The Glass Room

Simon Mawer

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Extract

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Note on Pronunciation

Most of the Czech letters are pronounced more or less as in English. A major exception is the letter c, which is pronounced 'ts'. Thus *inovace*, innovation, is pronounced 'innovatsuh' and *turecká*, Turkish, as in Turkish coffee, is 'turetskah'. Ch is always the 'ch' in the Scottish 'loch'. J is pronounced as the 'y' in 'yes', so *pokoj* is 'pokoy'.

Vowels are lengthened by the diacritical mark ´, a dash above. Thus Landauerová is 'Landauero-vah', not 'Landauerover'. *Paní*, Mrs, is 'panee'.

The *háček* or 'hook' diacritical mark ˇ peppers the language, modifying a number of vowels and consonants. *Háček* itself contains its own example – it is pronounced 'hah-chek'. Thus *č* is sounded as 'ch' in 'church'. With a *háček*, ě becomes 'ye' (thus *děvka*, whore, is 'd'yev-ka'); ž becomes 'zh', the sound of the 's' in 'pleasure' (thus *Žid*, Jew, is 'Zhid'); and š becomes 'sh', so the Špilas fortress is 'Sh-pilas'. The consonant that gives the most trouble to English speakers is ř. This is the 'rzh' sound in the name of the composer Dvořák, pronounced 'D'vorzh-ahk'. Finally, I have used Město for the name of the city in the book; this is simply the Czech word for town or city, and is pronounced 'Mnyesto', the 'm' and 'n' sounds being elided together.

Author's Note

Although *The Glass Room* is a work of fiction, the house and its setting are not fictional. I have disguised both with name changes, but that will not fool anyone who knows the building on which the Landauer House is modelled or the city that hides behind the name Město. However, penetrating those thin disguises will not lead to any further revelations: Liesel, Viktor, Hana and all the rest are creatures of my own imagination and their story has no basis in fact. A few non-fictional characters do make brief appearances. One such is the talented composer Vítězslava Kaprálová, whose tragically short life seems emblematic of the brilliant but doomed First Republic of Czechoslovakia. I urge the reader to find out more about her, and her country.

Acknowledgements

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Return

Oh yes, we're here.

She knew, even after all these years. Something about the slope of the road, the way the trajectory of the car began to curve upwards, a perception of shape and motion that, despite being unused for thirty years, was still engraved on her mind, to be reawakened by the subtle coincidence of movement and inclination.

'We're here,' she said out loud. She grabbed her daughter's hand and squeezed. Their escort in the back of the car shifted on the shiny plastic seat, perhaps in relief at the prospect of imminent escape. She could smell him. Damp cloth (it was raining) and cheap aftershave and old sweat.

The car – a Tatra, she had been told – drew in to the kerb and stopped. Someone opened the door. She could hear that, and sense the change in the air. Faint flecks of water on the wind and someone opening an umbrella – like the sail of a boat snapping open in the breeze. She recalled Viktor on the Zürichsee, the little dinghy pitching out into the waves, black trees rising from the blacker water beyond their fragile craft. 'Like riding a bike,' he had cried, bringing the dinghy up into the wind, deliberately letting the little craft heel over. 'You get the sense of balance.'

'It's not a bit like riding a bike,' she had replied, feeling sick.

Viktor should be here. Physically here, she meant, for in some way he was here, of course. His taste, his vision enshrined. She slid across the seat towards the blur of light that was the open door of the car. A hand gripped her arm and helped her out onto the pavement. There was a brush of rain across her face and the rattle of drops on the umbrella above her head. She straightened

up, feeling the light around her, feeling the space, feeling the low mass of the house just there across the forecourt. Viktor should be here. But Ottilie was, coming to her left side.

'It's all right, darling. I'll manage on my own.'

A strange hand grasped her elbow and she shook it off. 'Do you think I don't know my own house?' She spoke sharply, and immediately regretted the comment for its brusqueness and its pure factual inaccuracy. It wasn't her house, not any longer, not in any legal terms, whatever Martin might say. Stolen, with all the solemnity of legal procedures, at least twice and by two different authorities. But it *was* her house in other, less clearly defined terms. Hers and Viktor's. The vision. And it still bore their name, didn't it? Any amount of juridical theft had not managed to expunge that: *Das Landauer Haus*. The Landauer House. *Vila Landauer*. Say it how you will. And Rainer's too, of course.

Tapping with her cane she walked forward across the space, across the forecourt, while footsteps fell in beside her and tactfully kept pace, like mourners at a funeral walking along with the brave widow. 'The paving is the same,' she said.

'Remarkable how it has survived.'

