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The End of Law

Written by Thérèse Down

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THE END OF LAW

THÉRÈSE DOWN



LION FICTION

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“Isn’t it true that every honest German is ashamed of his government these days? Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes – crimes that infinitely outdistance every human measure – reach the light of day?”

**First leaflet of the White Rose German Resistance Movement,
Alexander Schmorell, circa 1942;
executed July 1943, age 26**

“How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause? Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?”

**Sophie Scholl, White Rose activist;
executed February 1943, age 21**

“It’s high time that Christians made up their minds to do something... What are we going to show in the way of resistance – as compared to the Communists, for instance – when all this terror is over? We will be standing empty-handed. We will have no answer when we are asked: What did you do about it?”

**Hans Scholl, White Rose activist;
executed February 1943, age 25**



*This is for them and
the God they served*

CHAPTER ONE

Hedda Schroeder had no reason to doubt she was content and no idea that Berlin in 1933 was becoming a very dangerous place for thinking people. Her father was extremely wealthy.

Her mother wafted about their magnificent nineteenth-century house in the salubrious Tiergarten district in a state of agitation, as though she just knew she'd left something somewhere. As she grew up, Hedda watched her mother's inward preoccupation with childish resentment. By the time she was fourteen, the resentment had been replaced by a sullen indifference. At twenty, Hedda no longer regarded with the slightest curiosity her mother's white rabbit fussing. She had learned that nothing ever really happened, nothing changed.

Hedda's father, Ernst, was one of the foremost chemists in Germany, with a seat on the board of the National Conglomerate Trust, IG Farben. His father, Heinrich Schroeder, had been among the earliest to revolutionize German organic chemical manufacture in the latter part of the nineteenth century and made his fortune at twenty-five by joining Bayer as a senior research chemist. Fewer than twenty-five years later, his son had followed suit. In 1933, Bayer was a merged company in the Farben Conglomerate Trust and Ernst was even more influential in the chemical research field than his father had been. He was hardly ever home and when he was, he disposed of Cook's sumptuous meals with rapid, moustachioed jaw movements which signalled his impatience with the distraction from work that was his dinner. Hedda mutated unnoticed at the table from a braided and scrubbed fraulein in pink trying not to

wolf her food, to a bobbed and painted beauty whose perfectly pencilled lips were unsullied by dining.

Digested now by the expanding city, the Tiergarten district had begun as a rich hunting ground for Prussian kings. Though the evening air still fell upon the beautiful gardens with the gentility of chiffon, the railway tracks, roads and tramlines of industrial living hemmed, severed and zipped through its delicate finery.

“I shall be out again this evening, Mutti.” Hedda announced her plans to the back of her mother’s head one evening after dinner as both were leaving the dining room.

“Oh? Anything amusing, dear?” Her mother’s reply was standard and the only deference to Hedda’s voice was a slight turn of the head. Otherwise, Mathilde Schroeder continued her mince across the parquet, one slender hand given to the other in a pose once contrived to draw attention to her expensive finger jewellery; now, it was as unconscious as anything else she did. “I shall be at the Suzmanns’, darling. Daddy will be late – as usual.” Then, as an afterthought, stopping and turning to face Hedda across the vast and spotless hallway, Mathilde added, “Do take your keys, dear. It’s not fairt...”

“...to wake Cook. Yes, Mutti, I know.”

Mathilde smiled and lowered her eyes for a moment. “You didn’t say, I think. What will you be doing tonight?”

“I am seeing Walter again – Walter Gunther. You met him already. I believe we’re dining at Haus Vaterland. Paul Godwin’s orchestra. Do you know it, Mutti?”

“Jazz, dear?” Mathilde recrossed a little of the parquet so as not to appear rude, though she was not eager to continue the conversation. Hedda remained where she was, leaned against the diningroom doorframe and studied her lavishly painted fingernails.

“Yes, though he doesn’t just do jazz – quite a variety of styles, really.” Hedda’s tone was already in neutral; the concessionary modulation in deference to manners, but she was as eager as her mother for the conversation to end. A sudden pique caused her to

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raise her head and look directly at Mathilde just before a customary number of seconds had passed and her mother could politely extricate herself from the exchange. How elegant and insubstantial Mathilde appeared as she raised an eyebrow in mild alarm at her daughter's sudden interest. "Actually," Hedda began, a note of contrived confidence in her voice, "they say he's... disappeared – you know?"

Mathilde frowned briefly and looked towards the Ming as though its exquisiteness could be restorative following such indelicacy. "Really?" she managed. "Well, perhaps that nice Mr Ginsburg will be on somewhere." Finally releasing herself, raising one hand in departure, Mathilde turned and retraced her steps across the parquet. "Not too late, Hedda."

Later, in the taxi, bumper to bumper along the Bellevuestrasse towards Potsdamer Platz and an eight-fifteen table at Haus Vaterland, Hedda wondered what it was that had made her risk a social faux pas with her mother. No one ever mentioned "das Judische problem" in the Schroeder household. Ernst never discussed current affairs with his wife or his daughter and indeed, such an indelicate discussion would have been most unwelcome. Domestic conversation was never more or less than polite. Mathilde had learned to accept that whatever it was she had lost would not be found, and thought given to its absence or anything which might disturb equanimity was fruitless and emotionally expensive.

