



Me and
Kaminski

A Novel

Daniel
Kehlmann

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY CAROL BROWN JANEWAY

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What a singular being do I find myself! Let this my journal show what variety my mind is capable of. But am I not well received everywhere? Am I not particularly taken notice of by me of the most distinguished genius? And why? I have neither profound knowledge, strong judgment, nor constant gaiety. But I have a noble soul which still shines forth, a certain degree of knowledge, a multiplicity of ideas of all kinds, an original humor and turn of expression, and, I really believe, a remarkable knowledge of human nature.

—James Boswell, *Journals*, December 29, 1764

I

I AWOKE as the conductor knocked on the door of the compartment. It was a little after 6 a.m., we'd been there in half an hour, had I heard him? Yes, I muttered, yes, and dragged myself up into a sitting position. I had been lying across three seats, alone in the compartment, my back hurt and I had a stiff neck. My dreams had been shot through with the persistent racket that comes with any journey, voices in the corridor, announcements about platforms; they were unpleasant dreams, and I was jolted out of them repeatedly; once someone had yanked open the compartment door from outside in the corridor and coughed, and I had to get up to shut it. I rubbed my eyes and looked out the window: raining. I pulled on my shoes, took my old shaving kit out of my suitcase, yawned, and went outside.

The mirror in the toilet showed me a pale face, a mess of hair, and a cheek still imprinted with the pattern of the seat upholstery. I plugged in the shaver, nothing happened. I opened the door, saw the conductor still down at the other end of the car, and called out that I needed help.

He came and gave me a look and a thin smile. The shaver, I said, wasn't working, clearly there was no current. Of course there's current, he replied. No, I said. Yes, he said. No! He shrugged, perhaps it's the wiring, but in any case there's nothing he can do. But surely, I said, it's the very least one can expect from a conductor. He wasn't a conductor, he said, he was a train escort. I said I really didn't care. He asked me what I meant. I said I really didn't care what the job was called, it was superfluous anyway. He said he wasn't going to let himself be insulted by me, I should watch out, he might just bust me in the chops. He could try, I said, I was going to file a complaint in any case, and I wanted his name. He wasn't going to do any such thing, he said, and what's more, I stank and I was getting a bald spot. Then he turned around and went away cursing.

I shut the door to the toilet and took a worried look in the mirror. Of course there was no bald spot where on earth did that ape get an idea like that? I washed my face, went back to the compartment, and put on my jacket. Outside the window railroad tracks, electricity poles, and wires began to form a tightening grid, the train was slowing down, and the platform was already in sight: billboard, telephone booths, people with luggage carts. The train braked and came to a halt.

I pushed my way along the corridor toward the door. A man jostled me, and I pushed him aside. The conductor was standing on the platform. I handed down my suitcase. He took it, looked at me, smiled, and let it fall smack onto the asphalt. "Sorry," he said, and grinned. I climbed down, picked up the suitcase, and walked away.

I asked a man in uniform about my connecting train. He gave me a long look, then fished out a crumpled little book, tapped his forefinger thoughtfully against his tongue, and began to thumb the pages.

"Don't you have a computer?"

He gave me a questioning look.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "Keep going."

He thumbed, sighed, thumbed again. "Intercity 6:35. Track 8. Then change . . ."

I moved on quickly, I had no time for his chatter. Walking wasn't easy, I wasn't used to being awake at such an early hour. My train was standing at track 8. I boarded it, entered the carriage, pushed a fat lady aside, worked my way to the last free window seat, and let myself fall into it. A few minutes later we were on our way.

Straight opposite me was a bony man wearing a tie. I nodded to him, he returned the greeting and then turned his eyes away. I opened my suitcase, took out my notepad, and laid it on the narrow table between us. I almost knocked his book off, but he was able to grab onto it in time. I had no time to lose, my article was already three days overdue.

Hans Bahring, I wrote, *who has made many . . . no! . . . numerous attempts to bore us to death . . . yes, that's it . . . with his insights, no, badly researched insights into lives of important, no, prominent historical personalities, has come up with another one. To call his just-published biography of the artist, no, painter Georges Braque a failure would probably be to overpraise a book that . . .* I stuck the pencil between my teeth. Now I needed something really to the point. I pictured Bahring's face when he read the article, but that didn't give me any ideas either. This was less fun than I'd thought it would be.

I was probably just tired. I rubbed my chin, the stubble felt unpleasant, I simply had to get a shave. I put down the pencil and leaned my head against the windowpane. It was starting to rain. Drops were hitting the glass and streaming in the opposite direction from the one we were traveling in. I blinked. As the rain got heavier, the raindrops seemed to make little exploded puddles full of faces, eyes, and mouths. I closed my eyes, and while I listened to the drumming of the water, I dozed off: for a few moments, I didn't know where I was; I felt I was floating through the huge emptiness of space. I opened my eyes: the glass was covered with a film of water, and trees were bowed under the force of the rain. I closed my notepad and put it away. Then I noticed the book the man in front of me was reading: *Picasso's Last Years* by Hans Bahring. I didn't like this. I had the feeling I was being mocked somehow.

"Lousy weather," I said.

He looked up for a moment.

"Not very good, is it?" I pointed to Bahring's hash-up.

"I find it interesting," he said.

"That's because you're not an expert."

"That'll be why," he said, and turned the page.

I leaned my head against the neck rest, my back was still hurting from the night in the train. I took out my cigarettes. The rain was easing up, and the first mountains were becoming visible through the haze. I used my lips to pull a cigarette out of the pack. As I clicked the lighter, I flashed on Kaminski's *Still Life of Fire and Mirror*: a flickering dazzle of bright colors out of which a lance-like flame came leaping, as if it were trying to shoot clear of the canvas. What year? I didn't know. I had to prepare better.

"This is a nonsmoking carriage."

"What?"

The man didn't look up, just pointed to the sign on the window.

"Just a couple of quick puffs!"

"This is a nonsmoking carriage," he said again.

I dropped the cigarette and ground it out with my foot, clenching my teeth with fury. Okay, if that's how he wanted it, I wouldn't talk to him. I pulled out Komenev's *Some Thoughts on Kaminski*, a badly printed paperback with an unattractive thicket of footnotes. It had stopped raining, blue sky could be seen through gashes in the clouds. I was still very tired, but I couldn't allow myself to go to sleep again, I was going to have to get off any time now.