The answering voice was that of the man from the city architect's office. 'But it is a work of art,' he added, as though works of art of necessity survive, whereas in fact they often don't. A fire here, some damp infiltrating a wall there, the random falling of a bomb, pure neglect. 'See the manner in which von Abt framed the view of the castle,' he said, and then fell silent, embarrassed by his lack of tact.

'I remember exactly,' she reassured him. And it was true, she could recall exactly how it was: the space between the main house and the servants' apartment, Laník's apartment, framing the hill on the far side of the city. 'The future frames the past,' Rainer had said. She could see it in the only eye she possessed now, her mind's eye, so much a cliché but so vividly a fact, all of it projected within the intricate jelly of her brain to give her an image that was almost as real as seeing: the wooded hill – the Špilas fortress – and the cathedral with its hunched shoulders and its black spires exactly, Rainer said, like hypodermic needles.

She walked on. The bulk of the house cut out the light around her as she came nearer. There was a freestanding pillar at that

point, supporting the overhanging roof. She remembered the children swinging on it, and Liba calling them to stop. She reached out with her cane and touched the pillar just to make sure, just to locate herself in the open sweep of the forecourt, just to delight in the small intake of breath from the man at her right elbow that told her how amazed he was at the way she could orientate herself. But of course she could. She knew this place like . . . like the inside of her own mind. She knew exactly how to walk around the curve of glassed wall and discover, tucked behind it, the front door.

'A photograph,' a voice called. The small procession halted. There was a shuffling and manoeuvring around her, contact with heavy, male figures. 'Ottilie, where are you?'

'I'm here, Maminka.'

'Smile, please,' said the voice and there came an instant of bright light, as though lightning had flashed briefly behind the even milk of an enveloping cloud. Then the group broke apart and hands guided her back towards the house while someone opened the front door, and invited her forward – 'This way, this way' – into the soft, familiar silence of the entrance hall. A quiet blanket of fog all around her, the opalescent light that was all she would ever see now, that had become her own universal vision. 'The light,' Rainer had said when showing her the milk-white glass panes, 'the soft light of detachment and reason. The future. Pure sensation.' Touching her.

She was aware of others – shapes, presences – crowding in behind her. The door closed. Home. She was home. Thirty years. A generation. She knew the walls around her, the rosewood panels facing her, to her left the stairs turning down into the living room. Sounds, the mere whisper of hearing, gave her the dimensions of the space. She put out her left hand and found the balustrade that guarded the stairwell. People were talking – the architect fellow extolling and exclaiming – but she declined to listen. Unaided she made her way to the top of the stairs and walked down carefully, knowing the moves but having to lift them out of memory, like someone being able to play the piano without looking at the keyboard, recalling a tune that she had last played many years ago. Twelve steps to the curve, and then round and down nine more and the space opened out around her, visible even in the

blankness. The lower level of the house. The Glass Space, *der Glasraum*.

'Ah.' A faint sigh, organic, almost sexual, came from somewhere deep within her. She could feel the volume as though it had physical substance, as though her face were immersed in it. Space made manifest. She could feel the light from the expanse of plate glass that made up the south wall, smell the Macassar wood, sense the people standing there between the glass and the onyx wall, between the plain white ceiling and the ivory white floor, people she knew and people she didn't know. The children of course, running across the carpets towards her, Viktor looking up from the chair where he sat reading the newspaper, her brother there, although he had never known the place, her friends, her parents, all of them there.

'Are you feeling all right, Frau Landauer?'

'Quite all right, thank you. Just the . . .' she cast around for the right word '. . . pictures.'

'Pictures, Frau Landauer?' There were no pictures. Never had been, not in this room. She knew that.

'In my mind.'

'Of course, of course. There must be many.'

Many. For example, when it was dark and Viktor left the curtains open so that the windows became mirrors casting the whole room in duplicate, the chairs, the table, the onyx wall, reflected out there in the night. And his mirrored image walking back and forth, back and forth, suspended over the lawn that had itself become ghostly and insubstantial in the reflection. Refraction of the daytime become reflection of the night. That was how Rainer himself put it. He had even used the English words, for the euphony. Euphony was a quality he loved: *der Wohlklang*.

Snow. Why did she think of snow? That peculiar bath of light, the sky's light reflected upwards from the blanched lawn to light the ceiling as brightly as the clouded sun lit the floor. Light become substance, soft, transparent milk. Birds picking hopefully at the ice, and Viktor pressing the button to lower the windows, like fading memories, down into the basement.

'We'll freeze!'

'Don't be silly.'

The slow slide of the pane downwards as though to remove the

barrier that exists between reality and fiction, the fabricated world of the living room and the hard fact of snow and vegetation. There is a pause during which the two airs stand fragile and separate, the warmth within shivering like a jelly against the wall of cold outside. And then this temporary equilibrium collapses so that winter with a cold sigh intrudes, and, presumably, their carefully constructed, carefully warmed interior air is dispersed into the outside world.