Hedda's arrival had served to increase Mathilde's impression of displacement. She hadn't a clue how to deal with her and mainly left her to Cook, whose kindly nature and anxiety to secure her position in times of high unemployment made her only too willing to move into the Schroeders' house and minister to Hedda. The child grew to have, it seemed to Mathilde, a vexingly obdurate manner, as though she had spied the lost thing and was keeping its location secret. Still, there were the parties in the early days as Ernst climbed the executive ladder at Bayer as a senior research chemist and everyone said what a perfect couple they made. If she

had been given to reflection, after twenty-five years of marriage to Ernst, Mathilde would perhaps have concluded that it wasn't really that she had lost anything so much as almost found it.

Hedda was not unaware that there was a growing dislike of Jewish people in Berlin. On occasions when someone took her to the cinema, she saw newsreels in which Hitler presented impassioned National Socialist cant, but it seemed to Hedda that all he did was shout. This in itself was anathema to her. No one shouted in the Schroeder family. Even Cook admonished her in whispers when she was naughty for fear of disturbing the strained silence which lay across the house like dust sheets. And though Hedda dated officers of Hitler's new Schutzstaffel, none seemed eager to do more than flatter her and ply her with fine Rhenish in the hope of more than a kiss. Certainly, none was eager to discuss his work. However, it was impossible not to overhear things when out on the crowded streets of the Potsdamer Platz or queuing for a film.

It was surprising how animated and angry people could be. Once, she had even witnessed a fight; an SS officer and a dark-haired young man hurled obscenities at each other while Orchester James Kok played swing in the smoky jazz club, Moka Efti, in the Friedrichstrasse. Tables were overturned and people had leapt from their places to avoid being caught up in the brawl. Hedda was mesmerized. She had turned quickly to her beau, whose arm had slipped protectively around her waist and drawn her to him. When the dark haired man finished the fight by rendering his opponent unconscious with a well-placed upper cut, Hedda had clapped spontaneously. Later, when the tables had been righted, the brawlers removed by police officers, she had blamed the wine for her excitement. The young man she was with, an engineering graduate and son of a doctor, had asked her if she fully understood the nature of the exchange between the two men. Hedda had frowned in irritation and shrugged. "A little – there was lots of shouting about being Jewish – obviously!"

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“He will probably be thrown in prison – or worse, you understand?” the student had continued. Karl had been his name.

“Who will? Why?”

“The Jew, of course. He will...disappear, I think.” When Hedda did not respond, Karl sought her face in the street-lit taxi. She turned to him and met his gaze, her eyebrows rising to quizzical arches.

“What?” she had prompted, when he didn’t speak.

“I thought...for a moment...”

“You thought what?”

“Well, when you clapped like that and then, just now – I thought, perhaps...”

“Goodness me, Karl – please say what you thought! What a puzzle you are making of things!”

How serious he is – and tiresome, Hedda had thought to herself as the strange young man beside her became sullen.

“No, forgive me. It’s nothing. Please, don’t let me spoil things. It has been a splendid evening.”

It has been short of splendid, thought Hedda. Still, there had been a welcome and rare element of excitement, at least. Then, as they entered Tiergarten, Hedda was struck by an interesting thought.

“Do you care if the Jew is put in prison?”

Karl brushed away imaginary dirt from his trousers. “No – no, of course not. Why would I care about that?”

When the taxi stopped, both were hugely relieved that Hedda could get out and leave Karl to his solo journey home. He opened the taxi door for her, saw her to the majestic portal of her family home and then bade her goodnight with a curt bow. She responded in kind and stepped with relief into the light of the immaculate parquet hallway. Karl was aware that the taxi driver eyed him suspiciously in the rear view mirror on many occasions during the drive back to his apartment.

Some three months after her evening with Karl, Hedda alighted from her taxi and drew her expensive tweed scarf closer around her

neck, lifted a kid-gloved hand to the tilt of her hat. Recalling how the flecked blue wool of her matching two-piece suit brought out the china blue of her eyes, Hedda smiled and forgot her brief foray into the unpleasantness of politics. And suddenly, here was Walter: tall, impossibly handsome, impeccably shaven. His full, strong mouth creased and eased with smiling. As he carved his way, right hand rigid before him, through the brightly lit crowds in the Platz and then reached her where she waited, she decided he was rather special. Who knew? Perhaps she might even be moved to offer this one more than a lipstick-preserving kiss.

Walter Gunther beamed at her, scanned her from head to toe and whistled his appreciation. Hedda pressed her lips together and looked to one side in mock derision, but her eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Wow! You look even more beautiful than I remember.”

“You say that each time you see me, Walter. Soon I shall dazzle you and you won’t be able to look at me at all!”

“Well, then I shall simply fall at your feet and worship you.”

Hedda laughed, bending forward a little as she did so, reaching to hit his right arm playfully. “You are too silly – but you make me laugh, which is good.”

Walter brought his feet together and lifted his right hand to his forehead in an imitation salute, then offered her his arm. “Shall we dine, my lady?” Chatting and laughing, Hedda holding his right arm with both hands, they made their way to the crowded restaurant.

Walter’s father had been a Field Marshal in World War One and distinguished himself by service to Germany so that in 1933 the new Führer had made him a General Staff Officer, serving under Chief of Staff Officer Ludwig Beck. His grandfather had been a Prussian general. Walter, twenty-eight years old, wealthy, intelligent, on occasional social terms with Goering, was a newly created SS officer. Berlin was his playground. By the time Hedda caught his eye in a smoky club on the Bellevuestrasse, Walter Gunther was as

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familiar with the female anatomy and the tactics of seduction as he was with his weapon of choice, the PO8 Parabellum. He handled both with skill, but the gun occupied his thoughts more and held his attention for longer.

