woman looked up from her paperwork. Her irritated eyes were ringed by green and golden shadow.

"Yes, Taub." The practice had a hospital style and Margaret felt a shock of cool.

"I'm going to enter you into the logbook as Margaret Täubner," the receptionist said.

"But that's not my name," Margaret said. Her euphoria of only a few moments before was quickly ebbing.

The receptionist, for her part, thought little of the disagreement. Her head disappeared again. Margaret went higher on tiptoe. The

nurse filled out a form with a calm left arm, not even asking to see Margaret's insurance card. Margaret tried to see which name the woman had chosen but even tall Margaret could only see the top third of the woman's body. The woman's tightly drawn hair pulled ever more taut as she concentrated.

Margaret took a seat in one of the plastic chairs. She waited a long time.

At last another voice, a very loud, warbling voice, called out Margaret's name, or rather Margaret Täubner's name, from all the way down the hall.

"The doctor will see you now," the nurse said. "Fourth door, all the way at the end."

As she walked the long hallway, Margaret felt an old fear returning. By the time she came into the doctor's room, however, it had vanished.

All at once in this spacious back room, gone, too, was the feeling of hospital. Here, the ceiling loomed three times her height over her head, and there was nothing fluorescent or sterile about the place, but rather a dark and golden, leathery atmosphere of Wilhelmine brass. Bookshelves nicely laden covered half the walls, and the windows were all but obscured by rich, chestnut-colored velvet curtains with frayed golden tassels. Over the wide, creaking floorboards, well-worn Persian carpets crept. There was a massive oak desk at the center of the room, and only off to one side was the padded doctor's table with the much-despised metal stirrups. A low steel counter ran along another wall and held two microscopes, several jars of sterilized tongue depressors, boxes of rubber gloves and antiseptic agents in tall, white plastic bottles. On the wall above the oak desk, an antique medical drawing of the human musculature—a male and female figure side by side—was yellowing and curling at the edges. Next to it was a rather fine, large, and dark-toned portrait in oils of a middle-aged man with a watch chain, holding a good-looking infant in white laces to his breast.

Behind the desk sat a woman with an enormous head, so large, in fact, that Margaret stepped carefully farther into the room without being called, trying to see it more closely. The woman's hair was thick and grey, piled in glistening layers. Her forehead was massive and also glistening with what might have been sweat or might have been extremely healthy skin, Margaret wasn't sure. Her cheekbones pushed up into the area just beneath her eyes, so that her thickly lensed bifocals rested very high on her face.

She looked up as Margaret entered. Her glasses magnified her eyes out of all proportion to her head—Margaret was faced with eyes as big as golf balls, of a grey-green color, peering out of lashless lids.

The doctor nodded knowingly and seemed to coo ever so quietly under her breath—the airy tones of a pigeon. The woman was old, improbably old.

Margaret also realized, as the woman's utterances began to amplify, that what had seemed to be cooings were in fact the raspings of a pulmonary disease, emphysema perhaps.

The doctor spoke to Margaret in a voice that was both croaked and purred: "My dear, if you'll undress—we'll get started. Let's begin with a general exam. I imagine you haven't had a Pap smear in a very long time."

Margaret stepped back in alarm. The doctor seemed to be focusing on a point in the middle distance and did not look at Margaret at all. Margaret spoke up. "I'm not here for an examination," she said. She looked at the woman. "I should introduce myself. I'm—"

"Of course you are, my dear. I have been concerned for you."

Now it must be said: these words should have puzzled Margaret, and in any case should almost certainly have been corrected. Instead, Margaret accepted them like a gift. *I have been concerned for you*. Margaret, in her strange state, was so soothed, her loneliness so instantly assuaged, that she was almost willing to go along with the doctor unconditionally from that moment on.

Still, she tried. "I got your note in the mail." She cleared her throat in an involuntary expression of sympathy with the doctor's wheeze. "I believe there has been a mistake. I'm not the intended recipient."

"What if I were to tell you that you are free to be anyone you like?" The old woman moved her hands in the air. She was not looking at Margaret.

"Oh." Margaret studied her. Secretly, she felt a kind of vindication. Again, it was the choice of phrase: "free to be anyone you like," that pealed in her ears. She decided she would play as if she were Margaret Täubner for the time being at least. She did not see the harm, except perhaps to the real Margaret Täubner, if that woman could be presumed to desire an appointment with the strange Dr. Arabscheilis.