Someone was coming towards her. She could sense the form as much as see it, perceive the nucleus of shadow against the light. She knew. What was it? A sense of motion, that particular movement, the sway of her hips as she walked? Perhaps even the perception of her scent. Or the sound of her breathing. Somehow, she knew. She said the name before anyone spoke, said it as a statement more than a question:

'Hana.'

'Liesi! God, you recognised me. How the hell did you do that?'

'You don't forget things,' she said. 'You store them up.' She felt arms around her, a smooth cheek against hers. Tears? Perhaps there were tears.

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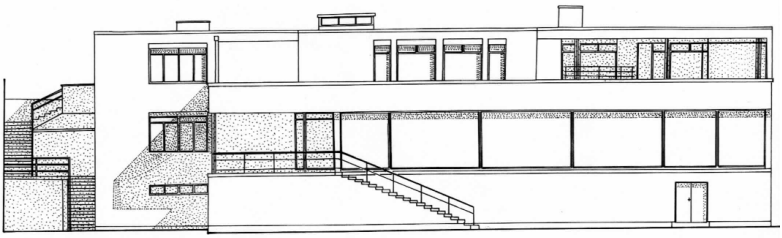

Honeymoon

They left the city immediately after the wedding and drove to Vienna, to the Sacher Hotel, where the manager met them on the steps. Minions scurried round to the back of their car for suitcases. There was much bowing and scraping, much bestowing of compliments. They were *gnädiger Herr*, *gnädige Frau*, and were to make themselves completely at home. It was the first time that Liesel had heard herself addressed like that, *gnädige Frau Landauer*, tied for life in one way or another to this man at her side, who seemed, for that moment when he was acknowledging the welcome, no longer her beloved Viktor but a stranger, someone she had encountered only a short while before and now saw as calm and detached and somehow admirable. This was how he would be at the factory, she guessed; how he would be with the workers' delegations, with the foremen and the managers. A kind of detached graciousness, as though dealing with a tiresome but respected relative.

The suite they were shown to was elaborate and ornate, the walls silk and the plaster mouldings gilt, the sort of thing Viktor loathed. 'It is exactly the kind of nonsense that we need to throw off, all this romanticism, all this . . . this *clinging to the past*. This is everything our new house will not be!'

Liesel laughed at him. When he got onto the subject of the new house he spoke with exclamation marks – that was how she put it to herself. She could picture them punctuating the air, small pulses of energy. Often talked about, this new house did not yet have shape or form. It merely existed as an abstract, written with capitals and punctuated by exclamation marks: The New House!

Liesel's parents had given them a plot of land on which to build, and that was to be Wenzel's wedding present to his daughter and son-in-law: a house of their own. 'Something good and solid,' the old man had said, while his future son-in-law had smiled. '*Good*, yes, but *solid*? No! We don't want a house that looks like a fortress, all turrets and towers and Gothic windows, nor one that looks like a church. Good God, we're living in the twentieth century, not the fourteenth. The world is moving on.'

And once the porters and the maid had left them alone in their suite in the Sacher Hotel the world certainly did move on, for Viktor went up to Liesel and carefully removed her spectacles, and then the silk jacket she was wearing, and then the dress she had on under that. Removal of her spectacles had rendered the world around her a mellow haze of colour, as though she had been plunged into a foggy day. 'What are you doing, Viktor?' she asked, rather nervously. Standing there in her underwear, in the fog, she felt defenceless.

'My darling Eliška, what do you think I am doing?' Viktor replied.

So it was that, rather to her surprise – she had expected to wait until evening – they made love for the first time at four o'clock in the afternoon, on a heavy Biedermeier bed, with the light flooding in through the tall windows and their clothes strewn on the carpet. The experience was curiously dispiriting but it was, she supposed, rather a modern thing to do.

The plan was to spend two days in Vienna, before setting off south. They were to motor through Austria to northern Italy. Alone. Viktor had resisted all pleas that they take a driver, or send a maid or a valet ahead on the train. What happens if you have a breakdown? people had asked. Which only brought laughter. 'We will be driving a Landauer, won't we? Don't they have the greatest reliability of all the cars of Europe? Isn't that the boast on all our advertisements? And' – the final blow this – 'don't *I* make them?'

So they drove alone, in a Landauer 80 cabriolet, the very latest in the range of cars produced by Landauerovy Závody (formerly Landauer Autofabrik), a touring convertible that advertised itself as the Mount of Princes despite the fact that princes and Kaisers

had been cast aside with the ending of the Great War. The car was painted cream and powered by a V8 engine that delivered, as Viktor was proud of explaining, the power of eighty horses. They drove through Carinthia and crossed the mountains into Italy near Villach, where he had been stationed during the war. There was much waiting around at the customs house while Viktor argued over whether he should pay an import duty on the car, and much frustration when he had to change to the left-hand side of the road to proceed. And then they were out of the Teutonic world and into the Latin, and the sun was brighter and the breeze softer and there was a quality to the light that Liesel had never seen before – as though it was denser than the same thing north of the Alps. '"*Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn?*"' Viktor quoted. Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom? And Liesel continued the poem, and then they completed it together so that they laughed delightedly at their unity of mind and body.