Tonight's dinner date at Haus Vaterland was their third meeting. Hedda found herself increasingly attracted to and interested by the handsome officer. She knew instinctively that his charm and foppish humour disguised a sharp intelligence and possibly a temper. She knew this because there was in Walter's eyes a darkness with which Hedda was familiar and which sometimes consumed his expression like un-dammed liquor when he turned from her to put out a cigarette or follow a thought during intervals in their conversation. These unguarded reversions to a more naturally saturnine disposition did not alarm Hedda. Indeed, she saw her father in Walter's underlying intolerance of the frivolity he politely indulged. And, although she was not consciously attracted by the connection, she was given increasingly to thoughts of stability and permanence.

For his part, Walter considered Hedda easy company. She did not lean forward and use the heel of her right palm to thrust her mouth at him in that way women have who want to be adored. She did not seek to establish her intellect by attempting to engage him in ideological discussions about his part in Hitler's rise or his views on "das Judische problem". In fact, Hedda was, he suspected, a little vacuous, but this did nothing to deter him. In fact, he welcomed it. Any woman who might hold his attention for more than a few dates or beyond seduction would necessarily be undemanding of it.

Walter was ambitious and not insensitive to the advantage a good marriage would afford him. Certainly, his social networking could expand to include the bridge and dining engagements of his parents' generation, had he a beautiful and well-connected wife on his arm. Hedda might do nicely. And so, just weeks after their third dinner date, Walter Gunther asked Hedda Schroeder to marry him

and she accepted with a gratified shrug and a brilliant smile that enhanced her flawless complexion like a sudden glaze.

The inevitable society wedding followed with well-oiled efficiency, and took place in the spring of 1934. Money was no object and neither were the trimmings essential to the execution of such an occasion. The sun shone, the couple were resplendent. Everyone agreed this was a perfect match. Walter's father and friends attended in full uniform; dazzling dress sabres and immaculately polished boots snared the crisp spring light. A salute of perfectly white gloves complemented the pristine organza froth of the bride's dress when the couple emerged onto the steps of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedachtniskirch. Walter and Hedda honeymooned briefly in Koblenz. Too much champagne, lights splashing giddily on the sombre Rhein, and a majestic four poster bed. And then back to Berlin.

For Walter, this was a time of consolidation. As well as serving under him, his father was a close and trusted friend of Ludwig Beck, General Chief of Staff, and stationed in Berlin. Beck's distinguished military service during World War One had ensured influence and power as Hitler's Reich took shape. But the Chief of Staff's misgivings regarding Hitler's assumption of absolute military as well as political power, following the 1933 Enabling Act, was well understood in wider military circles. Walter, striving to ensure that his alliance with Hitler and dissent from the conservative Prussian old guard was obvious, saw less and less of his father and confined his socializing to National Socialism circles. He spoke loudly and clearly to whomever might report his views in the right places.

Hedda busied herself with the decoration of her smart town house on the outskirts of the Tiergarten district. She learned to drive and was often seen on sunny days at the wheel of her husband's gleaming Audi DKW. Always gloved and wearing a fashionable matching hat, Hedda was admired and envied by the youthful Berlin set. She was beautiful, glamorous and married to

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the impossibly handsome and well connected Walter Gunther. What could be more perfect?

Indeed, life for the first months after their marriage was heady and socially exhausting for the newly-weds. Utterly convinced of their beauty, the couple made love to each other for hours each night. Hedda was not interested in Walter's SS duties and Walter was content to fund his wife's caprices. He smiled distractedly at her extravagances and saluted charmingly when he came home late to discover his drawing room full of giddy, flirtatious socialites. He would pour himself a large whisky, loosen his uniform collar and raise his glass to each one before kissing his wife gently on the mouth and withdrawing. The audible "oohs" and other suggestively admiring noises as he left the room never failed to please him. But by the time he sat upon his bed to remove his boots, his mind was once again grappling with the logistics of organizing working groups of ageing Jewish men to clear Berlin's roads of snow or rubbish or horse manure, depending on the season and the district.

Hedda visited her mother on afternoons when neither had anything more pressing in her diary. Dressed in expensive suits and furs, Hedda would sit with her legs crossed, sipping tea from a china cup without removing her carefully pinned hat. Just like a proper visitor. The pregnancy, discovered just six months after Hedda's marriage to Walter, was neither inconvenient nor welcome. It was hardly a surprise, given that neither she nor Walter had made serious efforts to avoid it; so secure was their arrangement that there was no reason to do so.

"Are you happy, Walter?" Hedda turned her head to observe her husband as they lay in bed one Sunday morning listening to the bells rolling across the Sabbath stillness from the north-western tower of the Berliner Dom. He lay on his back, contemplating the ceiling. When she spoke, he turned to her and smiled briefly, extended an arm so that she could move onto it and be pulled towards him. She buried her face in his shoulder as his thoughts resumed.

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Herr and Frau Schroeder received the news of their daughter's pregnancy with nods and smiles, but both hoped that becoming grandparents would not interfere with bridge. Only Cook beamed broadly at the news and covered her face with her apron to conceal her tears. It was clear she wanted to clasp Hedda in her arms, but her open gesture was met with an uncertain response and she folded her arms instead and curtsied, repeating her warm congratulations.

