Opening Extract from...

THE WOMEN AT HITLER'S TABLE

Written by **Rosella Postorino**

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Rosella Postorino is an internationally bestselling author and an editor. She speaks fluent English, Italian, French, and German. *The Women at Hitler's Table* is her first novel to be translated into English.

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A man can only live by absolutely
forgetting he's a man like other folk.

—BERTOLT BRECHT, *THE THREEPENNY OPERA*

Part ONE

1

East Prussia, 1943

We entered one at a time. We had waited for hours outside, lined up in the hallway. The room was large, its walls white. In the center of it, a long wooden table already laid out. They gestured for us to sit.

I sat with my hands clasped on my belly. In front of me, a white ceramic plate. I was hungry.

The other women had taken their places without a sound. There were ten of us. Some sat up straight and poised, their hair pulled into buns. Others glanced around. The girl across from me nibbled at her hangnails, mincing them between her front teeth. She had doughy, blotchy cheeks. She was hungry.

By eleven in the morning we were already hungry. It wasn't because of the country air or the journey by bus—the feeling in our stomachs was fear. For years we had lived with this hunger, this fear, and when the smell of the cooked food was under our noses, our heartbeats throbbed in our temples, our mouths watered. I looked over at the girl with blotchy skin. We shared the same longing.

The string beans were served with melted butter. I hadn't had butter since my wedding day. The aroma of the roasted peppers tickled my nostrils. My plate was piled high. I couldn't stop staring at it. The plate of the girl across from me was filled with rice and peas.

"Eat," they told us from the corner of the room, more an invitation than an order. They could see it, the longing in our eyes.

Mouths sagged open, breathing quickened. We hesitated. No one had wished us *bon appétit,* so maybe there was still time to stand up, say thank you, the hens were generous this morning, an egg will be enough for me today.

Again I counted the women around the table. There were ten of us. It wasn't the Last Supper.

"Eat!" they repeated from the corner, but I was already sucking on a string bean and felt the blood surging up to the roots of my hair and down to the tips of my toes, felt my heartbeat slowing. *What a feast you've prepared for me*—these peppers are so sweet—*what a feast for me, on a wooden table, not even a cloth covering it, ceramic dishes from Aachen, and ten women. If we were wearing veils we would look like nuns, a refectory of nuns who've taken vows of silence.*

At first our bites are modest, as though we're not being forced to eat it all, as though we could refuse this food, this meal that isn't intended for us, that is ours only by chance, of which only by chance we're worthy of partaking. But then it glides down our throats, reaching that pit in our stomachs, and the more it fills that pit, the bigger the pit grows, and the more tightly we clutch our forks. The apple strudel is so good that tears spring to my eyes, so good that I scoop bigger and bigger helpings into my mouth, wolfing them down until I throw back my head and gasp for air, all in the presence of my enemies.

My mother used to say eating was a way of battling death. She said it even before Hitler, back when I went to elementary school at Braunsteinstraβe 10 in Berlin. She would tie a bow on my pinafore and hand me my schoolbag and remind me to be careful not to choke during lunch. At home I had the bad habit of talking nonstop, even with my mouth full. *You talk too much*, she would tell me, and then I actually would choke on my food because it made me laugh, her tragic tone, her attempts to raise me with a fear of dying, as if every act of living exposed us to mortal danger—life was perilous, the whole world lay in ambush.

When the meal was over, two SS guards stepped forward. The woman on my left rose from her chair.

"Sit down! In your place!"

The woman fell back into her seat as though they had shoved her into it. One of the two braids coiled at the sides of her head loosened from its hairpin, dangling slightly.

"None of you have permission to stand up. You will remain here, seated at the table, until further orders. If the food was contaminated, the poison will quickly enter your circulation." The SS guard scrutinized us one by one, examining our reactions. We didn't breathe. Then he turned back to the woman who had stood up. She wore a dirndl, so perhaps she had risen out of deference. "Don't worry, an hour will be enough," he told her. "In an hour's time you'll all be free to go."

"Or dead," remarked his comrade.

I felt my rib cage constrict. The girl with blotchy skin buried her face in her hands, muffling her sobs.

"Stop it," hissed the brunette sitting beside her, but by then the other women were also crying, in tears like sated crocodiles—perhaps an effect of their digestion.

In a low voice I said, "May I ask your name?" The blotchy-faced girl didn't realize I was talking to her. I reached out, touched her wrist. She flinched, looked at me dumbly. All her capillaries had burst. "What's your name?" I whispered again.

Unsure whether she had permission to speak, the girl looked over at the guards in the corner, but they were distracted. It was almost noon and they may have been getting hungry themselves, because they didn't seem to be paying attention to us, so she whispered, "Leni, Leni Winter?" She said it as though it were a question, but that was her name.

"Leni, I'm Rosa," I told her. "We'll be going home soon, you'll see."

Leni was little more than a child—you could tell by her pudgy knuckles. She had the looks of a girl who'd never been touched in a barn, not even during the weary languor after a harvest.