"Where shall I undress?" Margaret asked.

So they would start with the yearly exam, she thought; so be it.

The sun fell through the muslin curtains inside the heavy, velvet drapes, and lit up the dust motes in the air.

“You can undress right where you are,” the doctor said.

“Right here?”

“You don’t want to?”

“Well—” Margaret began.

“Gymnophobia! I remember now. You were always so coy. There is that same screen you used to use, there against the wall. You can unfold it and mask yourself just as before, leave your clothes behind. Then come over here and lie on the table.”

Now it was true that Margaret had decided to go along with the misunderstanding, and that was all well and good. But by this time, surely, the woman should have sniffed out her mistake. Margaret was not Margaret Täubner. This was plain as a pikestaff, even to a very old woman. “I remain interested in your fate,” the doctor had written, but now any imposter was welcomed greedily. And because Margaret did not know the meaning of the word the doctor had used, *gymnophobia*, she began to thrust on that term all her fantasies of what was going wrong. *Gymnophobia*—perhaps it was a fear of self-revelation. She even began to develop an image of this other Margaret T. in her mind. She would have very short hair, she decided, and a habit when she was sitting of holding her handbag on her lap, rather than letting it rest at her ankles.

Behind the screen, Margaret pulled off her trousers. She looked down at the floor and saw that the deep burgundy and intricate pattern of the Oriental carpet disguised years of grime. She was disgusted. She came out from behind the screen, nude from the waist down, and the doctor gestured toward the leather table with its swathe of white paper and stainless steel.

And now Margaret’s nakedness made her even more wretched; her misgivings ducked from her mind to her stomach.

The doctor hurtled to the table and began to adjust the stirrups to their full length. “Legs spread! Feet in!” she commanded. She turned around and went to the cabinets below the long counter, rooted about, searching for something with both hands. Margaret climbed up on the table. She watched the doctor more closely than ever.

The doctor returned and gripped Margaret’s knees to steady herself, sighing melancholically. She screwed the instrument tight. She seemed not to glance at the thing as she did so, her hands working automatically. “I know you’re uncomfortable, my dear, but practically,” she said in a low voice, “you’re very lucky.” Her golf-ball eyes seemed to mist

over again and she gazed into some middle distance that seemed to be her eyes' preferred resting point. Her hands went still, and she again gripped Margaret's knees. "The speculum of the nineteenth century presented a challenge to the nervous system of much greater consequence than the one you are enduring. It had a system of mirrors and lenses, and the light source, my dear girl, was a lamp flame. These early specula burned a mixture of alcohol and turpentine, and I shudder at the thought of the burns that were occasionally the sad drawback to their use. Knowledge of the inner in exchange for the beauty of the outer, I'm afraid."

"My goodness," Margaret said.

"You might well say." The doctor sighed, her head falling forward as though gone overripe. "Tell me," she said, "have you become *afraid* of doctors in the meantime?"

Margaret looked at her. She twitched. "I'm uncomfortable with gynecologists," she said, having come to the realization only at that moment.

The woman gave a wheeze of satisfaction. "And what might this discomfort be?" she asked sharply, shrugging off her rasping illness. "Young comrade, there are two categories of people who are afraid of visiting the doctor. Their fear may seem at first glance identical, but in fact has neither the same cause nor the same effect. In the first case, the individual never goes to see the doctor at all—he suffers from a generalized atelophobia—fear of imperfection, that is—which masks a dark and disastrous thanatophobia. He thinks if he ducks out of sight of his personal emissary of malignant mortality," she chuckled, "he might possibly escape the reaper.

"The second type of fear is much more complex," the doctor went on, "and because it lacerates in waves, rising and abating," she drew up her hand in a trembling arc, "the sufferer sees the doctor on occasion and can even develop a hippocratophile's hypochondria which brings him to the doctor regularly. It is not easy to categorize, but seems to be an unhappy conjoining of gymnophobia, algophobia, and myxophobia: the fears of nudity, pain, and slime respectively. May I call you comrade, my child? You're a grown woman."

Margaret nodded in surprise, pleased at least to learn the meaning of gymnophobia. The doctor went on, "Comrade, you were willing to see me today. Thus, I deduce your fear is of the latter kind."