The only small blight on their happiness during this journey was a self-imposed one: after Udine they made a short detour to the war cemetery on the Tagliamento river, and after searching among the graves found a cement tablet with Benno's name on it. His body was not there of course, but muddled up with his comrades in the ossuary nearby. Thinking of her own happiness, a happiness that Benno had not lived to witness, Liesel wept. Viktor, who by one of those coincidences of fate had been the last person from home to see her brother alive, put his arm round her shoulder and hugged her to him. 'He is surely with you in spirit,' he said, which she knew to be a great concession to sentiment on his part, for he believed in nothing like the spirit and certainly not the continuation of the spirit after death. Then he kissed her on the cheek and told her she was the most wonderful woman in the world and she laughed and said, no she wasn't. But still the thought pleased her that he might at least consider that possibility, and by the time they had climbed back into the car and driven on, happiness and light-heartedness had been restored.

In Venice they stayed at the Royal Danieli. For three days they were on their own – visiting churches and palaces, exploring the *calle* and the canals, with Viktor snapping pictures of Liesel with his sleek new Leica – but on the third evening they were invited by

an acquaintance of Viktor to a party in an ancient palazzo on the Canal Grande. Beneath faded frescoes by pupils of Tiepolo, ancient Venetian nobility mixed uneasily with young men and women of sleek and dangerous good looks. One of these creatures trapped Liesel in a window seat and, in English as broken as her own, extolled the virtues of Fascism and the merits of modernity. 'One day all this will be swept away.' He sounded like a parody of what Viktor said when he was in one of his political moods. Sweep everything away! Out with the old, in with the new! But Liesel realised with some amazement that this Italian was referring to the whole city, and more than the city: the whole country in fact, this treasure house of art and history. Anything that wasn't a product of the twentieth century, in fact.

'That's absurd.'

He shrugged, as though her opinion meant nothing. 'For example, the Grand Canal drained and turned into a motor road. That is the future.'

'Then the future is peopled with barbarians.'

'Are you suggesting that I am a barbarian, *signora*?'

'I'm suggesting that you sound very like one.'

It was then that someone interrupted them, a voice speaking English with a German accent, but speaking it far better than either she or the Italian. 'Is this person filling your head with nonsense about how wonderful Il Duce is, and how the forces of modernity are being unleashed by Italian Fascism?'

She looked round. He was smoking, holding two glasses of champagne in one hand and his cigarette in the other. He seemed older than the Italian, as old as Viktor maybe, with the look of a boxer in the early part of his career, before he has begun to suffer much damage – a bluntness to his nose, a heaviness to his brow. Putting his cigarette between his lips he held out one of the glasses towards Liesel. 'Have a sip of French tradition. Even the Fascists will not be able to improve on it.'

There was a swift juggling of champagne flutes. Curiously the Italian was no longer there. The newcomer raised Liesel's hand to within a few millimetres of his lips. 'My name is Rainer, I'm afraid. Someone has to be . . .'

'Someone has to be? You mean, someone in your family? It is another tradition?'

The man made a disparaging face. His hair was parted in the middle and rather long; as though, despite the well-cut suit, he wished to convey a certain bohemian look. 'It was a joke. American style.'

'But you are not American.'

'I practise at their humour. One day that is all there will be to laugh at.' He sipped and looked at Liesel thoughtfully. He was shorter than her by two or three inches and his eyes had an unashamed frankness about them. He examined her quite openly: her mouth (red, quaintly curved, she knew), her bosom (rather flat, she feared), her hands (rather long and strong for a woman). Had he been standing a few paces back she imagined he would have examined the line of her hips (broad) and her ankles (she was proud of her ankles). Perhaps he had already done all this before his approach. Somehow – why should she be concerned? – she wished that she was not wearing her spectacles. 'And whose company do I have the pleasure of keeping?' he asked.

'Liesel Landauer's.'

Eyebrows rose. 'Landauer? You are Jewish then?'

'Not exactly.'

'Apostate?'

'My husband's family—'

He drew on his cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke towards the painted ceiling. 'Ah, I see. You are *Frau* Landauer and you have trapped a Hebrew into renouncing his religion for love's sake.'

She wasn't sure if she quite liked this conversation, the word Hebrew pronounced with just a hint of contempt. 'My husband's family are Jewish, but they are not observant.'