In '38, after my brother Franz moved away, Gregor brought me here to Gross-Partsch to meet his parents. *They're going to love you,* he told me, proud of the Berliner secretary whose heart he had won and who was now engaged to the boss, like in the movies.

I enjoyed it, that trip east in the sidecar. "Let us ride into the eastern lands," went the song. They would play it over the loudspeakers, and not only on April 20. Every day was Hitler's birthday.

For the first time, I took the ferry and left town with a man. Herta put me up in her son's room and sent him upstairs to sleep in the attic. When his parents had gone to bed, Gregor opened the door and slipped under my covers. *No,* I whispered, *not here. Then come to the barn,* he said. My eyes misted over. *I can't. What if your mother were to discover us?*

We had never made love. I had never made love to anyone.

Gregor slowly stroked my lips, tracing their edges. Then he

pressed his fingertip more firmly and more firmly still until he'd bared my teeth, coaxed them open, slipped in two fingers. They felt dry against my tongue. I could have snapped my jaw shut, bitten him. That hadn't even occurred to Gregor. He had always trusted me.

Later that night I couldn't resist. I went up to the attic and this time it was me who opened the door. Gregor was sleeping. I brought my parted lips close to his, let our breaths mingle, and he woke up. *Wanted to find out what I smell like in my sleep, did you?* he asked with a smile. I slid one, then two, then three fingers into his mouth, felt it water up, his saliva wetting my skin. This was love: a mouth that doesn't bite, or the opportunity to unexpectedly attack the other like a dog that turns against its master.

I was wearing a red beaded necklace when, during the ferry ride home, he clasped my neck. It had finally happened not in his parents' barn, but in a windowless ship cabin.

"I NEED TO get out of here," Leni murmured.

"Shh. . . ." I stroked Leni's wrist. This time she didn't flinch. "Only twenty minutes left. It's almost over."

"I need to get out of here," she insisted.

The brunette beside her had angular cheekbones, glossy hair, a harshness in her eye. "You just can't keep quiet, can you?" she said, wrenching Leni's shoulder.

"Leave her alone!" I said, almost shouting.

The SS guards turned toward me. "What's going on?"

All the women turned toward me.

"Please . . . ," Leni said.

One of the guards walked over to her. He clamped his hand on Leni's arm and hissed something into her ear. I couldn't hear what it was but it made her face twist grotesquely.

"Is she ill?" another guard asked.

The woman in the dirndl jumped up from her chair again. "The poison!"

The other women also shot to their feet when Leni began to retch. The SS guard stepped aside just in time as Leni vomited on the floor.

The guards rushed out, screamed for the kitchen staff, interrogated the chef—the Führer was right, the British were trying to poison him!—some of the women clung to one another, others sobbed against the wall, the brunette paced back and forth with her hands on her hips, making a strange sound with her nose. I went over to Leni and held her head.

All the women were clutching their bellies, but not from spasms—they had sated their hunger and weren't used to it.

They kept us there far longer than an hour. After the floor had been wiped clean with newspapers and a damp cloth, an acrid stench hung in the air. Leni didn't die, she simply stopped trembling. Then she dozed off at the table, her hand in mine and her cheek resting on her arm, a little girl. My stomach tensed and churned, but I was too exhausted to fret about it.

When it was clear there was no longer cause for alarm, the guards woke Leni and led us single-file to the bus that would take us home. My stomach no longer protested; it had allowed itself to be occupied. My body had absorbed the Führer's food, the Führer's food was circulating in my bloodstream.

Hitler was safe.

I was hungry again.

2

We had never been Nazis. as a little girl i hadn't wanted to join the Bund Deutscher Mädel, hadn't liked the black neckerchief that hung down the front of their white shirts. I had never been a good German.

But that day, surrounded by the white walls of the lunchroom, I became one of Hitler's food tasters. It was autumn 1943. I was twenty-five and had fifty hours and seven hundred kilometers of travel weighing on me. To escape the war, a week earlier I had moved from Berlin to East Prussia. I had come to Gross-Partsch, the town where Gregor had been born, though Gregor wasn't here.

They had shown up unexpectedly at the home of my parents-in-law the day before that first meal. *We're looking for Rosa Sauer,* they said. I didn't hear them because I was in the backyard. I hadn't even heard the sound of the jeep coming to a halt out front but had seen the hens scurrying toward the henhouse all at once.

"They're asking for you," Herta said.

"Who is?"

She turned away without replying. I called out for Zart, the cat, but he didn't come. In the morning he would go off to wander around town. He was a worldly cat. I followed Herta, thinking,

Who could be looking for me, no one knows me here, I've only just arrived, oh, god, has Gregor come home?

"Has my husband returned?" I asked breathlessly, but Herta was already in the kitchen, her back turned to the door, blocking the light. Joseph was also on his feet, stooping with one hand resting on the table.

"Heil Hitler!" Two dark silhouettes thrust their right arms in my direction.

I raised my arm in reply as I stepped inside. In the kitchen were two men in gray-green uniforms, pale shadows shrouding their faces. One of them said, "Rosa Sauer."

