THE TRILOGY

Three Volumes

Voßlohe · 1905 to 1989

The Seam

A Ruhr Valley Saga

aban news

Novel · written with Claude Opus

The Seam

Drama / Family and Social Novel

aban news

geschrieben mit Claude Opus · aban news

ERSTER BAND

Going Down

Voßlohe, 1905–1923

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Chapter 1 - Glück auf

The cage dropped, and with it Wilhelm dropped into the mountain, the way he dropped into the mountain every morning, six days a week, and he had never grown used to it and would never have admitted it. Above him the square of sky that the shaft still let through disappeared, first grey, then greyer, then nothing at all, and his stomach stayed up there while the rest of him sank. Beside him in the cage they stood eight men, shoulder to shoulder, lamp to lamp, and no one said a word, for what was there to say at four in the morning when you were riding down into the earth.

It smelled of oil and wet iron and of the men themselves, of sweat that never quite washed out of the clothes. Wilhelm held the cold guide-rail and counted the bell signals, the way he had counted them as a boy when his father first took him along, the way he would count them until the mountain kept him or spat him out. At the third level the cage slowed, a jolt, a stop you felt in your knees, and then they stood on solid ground that was none, eight hundred metres beneath Voßlohe, beneath the houses and the gardens and the Emscher, beneath everything that was called living.

"Glück auf," said the banksman, and it was not a greeting but an incantation, the one word that counted down here. It meant: come back up. It meant: may the mountain let you go today.

"Glück auf," said Wilhelm, and went into the roadway.

The way to the face was long, half-stooped, through galleries where the heat grew with every step, and the water dripped from above and stood under your boots. The pit lamp threw its small circle

ahead of him, and outside the circle was a darkness older than everything, a darkness the light did not drive off but only pushed briefly aside. Wilhelm knew the way blind. He knew every prop, every place where the roof bore down, every crack in the rock you had to hear in order to live. You learned the mountain with your body, not your head, and Wilhelm's body was twenty-nine years old and already not quite his own.

At the face Heinrich was waiting. Of course Heinrich was waiting. He sat on a stone, his lamp beside him, chewing on a piece of bread, and when Wilhelm came he pushed him half of it without a word. They had done it this way for years. One brought the bread, the other the next day, and neither kept count, for whoever kept count down here had already lost.

"Late," said Heinrich.

"The cage," said Wilhelm.

"Always the cage." Heinrich grinned, the white of his teeth in the sooty face. He was four years older than Wilhelm and a head broader, a man who laughed where others cursed, who opened his mouth where others kept silent. He had stood surety for Wilhelm, back when Wilhelm had started, a thin boy without a father, and ever since they had shared the contract, the face, the bread. A butty was not a friend. A butty was more. A friend could leave. A butty held the prop for you when the roof came.

They cut the face. It was hard labour, the hardest Wilhelm knew, the pick into the seam, again and again, in the heat, in the dust that settled on the lung and never quite went out again. They worked side by side, without much talk, in the rhythm only two men find who know each other, and filled the tubs, one after another, for they were paid by the tub, by the coal hewn, and every tub was a few pfennigs

closer to the end of the month.

Around noon, in the short break, Wilhelm leaned against the wet face and thought of Bertha. She was in her seventh month now, the first child, and she carried it the way she carried everything, with clenched teeth and a gaze that saw more than he liked. That morning, in the dark, she had set out his bread and said the garden needed manure, and the stall leaked, and he should speak to the overman about the tubs they had docked last week. Three tubs. Three shifts' work, for nothing, because there had been too much stone in them, they said, too much waste rock among the coal. Whoever decided that was a man up top with clean hands, who had never seen the tubs.

"You're brooding," said Heinrich.

"The docking."

Heinrich spat black spittle onto the black floor. "They dock everyone now. Two off me last week. Four off Schäfer. That's no accident, Wilhelm. That's a system. They squeeze the wage without touching the wage, you understand? They don't say, we pay you less. They say, your work was worth nothing." He stood, took up the pick. "But it won't go well for long. The men are already talking."

"Talk helps no one."

"Talk is the beginning of everything." Heinrich looked at him, and in his look was something Wilhelm could not quite grasp, a conviction Wilhelm lacked and envied him for. "There are many of us, Wilhelm. That's the only thing we are. Many. If the many once hold still, all at once, then the headframe stops, and a stopped headframe costs the gentlemen more money in one day than they can dock out of us in a year."