For Hedda, the pregnancy brought a new and unsettling lack of certainty which grew as the child began to strain the stitching of her chic clothing. It demanded her attention. The indignity of the vomiting she was forced to endure each morning horrified her. At times, she experienced nothing less than terror when she raised herself from the toilet bowl and contemplated her moist, wild eyes and dishevelled hair in the bathroom mirror. She suffered further indignity upon the examination table at the salubrious offices of Berlin's top gynaecologist, and at every turn, it seemed, was confronted by the rawness, the vulnerability, of her humanity. It did nothing to preserve the precarious harmony of their marriage when Walter came home unexpectedly early to find his wife gorging on apple strudel. Hedda would wipe her mouth guiltily with the back of her hand and start from her plate like a furtive animal.

Hedda was eight months pregnant when Klaus and Agna Gunther turned up unannounced one hot afternoon in August 1935. Hedda was horrified when the housekeeper suddenly showed them into the drawing room. She had kicked off her slippers and removed her stockings, for the heat was stifling. She was dozing in an armchair beside an open window where occasionally, at least, a light breeze disturbed the sullen heaviness of the room.

Agna Gunther was immediately apologetic and genuinely embarrassed at their intrusion.

"Dear Hedda, please – don't get up. We are sorry to land on you like this, but we so wanted to see you and Walter. Well..." Here Agna faltered, lifted her handbag and gripped its handles in front

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of her as though to defend herself. “Well, he is always too busy to respond to our letters and...” She turned towards her husband as if pleading for help.

“Walter is avoiding us, Hedda,” stated Klaus quietly.

“Well,” began Agna again, her voice breaking a little as though close to tears, “he is busy, we know... I so wanted to see you, Hedda,” Agna smiled broadly, moved towards her daughter-in-law and extended her arms. “How are you?”

By now Hedda had risen from her chair and located her slippers. She moved towards Agna and they hugged lightly.

“I am OK,” stated Hedda simply as the women moved apart once more. “Fat!”

Agna laughed. Klaus remained behind them, near the door. He smiled and looked down at his feet, put his hands in his pockets.

“Sit down, Hedda, please,” said Agna warmly, stooping to put her handbag on the floor and assuming a seat on a pouffe on which Hedda had earlier rested her feet. There ensued a flurry of exchanges between the women, during which Agna took Hedda’s hands in her own and held them, smiling always into her daughter-in-law’s beautiful eyes. She wanted to know how Hedda was keeping and if she was eating and sleeping properly. Had she had regular check-ups? Was everything all right? How naughty it was of Walter to give them so little information about this their first grandchild! What was he thinking?

Hedda could not comfort her. She had no idea what Walter was thinking or that he had been ignoring written invitations to his parents’ house. He never spoke of them and any attempts she had made to bring them up in conversation were dismissed. Hedda did not yet possess the temerity to challenge her increasingly secretive and serious husband on his behaviour towards his parents – or for that matter on his increasingly frequent and drunken evening forays. But the anger she felt and the resentment at the way in which her life had changed were gathering force as the child within her grew towards unavoidable birth.

Klaus paced the drawing room, concentrating on his feet as though he were not sure if his shoes exactly matched. When Agna stopped talking, Klaus stopped pacing and looked directly at Hedda.

“How is Walter, Hedda? I hear... things about my son, but I know nothing. I don’t know who his friends are – how he spends his time. I am not asking you to be disloyal – that would never do. You are his wife. But you can surely share with us a little of what Walter is up to these days? He is so busy. He never writes.”

Hedda regarded her father-in-law. After some seconds he began to doubt the girl’s hearing – or her wits. At last, she sighed and slumped back in the armchair as though she had given up trying to think of an answer.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what Walter is up to,” she replied flatly. “He leaves the house at eight each morning and he returns about seven each evening. Sometimes, it is earlier. He dines here or else he bathes and goes straight out again. Sometimes we have people to eat with us here – people Walter works with and their wives. They are all right, but I don’t know them well. I don’t ask where he goes when he goes out alone and I am generally asleep, or very nearly, when he comes back. Often, he has been drinking and sings in the bathroom. Sometimes he is very serious and quiet and he can’t sleep, so he gets up and goes downstairs. He never tells me what he’s been doing and he never discusses his work with me. In fact, he barely seems to notice I exist.”

Hedda was shocked at how progressively angry her tone had become as she spoke to Klaus. Now she regretted her openness and, in the silence that met her declaration, was ashamed. They would think her shallow and indiscreet. A hot blush heightened further her already high complexion. The heat in the room was overwhelming and she closed her eyes against a slight but rising nausea.

“My dear – I am so sorry.” Agna’s voice was truly sympathetic and soothing. “I am sorry we have arrived like this and upset you. Would you like some ice water, Hedda? Wait – I shall find your

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maid – ask her to bring some cold drinks.” Agna rose and as she crossed the drawing room to the door signalled to her husband to approach Hedda. Klaus nervously smoothed his moustache and took a seat in a chair adjacent to his daughter-in-law.