I nodded.

"The Führer needs you."

He had never seen my face, the Führer. Yet he needed me.

Herta wiped her hands on her apron as the SS officer continued to speak, addressing me, looking only at me, scrutinizing me as if to make an appraisal: a sturdy piece of craftsmanship. Of course, hunger had somewhat debilitated me, the air-raid sirens at night had deprived me of sleep, and the loss of everything, of everyone, had left me weary-eyed, but my face was round, my hair full and blond. . . . Yes, one look says it all: a young Aryan female tamed by war, a one hundred percent genuine national product, a fine acquisition.

The officer walked to the front door.

"May we offer you something?" Herta asked, too late. Country folk didn't know how to receive important guests. Joseph stood up straight.

"We'll return tomorrow morning at eight. Be ready to leave," said the other SS officer, who until then had remained silent. Then he too walked to the front door.

The Schutzstaffel were declining out of politeness, either that or they weren't fond of roasted acorn coffee, though perhaps there

was some wine, a bottle saved in the cellar for when Gregor returned. Or they were practicing self-restraint, hardening themselves through abstention, force of will. Whatever the case, they didn't even consider Herta's offer, admittedly tardy.

They shouted, *Heil Hitler!* raising their arms—toward me.

Once they had driven off, I went to the window. The tire tracks in the gravel marked the path to my death sentence. I shot to another window in another room, ricocheting from one side of the house to the other in search of air, in search of a way out. Herta and Joseph followed me. *Please, let me think. Let me breathe.*

It was the mayor who had given them my name, according to the SS. The mayor of a small country town knew everyone, even newcomers.

"We'll find a way out." Joseph tugged his beard in his fist as though a solution might slip out. Working for Hitler, sacrificing one's life for him—wasn't that what all Germans were doing? But that I might ingest poisoned food and die, not from a rifle shot, not from an explosion, Joseph couldn't accept it. A life ending with a whimper, perishing out of view. Not a hero's death but a mouse's. Women didn't die as heroes.

"I have to leave." I rested my cheek against the window. Each time I tried to take a deep breath, a stabbing pain by my collarbone cut it short. I changed windows. A stabbing pain by my ribs. My breath couldn't break free. "I came here to live a better life. . . ." I laughed bitterly, a reproach to my parents-in-law, as though they had been the ones to offer my name to the SS.

"You must hide," Joseph said, "seek refuge somewhere."

"In the woods," Herta suggested.

"In the woods where? To die from cold and hunger?"

"We'll bring you food."

"Naturally," Joseph confirmed. "We would never abandon you."

"What if they come searching for me?"

Herta looked at her husband. "Do you think they would?"

"They won't be pleased, that's certain." Joseph wasn't getting his hopes up.

I was a deserter without an army, ridiculous.

"You could go back to Berlin," he said.

"Yes, you could go back home," Herta echoed. "They won't follow you all the way there."

"I don't have a home in Berlin anymore, remember? If I hadn't been forced to, I never would've come here in the first place!"

Herta's features tensed. I had shattered the politeness that had stood between us because of our roles, because of our scarce familiarity with each other.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Never mind," she said stiffly.

I had been disrespectful to her, but at the same time I had thrown open the door to intimacy between us. She felt so close that I longed to cling to her. *Keep me with you, take care of me.*

"What about you two?" I asked. "If they come and don't find me here, they might take it out on you."

"We'll manage," said Herta. With this, she turned and left.

Joseph let go of his beard. There was no solution to be found there. "What do you want to do?"

I would rather die in a foreign town than in my own city, where I no longer had anyone.

On my second day as a food taster I rose at dawn. The cock was crowing and the frogs had suddenly stopped croaking, as though falling into an exhausted sleep all at once. It was then that I felt alone, after an entire night awake. In my reflection in the window

I saw the circles around my eyes and recognized myself. They hadn't been caused by insomnia or the war. Those dark furrows had always been there on my face. *Shut those books, look at that face of yours,* my mother would say, and my father would ask, *Do you think she has an iron deficiency, Doctor?* and my brother would rub his forehead against mine because the silky caress would help him fall asleep. In my reflection in the window I saw the same circled eyes that I'd had as a girl and realized they had been an omen.

I went out to look for Zart and found him curled up, snoozing beside the henhouse as though looking after the hens. It wasn't wise to leave the ladies unattended—Zart was an old-fashioned male, so he knew that. Gregor, on the other hand, had gone away. He had wanted to be a good German, not a good husband.

The first time we had gone out together he'd asked me to meet him at a café near the cathedral, and he arrived late. We sat at a table outside, the air chilly despite the sunshine. Enchanted, I heard a musical motif in the chorus of birds, saw in their flight a dance performed just for me, for this moment with him had finally arrived and resembled love as I'd imagined it ever since I was a little girl. A bird broke away from the flock. Proud and solitary, it plunged down almost as if to dive into the Spree, brushed the water with outstretched wings, and instantly soared up again. It had followed a sudden urge to escape, a reckless act, an impulse driven by euphoria. That same feeling tingled in my calves. Facing my boss, the young engineer sitting before me at the café, I found I was euphoric. Happiness had just begun.