"But—" Margaret hesitated. She looked at the doctor again. She

was still convinced that the woman would recognize her as *not* Frau Täubner at any moment. But the doctor, her eyes drawn into slits almost closed, seemed self-satisfied as a cat. Margaret tried her hand at a declaration. "I am only uncomfortable with gynecologists," she said carefully, "not with doctors generally."

"I do not change my case," the doctor said without slowing down. "A fear of nudity may only be associated with genital nudity in your case, and a fear of slime only with those moist feminine organs which remain mystical and disgusting to you." The doctor's head and eyes were strangely fixed.

The old woman started coughing very violently then, and when she finally stopped, a new light had entered her face. Margaret tried to speak, but the doctor raised her hand and silenced her. She sat down on a little stool between Margaret's spread legs. She rattled the speculum clamped inside Margaret's underbody as if she were about to go on with the exam, but her hand stopped and dropped. She breathed deeply in and out, more and more slowly, until, with her rasping breath, she sounded almost as if she were asleep.

Margaret waited. The doctor finally lifted her head. An expression of unbelievable discomfort began to twist the woman's face, as if she were choking. With difficulty, she asked:

"How is your little boy?"

"What?" Margaret craned her neck up, peering over the hillocks of her body.

"Oh," the doctor let out. "Oh, dear me," she said woodenly, and it was as though she were reciting a line in a play. Margaret had a sensation—she had opened a drawer not in her own house, and stumbled onto a treasure not her own, a treasure whose revelation was as awkward for her as it was for its owner. The doctor lifted her head toward the left corner of the room. "Perhaps I was mistaken," she said. "You don't have a child?"

"No—" Margaret began.

She should not have come here. A feeling crept up. She was surrounded by barking dogs. She closed her eyes and held still. She had blundered into other people's lives, and this was a musty place, smelled of bodies not her own. She said: "I am not Margaret Täubner."

The doctor snapped her hand away from Margaret's thigh as if she had touched a snake. "You're not Margaret Täubner?"

"No."

“Who are you then?”

“I’m Margaret Taub.”

But at this, the doctor surprised Margaret. She gave an exaggerated snort. She stood up, and there was a twitch around her eyes. “Comrade!” she said. “As for names—you can use *Arabscheilis* when you speak to me. As address I will accept both ‘doctor’ and ‘comrade.’ This question I leave up to you to decide. But don’t expect me to call you *Taub*.” The doctor spoke fluidly, but Margaret could see by her twitching cheeks that she was upset and unsure how to proceed.

The woman turned around as if to return to the counter, but she was not fated to reach it. She walked head-on into the screen that Margaret had propped up to indulge her alleged gymnophobia. The screen fell with a clatter, and the doctor stumbled heavily, groaned, and bounced into the side of an armchair. From there, she ricocheted into Margaret’s shoulder. At the impact, Margaret felt as if she had been deliberately attacked. The cold clamp of the speculum in her nether regions prevented her from alighting to fight or flee, nor did she know how to remove it. She was certain only that if she would hold still, nothing would hurt her, while any movement would mean certain internal crunching—of what, she knew not.

“Is there a problem, Doctor?” Margaret asked from her spot on the table, losing control of her voice.

“I’ll admit: I’m legally blind,” the doctor said, and Margaret made a sound like a mishandled guinea pig, “and in no position to act as a gynecologist any longer, not to you, and not to anyone else either. But you, my dear—it doesn’t need to matter to you that I am blind. I recognize your voice. Perhaps it was irresponsible of me to try to give you an exam today in light of my eyesight or lack thereof, but let’s be honest, shall we? You have problems of your own.”

“That’s true,” Margaret said almost automatically, “but—”

“I should never have let you out of my sight.” The doctor cried out, almost wailing. “I knew you were distraught.” And the doctor was in fact wringing her knuckly hands, her gigantic head swinging back and forth.

Her voice, when it came, sounded like river rocks knocking together. “Something terrible has happened.” She breathed with difficulty.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” Margaret said.

“Is that so?” the doctor said. “Where do you live?”

“Grunewaldstrasse 88.”

“How many American women by the first name of Margaret live at Grunewaldstrasse 88?”

Margaret’s fingers were cold, her head was beginning to swim. “I don’t know,” she said. “Only me, I suppose.”