'And the beautiful Frau Liesel Landauer and her fortunate husband are from . . . ?'

'We are Czechish. These are our' – she hesitated, the English word escaping her – 'our *Flitterwochen*?'

'Honeymoon, they say. Czechish? You are not *that* Landauer, are you? Motor cars?'

'Well, yes—'

The man's face lit up. There was something comic about his expression, a sudden childish delight painted over mock seriousness.

'I used to *own* a Landauer. A Model 50 – what they called the Torpedo. Unfortunately I aimed it at a bus and sank it.'

She laughed. 'The bus or the Torpedo?'

'Both, actually.' He raised his glass. 'To all Landauers, and those who ride them.' They drank, although Liesel wasn't quite sure about the toast. Landauer cars or Landauer people? And was there something vaguely suggestive about the word 'ride' which surely meant riding a horse as well as a vehicle? Shouldn't it be ride *in* them? But her English (they were still speaking English) was not good enough to be certain, and thankfully, just when she felt a warmth in her face and the insidious discomfort of perspiration beneath her arms, Viktor appeared beside her and the conversation slipped into German. There were formal introductions, a sharp shaking of hands, a bowing, and the faintest clicking of the stranger's heels. 'Herr Landauer,' he said, smiling in that knowing way he had, 'may I congratulate you on your wonderful motor cars? And your wonderful wife.'

It might have come to nothing, a mere curiosity, a passing acquaintance, like drivers of Landauer cars who meet on the open road and acknowledge each other's passing presence with a comradely wave. But they agreed to meet again. Rainer von Abt had something to show them. He smiled mysteriously when they asked, but declined to explain. 'A special treat for the two honeymooners.' He would meet them at the landing stage outside their hotel at nine o'clock the next morning.

The next day was one of beaten silver, like the plate you could buy in the shops near the Rialto bridge – the shimmering silver of the water turning this way and that to catch the light and fracture it in a thousand different directions. Above that the sleek zinc of a high layer of cloud and between the two, like a layer of decorative enamel, the buildings of the city – pink and gold and ochre and orange. At the appointed time von Abt arrived in the stern of a water taxi. He was dressed in white – white flannels, white linen jacket – and looked as though he might be headed for a tennis game. '*Buon giorno*!' he exclaimed. He handed Liesel and Viktor down into the boat while giving commands to the pilot in what seemed to be expert Italian. The engine bubbled and spluttered and edged the boat – all gleaming wood and brass – out into the

stream. '*Avanti*!' their host cried, and they turned and headed out into the basin of St Mark's, the narrow hull sliding past mooring posts and rocking gondolas and evading the stuttering *vaporetti* like a sheep dog running past cows. There was a sensation of floating in light, of being gently buoyed up by the breeze and the luminescence of the water. Liesel felt the wind of their motion flatten her dress against her.

'No wonder the great colourists came from here,' von Abt observed, noticing her expression of delight. 'Imagine spending your whole life bathed in light like this. If you were bathed in ultra-violet all that time, you'd come out black like a nigger. Here you come out white and pure, with colour in your heart.'

Viktor put his arm around her waist, as though defending her against such poetic thoughts. 'Where are we going, von Abt?' he called above the engine noise.

'My secret! But like all secrets in Venice, it cannot be kept for long.'

The boat headed along the great curve of the Riva degli Schiavoni, away from the pink confection of the Doge's Palace and towards the red-brick buildings of the Arsenale. It slowed and finally moored at a public garden beside the mouth of a small canal. Von Abt climbed ashore and led the way into the gardens as though there was no time to be lost, while Viktor and Liesel strolled after him, holding hands and laughing at the absurd adventure and at the urgent enthusiasm of this strange man with the boxer's face and the poet's vision of the city. 'A homosexual,' Viktor whispered in her ear.

She was outraged by the idea. 'Surely not!'

'You can tell. At least *I* can tell.'

'Tell what?' asked von Abt over his shoulder.

Viktor grinned at Liesel. 'That you are a poet.'

'Ah!' The man raised an imperious finger. 'A poet, yes; but not a poet of words. I am a poet of *form*.'

'A dancer then?'

'No.'

'A sculptor?'

'A poet of space and structure. That is what I wish to show you.'

Their footsteps crunched over gravel. There were buildings

among the trees, a strange mixture of styles, not at all ornate and ancient like the rest of the city, but newly built pavilions that might have housed cafés or restaurants, perhaps an orangery or greenhouse. In the furthest corner of the garden was a ponderous neo-classical building. Von Abt strode up the steps and led them into the echoing hallway. There were groups of people walking round and talking in hushed voices as though they were in church. Footsteps clipped beneath the high vault. There were framed designs mounted on display boards, and glass-topped tables with models made of balsa wood and celluloid. People peered and pointed, shifting their viewpoints like billiard players preparing a shot.