Very shortly afterward, I was wandering shivering through the main hall of a station, a cigarette in my mouth and a paper cup of steaming coffee in my hand. In the toilet I switched on my shaver, but it didn't work. God—no current here either. The bookstore had a revolving paperback holder outside. I saw Bahring's *Rembrandt*, Bahring's *Picasso*, and of course the window display had a pile of hardcover

copies of *Georges Braque, or the Discovery of the Cube*. In a drugstore I bought two throwaway razors and a tube of shaving cream. The local train was almost empty, the upholstered seats were soft, I leaned into them and immediately closed my eyes.

When I woke again, there was a young woman sitting opposite me, with red hair, full lips, and long narrow hands. I looked at her, she pretended not to notice. I waited. When her eyes crossed mine, she smiled. She looked out the window. But then she hastily smoothed back her hair, she was having trouble concealing her nervousness. I looked at her and smiled. After a minute or two, she stood up, took her purse, and left the carriage.

Silly creature, I thought. Most likely she was waiting for me in the dining car, but so what, I had no desire to get up and follow her. The heat was sticky now: the haze was making the mountains seem close for a moment, then distant again, the soaring cliffs were draped in shreds of clouds, villages flew by, churches, cemeteries, little factories, a motorcycle crawling along a path between the fields. Then more meadows, woods, meadows again, men in overalls smearing steaming tar on a road. The train stopped, I got out.

A single platform, an arched canopy outside, a little house with shutters, a stationmaster with a mustache. I asked about my train, he said something, but it was in dialect and I didn't understand. I asked again, he tried again, we looked helplessly at each other. Then he took me to the big wall display with all the departure times. Naturally I had just missed my train and the next one wasn't for another hour.

I was the only guest in the station restaurant. Up there? That's quite a long way, said the proprietress. Was I going to spend my vacation up there?

On the contrary, I said. I was on the way to Manuel Kaminski.

It wasn't the best time of year, she said, but I'd surely have a couple of good days at best. She couldn't promise me.

To Manuel Kaminski, I said again. Manuel Kaminski!

Don't know him, she says, he's not from around here.

I said, he's been living here for twenty-five years.

Exactly, she said, not from around here, she knew she was right about that. The kitchen door flew open, a fat man set a plate of greasy soup in front of me. I looked at it uneasily, swallowed a little, and said to the proprietress how beautiful I thought it was to be here. She smiled proudly. Here in the countryside, in nature, even here in this station. Way away from everything, among simple people.

She said what did I mean.

Not among intellectuals, I explained, overeducated posturing types with university degrees. Among people who were close to their animals, their fields, and the mountains. Who went to sleep early and got up early. Who lived, instead of thinking!

She stared at me as she frowned, and went away; I counted out the money on the table. I shaved in the wonderfully clean toilet: I had never yet been good at it, the shaving-cream got mixed with blood, and when I'd washed it off, dark stripes were suddenly spreading across my red, naked-looking face. Bald spot? Where on earth did he get that idea? I shook my head and my mirror image did the same.

The train was tiny. Just two carriages behind a little engine, wooden seats, nowhere to put your suitcases. Two men in rough overalls, one old woman. She looked at me, said something incomprehensible, the men laughed, and we set off.

Straight up the mountain. The force of gravity pushed me against the wood, as the train leaned in a bend, my suitcase tipped over, one of the men laughed, I glared at him. Another bend. And another. I began to feel faint. A ravine yawned next to us: a vertiginous slope of grass sprouting the strangest thistles and way below them contorted evergreens. We went through a tunnel, the ravine opened to our right, then another tunnel and it was back on our left. The air smelled of cow shit. A dull pressure

made itself felt in my ears, I swallowed, and it disappeared, but a couple of minutes later it was back to stay. ~~Now even the trees had run out, and there was nothing but fenced pastures and the outlines of mountains on the other side of the void.~~ Another bend, the train braked, my suitcase fell over one last time.

I got out and lit up a cigarette. The dizzy feeling gradually subsided. Behind the station was the village street, and behind that a two-story house with a weathered wooden front door and open shutters: *Belview Boardinghouse, breakfast, good cooking.* A stag's head stared at me gloomily from one of the windows. No help for it, this was where I'd reserved, everything else was too expensive.

The reception desk was staffed by a large woman with her hair in an elaborate beehive. She spoke slowly, articulating every word, but I still had to concentrate in order to understand her. A shaggy dog was snuffling around on the floor. "Take the suitcase to my room," I said, "and I need an extra pillow, a coverlet, and paper. Lots of paper. How do I get to Kaminski's house?"

She set her sausage hands on the reception desk and looked at me. The dog found something and ate it noisily.

"He's expecting me," I said. "I'm not a tourist. I'm his biographer."

She seemed to be thinking this over. The dog pushed his nose against my foot. I suppressed the urge to kick him.

"Behind here," she said, "up the path. Half an hour, the house with the tower. Hugo!"

It took me a moment to grasp that this was aimed at the dog. "Do people often ask for him?"

"Who?"

"I don't know. Vacationers. Admirers. Anyone?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you have any idea who this man is?"

She said nothing. Hugo grunted and let something drop out of his mouth; I made myself not look. A tractor chugged past the window. I thanked her for her help and went outside.

The path began behind the semicircle of the main square, went up in a double spiral above the rooftops, and then through some brownish field of rubble. I took a deep breath and set off.

It was worse than I'd expected. A few steps and my shirt was already sticking to my body. A warm mist was rising off the meadows, the sun was blazing, sweat poured down my forehead. When I stopped to catch my breath, I had cleared the first two turns.

I took off my jacket and put it over my shoulders. It fell to the ground; I tried tying the sleeves around my hips. Sweat was getting into my eyes, I wiped it away. I made it up another two bends, then I had to rest.

I sat on the ground. A mosquito buzzed, high-pitched, then suddenly stopped somewhere close to my head; seconds later my cheek began to itch. The wet grass was beginning to soak my pants. I stood up.

The main thing was obviously to find the right rhythm between walking and breathing. But it didn't come to me, I kept having to stop, my whole body was soon wet, I was having to pant and my breath rattled, my hair was stuck to my face. Then there was a rumble, I leapt sideways in fright, a tractor overtook me. The man driving it looked at me with indifference, his head bobbing to the rhythm of the engine.