“The wrong person.” The doctor gave a dry laugh. “Don’t delude yourself. I *know* you, Margaret. You’re the girl that left her family behind in America.” The doctor pointed her finger.

“Not exactly,” Margaret said. “My father was a German.”

“What?”

“I said, my father was a German.”

“That may be. Whoever he was,” the doctor said, contempt in her voice. She was silent. When she spoke again, her voice was even more hoarse, but the contempt was gone. “What have you been doing these last years? I would assume that for some time now you have been pursuing novelty, am I right? Those lost in a fugue seek novelty automatically; they can do little else.”

It was unaccountable, Margaret thought, that the woman immediately made such insinuations. Margaret wanted to get out of the room, but the contraption was still clamped in her. “Doctor—”

“We must do something. *I* must do something,” the doctor said. “But what am I to do?” The question was not directed at Margaret. The doctor craned her head upward toward the left window.

“You don’t need to do anything,” Margaret said. “There’s been a mistake. Please explain to me the circumstances of your—your falling-out with this Margaret Täubner.” Margaret thought perhaps this was the best way to clear up the misunderstanding. Find out what had happened, and then explain in a step-by-step manner why none of it could possibly be in accordance with her own identity.

But the doctor would have none of it. “Do not lure me into rekindling the flames of your punishing wrath!”

Let us pause and say that in the very broadest sense, the doctor caught Margaret off guard. Margaret Taub was a young woman who had been living for a very long time without certainties. Trying to establish one now, even in the privacy of her own mind, was almost entirely beyond Margaret’s capabilities, like trying to switch into the tongue of a long-deposed tyrant. Her attempts to counter the woman were sclerotic, if not to say completely lame.

The doctor, meanwhile, was still rising to her full vigor. “Listen to

me,” she was saying. “The role I am going to play is neither that of gynecologist nor actually that of mentor. I will act as memory surgeon. I think that is better than going to the police.”

Margaret’s face went cold. She lay her head back on the table and took several deep breaths. A madwoman. A “memory surgeon” the doctor called herself. Colors swam at Margaret’s eyes. At last she ventured, using her most accent-free German—and it was true that in this moment she did something peculiar: she adopted the problems of someone else, carried the whole situation over onto herself with an aptitude at which she later wondered. “I do not *mind*,” she said, slamming the last word into the room, “that I can’t remember.”

And the doctor pounced. “So it’s true that you can’t remember?”

Margaret was breathing with difficulty. So she was going to be “cured,” she thought, just as if she were Margaret Täubner. “I’ve had problems with my memory. I admit that,” Margaret said. “But that—that doesn’t mean I’m Margaret Täubner.”

The doctor was barely listening. “My dear, a patient of your type—the type, that is, I’m assuming you are, since it seems you are clinging to your illness invidiously—is infatuated with the nonexistence of the past. Recovery is like falling out of love.”

“No,” Margaret said, shaking her head. “That’s not right.”

“Does this not frighten you,” the doctor said, “to think of your life passing and leaving you with nothing in exchange for the years you’ve forfeited toward death?”

Margaret breathed in and out through her nose. She tried to calm herself.

A tall clock ticked in the corner. The doctor seemed to gaze at Margaret sadly from behind her blind eyes. She had managed to set herself up behind the desk again.

“Let us begin your therapy,” the doctor said, and Margaret saw that she was to be held captive. A blind woman was not going to release her until she had done everything for the recovery of a collection of memories that belonged to someone else. Margaret could feel the now warm stainless steel of the speculum; its temperature had risen to match her body’s.

Something occurred to Margaret with which she might make one final effort.

“How is it that you suppose an American like myself has the last name Täubner?” she asked. “We don’t even have the letter *ä* in my country.”

“Of course, comrade, your father is German, just as you say. *Just* as you say. Or at least, the man who gave you his name—Täubner.”

Margaret did not know what to reply. She thought: another American at Grunewaldstrasse 88, also Margaret T., whose father was also German? It did in fact seem very unlikely, and she felt alone.

“My dear,” the doctor said gently, as if having sensed this, “I am not a blind woman passing as a doctor. I am a doctor who has passed into blindness.” The doctor swiveled about in her chair.