“I too am sorry. I fear I was a little abrupt, Hedda. Clearly, Walter is very busy and he does not – quite rightly – want to concern you with his problems, or...” Klaus waved his hand abstractedly in his inability to define what it was about Walter’s evening habits that he couldn’t impose on his wife. He feared the worst. Much as he hated to contemplate the possibility that Walter might already be returning to his bachelor habits, it seemed a logical consideration. Had he really raised such a shallow and inconsiderate cad? A new and beautiful wife, heavily pregnant, and Walter could not stay with her in the evenings? More than ever, he feared what his son’s SS connections and orders might be doing to his conscience. He knew well how ambitious Walter was to make something of himself, to achieve a status that rivalled his father’s. He greatly feared that the machine of Hitler’s Nazism would propel Walter much further professionally and politically than Klaus had ever travelled. But he could not see how such violent and sudden momentum could do otherwise than cause great destruction, or at best falter to a miserable halt. If he could, Klaus was determined to make Walter see sense before it was too late.

When Walter arrived home from work that evening he was not pleased to discover his parents seated for dinner. Cook was serving finely sliced meats from a large silver salver and placing generous dishes of steaming vegetables upon the table. Walter nodded acknowledgment to each of his parents while saluting in true SS fashion. Klaus and Agna stood up to greet their son, while Hedda remained seated and regarded her husband with the same level and inscrutable gaze with which she had earlier contemplated his father. Although she had truly no idea what or who Walter had become – or really, what he had ever been – she sensed a sort of alliance in his parents’ misgivings, and though its nature was indefinable, it was

a source of strength. She felt no fear of her husband as he turned his joyless smile upon her and one raised eyebrow questioned her complicity in this unexpected turn of events. It was clear he wished her to rise and greet him.

“Good evening, Walter,” Hedda began, her voice clear and steady, though she still made no attempt to stand. “Your parents are here to visit us from Zehlendorf. Isn’t this a lovely surprise? I had Cook make something special for dinner: pork in white wine sauce with sauerkraut – your favourite. For dessert we are having plum tart with cream. After all, this is a special occasion! I was not sure if you would be joining us for dinner, or if you might have plans for dining out, but you see of course that I needed to welcome your parents properly – we have not seen them in such a longtime.”

Walter nodded again. “Of course, Hedda – you have behaved perfectly correctly. I shall join you directly I have changed for dinner. Please – continue without me for now. Have you asked Cook to bring a nice Riesling to accompany the pork?”

Klaus interjected, “I took the liberty, Walter, of asking your cook to bring wine. We have already started – shall I pour you a glass?”

“Of course – please. I shall be with you soon.” And turning stiffly on his heel, Walter left the dining room.

“Oh, dear.” Agna’s voice was quiet and her words not particularly directed. “I don’t think our son is pleased to see us.”

Hedda shrugged and looked down at her plate as Cook carefully layered upon it slices of succulent pork. “I wonder if I might have just a little wine? I haven’t had a drink of anything more stimulating than fruit juice for such a long time.”

Dinner passed awkwardly. Walter made polite conversation with his parents, enquiring after their health and passing occasional remarks on Hedda drinking wine. She regarded him with an apparent imperturbability of which she was master and which served her well when she was feeling anything but calm. Walter studied his wife anew this evening and realized her strength for the

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first time. It was not a strength he admired particularly, for it was untried and of the infuriatingly passive type he was encountering more often from Jews and Social Democrats who held offices or university degrees and thought they deserved respect, but were too timid – or wise – to demand it.

Finally, Cook cleared away the dessert dishes and brought brandy for the men. Agna and Hedda were discussing baby things and nursery decoration, and Klaus was reduced to sullen silence by the futility of trying to engage his son in conversation. Walter could maintain his composure no longer.

“So, tell me, Father, why is it that you are here – really? If this were only a social visit I think you might have arranged it in advance in the usual way.”

Walter’s sharpness was startling. Hedda and Agna stopped talking, and all three turned to him at once. The redness that spread from his throat to his cheeks and the burning defiance in Walter’s eyes did nothing to reduce their anxiety. Cook withdrew, leaving the brandy bottle on the table. When she had gone, Klaus answered his son. “You do not acknowledge our written invitations or your mother’s letters, Walter. I suppose I could try and contact you by telephone at your new place of work – the Air Ministry Building on Wilhelmstrasse, isn’t it? I understand you have found favour with Prime Minister Goering. Are you enjoying your new job in Logistics?”

Agna was keen to soften her son and avoid unpleasantness. She knew well that Klaus was increasingly furious at the power and militancy of the SS and Goering’s Gestapo, the cavalier contempt with which this new Führer and his “henchmen”, as Klaus termed them, treated the army generals. That his own son might be complicit in the smear campaigns conducted against the Prussian army generals, and the recent murders of some, made him sleepless and distraught. Agna was terrified of permanent division between these two men whom she so loved.

“Walter, darling, we have missed you so much. We know you are busy, but – it was my fault. I simply couldn’t stay away

any longer. I bullied your poor father mercilessly until he agreed to drive me here. I so wanted to see Hedda! You know how we women are when there's a baby on the way. And, darling, this is no ordinary baby. This is our grandson or daughter! I am so happy for you both, Walter. I just wanted so much to see you both. Don't be cross, Wally, please."

Walter heard the love in his mother's voice, and her use of his pet name doused a little the fire of his resentment at what he regarded as an ambush. He did not doubt that his mother was desperate to see him, but he knew for certain that his father would have something to say about his appointment as Chief Logistics Officer to Goering. Walter had, after all, served Goering well in ways of which his father could never approve.