Wilhelm said nothing. He raised the pick and struck the seam, and the mountain gave way, piece by piece, as it had waited for no one

for millions of years and now waited for them, who hauled it out into the tubs, into the cage, up to the light they themselves barely saw.

In the evening, when the cage brought them up again and the square of sky grew above them, first nothing, then grey, then nearly day, Wilhelm breathed the upper air as if he had earned it. In the washhouse they scrubbed the mountain from their skin as best they could, and the black ring around the eyes stayed, as it always stayed, the mark by which you knew a miner, on Sundays too, in the coffin too.

The way into the colony led past the headframe, which stood over everything, over the terraced houses of the pit, over the gardens, over the kiosk on the corner where the first light was already burning. The houses belonged to the pit. The garden belonged to the pit. The stall that leaked belonged to the pit. Whoever worked for the pit lived in what belonged to the pit, and whoever no longer worked for the pit lived nowhere any more. It was that simple, and so unspoken that no one spoke it any more.

Bertha stood in the doorway when he came, one hand at the small of her back, the other on the doorframe, and watched him come up the path with the black ring around his eyes and the weary gait. She did not say she was glad he was up top again. She said: "Did you speak to the overman?"

"Tomorrow," said Wilhelm.

She looked at him, and he knew that she knew he would not speak tomorrow either, not the way Heinrich would, not loud, not demanding, but at most pleading, and that pleading brought nothing. But she did not say it. She stepped aside and let him in, into the house that belonged to the pit, into the warmth he had paid for with his lung, and inside the soup was hot, and the child in her kicked

against her hand, and for one evening that was enough.

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Chapter 2 - The Butty

There was a story Bertha did not like to hear, because she appeared in it without having been there, and which Wilhelm never told, because a man did not tell such a thing, and which nonetheless stood between him and Heinrich like a third man at the face. It was three years old, the story, and it went like this.

They had been working in a seam with a bad name, because the roof there was treacherous, the rock above them that did not keep what it promised. They had set props, the way you set props, timber against the pressure of the mountain, but the mountain pressed when it wanted to, and on that day it wanted to. Wilhelm had heard the cracking, that particular cracking that every hewer knew in his sleep, and he had frozen, half a second, a second that would have been enough to kill him. Heinrich did not freeze. Heinrich had taken him by the collar and torn him backward, and in the same instant the roof came, tons of rock where Wilhelm had stood, a thundering, a dust that choked the lamps, and then silence and Heinrich's hand still at his collar.

They had not spoken of it afterward. Heinrich had said: "You owe me a bread," and Wilhelm had brought the bread the next day, and with that it was settled, by the rules that held here. But Wilhelm knew you did not settle such a thing with bread. He knew he owed Heinrich his life, and that this debt did not grow smaller but larger the longer he lived, because every day he lived was a day Heinrich had given him.

That was comradeship underground. It was not friendship the way people up top meant it, with sympathy and shared interests and favours done. It was something older, harder. It was the pact that one would not let the other die as long as he could prevent it, without question, without reckoning, without condition. You did not have to like your butty to die for him. You only had to know him, know him with your body, have hewn at his side, in the same dust, the same heat, the same darkness. Wilhelm liked Heinrich. That came on top, but was not the core. The core was that without him he would be dead.

That day they worked in a better seam, one that drew well, many tubs, and they were in good spirits, as far as one could be in good spirits down here. Heinrich talked, the way he always talked, of the world up top, of things too big for Wilhelm. He read. That was the special thing about Heinrich, that he read, newspapers, leaflets, even books that he borrowed from a teacher in town, and that he carried what he read further, at the face, in the kiosk, everywhere.

"There's a union now," said Heinrich. "A real one. The Old Union. They fight for us, for all miners, across the whole district. Not pray, Wilhelm. Fight. For the eight-hour day. Against the docking. Against the fines they slap on us for nothing."

"And what does that pay?" said Wilhelm. "The union. What does it cost, and what does it bring?"

"It costs a groschen a month. And it brings that you're not alone when they dock you. That a thousand others stand up for you when they kick you." Heinrich paused, pick in hand. "You know what the gentlemen fear most? Not the single man who grumbles. They throw him out, and tomorrow another stands at the face. They fear the many who grumble at once. Solidarity, Wilhelm. That's the word. The only

thing we have against their money."