She opened two cabinet doors that climbed the length of the wall behind her. She began feeling about in the darkness. Margaret looked into the grotto where the doctor’s hands played and saw what appeared to be, if she was not mistaken, a film projector. The doctor held her head at an odd angle. She was performing all her intricacies by feel. “It has been many years since I’ve treated a case of your type,” she said. “Immediately after the war, I saw violations against memory more egregious than yours. Sometimes I had success with a cure—not always, but when, then mostly through what we would today call guided imagery therapy, although at the time it had no name, it was merely something I thought up spontaneously, thanks to my practical genius.” The doctor smiled.

She went on. “Let’s begin, shall we? You seem to be highly lucid, I will assume for the time being that yours is a case of psychogenic amnesia. If it is organic, there is little I can do in any case, so let us assume it is psychogenic.”

Margaret did not try to understand. She was thinking of other things.

“It happens there is a film I have right here in the office,” the doctor went on. Her fingers were busy, and her voice caught for a moment in distraction. “If this film has the effect it occasionally has had on others, we might see—*dramatic* changes in you.” The doctor fumbled with the projector. Finally it began to tick. It started and it stopped. Once it was responding without fail, the doctor turned it off again and sat facing Margaret.

She began to speak slowly, the stresses of her words falling like a clock’s hands. “As you watch this film,” she said, “here is what I would like you to consider, my girl,” and the doctor’s voice glided up, becoming ever more incantatory and commanding. “In its entire history,” she said, “the Western world has produced nothing more meaningful than what you are about to see. Nothing has ever surpassed it

for density of significance. Can you believe that?” the doctor asked, with real curiosity.

Margaret looked at the woman. “Not really,” she said. The speculum was not painful, but the denatured steel in the bottom of her was worse than pain.

“A work of perfect meaning, that is, of perfect pregnancy,” the doctor went on, “is the opposite of oblivion. It is the linking node between fantasy and reason, at which point all is remembered and correlated. If you imbibe an expression—whether it be symphony, poem, or skyscraper—whose creator has endowed it by intention or accident with perfect pregnancy, you will attain perfect consciousness.”

“But—” Margaret began.

“Wait,” the doctor said. “You *will* understand. After experiencing a work of perfect pregnancy, or, otherwise put: an artwork of perfect meaningfulness. The mind will enjoy a season of pulchritude, finding the grace to read all metaphors as they ride in: the symbols hidden in the clouds, the analogical proxies buried in the faces of dogs and clocks, the eyes and ears of subway trains will open, the slightest corner of a footprint will summarize the Avesta, the threading of an oak stump will tell whence came Jupiter, and every poor crescent fingernail will be a prophecy of the future history of the human earth. You will admit—this sort of miracle has the capacity to become the greatest therapeutic tool of all, my darling.

At this last term of endearment, the doctor turned away from Margaret toward the projector, and at that moment, Margaret did not think about perfect pregnancy or perfect meaningfulness or anything of the kind. She was struck by something else—it must have been latent all along, but she only recognized it now. She was sure: the doctor did not like her. Or she did not like, at least, the person she believed Margaret to be. She spoke to Margaret kindly and with many loving names, but only as a self-discipline and camouflage. There was a movement in her neck, a slide of the gullet as she spoke, that Margaret saw now to be the jerky passage of pride being swallowed. Margaret considered again what the doctor had written in the letter: “You and I have not always seen eye to eye.” All at once, the phrase seemed ominous. Coolness licked her; she was bathed in a new flush of sweat.

The film projector began to tick, and the doctor was now circling the perimeter of the room, running her hands against the walls to find each window in turn and pull the tall brown drapes closed, until she

and Margaret sat in a chiaroscuro world. Margaret, from her vantage point on the examination table, where she was still coldly exposed, was compliant. She turned her attention to the wall across from the doctor's desk. A small black-and-white film began to play there, its light glowing yellow.

It is fair to say that Margaret both watched the film and went to sleep. She saw the film in the same sort of trance in which she gave tours of the city, where all that is perceived is blown up so large that it crowds out other elements of consciousness. The darkened room, the buzzing light of the projector, her sudden freedom from the obligation to speak—all came together and allowed her to swim away.

The little film was poor-quality 8mm, in black and white, at least fifty years old. The air in the room seemed to become thinner as it played.

It began in the woods. From the top of what seemed to be a narrow rock outcropping, the camera looked down on a lake nestled in the forest. Trees sprang up around the lake like scaffolding. The water was inky, black, and cold.