"Can I hitch a ride?" I yelled. He didn't pay any attention. I tried to keep pace with him and almost managed to jump on. But then I fell back and couldn't catch up with him, and watched as he climbed the hill away from me, grew smaller, then disappeared around the next curve. His diesel smell hung in the air for quite some time.

Half an hour later, I was at the top, breathing heavily and hanging on to a wooden post. As I turned around, the slope seemed to plunge in one direction as the sky soared away in the other, and I clung

the post till the rush of vertigo eased. I was surrounded by sparse tufts of grass mixed with shale, and the path ahead of me fell away gently. I followed it slowly, and after ten minutes it ended in a small south-facing bowl of rock that held three houses, a parking place, and a black-topped road leading down to the valley.

Yes: a wide, tarred road! I had made a great big detour, not to mention the fact that I could have done the whole thing by taxi. I thought about the proprietress: this was going to cost her! The parking place held nine, I counted them, cars. The first nameplate said *Clure*, the second said *Dr. Glinzli*, the third said *Kaminski*. I looked at it for a while. I had to get myself used to the idea that he really lived here.

The house was large and graceless: two stories and a pointy decorative tower in an elephantine approximation of art nouveau. There was a gray BMW parked in front of the garden gate; it made me envious, I would love to have driven a car like that just once. I smoothed back my hair, put on my jacket, and fingered the mosquito bite on my cheek. The sun was already low in the sky, my shadow on the lawn in front of me was narrow and long. I rang the bell.

II

APPROACHING FOOTSTEPS, a key turned, the door flew open, and a woman in a dirty apron was giving me the once over. I said my name, she nodded, and the door slammed.

Just as I was about to ring again, the door reopened: another woman, mid-forties, tall and thin, black hair, narrow, almost oriental eyes. I said my name, she made a brief gesture that meant: Come in. “We weren’t expecting you until the day after tomorrow.”

“I was able to get here sooner.” I followed her through a bare hall, at the other end of which a door stood open, emitting a babble of voices. “I hope it won’t cause you any problems.” I gave her time to confirm that it wouldn’t indeed cause any, but she didn’t take me up on it. “You could have told me about the road. I came up here on the path, I could have gone right over the edge. You’re the daughter?”

“Miriam Kaminski,” she said, quite coolly, and opened another door. “Please wait.”

I went in. A sofa, two chairs, a radio on the windowsill. On the wall, an oil painting of a dark hillside landscape, probably Kaminski’s middle period, early fifties. The wall above the heating unit was streaked with soot, in a couple of places dust hung down from the ceiling in threads that moved with some air current that was otherwise undetectable. I was going to sit down, but right then in came Miriam and, I recognized him at once, her father.

I hadn’t expected him to be so small, so tiny and shapeless compared with the slim figure in old photographs. He was wearing a pullover and impenetrable dark glasses, one hand was on Miriam’s arm and the other on a white walking cane. His skin was brown, creased like old leather, his cheeks sagged loosely, his hands seemed enormous, his hair a chaotic halo. He was wearing threadbare corduroys and gym shoes, the right one was undone and the laces dragged behind him. Miriam led him to a chair, he groped for the armrests and sat down. She remained standing and watched me.

“Your name is Zollner,” he said.

I hesitated, it hadn’t sounded like a question, and I was struck, quite inexplicably, by a momentary shyness. I held out my hand, met Miriam’s stare, and pulled it back again; of course, stupid mistake! I cleared my throat. “Sebastian Zollner.”

“And we’re waiting for you.”

Was that a question? “If it’s okay with you,” I said, “we can start right now. I’ve done all the preparation.” Literally, I’d been traveling for the better part of two weeks. I had never spent so much time on a single project. “You’ll be amazed how many old acquaintances I’ve found.”

“Preparation,” he repeated, “acquaintances.”

I felt a stirring of unease. Did he understand what I was saying? His jaws were working, he laid his head to one side and seemed, but this was obviously a mistake, to be looking past me at the picture on the wall. I looked at Miriam for help.

“My father has very few old acquaintances.”

“Few is misstating things,” I said. “Let’s just take Paris . . .”

“You must excuse me,” said Kaminski. “I’ve just got out of bed. I spent two hours trying to get to sleep, then I took a sleeping pill, and then I got up. I need coffee.”

“You’re not allowed coffee,” said Miriam.

“A sleeping pill before you get up?” I asked.

"I always wait till the very end, in case I can do it on my own. You're my biographer?"

"I'm a journalist," I said. "I write for several major newspapers. Right now I'm working on your life story. I've got a couple more questions, then as far as I'm concerned we can start tomorrow."

"Article?" He lifted one of his enormous hands and ran it over his face. His jaws worked. "Tomorrow?"

"You'll be working mostly with me," said Miriam. "He needs his peace and quiet."

"I don't need peace and quiet," he said.

Her other hand laid itself on his other shoulder. She smiled at me over his head. "The doctors see differently."

"I'm grateful for any help," I said cautiously, "but naturally your father is the most important person to talk to. The source, quite simply."

"I'm the source, quite simply," he said.

I rubbed my cheeks. It wasn't going well. Peace and quiet? I needed my own peace and quiet. Everyone needs peace and quiet! Ridiculous! "I'm a great fan of your father, his paintings have changed art . . . the way I see it."

"Rubbish," said Kaminski.

I began to sweat. Of course it was rubbish, but I'd never yet met an artist who didn't believe the sentence. "I swear it!" I laid a hand on my heart, reminded myself that such a move would have zero effect on him, and quickly yanked it away again. "You have no greater admirer than Sebastian Zollner."

"Who?"

"Me."

"Oh, right." He lifted his head, then let it droop again, for a second I thought he'd really looked at me.

"We're glad you've taken over this project," said Miriam. "There were several applicants, but . . ."

"Not that many," said Kaminski.

". . . your publisher recommended you highly. He thinks a lot of you."