I had ordered a slice of apple pie but hadn't tasted it yet. Gregor pointed this out. *Don't you like it?* he asked. *I don't know,* I said, laughing. I pushed the plate forward, offering it to him, and when I saw him put the first piece into his mouth and chew quickly,

with his customary enthusiasm, I wanted to as well. And so I took a bite, and then another, and we found ourselves eating from the same plate, chattering about nothing in particular without looking at each other, as though that were already too intimate, until our forks suddenly touched. When they did we fell silent, looking up. We stared at each other for a long while, as the birds continued to circle overhead or came to rest on branches, on balustrades, lampposts, who knew, perhaps they were diving down to plunge beak-first into the river, never again to emerge. Then Gregor pinned my fork down with his, and it was as if he were touching me.

Herta came outside to collect the eggs later than usual. Perhaps she too had spent a sleepless night and was having a hard time waking up that morning. She found me there, sitting on the rusty metal chair, Zart curled up on top of my feet. She sat down beside me, forgetting about breakfast. The door creaked.

"What, are they here already?" Herta asked.

Leaning against the doorframe, Joseph shook his head. "Eggs," he replied, gesturing at the henhouse. Zart scampered after him, and I missed his warmth.

The soft glow of sunrise had withdrawn like the tide, laying the morning sky bare, pale, drained. The hens began to squawk, the birds to twitter, the bees to buzz against that circle of light overhead, but the squeal of a vehicle coming to a halt silenced them.

"Get up, Rosa Sauer!" we heard them shout.

Herta and I leapt to our feet and Joseph returned carrying the eggs. He didn't notice he'd clutched one of them too tightly and had broken its shell, the yolk oozing through his fingers in viscous rivulets of bright orange. I stared at them. They were about to

drip from his skin and would hit the ground without making a sound.

"Hurry up, Rosa Sauer!" the SS officers insisted.

Herta touched my back and I moved.

I chose to await Gregor's return. To believe the war would end. I chose to eat.

In the bus, I glanced around and sat in the first empty spot, far from the other women. There were four of them, two sitting next to each other, the others sitting on their own. I couldn't remember their names. I only knew Leni's, and she hadn't been picked up yet.

No one replied when I said good morning. I looked at Herta and Joseph through the window, which was streaked with dried rain. Standing by the doorway, she raised her arm despite her arthritis, he still held a broken egg in his hand. I watched the house as it fell behind—its moss-darkened shingles, the pink paint, the valerian blossoms that grew in clusters from the bare earth—until it disappeared behind the bend. I would watch it every morning as though I were never to see it again. Until one day I no longer felt that longing.

The headquarters were three kilometers from Gross-Partsch, hidden in the forest, invisible from the air. When the workers began to build it, Joseph told me, the locals wondered why there was all that coming and going of vans and trucks. The Soviet military airplanes had never detected it. But we knew Hitler was there, that he slept not far away, and perhaps in summer he would toss and turn in his bed, slapping at the mosquitoes that disturbed his slumber. Perhaps he too would rub the red bites, overcome by

the conflicting desires caused by the itch: though you couldn't stand the archipelago of bumps on your skin, part of you didn't want them to heal because the relief of scratching them was so intense.

They called it the Wolfsschanze, the Wolf's Lair. "Wolf" was his nickname. As hapless as Little Red Riding Hood, I had ended up in his belly. A legion of hunters was out looking for him, and to get him in their grips they would gladly slay me as well.

3

Once we arrived in Krausendorf, they lined us up and walked us single file to a red-brick schoolhouse that had been set up as military barracks. We crossed the threshold as docile as cows. The SS guards stopped us in the hallway, searched us. It was terrible to feel their hands linger on my sides, under my arms, and not be able to do anything but hold my breath.

We answered the roll call and they marked down attendance in a register. I discovered that the brunette who had wrenched Leni's shoulder was named Elfriede Kuhn.

Two by two, we were made to enter a room that smelled of alcohol while the others waited their turn outside. I rested my elbow on the school desk in front of me. A man in a white coat tied a tourniquet tightly around my arm and tapped on my vein with his pointer and middle fingers. With the drawing of blood samples, we were officially test animals. While the day before might have been seen as an inauguration, a rehearsal, as of this moment our work as food tasters had officially begun.

When the needle pierced my vein I looked away. Elfriede was beside me, staring at the syringe that drew her blood, filling up with a red color that grew darker and darker. I had never been able to stand the sight of my own blood—recognizing the dark

liquid as something that came from inside of me made me dizzy—so I looked at her instead, at her posture straight as two Cartesian axes, her indifference. I sensed Elfriede was a woman of beauty, though I still couldn't see it. Her beauty was a mathematical theory I had yet to prove.

Before I knew it, her profile became a face glaring at me sharply. Her nostrils flared, as if lacking air. I opened my mouth to catch my breath and said nothing.

"Keep pressure on this," the man in the white coat told me, pressing a cotton ball against my skin.