'Why are you being so mysterious, Herr von Abt?' Liesel asked.

'You must call me Rainer, for I am certainly not going to call you Frau Landauer. And I am not mysterious. I am showing you everything I do, in the pure and unremitting light of day.' He had stopped before one of the displays. The label was in Italian and English: *Progetto per una Padiglione Austriaca; Project for an Austrian Pavilion, Rainer von Abt, 1929*. 'There!' he said. '*Ecco*! *Voilà*! *Siehe da*!'

Viktor made a small noise – 'Ah!' – just as though something had bitten him. 'So!' he exclaimed, crouching down to bring his eyes level with the model. He was looking across a green baize lawn, past miniature trees carved from cork, towards a low-lying box with transparent celluloid sides. There were small chairs inside the box, like the furniture made for dollshouses, and narrow pillars of chrome wire and a reflecting pool made out of the kind of mirror that a woman – that Liesel herself – carries in her handbag. The colours of the model were those that von Abt had extolled in their voyage down from Saint Mark's: ethereal white, glaucous pearl, glistening chrome.

Viktor straightened up with an expansive smile. 'You are an architect!'

'I repeat,' replied Rainer von Abt, 'I am a poet of space and form. Of light' – it seemed to be no difficulty at all to drag another quality into his aesthetic – 'of *light* and space and form. Architects are people who build walls and floors and roofs. I capture and enclose the space within.'

*

For lunch – 'You must be our guest,' Viktor insisted – they found a restaurant that boasted a courtyard where they could eat beneath the luminous leaves of a vine. They ordered *moleche*, soft-shelled crabs, and a white wine called Soave. They toasted each other, glasses clinking together across the table and catching the sunlight. They talked, of art and architecture, of painting and sculpture, of the nonsense of the Dadaists and the absurd found objects of Duchamp, of Cubism and Fauvism and a group of little-known Dutch artists whom von Abt admired. 'De Stijl, they call themselves. Do you know them? Van Doesburg, Mondrian? Purity of line, focus on shape and proportion.' The honeymooners did not know this latest group. They knew the word clearly enough – *de stijl*, the style – but the idea of a group of stylish, modern Dutchmen almost seemed a contradiction in terms. Liesel expressed her liking for the *Jugendstil*, the Young Style, and the artists of the Viennese Secession. 'Klimt painted my mother when she was young,' she told von Abt. 'The portrait hangs in the dining room of my parents' house.'

Von Abt smiled at her. 'If the daughter is anything to go by she must be a beautiful woman. I am sure that Klimt did her justice.'

'It is a wonderful painting . . .'

'All gilt and tinsel, no doubt. But . . .' There was always a but. It seemed that von Abt moved round the world butting into obstacles placed in his way by the less intelligent, less gifted, less imaginative. 'But as a *style*, what is the Secession? Wagner? Olbrich? Do you know their building in Vienna? Of course you do.'

'I think it very fine. Bold lines, a statement of intent.'

'But it looks like a mausoleum! Or a railway station! A building should not look like something! It should just *be*, a shape without references, defined only by the material it is built of and the conception of the architect. As abstract as a painting by De Stijl.'

Viktor was nodding in approval but Liesel protested, 'What building is abstract? An abstract building would let the rain in.'

Von Abt's laughter was loud and forthright, so that people at nearby tables looked round to see the source of the noise. 'I am, you see, a disciple of the great Adolf Loos. You know Loos? He hails, I believe, from your home city.'

'I have met the man,' Viktor said. 'I admire his work. It is a shame he felt the need to flee Město. But things are different now. The place is looking to the future.'

This seemed to please von Abt. He praised the virtues of his master, the intelligence, the sense of pure uncluttered form. He drew spaces and constructions before them on the table cloth to illustrate his ideas; he cast towers into the sky and – as Viktor later put it – castles into the air. He extolled the virtues of glass and steel and concrete, and decried the millstones of brick and stone that hung about peoples' necks. 'Ever since Man came out of the cave he has been building caves around him,' he cried. 'Building *caves*! But I wish to take Man out of the cave and float him in the air. I wish to give him a glass space to inhabit.'

Glass Space, *Glasraum*. It was the first time Liesel had heard the expression.

'Perhaps,' said Viktor, glancing thoughtfully at his wife and then back to the architect, 'perhaps you could design a Glass Space for us.'

Commitment

That evening they dined by candlelight on the balcony of their room, watching the glimmering boats, the gondolas and the sandalos, pass below. There was the slap of the water against wooden piles, not the rhythmic sound of the sea but a hurried noise, like cats lapping in the darkness. 'What do you think of our friend?' Viktor asked.

'A curiosity. He's very full of energy.'