Hard to believe. I had met Knut Megelbach precisely once in his office. He had walked up and down, wringing his hands, when he wasn't using one hand to pull books out of the bookcase and stick them back again while the other was groping the coins in his pants pocket. I had been talking about the imminent Kaminski Renaissance: new dissertations were going to be written, the Pompidou Centre was working on an exhibition, and there was also the sheer documentary value of his memories, one mustn't forget everything he'd seen and whom he'd known; Matisse had been his teacher, Picasso his friend, Richard Rieming, great poet, his mentor. I was, I told him, well acquainted with Kaminski, friend of his, actually, there was no doubt he would talk to me candidly. Only one small thing was lacking to ensure that everyone's interest would land on him, there would be articles in all the magazines, the price of his paintings would soar, and the biography would be a surefire success. "And what is that?" Megelbach asked. "You mean, what's missing? He needs to die, of course." Megelbach walked back and forth, thinking. Then he stood still and smiled at me.

"I'm glad," I said. "Knut's an old friend."

"What's your name again?" asked Kaminski.

"We need to get a couple of things straight," said Miriam. "We'd like . . ."

The sound of my cell phone interrupted her. I pulled it out of my pants pocket, saw who was calling and switched it off.

"Who was that?" asked Kaminski.

"We would like you to show us everything you want to publish. In return for our cooperation. Agreed?"

I looked her in the eyes. I was waiting for her to look away, but oddly she didn't blink. After a few seconds I looked down at the floor and my dirty shoes. "Naturally."

"And as for old acquaintances, you will not use them. You have us."

"Got it," I said.

"Tomorrow I have to be away," she said, "but the day after tomorrow we can start. You will put your questions to me, and if necessary, I'll get further information from him."

For a few seconds I didn't say anything. I heard Kaminski's whistling breath, his lips smacked. Then they moved. Miriam looked at me.

"Agreed," I said.

Kaminski bent forward and had a coughing fit, his shoulders shook, he pressed a hand to his mouth and his face went red. I had to restrain myself from giving him a thump on the shoulder. When it was over, he sat there stiffly, seemingly drained.

"Then everything's settled," said Miriam. "Are you staying in the village?"

"Yes," I said vaguely. "In the village." Did she want to invite me to spend the night in the house? Nice gesture.

"Good. And now we must get back to our guests. We'll see you the day after tomorrow."

"You have guests?"

"People from the neighborhood and our gallerist. Do you know him?"

"I spoke to him last week."

"We'll straighten that out," she said.

I had the feeling her mind was already on something else. Her grip as she shook my hand was surprisingly strong, then she helped her father onto his feet. The two of them moved slowly to the door.

"Zollner." Kaminski was standing still. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-one."

"Why are you doing this?"

"What?"

"Journalist. Several major newspapers. What do you want?"

"I find it interesting! You learn a lot and you can get involved in things that . . ."

He shook his head.

"I wouldn't want anything else!"

He banged his stick impatiently on the floor.

"I don't know, I—I fell into it somehow. Before, I was at an advertising agency."

"That explains it."

That had sounded odd; I looked at him, trying to understand what he'd meant. But his head was nodding down onto his chest and his expression was blank. Miriam led him out, and I heard the footsteps fade into the distance.

I sat down in the chair the old man had just been sitting in. Sunbeams were slanting in through the window, and motes of dust were dancing in them. It must be nice to live here. I pictured it: Miriam was roughly fifteen years older than me, but I could live with that, she still looked good. He wasn't going to be around much longer, we'd have the house, his money, and there'd certainly be a few remaining paintings. I would live here, administer the estate, maybe set up a museum. I would finally have the time to write something really big, a fat book. Not too fat, but fat enough for the fiction shelves in the bookshops. If possible one of my father-in-law's paintings on the cover. Or maybe better to use something classical. Vermeer? Title in dark type. Stitched binding, heavy paper. Give me my connections, I would get a couple of good reviews. I nodded, stood up, and went out.

The door at the end of the hall was now closed, but you could still hear the voices. I buttoned my

jacket. It was time for decisiveness and being a man of the world. I cleared my throat and walked fast.

A large room, table laid, and two Kaminskis on the walls: one pure abstract and the other a mis- city view. People were standing around the table and at the window with glasses in their hands. As I came in, silence fell.

“Hello!” I said. “I’m Sebastian Zollner.”

That broke the ice right away; I felt the mood ease. I held out my hand to each of them in turn. There were two elderly gentlemen, one of them obviously a village dignitary and the other a banker from the capital. Kaminski muttered something to himself; Miriam looked at me thunderstruck and seemed to want to say something, but then stayed silent. A dignified English couple introduced themselves to me as Mr. and Mrs. Clure, the neighbors. “Are you the writer?” I asked. “I guess so,” he said. And then of course there was Bogovic, the gallerist to whom I’d talked ten days before. He gave me his hand and looked at me thoughtfully.

“Are you still working?” I said to Clure. “Anything new?”

He threw a glance at his wife. “My new novel just came out. *The Forger’s Fear*.”

“Brilliant,” I said, giving him a slap on the upper arm. “Send it to me, I’ll review it!” I smiled at Bogovic, who for some reason was behaving as though he didn’t remember me, then I turned toward the table, where the housekeeper, with raised eyebrows, was laying another place. “Do I get a glass too?” Miriam said something quietly to Bogovic, he frowned, she shook her head.

We sat down at table. There was a totally tasteless soup made of apple and cucumbers. “Anna is an expert in my diet!” said Kaminski.

I began to tell them about my journey, the insolent conductor this morning, the clueless railroad employees, the incredibly changeable weather.

“Rain comes and goes,” said Bogovic. “That’s what it does.”

“Keeps it in training,” said Clure.

Then I told them about the proprietress at the boardinghouse, who really didn’t know who Kaminski was. Could they imagine? I banged the table, glasses jingled, my mood was infectious. Bogovic slid his chair back and forth, the banker talked quietly to Miriam, I spoke louder, he fell quiet. Anna brought peas and cornbread, very dry, almost impossible to swallow, evidently the main course. There was a wretched white wine to go with it. I couldn’t remember ever eating so badly.

“Robert,” said Kaminski in English, “tell us about your novel.”

“I wouldn’t dare call it a novel, it’s a modest thriller for unspoilt souls. A man happens to find out by mere chance, that a woman who left him a long time ago . . .”

I began to tell them about my difficult climb. I imitated the man driving the tractor and the way he looked, and how the engine had made him shake from head to foot. My acting made everyone merry. I described my arrival, my shock when I discovered the road, my investigation of the mailbox. “Imagine! Glinzli! What a name!”

“What do you mean?” asked the banker.