I heard Elfriede's tourniquet come off with a snap and her chair scrape the floor. I too stood up.

In the lunchroom I waited for the others to sit down before me. Most of the women chose the same place they had sat in the day before. The chair across from Leni was free, and from then on it was mine.

After breakfast—milk and fruit—they served us lunch. On my plate, asparagus pie. With time I would come to learn that giving different food combinations to different groups of us was one of their control procedures.

I studied the lunchroom as one studies a foreign environment—the windows with iron grilles, the French door leading to the courtyard guarded at all times, the pictureless walls. On my first day of school, when my mother had left me in the classroom and walked out, the thought that something bad might happen to me without her knowing about it filled me with sorrow. What affected me wasn't the danger of the world around me but my mother's powerlessness. It seemed intolerable that my life could go on happening with her oblivious to it. Whatever remained concealed, even if not on purpose, was already a betrayal. I had

searched the classroom for a crack in the wall, a spiderweb, anything that might be mine, like a secret. My eyes wandered the room, which seemed enormous, and finally noticed a missing fragment of baseboard, which calmed me.

In the lunchroom in Krausendorf the baseboards were all intact. Gregor wasn't there, I was alone. The SS guards' boots dictated the pace of the meal, clicking away the countdown to our potential death. *This asparagus is delicious, but isn't poison bitter?* I swallowed and my heart stopped.

Elfriede was also eating asparagus, staring at me as she did, and I drank one glass of water after another to dilute my anxiety. It might have been my dress that made her so curious. Maybe Herta was right, maybe I was out of place wearing that checkered pattern, it wasn't like I was going to the office, I didn't work in Berlin anymore. *Get rid of those city airs of yours,* my mother-in-law had told me, *otherwise everyone's going to look down on you*. Elfriede wasn't looking down on me, or maybe she was, but I had put on my most comfortable dress, the one most worn—the uniform, Gregor used to call it. It was the one I never had to question, neither if it flattered my figure, nor if it would bring me luck. It offered me shelter, even from Elfriede, who was scrutinizing me with a serious look on her face and didn't even bother to hide it, her eyes scouring the checks on my dress with enough vehemence to make them fly off the fabric, with enough vehemence to unravel the hem, unlace my heeled shoes, make the wave of hair that framed my temple fall flat as I continued to drink water.

Lunch wasn't over yet and I didn't know if we were permitted to leave the table. My bladder ached, like it had in the cellar in Budengasse where Mother and I would seek refuge at night with the building's other tenants when the air-raid sirens went off. But there was no bucket in the corner here, and I couldn't hold it any longer. Without even consciously deciding to, I stood up and

asked permission to go to the washroom. The SS guards nodded. As one of them, a very tall man with big feet, escorted me into the hallway, I heard Elfriede's voice. "I need to go too."

The tiles were worn, the grout blackened. Two sinks and four stalls. The SS man stood guard in the hallway, we went in, and I hurried into one of the stalls. I didn't hear another stall door close or a faucet run. Elfriede had disappeared, or was standing there listening. The sound of my stream breaking the silence was humiliating. When I opened the door she blocked it with the tip of her shoe, grabbed me by the shoulder, and shoved me back against the wall. The tiles smelled of disinfectant. She moved her face close to mine, almost sweetly.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Me?"

"Why were you staring at me during the blood sample?"

I tried to break free. She blocked my way.

"A word of advice: mind your own business. In this place, everybody's better off minding their own business."

"I can't stand the sight of my own blood, that's all."

"Oh, but the sight of someone else's blood is okay, is it?"

The scrape of metal against wood made us start. Elfriede pulled away.

"What are you up to in here?" the guard asked, stepping inside. The tiles were cold and damp, or maybe it was the sweat on my back. "Having a little tête-à-tête, are we?" He wore enormous shoes, perfect for crushing the heads of snakes.

"I had a dizzy spell. It must be because of the blood sample," I stammered, touching the red mark over the bulging vein on the inside of my elbow. "She was helping me. I feel better now."

The guard warned that if he caught us like that again, so intimate, he would teach us a lesson. Or better yet, he would take advantage of it. Then he burst out laughing.

We went back to the lunchroom, the Beanpole watching our every step. He was wrong: it hadn't been intimacy between Elfriede and me, it had been fear. We were sizing up each other and our surroundings with the blind terror of someone who's just been born into the world.

That night, in the bathroom of the Sauer home, the scent of asparagus that emanated from my urine made me think of Elfriede. She too, sitting on the commode, probably smelled the same odor. Even Hitler, in his bunker at the Wolfsschanze. That night, Hitler's urine would stink like mine.

