

FLORIAN ILLIES
1913

THE YEAR BEFORE THE STORM

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JANUARY

This is the month when Hitler and Stalin meet while strolling in the Castle Park at Schönbrunn, Thomas Mann nearly gets outed and Franz Kafka nearly goes mad with love. A cat creeps onto Sigmund Freud's couch. It's extremely cold, snow crunches under the feet. Else Lasker-Schüler is impoverished and in love with Gottfried Benn, gets a horse postcard from Franz Marc but says Gabriele Münter is a non-entity. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner draws the ladies of pleasure on Potsdamer Platz. The first loop-the-loop is flown. But it's no good. Oswald Spengler is already at work on The Decline of the West.



The first second of 1913. A gunshot rings out through the dark night. There's a brief click, fingers tense on the trigger, then comes a second, dull report. The alarm is raised, the police dash to the scene and arrest the gunman straight away. His name is Louis Armstrong.

The twelve-year-old had wanted to see in the New Year in New Orleans with a stolen revolver. The police put him in a cell, and early on the morning of 1 January they send him to a house of correction, the Colored Waifs' Home for Boys. Once there, his behaviour is so unruly that the only solution the institution's director, Peter Davis, can come up with is to hand him a trumpet. (What he really wants to do is slap him.) All at once Louis Armstrong falls silent, picks up the instrument almost tenderly, and his fingers, which had been playing with the trigger of the revolver only the previous night, feel the cold metal once again, except that now, still in the director's office, rather than a gunshot, he produces his first warm, wild notes from the trumpet.



'The gunshot at midnight. Cries in the alley and on the bridge. Ringing bells and clock chimes.' A report from Prague: Dr Franz Kafka, a clerk with the Workers' Accident Insurance Company for the Kingdom of Bohemia. His audience in faraway Berlin, in the apartment at 29 Immanuelkirchstrasse, is a lone individual, but to him she is the whole world: Felice Bauer, twenty-five, a bit blonde, a bit bony, a bit gangling. A shorthand typist with Carl Lindström Ltd. They had met briefly in August, the rain pelting down, she had had wet feet, and he'd quickly got cold ones. But since then they've been writing to each other at night while their families are asleep: hot-headed, enchanting, strange, unsettling letters. And usually another one the

next afternoon. Once, when there hadn't been a word from Felice for a few days, after waking from unsettled dreams, in desperation he desperately started work on *Metamorphosis*. He told her about this story, which he had finished just before Christmas. (It now lay in his desk, warmed by the two photographs of herself that Felice had sent him.) But just how quickly her distant and beloved Franz could turn into a terrible mystery she would learn only from his New Year's letter. He asks her out of nowhere, by way of introduction, whether, if they had arranged to go to the theatre in Frankfurt am Main, and if he had instead just stayed in bed, she would have beaten him violently with an umbrella. And then, apparently innocuously, he evokes their mutual love, dreams that his hand and Felice's will be forever bound together. Before going on: it is, 'however, always possible that a couple might once have been led to the scaffold bound together in such a way'. What a charming thought for a prenuptial letter. They haven't even kissed, and here he is already fantasising about their walking hand in hand to the scaffold. Kafka himself seems momentarily startled by the thoughts spilling from him: 'But what sort of things are these, pouring out of my head?' he writes. The explanation is simple: 'It's the number 13 in the year.' And that is how 1913 begins in world literature: with a fantasy of violence.



Missing person notice. Lost: Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. She was stolen from the Louvre in 1911; still no clues. Pablo Picasso is questioned by the Paris police, but he has an alibi and they let him go home. In the Louvre, French mourners lay bouquets against the bare wall.



In the first days of January, we don't know exactly when, a slightly scruffy 34-year-old Russian arrives at Vienna's Northern Station from Kraków. A flurry of snow outside. He is limping. His hair hasn't been washed this year, and his bushy moustache, which spreads like

rampant undergrowth beneath his nose, can't conceal the pock-marks on his face. He is wearing Russian peasant shoes, and his suitcase is full to bursting. As soon as he arrives, he boards a tram for Hietzing. His passport bears the name Stavros Papadopoulos, which is supposed to sound like a mixture of Greek and Georgian, and in view of his scruffy appearance and the piercing cold, every border guard has let him through. In Kraków, in his other exile, he had beaten Lenin at chess one last time the previous evening, making that the seventh time in a row. He was plainly better at chess than he was at cycling. Lenin had desperately tried to teach him. Revolutionaries have to be quick, he had drummed that into him time and again. But the man, whose name was actually Josef Vissiaronovich Djugashvili and who now called himself Stavros Papadopoulos, couldn't learn how to ride a bike. Just before Christmas he had a bad fall on the icy cobbled streets of Kraków. His leg was still covered with grazes, his knee was sprained, and he had only been able to stand on it again for a few days. My 'magnificent George', Lenin had called him with a smile as he limped towards him to accept his forged passport for the journey to Vienna. And now *bon voyage*, Comrade.

He crossed borders unmolested, sat feverishly in the train, hunched over his manuscripts and books, which he frantically stuffed back into his suitcase every time he had to change trains.

Now, having arrived in Vienna, he had discarded his Georgian alias. From January 1913 onwards he said: My name is Stalin, Josef Stalin. When he had got out of the tram, on his right he saw the Schönbrunn Palace, brightly lit against the dull winter grey, and the park behind it. He enters the house at 30 Schönbrunner Schloßstrasse, which is what it says on the little slip of paper that Lenin had given him. And: 'Ring the bell marked Trojanow'. So he shakes the snow off his shoes, blows his nose in his handkerchief and slightly nervously presses the button. When the maid appears, he says the agreed code word.