“Listen, nobody can have a name like that!” I described Anna opening the door to me. At that very moment, she came in with the dessert; of course I jumped, but I knew instinctively that it would have been a major mistake just to stop talking. I imitated her gaping, and how she had slammed the door right in my face. I knew for sure that the person being imitated is always the last to recognize the imitation. And indeed, she set the tray down so hard that everything clattered, and left the room. Bogovic was staring out of the window, the banker had his eyes closed, Clure rubbed his face. Kaminski’s lip-smacking seemed deafening in the silence.

Over dessert, a chocolate cream that was far too sweet, I told them about a piece I’d written on Wernicke, the artist who died so spectacularly. “You know Wernicke, surely?” Curiously, none of

them did. I described the moment when his widow threw a plate at me, just like that, in her living room, it hit me on the shoulder, and it hurt quite a lot. Wives, I explained, were the absolute nightmare for any biographer, and one of the reasons this new job was such a pleasure to me was the absence of . . . well, you know!

Kaminski moved his hand, and as if on command, everyone stood up. We went out onto the terrace. The sun was sinking on the horizon, and the mountainsides glowed dark red. "Amazing," said Miriam Clure, and her husband stroked her gently across the shoulders. I finished the wine in my glass and looked around for someone to refill it. I felt pleasantly tired. I should really go home now and replace the tapes with the conversations of the last two weeks. But I didn't feel like it. Maybe they'd invite me to spend the night up here. I went to stand next to Miriam and inhaled. "Chanel?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your perfume."

"What? No." She shook her head and moved away from me. "No!"

"You should leave while there's still light," said Bogovic.

"I'll be fine."

"You won't be able to find your way back!"

"Do you know that from experience?"

Bogovic grinned. "I never go anywhere on foot."

"The road isn't lit," said the banker.

"Someone could drive me," I proposed.

There was silence for a few seconds.

"The road isn't lit," the banker said again.

"He's right," said Kaminski hoarsely. "You need to start down."

"It's much safer," said Clure.

I held my glass tighter and looked from one to the next. They were silhouettes against the sunset. I cleared my throat, now was the moment when someone would have to ask me to stay. I cleared my throat again. "Well then . . . I'll be going."

"Follow the road," said Miriam. "After a kilometer or so there's a signpost, you go left and you'll be there in twenty minutes."

I glared at her, put the glass on the ground, buttoned my jacket, and set off. After a few steps, I heard them all burst out laughing behind me. I listened, but already I couldn't catch what they were saying; the wind carried only snatches of words. I was cold. I walked faster. I was glad to be out of there. Disgusting little brownnoses, repellent the way they sucked up to you! I felt sorry for the old man.

It really was getting dark very quickly. I had to narrow my eyes and squint to see where the road was going; I felt grass under my feet, stopped, and groped my way very carefully back onto the asphalt. In the valley, the pinpricks of streetlights were already visible. And here was the signpost, though it was too dark to read, and that must be the path I had to take.

I lost my footing and fell flat. I was so furious I picked up a stone and flung it into the blackness of the valley. I rubbed my knee and imagined the stone collecting other stones as it fell, more and more of them until finally it turned into a rockslide that buried some innocent walker. The thought pleased me and I threw another stone. I wasn't sure if I was still on the path, I could feel the shale shifting under my feet, and almost fell again. I was cold. I bent down, groped around on the ground, and felt the hard-packed earth of the path. Should I just sit down and wait for daybreak? I might freeze, though not before I'd died of boredom, but either way it wouldn't be a fall that killed me.

No—out of the question! Blindly I set one foot in front of the other, inching forward by sheer willpower, clutching bushes as I went. Just as I was wondering whether I shouldn't in fact call for

help, I saw something that formed itself into the contours of the wall of a house, and a steep roof. And then I could see windows, light glowing through closed curtains, and I was on a regular lit street. I came around a corner and found myself on the village square. Two men in leather jackets looked at me curiously, and a woman in curlers on the balcony of a hotel clutched a whimpering poodle to her bosom.

I pushed open the door to the Belview boardinghouse and looked around for the proprietress, but she was nowhere to be seen, the reception area was empty. I took my key and went upstairs to my room. My suitcase was next to my bed, the walls were hung with watercolors of cows, an Edelweiss, and a farmer with a shaggy white beard. My pants were filthy from the fall I'd taken and I didn't have another pair with me, but the mud could be brushed off. What I needed right now was a bath.

While the tub was filling, I unpacked my tape recorder, the satchel with the taped conversation and the book with the complete images, *Manuel Kaminski, His Paintings*. I listened to the messages on my cell phone: Elke asked me to call back right away. The culture editor of the *Evening News* needed the Bahring hatchet job ASAP. Then Elke again: Sebastian, call me, it's important! Then a third time: Sebastian, *please*. I nodded, though I really wasn't paying attention, and switched off the phone.

In the bathroom mirror I eyed my naked self with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. I set the book of collected Kaminski paintings down next to the tub. The foam made little popping sounds, and smelled pleasantly sweet. I slid slowly down into the water, lost my breath for a few moments because it was so hot, and felt I was swimming in a vast, motionless sea. Then I groped for the book.

III

FIRST THERE WERE the botched drawings of a twelve-year-old: humans with wings, birds with human heads, snakes, and swords swooping through the air: absolutely zero evidence of talent. And yet the great Richard Rieming, who had lived with Manuel's mother in Paris for two years, had used several of them to illustrate his volume of poetry *Roadside Words*. After war broke out, Rieming had emigrated, found passage on a ship to America, and died of a lung infection during the voyage. Two childhood photographs of a chubby Manuel in a sailor suit, one of them showing him wearing glasses that grotesquely enlarged his eyes, the other one showing him blinking as if he couldn't tolerate bright light. Not a good-looking child. I turned the page, the paper swelling in the damp.

Now came the exercises in symbolism. He had painted hundreds of them, soon after leaving school and his mother's death, alone in a rented apartment, protected by his Swiss passport during the German occupation. Later he burned almost all of them, the few that survived were bad enough: gothic backgrounds, clumsily painted falcons above trees with gloomy heads growing up out of them, a crudely rendered blowfly on a flower, looking as if it were made of cement. God knows what would have brought him to paint such a thing. For a moment, the book got away from me and sank into the foam; the glistening white seemed to climb up the paper, and I wiped it away. Taking a letter of recommendation from Rieming, he went to Nice to show his work to Matisse, but Matisse advised him to change his style, and, helpless, he went home again. A year after the end of the war, he visited the salt mines of Clairance, got separated from the guide, and wandered for hours through the empty passageways. After he'd been located and brought back out, he locked himself away for five days. Nobody knew what had gone on. But starting from then, he began to paint quite differently.