Gradually, however, there came a dance of light on the water, and soon it burned. More and more, and then the surface of the lake was all ablaze, the fire so bright the woods around it went dark.

And then a black shape, a smudge like a thumbprint, formed in the center of the lake amidst the flames, a shadow rising at the crux of the water. It was a figure—a man—who was rising from the flames, and the way he rose was not with volition or muscular energy. He rose sideways like a doll on a string, jouncing along the slope.

But then he straightened, and when he did, he glided through the air, flew through it, amazingly!, and landed perfectly straight on his feet at the top of the cliff, next to the camera. And there he was, standing with wide stance, quivering and proud, leonine head held high.

But the figure was more distinct now, and it was not a man. It was only a boy, fourteen or fifteen, in costume—a medieval huntsman. Long, waving black hair, and his broad, well-shaped forehead caught the light as he turned it to the side, a forehead that was square and flat and fine, a vein like an *M* pushing from it, and he had as much beauty in that moment as the young Gary Cooper coming toward the camera out of the Moroccan desert.

The boy took a sword from a sheath hung on a carnival belt slung

low around his narrow hips. He held the sword aloft, his face earnest, his arm extended and utterly convinced. Then, with a helpless, backward gesture, he brought it back down.

And the lake below continued to burn ever brighter, until abruptly it went black. At the same moment there was a flicker of movement, a neat parabola on the right edge of the frame, and the forest came back into focus and went still.

For a few seconds the projector continued to tick, and the forest persisted—only a slight rustle of branch now and then; a lonely bird alighting on a twig. And then gracelessly, and yet still with a kind of charm, like a cat lifting its paws out of water, the boy moved out of the frame.

The film ticked off.

For a while, Margaret and the doctor sat still: Margaret in one of her trances, and the doctor asleep.

The doctor finally woke herself with a snort. She said, as though time had not passed, “Treat your memories gently when they return, my dear.”

Margaret did not reply. The doctor sat for a while longer.

“Can I trust you will come back to the office?” she asked. “When your memories return, I mean? Your treatment isn’t finished, you know.” There was something much gentler about the doctor now.

Margaret said she would come, but she spoke in a flat voice.

“I’ll wager,” the doctor said, “that you believe you’ll never set foot in my office again. Perhaps you have judged me insane, or perhaps you are not as mentally disturbed as you pretend, and even now you are planning your escape to Brazil, or to some other country that has no extradition treaty with Germany.” She sat very still, drumming her fingers against the desk. She sighed. “In any case, I’m willing to take the risk.”

She felt her way across the room to Margaret, and at last removed the speculum from Margaret’s unfortunate abdomen.

At the prompt, Margaret rubbed her eyes and sprang off the table. She dressed and went as fast as she could back down to the courtyard and out into the street.

On the way home, the buildings on the Grunewaldstrasse grew farther into the sky. Margaret’s heart pounded and her cheeks flushed. She felt mysteriously unwell. Not as though the doctor had any right

to her insinuations, but as though Margaret had somehow been complicit in the accusation.

Another strange thing: the film, for its part, was the very opposite of what the doctor had promised. It offered nothing in the way of pulchritude, pregnant or not. On the contrary. After the viewing, Margaret felt much worse than before. The gentle breathing terror was wending back to life.

Poor Margaret! That evening, she went to the phone booth on Gleditschstrasse and looked in the Berlin telephone book, and then on the Internet. She found no Margaret Täubners listed in all of Germany, nor Margarethe Täubners, nor Margaretes, nor Margaritas nor Grits nor Gretchens nor Marguerites nor Maggies. She looked over the world, she looked in the U.S. telephone directories online. She tried various alternate spellings of Täubner. She found a record of a Margarethe who married a Taubner (without an *ä*) once in Missouri, but that woman had been dead more than fifty years now. She even did something she could not quite explain to herself. She looked for other Margaret Taubs. But Margaret Taub, too, was a lonely name.

Why was it Margaret did not chalk the whole thing up to a misunderstanding? Why did she let the doctor trouble her? After all, Margaret was neither crazy nor imbecile. Surely, once in the safety of her own home, she could have shrugged the whole thing off.

The answer is twofold. One, there was the rushing silence of the missing time, the time up until and including the night in the forest, which she could not remember. This effectively rendered her without alibi. The complete knowledge required in order for her to stand straight and declare herself a stranger to the doctor, once and for all—it was not there, she could not defend herself. She could not say for certain she had never been acquainted with this doctor, and she knew it.