Wilhelm knew the word. He had heard it often, from Heinrich, in the kiosk, at the meeting Heinrich had once dragged him to. Solidarity. It sounded good. It sounded like something larger than a single man with a pregnant wife and a leaking stall and three docked tubs. But Wilhelm mistrusted things that were larger than himself. He had learned that you had to rely on what you held in your hands, and you could not hold solidarity in your hands. Bread you could hold. A wage. A child. Solidarity was a word, and words filled no pot.

"You don't believe in it," said Heinrich. It was not a question.

"I believe in what I see."

"Then come along once and see." Heinrich drove the pick back into the face, and the mountain gave way. "Something's coming, Wilhelm. I can feel it. They dock and dock, and one day the measure is full, and then they'll see what the many are. And then you'll have to choose which side you stand on."

"I stand at the face," said Wilhelm. "As always."

Heinrich laughed, the loud laugh that fit so badly into the darkness and for that very reason made it bearable. "We all stand at the face. The question is whether you stand up top too, when it comes to it."

They hewed on, and the tubs filled, and above them, eight hundred metres above them, Bertha walked through the colony and bought half a loaf on tick at the kiosk, because the wage did not stretch to the end of the month, and the kiosk owner chalked it up, with a look that said his chalking too had an end. And in town, in a counting house with clean windows, a man sat over the output figures and worked out how to get more coal and less wage out of the same mountain, and found that it could be done if one only handled

the docking consistently, and wrote an instruction that reached the overman the next day and the day after that the face where Wilhelm and Heinrich stood, not knowing that their next shift had already been decided before they worked it.

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Chapter 3 - Docked Tubs

The overman was called Bröker, and he was no bad man, which made it worse. A bad man you could have hated, cleanly and without remainder. But Bröker had been one of them, a hewer, risen by diligence and a good word at the right moment, and he carried the instructions from above further as if they pained him himself, with a shrug that said: Ihr Herren, Jungs, but what am I to do.

Wilhelm caught him in the morning, before the descent, at the pit bottom where Bröker stood with his list and divided up the gangs.

"Herr Steiger." Wilhelm did not take off his cap, but he lowered his voice, the way you lowered it when you begged. "The tubs last week. Three docked. There was no stone in them, no more than usual. That was clean coal."

Bröker looked at him, wearily, over the list. "Kortmann. I don't write what gets docked. I get the list, and on the list it says what the washery reports. Too much stone in the tub, tub docked. That's what it says."

"The washery didn't weigh the tubs, it guessed. Three tubs, Herr Steiger. That's half a week."

"I know what three tubs are." Bröker said it quietly, almost kindly, and it was the kindness that took the hope from Wilhelm. "I hewed myself, fifteen years. I know exactly what three tubs are. But I can't change it. It comes from above, Kortmann. They want the production costs down, and they take it through the docking, because no one can forbid that. They're not allowed to touch the wage, the union stands in front of that. The tubs they can. Understand?"

Wilhelm understood. That was the bad part. He understood it exactly, and the understanding helped him nothing.

"I have a wife," he said, and it disgusted him to say it, because it sounded like begging. "A child's coming."

"We all have those." Bröker looked back at the list. "Go to your face, Wilhelm. Hew good coal, then fewer tubs get docked. That's all I can tell you."

It was a lie, and both knew it. You could hew as clean as you liked; whether a tub got docked was decided not by the coal in the tub but by a figure needed up top, a production-cost figure that had to come right, and they made it come right by docking as many tubs as it took. It was no quarrel about coal. It was a quarrel about money, and one side had the money and the list, and the other had the pick and the lung.

Wilhelm went to his face. He said nothing to Heinrich, but Heinrich saw it on him.

"Bröker?"

Wilhelm nodded.

"What did he say?"

"That it comes from above."

Heinrich laughed the laugh that this time was no laugh. "Of course it comes from above. Everything comes from above. The pressure comes from above, the rock, the docking, the whole weight. And below we stand and catch it, with our backs." He hewed into the face, harder than necessary. "But they're making a mistake, Wilhelm. They dock everyone now. Not just the lazy, not just the troublemaker they want rid of. Everyone. The diligent like the lazy, the old like the young. And you know what happens when you treat everyone equally badly?" He turned, the lamplight on his sooty face. "Then

everyone becomes one. Then you've driven them together, the ones you'd never have got together otherwise. That's their mistake, and it's a big one."