His friend and patron Dominik Silva paid for him to get a studio. There he worked, studying perspective, composition, and the theory of color, destroyed all his sketches, began again from scratch, destroyed, began again. Two years later Matisse arranged his first exhibition at the Théophraste Renoncourt Gallery in Saint-Denis. That was where he showed for the first time (I was thumbing my way further) a new series of paintings: *Reflections*.

Today the series hung in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The paintings were of mirrors that faced one another at different angles. Silvery gray passageways opened into infinity, slightly crooked, filled with otherworldly, cold light. Details of the frames or impurities on the glass multiplied and formed rows of identical copies that shrank away into the distance until they disappeared altogether out of the field of vision. A few of the pictures contained, as if by oversight, traces of the painter himself, a hand holding a brush, the corner of an easel, captured accidentally in one of the mirrors and repeated endlessly. Once a candle sparked a fire of dozens of flames licking upward together, another time the surface of a table stretched away, strewn with papers, and in one corner a postcard reproduction of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, between two mirrors that met at right angles so that the reflection of one in the other produced a third mirror that instead of showing things in reverse showed them the right way around, creating a miraculously symmetrical chaos: the effect was of enormous complexity. André Breton wrote an ecstatic article, Picasso bought three of them, it looked as if Kaminski was going to become famous. But it didn't happen. Nobody knew why; it just didn't happen. After three weeks the exhibition ended, Kaminski took the paintings back home with him and was unknown as he'd been before. Two photographs showed him with large glasses that gave him

something of the air of an insect. He married Adrienne Nalle, the owner of a successful paper business, and lived for fourteen months in a certain comfort. Then Adrienne left him with the newborn Miriam, and the marriage was dissolved.

I turned on the hot-water tap; too much, I suppressed a cry, a little bit less, that's it. I propped the book on the edge of the bath. There was a lot I needed to talk to him about. When did he learn about his eye disease? Why didn't the marriage hold up? What had happened down in the mine? I had other people's opinions on tape, but I needed quotes from him himself, things he hadn't yet said to anyone. My book should not come out before his death and not too long afterward either, for a short time I would be at the center of all attention. I'd be invited to go on TV, I would talk about him and at the bottom of the screen it would show my name and *biographer of Kaminski*. This would get me a job with one of the big art magazines.

The book was now getting quite wet. I skipped over the rest of the *Reflections* and leafed to the smaller oil and tempera paintings of the next decade. He had lived alone again, Dominik Silva gave him money regularly, sometimes he sold a few paintings. His palette brightened, his line got crisper. Pushing to the very boundaries of the recognizable, he painted abstract landscapes, cityscapes, scenes of busy streets that dissolved into a viscous mist. A man walked along, pulling his own dissolving contours behind him, mountains were swallowed up in a pulp of clouds, a tower seemed to turn transparent under the fierce pressure of the background; you struggled in vain to see it clearly, but what had been a window a moment ago turned out to be a trick of the light, what had looked like artfully decorated stonework turned out to be a strangely shaped cloud, and the longer you looked, the less of the tower you found. "It's quite simple," said Kaminski in his first interview, "and damned difficult. Basically I'm going blind. That's what I paint. And that's all."

I leaned my head against the tiled wall and balanced the book on my chest. *Chromatic Light*, *Evening*, *Magdalena Daydreaming at Prayer*, and above all *Thoughts of a Sleepy Walker*, after Rieming's most famous poem: an almost imperceptible human figure, wandering through a pewter gray darkness. The *Walker*, apparently solely on the basis of Rieming's poem, was included in an exhibition on the Surrealists, where by chance it caught the eye of Claes Oldenburg. Two years later Oldenburg arranged for one of Kaminski's weakest works, *The Interrogation of St. Thomas*, to be shown in a Pop Art show at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. The title was expanded to include the tagline *painted by a blind man*, and the picture was hung next to a photo of Kaminski in dark glasses. When he was told about this, he got so angry that he took to his bed and ran a fever for two weeks. When he was able to get up again, he was famous.

I stretched out both arms cautiously and shook first my right hand, then the left; the book was quite heavy. Looking through the open door, my eyes fell on the picture of the old farmer. He was holding a scythe in his hands, looking at it proudly. I liked the thing. Actually, I liked it better than the pictures I had to write about every day.

Because of the rumors about his blindness, Kaminski's paintings suddenly went all around the world. And as his protests that he could still see gradually gained credence, it was too late. No way back. The Guggenheim Museum put on a retrospective, his prices shot up into the stratosphere, photographs showed him with his fourteen-year-old daughter, a really pretty girl back then, at openings in New York, Montreal, and Paris. But his eyes were getting steadily worse. He bought a house in the Alps and disappeared from view.

Six years later Bogovic organized Kaminski's last show in Paris. Twelve large-format paintings, once again in tempera. Almost all bright colors, yellow and light blue, a stinging green, transparent beiges; streams of color that tangled and merged into one another, yet, when you stepped back and narrowed your eyes, suddenly were sheltering wide landscapes: hills, trees, fresh grass under summer rain, a pale sun that dissolved the clouds into a milky haze. I leafed more slowly. I liked them.

couple of them kept me looking for a long time. The water slowly grew cold.

But it was better not to like them, because the critical reaction to them had been annihilating. They were called kitsch, a painful blunder, evidence of his illness. A last full-page photograph showed Kaminski with a cane, dark glasses, and a strangely cheerful expression, wandering through the rooms of the gallery. Shivering with cold, I shut the book and laid it down next to the tub. Only too late did I notice the big puddle. I cursed: I couldn't sell it at the church flea market in a state like that. I stood up, pulled out the plug, and watched a little worm of water drain everything away. I looked in the mirror. Bald spot? No way.