A cat creeps into 19 Berggasse, Vienna, and into the study of Sigmund Freud, where the Wednesday club has just assembled. The cat is the second surprise visitor in a very short time: in the late autumn Lou Andreas-Salomé had joined the menfolk. At first she had been eyed suspiciously, but now she was fervently worshipped. On her garter belt Lou Andreas-Salomé wore the many scalps of the great minds she had bagged: she had been in a confessional in St Peter's with Nietzsche, in bed with Rilke and in Russia with Tolstoy, Frank Wedekind named his *Lulu* after her and Richard Strauss his *Salomé*. Now her latest victim, intellectually at least, was Freud – that winter she was even allowed to stay on the same floor as his study, discussed his new book about *Totem and Taboo*, on which he was currently working, and listened to his complaints about C. G. Jung and the renegade school of Zurich psychologists. Above all, however, Lou Andreas-Salomé, now fifty-two, the author of several books about eroticism and the mind, was receiving psychoanalytic training from the master himself – in March she would set up her own practice in Göttingen. So there she sits at the solemn Wednesday lecture. Beside her the master's learned colleagues, on her right the already legendary couch and everywhere the little sculptures that the antique-obsessed Freud collected to console himself about the present day. And into this devout room, as Lou stepped through the door, there slipped a cat. At first Freud was irritated, but when he saw the curiosity with which the cat was studying his Greek vases and Roman miniatures, he brought it some milk. But Lou Andreas-Salomé reports: 'As he did so, in spite of his mounting love and admiration, she paid him no attention, coldly turned the slanting pupils of her green eyes on him as if on a random object, and if for a moment he wanted something more than the cat's egoist-narcissist purring, he had to take his foot off the comfortable couch, and try to win her attention with enticing wiggles of the toe of his boot.' From then on, week after week, the cat was allowed to attend Freud's lectures, and if she wheedled she was allowed to lie on his couch, on gauze compresses. She clearly proved susceptible to therapy.



Speaking of sickly: where is Rilke, by the way?



Contemporaries are worried that 1913 may prove to be an unlucky year. Gabriele D'Annunzio gives a friend a copy of his *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* and in the dedication prefers to date it '1912 + 1'. And Arnold Schönberg refuses to mention the unlucky number. Not for nothing had he invented twelve-tone music – a fundamental principle of modern music, born in part of its creator's fear of what might come next. The birth of the rational out of the spirit of superstition. In Schönberg's music the number '13' does not occur, not even as a rhythm. Not even as a page number. When he realised with horror that the title of his opera about Moses and Aaron would have thirteen letters, he crossed out the second A from Aaron, and henceforth it was called *Moses and Aron*. And now a whole year fell under the shadow of that unlucky number. Schönberg was born on 13 September – and he was terrified at the idea of dying on Friday the 13th. It was no good. Arnold Schönberg did in fact die on Friday the 13th (although in 1913 + 38, or 1951). But 1913 also had a fine surprise in store for him. He would receive a slap in the face. But one thing at a time.



And now enter Thomas Mann. Early on 3 January, Mann takes his seat on the train in Munich. First of all, he reads some newspapers and letters, looks out at the snow-covered hills of the Thuringian Forest, and then, in the overheated compartment, he repeatedly nods off while worrying about his Katia, who has gone off once more for a spa treatment in the mountains. The previous summer he had visited her in Davos, and in the waiting room he had suddenly had an idea for a great short story, but now it strikes him as pointless, too remote

from the world, this sanatorium-based tale. In any case, his *Death in Venice* would be published in only a few weeks.

Thomas Mann sits in the train and frets over his wardrobe: so annoying that long train journeys always leave those creases in one's clothes, he would have to have his coat ironed again in the hotel. He gets up, slides the carriage door open and decides to walk up and down the corridor. So stiffly that the other guests keep mistaking him for the conductor. Outside the castles of Dornburg fly past, Bad Kösen, the vineyards of the Saale, covered with snow, the rows of vines running across the slopes like zebra stripes. Pretty, in fact, but Thomas Mann senses anxiety mounting within him the closer he gets to Berlin.

When he has stepped out of the train, he immediately takes a cab to the Hotel Unter den Linden, and he looks around the lobby to see whether the other guests recognise him as they push their way to the lifts. Then he steps into his usual room to change into expensive new clothes and comb his moustache.

At the same time, in the Grunewald deep in the west of the city, Alfred Kerr is tying his bow tie in the dressing room of his villa at 6 Höhmannstrasse and combatively twirling the tips of his moustache.

Their duel is scheduled for eight o'clock that evening. At a quarter past seven they climb aboard their respective droschkes. They drive to the Kammerspiele of the Deutsches Theater, arriving at the same time. And they ignore one another. It is cold, they both hurry inside. Once (in Bansin, on the Baltic), strictly between ourselves, he, Alfred Kerr, Germany's greatest critic and vainest popinjay, had wooed Katia Pringsheim, the wealthy, cat-eyed Jewess. But she had turned him down, the proud and reckless man from Breslau, and thrown herself instead at Thomas Mann, the stiff northerner. Incomprehensible. But perhaps he can get his own back this evening.

Thomas Mann takes his seat in the front row and tries to emanate calm gravitas. This evening sees the première of his *Fiorenza*, the play he was writing when he met and fell in love with Katia. But he senses that tonight there may be a débâcle of sorts: the piece has long been his problem child. They shouldn't have made such a drama