4

I was born on December 27, 1917, eleven months before the Great War ended, a Christmas gift to wrap up the holiday celebrations. My mother said Santa Claus had heard me wailing, bundled up beneath so many blankets in the back of his sleigh that he'd completely overlooked me. And so he flew back to Berlin, unwillingly though, because his vacation had just begun and the unscheduled delivery was an inconvenience. *It's a good thing he noticed you,* Father used to say, *because you were our only gift that year.*

My father was a railroad worker, my mother a seamstress. Our living room floor was always covered with spools of thread and balls of yarn in all different colors. My mother would lick the end of a strand to thread the needle more easily, and I would mimic her. Once, without letting her see, I sucked a strand of thread and played with it on my tongue. When it had been reduced to a soggy clump, I couldn't resist the urge to swallow it and discover whether, once inside me, it would kill me. I spent the following minutes wondering what the signs of my imminent death would be, but, given that I didn't die, I soon forgot about it. Then at night I remembered it, certain my time had come. The game of death began at a very early age. I never spoke a word of it to anyone.

At night my father would listen to the radio while my mother would sweep up the threads strewn on the floor and climb into bed to open a copy of *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, eager to read the latest episode of her favorite serial novel. That was my childhood, the steamed-up windows looking out onto Budengasse, multiplication tables memorized well in advance, the walk to school wearing shoes that were first too big and then too tight, ants decapitated with fingernails, Sundays on which Mother and Father would read from the pulpit—she the psalms, he the Epistles to the Corinthians—and I would listen to them from the pew, either proud or bored, a pfennig coin tucked in my mouth. The metal was salty, it tingled. I would close my eyes in delight, my tongue pushing it to the edge of my throat until it teetered there, ready to slide down, then all at once I would spit it out. My childhood was books beneath my pillow, nursery rhymes sung with my father, blind man's bluff in the square, stollen at Christmas, trips to the Tiergarten, the day I went to Franz's crib, stuck his tiny hand between my teeth, and bit down hard. My brother howled like all newborns howl when they wake up, and no one found out what I had done.

It was a childhood full of sins and secrets, and I was too focused on their safekeeping to notice anyone else. I never wondered where my parents found the milk, which cost hundreds and later thousands of marks, if they held up a grocery store and eluded the police. Not even years later did I wonder if they felt humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles like everyone else, if they too hated the United States, if they felt unjustly treated for being held responsible for a war in which my father had fought. He had spent an entire night in a foxhole with a dead Frenchman and had eventually dozed off beside the corpse.

During that time, when Germany was a gridlock of wounds, my mother would pull back her lips as she slicked down the end

of the thread, on her face a turtle expression that made me laugh, my father listening to the radio after work, smoking Juno cigarettes, and Franz napping in his crib, his arm bent and his hand by his ear, his tiny fingers curled over his palm of tender flesh.

In my room I would do an inventory of my sins and my secrets, and would feel no remorse.

5

"I can't make heads or tails of this," Leni moaned. We were sitting at the cleared table after dinner with open books and pencils provided by the guards. "There are too many hard words."

"For example?"

"Salivary alym—no, amyl—wait." Leni checked the page. "Salivary amylase, or that other one: peps—err . . . pep-sino-gen."

A week after our first day, the chef had come into the lunchroom and handed out a series of textbooks on nutrition, asking us to read them. Ours was a serious mission, he said, and we should be knowledgeable as we carried it out. He introduced himself as Otto Günther but we all knew the guards called him Krümel, or Crumbs, maybe because he was short and skinny. When we arrived at the barracks in the mornings he and his staff would already be working on breakfast, which we ate immediately, while Hitler ate at around ten, after being briefed on news from the front. Then, at around eleven, we had what he would have for lunch. When the hour-long wait was over they took us home, but at five in the evening they returned to pick us up to taste his dinner.

The morning Krümel gave us the books, one of the women flipped through a few pages and then pushed her book away with a shrug. She had broad, square shoulders disproportionate to her

slender ankles, which were left bare under her black skirt. Her name was Augustine. Leni, on the other hand, went ashen, as though they had announced a big exam and she was certain she would fail. As for me, the task was a consolation—not that I thought it was useful to memorize the phases in the digestive process, nor felt the need to make a good impression. In those diagrams, those tables, I recognized my age-old thirst for knowledge so strongly that I could almost make believe I wasn't losing myself.

"I'll never manage to learn this," Leni said. "Do you think they'll quiz us?"

"The guards sitting at the teacher's desk and giving us grades? Don't be silly," I said, smiling at her.

Leni didn't smile back. "Maybe the doctor will ask us something at our next blood exam, surprise us with a question!"

"That would be funny."

"What's so funny about it?"

"It's like we're peeking into Hitler's innards," I said with incomprehensible cheerfulness. "If we make a rough estimate, we can calculate when his sphincter will dilate."

"That's disgusting!"

It wasn't disgusting, it was human. Adolf Hitler was a human being who digested.

"Has the professor finished her lesson? When the lecture's over we can applaud you." It was Augustine, the woman with square shoulders dressed in black. The guards didn't order us to be quiet. At the chef's request, the lunchroom was to be a schoolroom, and his request was to be respected.

"I'm sorry," I said, lowering my head, "I didn't mean to bother you."

"We all know you studied in the city, okay?"

"What do you care what kind of studies she did?" another

woman, Ulla, broke in. "In any case, she's here now, eating just like the rest of us. Delicious food, no doubt, dressed with a drizzle of poison." She laughed, but no one joined her.