Almost everyone I talked to about Kaminski reacted with astonishment that he was still alive. It seemed unbelievable that he should still exist, hidden in the mountains, in his large house, in the shadows of his blindness and his fame. That he should follow the same news that we did, listen to the same radio programs, was part of our world. I'd known for quite a while that it was time for me to write a book. My career had begun well, but now it was stagnating. First I had thought maybe I should do a polemic, an attack on a famous painter or movement; a total trashing of photorealism, maybe, or a defense of photorealism, but then suddenly photorealism was out of fashion. So why not write a biography? I hesitated between Balthus, Lucian Freud, and Kaminski, then the first of them died and the second was reported to be already in conversations with Bahring. I yawned, dried myself off, and put on my pajamas. The hotel telephone rang, I went into my bedroom, and picked up without thinking.

"We have to talk," said Elke.

"How did you get this number?"

"Who cares? We have to talk."

It must be really urgent. She was on a business trip for her advertising agency, and normally she never called when she was on the road.

"Not a good time. I'm very busy."

"Now!"

"Of course," I said, "hang on." I put down the receiver. In the darkness outside the window, I could make out the mountaintops and a pale half-moon. I breathed deeply in and out. "What is it?"

"I wanted to talk to you yesterday, but once again you managed to fix things so that you didn't go home till after I'd left. And now . . ."

I blew into the receiver. "There seems to be a bad connection."

"Sebastian, it's not a cell phone. There's nothing the matter with the connection."

"Excuse me," I said. "Just a moment."

I let the receiver sink down. I could feel the soft panic rising. I could guess what she wanted to say to me, and I absolutely must not allow myself to hear it. Just hang up? But I'd done that three times already. Hesitantly I raised the receiver again. "Yes?"

"It's about the apartment."

"Can I call you tomorrow? I've got a lot to do, I'll be back next week, then we can . . ."

"No you won't."

"What?"

"Come back. Not here. Sebastian, you don't live here anymore."

I cleared my throat. Now was the moment I needed an idea. Something simple and convincing. Now! But I couldn't think of anything.

"Back then you said it was only temporary. Just a few days, till you found something."

"And?"

"That was three months ago."

"There aren't many apartments."

“There are enough, and it can’t go on like this.”

I said nothing. Maybe that was the most effective tactic.

“Besides, I’ve been getting to know somebody.”

I said nothing. What was she expecting? Should I cry, scream, plead? I was perfectly prepared to do all three. I thought of her apartment: the leather armchair, the marble table, the expensive couch. The wet bar, the stereo setup, and the big flat-screen TV. She’d really met someone who was willing to listen to her carrying on about the agency, vegetarian food, politics, and Japanese movies?

“I know it isn’t easy,” she said with a break in her voice. “I didn’t want . . . to tell you over the phone. But there’s no other way.”

I said nothing.

“And you know it can’t go on like this.”

She’d said that already. But why not? I could see the living room in front of me: four hundred square feet, soft carpets, views of the park. On summer afternoons a gentle southern light played on the walls.

“I can’t believe it,” I said, “and I don’t believe it.”

“You have to. I’ve packed your things.”

“What?”

“You can collect your suitcases. Or actually when I get back I’ll have them delivered to you at the *Evening News*.”

“Not in the newsroom!” I cried. That was all I needed. “Elke, I’m going to forget this conversation. You didn’t call and I haven’t heard a word. We’ll talk about it all next week.”

“Walter says if you come back one more time, he’s going to throw you out himself.”

“Walter?”

She didn’t reply. Did he have to be called Walter?

“He’s moving in on Sunday,” she said quietly.

Ah, now I got it: the apartment shortage was driving people to do the most astonishing things. “And where am I supposed to go?”

“I don’t know. To a hotel. Or a friend.”

A friend? The face of my tax accountant rose in front of me, followed by the face of someone I’d been at school with, and whom I’d bumped into on the street the previous week. We’d shared a beer and hadn’t known what to talk about. I spent the whole time racking my brains for his name.

“Elke, it’s our apartment!”

“It isn’t ours. Have you ever paid anything toward the rent?”

“I painted the bathroom.”

“No, painters painted the bathroom. You just called them up. I paid.”

“You’re keeping count now?”

“Why not?”

“I can’t believe it.” Had I said that already? “I would never have believed you were capable of it.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “Me neither. Me neither. How are you getting on with Kaminski?”

“We hit it off right away. I think he likes me. The daughter’s a problem. She shields him from everything. I have to get rid of her somehow.”

“I wish you all the best, Sebastian. Maybe you still have a chance.”

“What does that mean?”

She didn’t reply.

“Hang on. I want to know. What do you mean?”

She hung up.

I immediately dialed her cell phone, but she didn’t answer. I tried again. A calm computer voice

invited me to leave a message. I tried again. And again. After the ninth attempt I gave up.

~~Suddenly the room didn't look so comfortable anymore. The pictures of the Edelweiss, the cow and the wild-haired old farmer were vaguely threatening, the night outside too close and unsettling. Was this my future? Boardinghouses and sublet rooms, spying landladies, cooking smells at lunch time, and the early-morning racket of unknown vacuum cleaners? It must not come to that!~~

The poor girl was completely off the wall, I almost felt sorry for her. If I knew her, she'd be regretting it already; by tomorrow at the latest she'd be calling me in tears to say she was sorry. She couldn't fool me. Already feeling a little calmer, I picked up the recorder, stuck in the first tape, and closed my eyes so as to be able to remember things better.

IV

“W_{HO}?”

“Kaminski. Manuel K-A-M-I-N-S-K-I. Did you know him?”

“Manuel. Yes, yes, yes.” The old lady smiled expressionlessly.

“When was that?”

“Was what?”

She turned a waxy shriveled ear toward me. I leaned forward and screamed, “When!”

“My God! Thirty years.”

“It must be over fifty.”

“Not that many.”

“Yes it is. You can count!”

“He was very serious. Dark. Always in the shadows, somehow. Dominik introduced us.”

“Madam, what I actually wanted to ask . . .”

“Have you heard Pauli?” She pointed to a birdcage. “He sings so beautifully. You’re writing about all that?”

“Yes.”

Her head drooped of its own accord, for a moment I thought she’d fallen asleep, but then she twitched and straightened herself up again. “He always said he’d be unknown for a long time. Then famous, then forgotten again. You’re writing about all that? Then you should also write . . . that we had no idea.”

“About what?”

“That you can get so old.”

“What was your name again?”

“Sebastian Zollner.”

“From the university?”

“Yes . . . from the university.”