'Almost too full. You find him attractive?'

'He would attract a certain type of woman.'

'But not my Liesel?'

She smiled. 'Your Liesel is attracted only by you,' she said comfortingly.

He took her hand across the table. 'When you say things like that, I would happily take you immediately, right here at the table.'

'How outrageous. People would complain and we would both be arrested by handsome *carabinieri* and carried away to that awful gaol that we saw in the Doge's Palace.' They had invented this kind of talk over the few days they had been together. It was something new, something slippery, daring. *Schlüpfrig*. Previously such banter had been about strangers; this was the first time that the subject of their amusement was someone known to them, and whereas previous jokes had appeared harmless enough, this seemed more dangerous.

'What do you think of my suggestion that he might build us our house?'

'Is he to be trusted with something so precious?' she asked. 'We

must see his work, mustn't we? Get references, that kind of thing.'

They had already spoken with architects about the new house. They had discussed proposals, shaken their heads over gables and towers, questioned ornate and mullioned windows, even marched round a balsa wood and celluloid model of something that one studio had suggested. But nothing had seemed right for Viktor's vision of the future, his desire not to be pinned down by race or creed, his determination to speak Czech as well as German, his insistence on reading *Lidové Noviny*, his talk of *inovace* and *pokrok*, innovation and progress. 'Let the world move on,' he would say. 'We' – he meant those newly created political beings, the Czechoslovaks – 'have a new direction to take, a new world to make. We are neither German nor Slav. We can choose our history, that's the point. It's up to us, don't you see? People like us.'

And now there was this fortuitous encounter with a young architect in the amphibious city of Venice, a man whose architectural ideals seemed to be of the future rather than the past.

'I can send a telegram to Adolf Loos. Von Abt claims to have studied under him.'

'Claims? Do you doubt his word?'

'Do you?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, we will see. We must arrange to meet him again. Interview him.' He was suddenly businesslike, a disconcerting manner that he could put on at a moment's notice. One expected him to gather papers up from the table in front of him and tap them into some kind of order and slip them away inside a leather briefcase, then call for a car to whisk him away to another meeting. 'We must find out for ourselves what his ideas might be. He gave me his card. I will give him a ring.'

'Can't we leave that kind of thing until we're back home?'

'Why wait? Why not strike while the iron is hot?'

The meeting with Rainer von Abt took place the next day. He was summoned to their suite at six o'clock in the evening, ostensibly for cocktails but actually to be grilled about the possibility of his designing their house. It was a fine evening, with the windows open and the slop and stir of the water outside like the presence of

some large feline animal. Liesel stayed out on the balcony, smoking and sipping her drink and looking out over the basin of St Mark's towards the Isola San Giorgio, while the two men remained inside the room to talk. She was conscious that von Abt glanced towards her from time to time. She told herself that she was unmoved by his attentions. He was short, dark, bouncing in that boxing manner of his, whereas what she admired was tall and angular and almost stooped when standing or sitting, as though making a concession to people of lesser height than he. Viktor. A man of qualities, a man who was altogether admirable.

'It is quite a proposition,' von Abt remarked when Viktor had finished what he had to say. 'Quite a *difficult* proposition.'

'Why difficult? Build a house.' Viktor held his hands open as though to show the simplicity of things. 'Difficult for me, perhaps, but surely straightforward for an architect. If you asked me to build you a motor car . . .'

'Ah, but you build a motor car for a market, don't you? You might wish to build a motor car to your taste, but actually you build a motor car for a market.'

'Precisely,' Viktor agreed. 'The same with a house. Only the market is me alone. And my wife.'

'That is exactly the problem with such a commission. You, your wife.'

'*We* are a problem?'

'The situation creates a problem. You want someone to build a house, four walls—'

'Maybe more, maybe more than four.'

'—and a roof. Doors, windows, upstairs, downstairs, the whole rigmarole. Servants' quarters, I imagine . . .'

'They must go somewhere.'

'Quite so. But it'll be working to order.'

'Rooms for the children,' Liesel called from the balcony.

Von Abt smiled and inclined his head towards her. 'Rooms for the children, indeed. However, *I* wish to do different things than mere construction. I wish to create a work of art. A work that is the very reverse of sculpture: I wish to enclose a space.' And he made a gesture, using both his hands, the space between them as fluid and shifting as the air out of which he modelled it. 'So. It is not like a client making demands and the artisan or the factory

worker listening to those demands and doing what he is told. It is me making my vision in concrete and glass.'

Viktor glanced towards Liesel and smiled. She didn't know how to read him in this kind of encounter. She was learning how to read him in matters of love and companionship, but she had never seen him in negotiation with a client or a workers' representative or a supplier. He was smiling, sitting back to consider the matter, with his elbows on the arms of his chair and his hands in front of his face, his long fingers steepled together like the groins of a Gothic vault and his mouth composed in a quiet and confident smile. 'Show me,' he said.