Narrow of waist, firm of bosom, Ulla was quite a dish—that's what the SS guards said about her. She liked to clip out photographs of actresses from magazines and glue them into a scrapbook. At times she would leaf through them and point them out to us one by one: the porcelain cheeks of Anny Ondra, who had married Max Schmeling, the boxer; Ilse Werner's lips, soft and plump as she pursed them to whistle the refrain of "Sing ein Lied, wenn Du mal traurig bist" on the radio, because all it took to keep from feeling sad and lonely was to sing a song. Especially, Ulla admitted, to German soldiers. But her favorite was Zarah Leander, with her high-arched eyebrows and the little curls framing her face in the movie *La Habanera*.

"Coming here to the barracks wearing elegant clothes is a good idea," she said to me. I wore a wine-colored dress with a French-cut collar and puffed sleeves. My mother had made it for me. "This way, if you die, at least you'll already be in your good dress. They won't even need to prepare your corpse."

"Why do you all keep talking about such horrible things?" Leni protested.

Herta was right: the others noticed my appearance. Not only Elfriede, who had scoured the checks on my dress on our second day there and was now leaning against the wall as she read her book, a pencil between her lips like a burned-out cigarette. It seemed to weigh on her, having to stay seated. She always looked like she was on the verge of leaving.

"So you like this dress, then?"

Ulla hesitated, then answered me. "It's a bit chaste, but the style is almost Parisian. And it's definitely much nicer than the dirndls Frau Goebbels wants to make us wear." She lowered her voice.

"And that *she* wears," she added, pointing with her eyes to the woman next to me, the one who had stood up after lunch on the first day. Gertrude didn't hear her.

"Oh, what nonsense." Augustine slammed her palms on the table for emphasis and turned away. Unsure how to conclude her dramatic finale to the conversation, she decided to move closer to Elfriede, though Elfriede didn't take her eyes off her textbook.

"So do you like it or don't you?" I asked again.

Ulla reluctantly admitted: "Yes."

"Fine. You can have it, then."

A thump made me look up. Elfriede had snapped her book shut and folded her arms over her chest, the pencil still in her mouth.

"So what are you going to do, strip down like Saint Francis right here in front of everyone and give it to her?" Augustine snickered, expecting Elfriede to back her up, but she just stood there staring at me, expressionless.

I turned back to Ulla. "I'll bring it to you tomorrow, if you like. No, wait, give me time to wash it."

A murmur spread through the room as Elfriede pulled away from the wall and moved over to sit across from me. She let her textbook thud to the table, rested her hand on it, and began to drum her fingers on the cover, scrutinizing me. Augustine watched her, certain she was about to pass judgment, but Elfriede said nothing. Her fingers fell still.

"She comes here from Berlin to give us handouts," Augustine said, piling it on. "Wants to give us lessons in biology and Christian charity, to prove she's better than us."

"I do want it," Ulla said.

"It's yours," I replied.

Augustine tsked. I would learn she always did that to express her displeasure. "Oh, please. . . ."

"Line up!" the guards ordered. "The hour is over."

We quickly rose to our feet. Augustine's little scene had captivated the other women, but their desire to leave the lunchroom was even stronger. Once again, we were going back home safe and sound.

As I joined the line, Ulla touched my elbow. "Thank you," she whispered, and ran off ahead.

Elfriede was behind me. "This isn't a boarding school for women, Berliner, it's a barracks."

"Mind your own business," I was surprised to hear myself say. The back of my neck instantly flushed. "You're the one who taught me that, remember?" It sounded more like an excuse than a provocation. I wanted to get along with Elfriede rather than clash with her, though I didn't know why.

"In any case," she said, "the kid's right: there's nothing funny about those books, unless you get a kick out of learning the symptoms caused by various forms of poisoning. Do you enjoy preparing for death?"

I kept walking, without replying.

That night I washed the wine-colored dress for Ulla. Giving it to her wasn't an act of generosity or even a ploy to make her like me. Seeing it on her would be like scattering my life in the capital into Gross-Partsch, dispersing it. It was resignation. Three days later, I gave it to her, dried, ironed, and wrapped in newspaper. I would never see her wear it to the lunchroom.

Herta took my measurements and altered some of her own dresses for me, narrowing the waistline and shortening the back hems slightly, at my insistence. *That's the fashion,* I explained. *Berliner fashion,* she retorted, pins between her lips like my mother and not even one scrap of thread on the floor of her country house.

I kept the checkered dress in the wardrobe that had belonged

to Gregor, along with all my work clothes. My shoes were the same—*Where are you going in those heels?* Herta said reproachfully—but only with them on could I recognize my own footsteps, no matter how uncertain they had become. On foggy mornings I would sometimes pull out the checkered dress, gripping the hanger angrily. There was no need for me to blend in with the other tasters, we had nothing in common, why did I care about being accepted by them? But then I would glimpse the dark circles under my eyes and the anger would wither to despondency. Putting the dress back in the darkness of the wardrobe, I would close the door.