He sniffed audibly, his hand was heavy as he ran it over his bald spot. “Let me think. Got to know him? I asked Dominik who the arrogant guy was, he said Kaminski, as if it meant something. Maybe you know there had already been public performances of my compositions.”

“Interesting,” I said wearily.

“For the most part he just smiled away at nothing. Pompous ass. We all know people like that, who think they’re so important before they’ve ever done a thing . . . and then it all comes true, *mundus vult decipi*. I have worked on a symphony. I composed a quartet that was performed in Donaueschingen and Ansermet said it was . . .”

I cleared my throat.

“Oh, Kaminski. That’s why you’re here. You’re not here about me, you’re here about him, I know. Once we were invited to look at his paintings, the ones Dominik Silva had at home, he had the apartment on the rue Verneuil. Kaminski himself used to sit in the corner and yawn, as if the whole thing were a bore. Maybe it was to him, I couldn’t blame him. Tell me, what university are you actually from?”

"Did I understand correctly," asked Dominik Silva, "that you're paying for lunch?"

"Order whatever you like!" I said, surprised. Behind us, cars roared past heading toward the Plateau des Vosges, and waiters neatly snaked their way between the wicker chairs.

"Your French is good."

"It's okay."

"Manuel's French was always dreadful. I never met anyone with so little gift for languages."

"You weren't easy to find." He looked scrawny and fragile, his nose jutting out against a face that was curiously collapsed in on itself.

"I live in different circumstances from the old days."

"You did a lot for Kaminski," I said carefully.

"Don't overestimate it. If I hadn't, someone else would. People like him always find people like me. He wasn't born rich. His father, who was Swiss of Polish parentage, or vice versa, I don't remember anymore, went into bankruptcy before Kaminski was born, and died, his mother was supported by Rieming later on, but Rieming didn't have much money either. Manuel always needed money."

"You paid his rent?"

"It happened."

"And today you're . . . no longer wealthy?"

"Times change."

"Where did you get to know him from?"

"Matisse. I visited him in Nice, he said there's a young painter in Paris, a protégé of Richard Rieming."

"And his pictures?"

"Nothing earth-shattering. But I thought, this will change."

"Why?"

"Because of him, really. He simply gave you the impression that he could go places. At the beginning, his stuff was fairly bad, overloaded Surrealism. That all changed with Therese." His lips rubbed together; I wondered if he still had any teeth in his head. On the other hand, he'd just ordered steak.

"You mean Adrienne," I said.

"I know who I mean. Maybe this will surprise you, but I'm not senile. Adrienne came later."

"Who was Therese?"

"My God, she was everything! She changed him completely, even if he would never admit it. You've certainly heard about his experience in the salt mine, he talks about it often enough."

"That's where I'm going the day after tomorrow."

"Do whatever you want. But Therese was more important."

"I didn't know."

"Then you need to start at the beginning again."

"Let's be candid. Do you consider him a great painter?"

"Yes, of course." I returned Professor Komenev's stare. "Within bounds."

Komenev folded his hands behind his head, and his chair tipped right back in a single movement. His little fuzzy beard stuck out straight from his chin. "Okay, to take things in order. No need to waste words on the early pictures. Then the *Reflections*. Very unusual for that time. Technically brilliant. But still rather sterile. A good basic idea, too often worked through too exactly and too precisely, and the Old Master stuff with the tempera doesn't make it any better. A little bit too much Piranesi. The

Chromatic Light, the *Walker*, the street scenes. At first sight, fabulous. But not exactly subtle thematically speaking. And let's be honest, if people didn't know about him going blind . . ." He shrugged. "You've seen the pictures themselves?"

I hesitated. I had thought about flying to New York, but it was quite expensive and besides—where were art books for? "Of course."

"Then you will have noticed the uncertain brushwork. He must have used strong magnifying glasses. No comparison to the earlier technical perfection. And after that? Oh God, the verdict already in. Calendar art! Have you seen the hideous dog on the beach, the Goya knockoff?"

"So, first too much technique and too little feeling, then the reverse."

"You could say that." He lifted his hands from behind his neck, the chair tipped upright again. "Two years ago I discussed him again in a seminar. The kids were baffled. He had nothing to say to them anymore."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No, why would I? When my *Some Thoughts on Kaminski* came out, I sent him the book. He never responded. Didn't think it mattered! As I say, he's a good painter, and good painters are transient. Only great painters are not."

"You should have gone there," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's pointless to write and then sit there waiting for an answer. You have to go there. You have to take him by surprise. When I wrote my portrait of Wernicke—you know Wernicke?"

He looked at me, puzzled.

"It had just happened and his family didn't want to talk to me. But I didn't leave. I stood at the front door and told them I was going to write about his suicide anyway, and the only choice they had was whether to talk to me or not. 'If you choose not to,' I said, 'what that means is that your own views won't be represented. But if you were prepared . . .'"

"Excuse me." Komenev leaned forward and stared at me. "What exactly are you talking about?"

"It didn't last that long. A year, and then the thing with Therese was over."

The waiter brought the steak with roast potatoes, Silva grabbed his knife and fork and began to eat, his throat quivering as he swallowed. I ordered another Coca-Cola.

"She was really something special. She never saw him as he was, but as what he could become. And then that's what she made him. I can still remember how she looked at one of his pictures and said quite quietly, 'Do those always have to be eagles?' You should have heard the way she said 'eagles.' That was the end of his Symbolist phase. She was wonderful! The marriage to Adrienne was just a messed-up mirror image, she looked a little like Therese. Need I say more? If you ask me, he never got over her. If every life has one decisive catastrophe"—he shrugged his shoulders—"then that was his."

"But his daughter is Adrienne's?"

"When she was thirteen, her mother died." He stared into nowhere, as if the memory were painful. "Then she came to him in this house at the end of the world, and since then she has taken care of everything." He pushed a chunk of meat that was a bit too ambitious into his mouth, and there was a pause before he was able to speak again; I made an effort not to look. "Manuel always found the people he needed. He felt the world owed him."

"Why did Therese leave him?"

He didn't answer. Maybe he was hard of hearing. I pushed the recorder closer to him. "Why . . .?"

"How do I know? Mr. Zollner, there are always a thousand explanations, a thousand versions of every thing, and in the end, the truth is always the most banal. No one knows what happened, and no

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