'Show you?'

'Yes. Prepare some drawings. The kind of thing you would wish to do. The kind of' – he paused – '*space* you would wish to enclose. Just sketches.' Almost as an afterthought, he added, 'The site is sloping, quite steeply sloping. Overlooking the whole city. Do you know Město? Perhaps you don't. Below the hill is a park – the Lužánky Park. It used to be known as the Augarten but of course the name has been changed. Where we live, everything has two names. Austrian. Czech. It is the way of our world. So, you must imagine a house at the top of a hill, quite a steep hill, and below it a sloping field, and then laid out before it the whole of the city. A magnificent prospect. Make some drawings.'

Von Abt held out his hands helplessly. 'But how large? I have no information, no idea of what you want.'

'A family home. I have made that clear. A home for my wife and me and our eventual children. Say' – he smiled at Liesel – 'a maximum of three. What area? Say three hundred square metres. Just sketch something out.'

'I will bring you photographs of some of my work. That will suffice.'

'I would like to see some ideas.'

'You *will* see ideas. I work with nothing but ideas.'

Viktor laughed. Liesel had somehow expected that he would be angry, but instead he laughed. 'Show me your ideas, then. Convince me that you are the man for our house.'

Two days later they met again, by appointment, at Café Florian in the Piazza. St Mark's stood like a fantasy of Arabian tents at the

end of the great space and the orchestra, camped outside the café like a band of nomads, played selections from Verdi's operas. Rainer von Abt approached their table with all the panache of an opera singer making his entrance. '*Ecco*!' he announced, and placed a portfolio on their table. 'I have laboured day and night, to the disadvantage of my current work. But the demands of true love are more powerful than mere artistic patronage.'

The tapes were untied and the portfolio was opened and Viktor and Liesel put their heads together to look. There were photographs, large glossy prints with studio stamps on the back: an apartment block with white, featureless walls; a square, banded villa set in an anonymous garden; an office block of some kind, all plate glass and white plaster.

'This is all your work?'

'Of course it is.' He leaned forward and pulled out another photograph, one showing a long, low apartment block receding down the perspective lines of a street. 'Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart. Have you seen the place? Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Behrens, Schneck. Do you know these people?'

'Of course,' said Viktor. 'Le Corbusier, of course. And Behrens.'

Von Abt made a small sound that may have been amusement. '*And* von Abt,' he said, putting the photographs aside. 'Those are some of the things I have done. Now, the things that I have imagined.' He spread out some drawings. These were all architect's sketches, rectilinear, sharp of line, devoid of any kind of embellishment. He pointed with a thick, artisan's finger. 'That one I am working on for people in Berlin. An industrialist and his third wife. They wanted columns and capitals and statues and I told them that if they were looking for ornament, they could look elsewhere. Perhaps you know the essay by Loos, "Ornament and Crime"?'

Viktor smiled. 'Certainly I do.'

'Well then, that is our manifesto. The Communists have theirs and we of the Modern Movement have ours. You ask me to design you a house? I will design you a house. But form without ornament is all I can give you.' He looked round at the long colonnades of the Piazza, at a couple of children immersed in a fluttering cloud of pigeons and being photographed by a commercial photographer with a massive mahogany box camera.

Beyond them were the ornate domes of the Basilica with its mosaics and prancing horses. He gestured towards the scene, as though somehow it had been laid on for his own purposes. 'Here, in the most ornamental city in the whole world, I am offering you the very opposite.'

And at his gesture things began to happen. At least that was the impression Liesel had: the café orchestra set off on a lugubrious traipse round the 'Lament of the Hebrew Slaves'; the photographer bent his head beneath his black cape; and the children, focused through the lens of his machine, shrieked with laughter as though being captured in the box, being inverted and diminished, gave them a physical sensation like being tickled or being frightened. Viktor sipped champagne and considered von Abt's drawings.

'It all seems rather cold.'

'Cold?' For once von Abt appeared lost for words. 'Cold! All my work, all my art is based on this.' He took a pencil from an inner pocket and leaned forward to draw a line as sharp as a razor cut on the nearest sheet of paper. 'This is the first work of art: the woman who lies down.' He looked from Viktor to Liesel, holding her gaze for moment longer than seemed polite. Then he went back to the sheet of paper and drew another line, a vertical cutting at right angles through the horizontal. 'And this. This is the man who penetrates her. The result is the rectangular cross that underpins all my art. What could be warmer than that?'

Liesel took a cigarette and lit it, hoping it would distract her from von Abt's look, hoping she would not blush beneath his gaze. 'Yes, Herr von Abt seems a most uncold person. Don't you agree, Viktor?'