They had been a warning, those circles under my eyes, and I hadn't grasped it, hadn't foreseen my fate, blocked its path. Now that death was finally upon me, there was no longer room for the little girl who sang in the school choir, who went roller-skating with friends in the afternoon, who let them copy her geometry homework. Gone was the secretary who had made the boss fall head over heels for her. Instead there was a woman whom the war had suddenly aged. That was the fate written in her blood.

That night of March '43, the night my fate had taken a sharp turn for the worse, the air-raid siren had gone off with its usual whine, the smallest run-up and then a leap, just long enough for my mother to roll out of bed. "Rosa, get up," she urged me. "They're bombing."

When my father died, a year and a half after we entered the war, I had begun to sleep in his place beside her. We were two adult women who had both experienced everyday familiarity with the marriage bed, had both lost it, and there was something profane in the similar smell of our two bodies beneath the covers. Still, I wanted to keep her company when she woke during the night,

even if the siren wasn't going off. Or maybe I was afraid to sleep all alone. That's why, six months after Gregor had gone off to war, I had rented out our apartment in Altemesseweg and moved back in with my parents. I was still learning the ropes of being a wife and already I had to stop that and become a daughter again.

"Hurry," she said, seeing me search for a dress, any dress, to change into. She threw her coat on over her nightgown and headed down in slippers.

The siren was no different from the previous ones, a long wail that built up as though to last forever, but after eleven seconds it diminished in tone, abated. Then it started up again.

All the ones before it had been false alarms. Each time we had run downstairs with our flashlights on, despite the blackout orders. In the dark we would have tripped over the other tenants, bumped into them as they too headed for the cellar, carrying blankets and children and canteens filled with water, or descended terrified and empty-handed. Each time we had found a tiny patch for ourselves on the floor and sat down beneath a dim, bare lightbulb that dangled from the ceiling. The floor was cold, the people cramped, the dampness sinking into our bones.

Huddled against one another, we who lived at Budengasse 78 wept and prayed and cried for salvation. We urinated in a bucket too close to the eyes of the others, or held our bladders though they were ready to burst. A young boy bit into an apple and another boy stole it out of his hand, taking as many bites as he could before the first boy snatched it back and slapped him. We were hungry and sat there in silence or dozed, and would reach the dawn with haggard faces.

Soon afterward, the promise of a new day would drift down onto the light blue façade of our stately building in the outskirts of Berlin, making it glow. Hidden away in the depths of the building, we couldn't see that light, much less believe it possible.

As I raced down the cellar stairs with my arm around my mother on that March night, I wondered what note it was, the sound of the air-raid siren. As a girl I had sung in the school choir, the teacher had complimented my pitch, the timbre of my voice, but I hadn't studied music, so I couldn't tell the notes apart. And yet, as I nestled down in my spot beside Frau Reinach with her brown kerchief on her head, as I stared at Frau Preiß's black shoes deformed by her bunioned big toe, at the hairs sticking out of Herr Holler's ears, at the Schmidts' son Anton's two tiny front teeth, and as my mother's breath—*Are you cold?* she whispered to me. *Bundle up*—became the only profane yet familiar smell I had to cling to, all that while the only thing that mattered to me was finding out what note corresponded to that long blare of the siren.

The rumble of planes overhead instantly banished the thought. My mother squeezed my hand, her nails piercing my skin. Pauline, who was barely three, stood up. Her mother, Anne Langhans, tried to pull her down, but with all the obstinacy of her scant ninety centimeters the little girl broke free. She tilted back her head and looked straight up, turning around as if to seek the origin of the sound or follow the plane's trajectory.

The ceiling shuddered. Pauline toppled over as the floor lurched, a deafening hiss drowning out every other sound, including our screams, her cries. The lightbulb flickered out. A massive explosion burst into the cellar, caving in the walls, hurling us every which way. The blast sent our bodies flying through the air, slamming into one another, tangling together as the walls spewed plaster.

After the bombing ceased, sobs and shouts reached our injured eardrums, muffled. Someone pushed on the cellar door. It was blocked. The women shrieked, the few men present kicked it again and again until finally it burst open.

We were deaf, blind, the dust had masked our features, made us strangers even to our own parents. We searched for them,

calling out, *Mother, Father,* unable to utter any other words. My eyes saw only smoke. And then Pauline: she was bleeding from the temple. I tore the hem off my skirt with my teeth and stanched the wound, tied the strip of fabric around her head, looked for her mother, looked for mine, recognized no one.

The sun arrived by the time everyone had been pulled out. Our building hadn't been leveled but the roof had a gaping hole in it. The roof of the building across from ours was entirely gone. Lined up on the street were the wounded and dead. Survivors leaned back against the wall, gasping for breath, but the fine debris had left throats stinging, noses clogged. Frau Reinach had lost her headkerchief, her hair clumps of smoldering dust that sprouted from her scalp like tumors. Herr Holler was limping. Pauline had stopped bleeding. I was intact, no aches, no pains. My mother was dead.