A year earlier, Walter had come to Goering's attention following a particularly zealous demonstration of fealty to the Reich during Operation Hummingbird. The stratagem had been to storm the vice chancellery with a number of other SS and Gestapo officers and shoot certain people who were considered a threat to the Reich. One of the main targets was a close advisor to the vice chancellor himself. When the Gestapo officer holding the pistol at point blank range from the target's head had hesitated, Walter had seized his moment. In an instant he removed his Parabellum from its holster, aimed and pulled the trigger. He had received a letter of commendation from Goering, and there followed an offer of a job in Goering's Reichsluftfahrtministerium. It was the recognition Walter craved.

"Mother, I quite understand your wanting to see us. I just wish you could have waited until I am less busy at work. This new job is very demanding and I have simply no time for anything but work. I would have replied to your letters as soon as I could – when the baby was born, certainly."

"When is the baby due, exactly, Hedda?" Agna was determined to lighten the conversation and, if she had her way, they would leave as soon as Klaus had finished his brandy. She had the most terrible feeling of foreboding.

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“Oh... well, in about two weeks’ time.” Hedda’s response was distracted. She had perceived the growing antipathy between Walter and his father, watched the gathering storm of Walter’s fury with something like the horrified exhilaration she had experienced when the Jew and the SS officer fought at the Moka Efti club over two years ago. This was only the second time in her life that something had threatened to puncture the veneer of civility on which she had always trodden so carefully.

“And we shall come and visit you at the hospital. Which one will you be in, Hedda?”

“Rudolf Virchow – Augustenberger Platz.”

“Augustenberger Platz... let me write that down.” Agna retrieved her handbag from where it rested on the floor at her feet and riffled through it until she found a small address book and a pen. She broke the words down aloud into constituent syllables as she recorded the hospital address under “H”. “We shall, at any rate, contact the hospital by telephone in a couple of weeks’ time. Oh, Walter...” Agna looked to her son with an excited smile. “You are hoping for a boy, I expect, hmm? You men! You always want boys.”

Walter, his elbows upon the table, hands joined as if in prayer and fingers pressed to his lips, contemplated his mother’s lovely smile for an instant, then slowly folded his hands into each other so that his mouth was free to form words.

“A boy would be pleasing, yes.”

“And what would you call him?” Agna was determined to be cheerful. She looked from Walter, to Hedda, to Walter again. Hedda shrugged and contemplated her empty wine glass, ceded the answer to Walter.

“I think... Adolph, perhaps? Or maybe Heinrich or Hermann? It is not decided.”

Hedda looked up sharply and could not this time disguise her alarm as she turned towards Walter, though she said nothing. He looked at her steadily and without a trace of warmth. Klaus suddenly snatched his napkin from his knees and rose from the table.

“I think, Walter, it is time you and I talked. Let us leave the ladies and – where can we go? The drawing room? I, for one, would like a cigar.” So saying, he picked up the brandy bottle, bowed to Agna and Hedda, and took his leave.

When the men were alone, Klaus remained standing and took an elegant cigar case from an inner jacket pocket and offered a cigar to Walter, who declined with a dismissive gesture from his position in an armchair. Walter never took his eyes from his father as the older man busied himself in cutting off the end of his fine Dutch cigar with a tiny gold guillotine made for the purpose and which he kept in a waistcoat pocket. Then, still without regarding his son, Klaus took his silver gasoline lighter from an inner pocket on the opposite side of his jacket from that in which he kept his cigar case and lit his cigar with great care. Finally, tilting back his head slightly and squinting to avoid smoke, he spoke.

“Walter, you are an SS officer and now Chief Logistics Officer to Hermann Goering, but you are still my son, and though I have not said it in either of our memories... I love you.”

Walter could not help the widening of his eyes or the sudden guffaw that escaped him. He said nothing, but continued to watch his father, a look of bemusement on his face.

“I don’t blame you for being cynical – I did not much... eh... coddle you when you were a boy. My error perhaps, but I was a soldier and I wanted my son to be a soldier. You understand?”

“Perfectly.”

Klaus contemplated his son for a long moment. He was struck by the otherness of him and the distance between them. How angular, how strong and how very much the man Walter seemed now. But what sort of man? That was the question that burned in Klaus’s heart. He could not quite believe that he was too afraid to ask it outright.

“I was, in spite of what you suppose, always proud of you, Walter. I know we have disagreed a good deal in the past about how you spent your time – and my money – but I always thought

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you were a good boy – a good man – at heart. And now... now you are thirty – in your prime and about to become a father yourself.”

“Father, what is it you are here to say? I know you will not approve of my closeness to Prime Minister Goering. You do not approve of his... methods. But you will surely know that I cannot discuss my work, and it is better if you and I do not do so.” Walter had some difficulty speaking these words, for his father’s declaration of love for and pride in him had affected him in ways he could not yet process. The immediate effect was, though, to make him less determined to distance himself from this man whose approbation he had sought openly until it seemed it would never come.

“Walter, you and I come from a distinguished line of military men. Your ancestors were Prussian nobility.” Klaus’s expression was earnest as he took a chair from beneath a polished occasional table and placed it squarely before Walter’s armchair and then sat close, facing his son. Only the repeated movements of Walter’s Adam’s apple gave away his mounting nervousness. “I love Germany! Goddam it, Walter, your grandfather was a Field Marshal before I was, and gave his life for this country. Your great-grandfather fought Napoleon under Wilhelm and helped to make this nation what it was before the French took their latest revenge upon us with this confounded Treaty. And his father before that lost his life defending Prussia at Saalfeld. For goodness’ sake, Walter, I don’t think there has been a time when a Gunther was not defending Prussia or Germany with his life on a battlefield. And now here you are...”