There was another problem, however, something far less concrete, and therefore more dangerous. It was a matter of an ineffable distortion in Margaret's mental landscape. Just as a man of chronically injured pride believes a bank error in his favor to be a matter of celestial justice, Margaret's anxiety framed her vision, and she was incapable of understanding the doctor's interest as fully accidental.

The result was this: after the doctor's visit, Margaret no longer stood straight. She went about crookedly.

On that very first night, she dreamt she was leading a walking tour, but all the city's buildings were infected. It seemed there was a kind of mold. It was in the walls, even in the stone, and she did not know where the trouble lay. Was it in the atmosphere or was it in the soil, was it growing from within the city, or was it blowing in from the outside—a cancer or a virus?

The next day she again went to the computer. She clicked farther and farther back in her e-mail account, trying to reach the e-mails from two years before. She was swimming beyond the buoys marking the shallow sea. She found a few pieces of mail from her boss at the tour company dating from March 2003. She clicked backward. The dates jumped. The next set of e-mails was from August 2002. There was a six-month gap.

She called her boss a wonderfully correct Englishman, at home. At first he did not understand what she was asking. "Well, Margaret," he finally said, "that was when you went traveling, wasn't it?"

"Was it?"

"I can look it up in our finances." He went from the phone and came back. "Yes," he said. "We did not make any payments to your account from August 2002 to February 2003. I'm remembering now, you went traveling in the East. Something about Odessa, or Yalta, wasn't it? You told us at the time."

"Right," said Margaret hoarsely.

"Is that why you called?"

"I'm trying to straighten things out in my mind."

"Is everything all right?" He paused. "I see you are scheduled to give a tour already tomorrow morning. Shall we find you a replacement? You don't sound well, Margaret."

"No, no," Margaret said. She reflected. She thought she would try something craftier. "I hope I haven't inconvenienced the company over the years with my—absences," she said.

"Absences?"

"Back then, you know . . ." She let her voice trail off, hoping he would fill in.

“Margaret, you’ve always been very reliable. We’ve appreciated that. Freelancers are not always of your kind.”

“I see. I couldn’t recall whether I had . . .” She allowed her voice to trail off again, but her boss too was silent, and the moment became awkward. “Well thank you anyway.” She rang off.

She had never taken a trip to Odessa or Yalta. She was sure of it.

In the bookshelf she had thirty-seven chronological notebooks in which she copied passages from historical documents and kept records of her lectures and seminars. Again, she began sifting through the dates. Again, she found a hole. The period from August to February had left behind no notes.

She sat back down in the chair. She thought of the time she had lost. The record stopped, the colors ceased, the numbers jumped and skidded and went dark. To think of the gap was to stick her tongue into the soft, itching place where a tooth has been lost. The effort to remember life experience is a strange kind of effort.

And then that night as Margaret looked out her window and saw the rhythmic streetlamps getting smaller in the distance beat by beat an image did arise in her after all, vaguely. It was so weak, so soft. A poorly sketched little dream. A woman in a blue dress came wavering before her imagination. Margaret closed her eyes. The way she saw her, the woman was walking up a red staircase. She was climbing around an oval spiral that circled a central shaft. At the top of the stairwell was a skylight made of convex glass. The woman climbed up and up around the brilliantly curving banister, and as she did, the milky light from the central shaft played on her face.

But Margaret could only feel the woman visually, she could not see her, and this sensation—of visual knowledge without vision—made her think it was not a memory at all, but something she had once seen in a film. Right away, she tried to think of something else, frightened by the triviality of it. In things one knows to be critically important, triviality is a kind of horror.

Finally, later that night, the phone rang, and although Margaret did not manage to get it in time—when she spoke into the receiver there was no one on the other end—still, it jounced her down from the high wire. She stared into the mirror in the hallway by the telephone.

She began to laugh: What a fool I’ve been, she said to herself. Of

course she was not Margaret Täubner. Of course she did not know the strange doctor. She would not have forgotten such a huge and bulbous head! And she laughed and wondered at how the doctor had rattled her. She thought of the doctor's office, which now seemed very far away: its mustiness, dark drapes, the shadows, the film projector hidden in the cupboard. It was absurd; it belonged to another dream, a missing country. It was not hers.