“Father, I really...” Walter made to rise from his chair, but Klaus was determined to speak, raised his right hand in a gesture intended to prevent his son’s rising.

“No, Walter, let me finish. Von Schleicher was a fine man and an exceptional general. He helped Hitler to gain power, as you know. And now, because he had differences of opinion with the Führer, he is dead. Murdered. Yes, Walter –” Klaus responded to

Walter's raised hand and shaking head by raising his voice – "there is no other word for it. Murdered! Hear me out and then I will go. Von Schleicher was my friend, my true friend. Do you remember how, on summer days, you and your mother and I would visit his house and how he would sit you on his knee and tell you how proud you should be of who you are? He loved you, Walter, and his wife, Elisabeth..." Here Klaus paused and seemed to wrestle with his emotions, unable to look at Walter until he could continue. "She was such a lovely woman – so noble and gentle. She would spoil you, Walter, with sweets and what-not. Do you remember?" For answer, Walter lowered his head and nodded slightly. "Well, they were gunned down like dogs – like dogs – in their own home, and for why, Walter?"

"Father, I am not privy to such things. I..."

"Walter, I hope you never will be privy to decisions to murder honourable men and their wives. This is why I am here – to beg you not to make decisions that will make you more than privy to such things. Be careful, my son, of Goering and of your Führer. They will make a murderer of you if they can." There was a pause during which neither knew what to say, and then Klaus spoke again. "I think they may already have done so." Just as Walter had suspected, it seemed rumours of his actions at the vice chancellery had reached his father's ears.

"That is enough! I must insist you stop this instant, Father, and I would like you to leave." Walter stood up abruptly. Klaus too rose to his feet. It had been a very long time since they had been this physically close.

"You will hear me or you may shoot me, Walter. But I shall finish what I came to say." Klaus's tone was steady and authoritative. "Von Schleicher wanted only to bring back a little Prussian dignity to present political proceedings. He was the voice of reason in the wilderness. If he had succeeded in resurrecting Hohenzollern, what strength, what unifying greatness might we have harnessed once more in Germany! And what sanity might now prevail in this

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godforsaken Reich! Yes, Walter, and I use the term ‘godforsaken’ with full intent, for there is no... no... goodness in the dictates of your Führer.”

Walter considered whether he should push his father out of the way and fetch his gun. He looked at Klaus as coolly as he could manage and recalled the instant when he had shot the vice chancellor’s advisor. Could he shoot the man in front of him?

“Do you know what the motto is of the House of Hohenzollern, Walter?” Walter did not answer. Klaus turned away from his son, contemplated his dead cigar for a moment, then dropped both hands at his sides before facing Walter again and continuing. “It is *Nihil Sine Deo*—Nothing without God. And that, Walter, is precisely what your Nazis are. No matter how powerful, how brutal, how... thuggish they become, they are nothing without God, and Germany will never be made great by such men. My son, you will never be a great man if you walk with such men. There, now I have said what I came to say. I am done.”

“You are done? Yes, I should think that is the whole point, Father. You are done – you and all your Prussian friends!” Walter walked away from his father, assumed a central position in the room. “You are finished. You cannot resurrect what is dead, and von Schleicher was a fool to try. He was, as the Führer said, an enemy of the state. He was trying to undermine the new order and take Germany back to a time of... of social division and...” – Walter struggled for fluency against tides of anger and blood pulsing through his head – “...pomposity, which has no place in a Socialist state!”

Visibly shaken by his son’s fury and the unambiguousness of his declarations, Klaus had heard Walter’s last speech without turning to watch him make it. Now he contemplated the younger man with an expression of enormous sadness. There was a long silence. When Klaus still said nothing, Walter continued, slightly less vehemently, “Move with the times, Father. Embrace the opportunities which are still there for you and do not try and divide the nation you

and your ancestors fought so hard to unite. What is honourable about conspiracy? Von Schleicher, Bredow, the others – they are conspirators against this Reich. I... I will not have this treachery in my house.”

Klaus looked tired. He reached for the chair on which he had sat earlier, turned it so that it faced Walter, and sat down once more before continuing. When he spoke, his voice was gentle, his tone rather flat.

“Do you know your great and noble Goering is spreading rumours about other generals – disgusting and untrue... filth about their private lives? Is this the mark of a great man, a good man? Every week we hear some new lie about someone. Just yesterday I heard that von Fritsch is supposed to be a... a... homosexual – outrageous! The man is honourable to his bones and would retch at the thought of... well, well... And now – now that Field Marshal von Mackensen has dared to denounce the murders of von Schleicher and his wife in their own home – and poor Bredow, of course – now he has done that, will he be next?”

Walter regarded his father, said nothing. His face was very red and he swallowed often; though in anger or anxiety, Klaus could not discern. He appealed once more to what he hoped was the goodness deep in his son’s heart. “You tell me, Walter, is this honourable behaviour? Is this the glorious Germany for which your ancestors fought and died? How did we get from Frederick the Great to Goering, Walter? Can you tell me? Berlin is the birthplace of kings. What will it become under Hitler, do you think? When he has annihilated all possible opposition and forbidden us even to think for ourselves – when he controls the army utterly and when Goering and his murdering Gestapo have succeeded in terrorizing all who dare to express an opinion – tell me, Walter, what sort of Berlin, what sort of Germany, will we have?”

Walter recrossed the room to stand over his father. He feared his intense emotions might affect the pitch and steadiness of his voice and he wanted to be manly and impressive – even now. But

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never in his wildest imaginings had he thought his father would be so incontinent of thought, so imprudent. As Klaus took out a handkerchief from a trouser pocket and wiped his brow, then relit his cigar with shaking hands, Walter began to collect his thoughts. Father or not, what this man had just said was treacherous. If Goering had heard just a snippet of the spiel that had poured from Chief of Staff Officer Klaus Gunther's mouth he would have had him shot. And this treason was unsluiced in Walter's own drawing room! It spread like poison over the chintz and gleaming brass, the polished furniture and elegant mantle. How unspeakably selfish of this old man to bring this compromising slander to his house – uninvited and unannounced.

Walter knocked the cigar from his father's mouth, then followed it to where it fell and crushed it underfoot. Klaus simply watched.

"I must ask you to leave at once! I did not ask you here. I... I simply cannot believe that you dared to say such things in my own house. Did I ask you here, hmm? Did I?" Walter paced the room, his fury growing with every turn, a note of barely controlled hysteria in his voice. "No! You took it upon yourself to arrive in my house, eat my food and drink my wine. Then you... then you pollute me with all that... all that Prussian old school rubbish! All that..." Inarticulate with wrath, Walter stopped pacing and faced his incredulous father. "Your time is gone. That is what you cannot stand. This is not a time for... for kings and... and Prussian Field Marshals with moustaches who think war must be fought with pistols and sabres. Look around you – Germany is dying on her feet, but we are reviving her – Hitler is reviving her!"

He stood entirely unafraid now before his father, and as he spoke, the contempt he felt was evident. Klaus leaned forward in his chair, rested his arms on his thighs, bent his head and contemplated the ground. Walter struggled to regain composure and stood square before Klaus. "Tell me, Field Marshal, have you even heard of the Junkers 87 dive bomber? No? Let me tell you about it. I am deploying prototypes at this very time – it is part

of my job at the Air Ministry. It is a plane which will make the Luftwaffe the finest military airborne force in the world. It can dive at eighty degrees... but the pilot is so comfortable... he is in total control, so... so he can make precision judgments at a practically vertical angle about where to drop his bombs. It will revolutionize warfare. Under Prime Minister Goering, your Prussia will be an almighty power once again. If you cannot see that, old man, then I suggest... I suggest you keep quiet about your blindness.”

“Or?” At last, Klaus looked up at Walter. His expression was neutral; his eyes, when they met Walter’s, fearless and clear. He stood up slowly.

“Or,” Walter stepped back and seemed less sure of himself now that his father had risen and held his gaze, “or else you might find yourself compromised in your work as Chief of Staff Officer for the Führer, Field Marshal Gunther.”

“I see.” Klaus nodded as though he at last understood something, and then, sighing, he patted his pockets to ensure all the smoking paraphernalia he possessed was in place. He lifted the chair he had used and crossed the room to replace it beneath the table. “You are wrong to presume I have not heard of your Junkers plane – the Stuka, they are calling it? Junkers himself is dead, I think. Yes, yes - February of this year. He was sent...” and here Klaus turned to look at Walter, emphasized the word, “to Bavaria, I think. Did you know this?” Again, Klaus nodded, shrugged his shoulders a little, turned away from Walter and began walking towards the drawing room door. “He owned that firm, you know – of course you know. But he said the wrong things. Just like the others. Just as I have done this evening. I am going, Walter. I shall see myself out.” But just as he opened the drawing room door, Klaus shut it gently again and half turned towards Walter, his hand still on the door handle. “In case you are ever... privy to such a discussion, I would rather be shot than sent to Bavaria. I never liked the place. Too much singing.” And then he opened wide the door and passed through into the hallway.

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Agna knew better than to ask what had happened in the drawing room. Her husband's crestfallen posture and her son's clenched jaw told her all was far from well. With a heart already grieving, she threw herself at Walter and clung to his neck like a stricken lover. He did not raise his arms to return her embrace, but muttered his goodbyes before turning from the open door and marching across the hallway and up the stairs.

Hedda embraced her now sobbing mother-in-law and bade Klaus goodbye. He half smiled at her, but made no attempt to embrace her. Halfway to the car he turned and said only, "I wish you well, Hedda. Look after my grandchild, hmm? There is noble blood in the child's veins. Oh, and Hedda..."

"Yes, Herr Gunther?"

"You might be interested in asking your father what he is working on so hard these days. I hear he is a very brilliant man. Says all the right things."

When Agnette was born fifteen days later, Hedda wrote a short note to Agna and Klaus to inform them that they had a granddaughter and to tell them her name. She promised that she would send a photograph as soon as she had the chance. Walter left the choice of baby's name to Hedda and did not object to its resemblance to that of his mother, although he never mentioned either of his parents again and forbade Hedda to do so. Neither Agna nor Klaus telephoned the Rudolf Virchow hospital to see if they had a grandchild, and Hedda never received a reply from them to her letter announcing Agnette's birth.