In the weeks that followed Wilhelm saw that Heinrich was right. In the kiosk, where they usually talked of football and pigeons and women, they now talked of the docking. Everyone had his story, everyone his docked tubs, and out of the many small stories grew slowly a big one, a story of men being cheated, all in the same way, by the same counting house, by the same clean hand. Heinrich stood in the middle of it, talking, explaining, reading aloud from the union paper. The eight-hour day. The end of the docking. A wage that was a wage and not a mercy. The men listened, and in their faces was something that worried Wilhelm and that he could not name, a readiness, a gathering, like the mountain before the roof came.

At home it grew tighter. Bertha reckoned every evening, and her reckonings did not add up. The tick at the kiosk grew. The stall stayed leaky. She sold the rabbits she had meant to fatten for winter, and said nothing while she did it, but Wilhelm saw how she looked at the empty hutches, and knew what it cost her.

"They say they want to strike," she said one evening, without looking up, while darning.

"Who says that?"

"The women. The whole colony's talking about it." She drew the thread through. "Heinrich Brass is talking about it."

"Heinrich always talks."

"And you?" Now she looked up, and her gaze was so clear it hurt him. "You never talk. What do you think, Wilhelm? If they strike. Will you join?"

Wilhelm was silent. He thought of the docked tubs and Bröker's weary face and Heinrich's word about the many who become one. And he thought of the child in Bertha's body, that would come in winter, into a household that already did not stretch, and of what a strike meant: no wage. For weeks perhaps. No wage and a child and a house that belonged to the pit.

"I don't know," he said.

It was the most honest answer he had, and Bertha took it, the way she took everything, without a word, and darned on, and outside the wind moved through the colony and carried over from the kiosk the murmur of many men slowly becoming one.

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Chapter 4 - The Great Strike

It did not begin with a bang. It began with a silence. On a Monday morning in January the early shift did not ride down. They came to the shaft, the way they came every morning, in the dark, with the lamps, and they gathered at the pit bottom, and then they did not ride down. They just stood there. The banksman waited, the overman waited, the cage hung empty, and the men stood and did not stir, and it was this silence Wilhelm never forgot, the silence of three hundred men who had decided not to obey.

Heinrich stood at the front, of course Heinrich stood at the front. He had climbed onto an overturned tub and was speaking, and his voice carried through the hall, through the ringing of the iron.

"No one rides down," he cried. "Not today and not tomorrow. Not until they abolish the docking. Not until a wage is a wage again. Across the whole district they stand still, comrades, from Hamborn to Dortmund, a hundred thousand, and we stand with them. Today the pit belongs to us!"

They cheered. Wilhelm did not cheer, but he felt it, the cheering, how it ran through the men, through him, a feeling he did not know and that frightened him and swept him along at once. Power. For the first time in his life Wilhelm felt something like power, not his own, but that of the many of whom he was a part, and it was an intoxication, and he mistrusted it in the same instant that he felt it.

The headframe stood still. That was the monstrous thing. The wheel that had turned as long as Wilhelm could remember, every day, day and night, the wheel stood still. It was as if time had halted.

The whole town heard it, this silence of the wheel, and the whole town knew what it meant.

In the first days it was almost a festival. The men who were usually under the earth stood in daylight, in the gardens, on the street corners, and talked and planned. The union organised: a strike committee, a strike fund, soup kitchens for those who ran short first. Discipline was kept, strict discipline, for Heinrich and the others knew that the gentlemen were only waiting for trouble, a pretext for the police, for the lockout. "No violence," Heinrich preached. "Not a hair on anyone's head. Our weapon is that we do not work. Nothing else. That is enough. That is more than enough."

Bertha bore it. She went to the soup kitchen and helped ladle, the belly already heavy before her, and brought home in the evening what there was, a thin soup, a piece of bread from the strike fund. She did not complain. But Wilhelm saw how she lay awake at night and stared at the ceiling, and he knew she was reckoning the same reckoning as he: how long this could go on. How long the fund would last. How long a person lived without a wage, with a child in the belly.

"They can't hold out forever," Bertha said once in the dark. "The gentlemen. A stopped pit costs them a fortune. Every day."

"Heinrich says that too."

"Heinrich." She was silent a moment. "Heinrich has no children, Wilhelm."

It was the first time she had said anything against Heinrich, and it was not against Heinrich, Wilhelm knew that. It was for the child. Heinrich could carry the risk because he had only himself to lose, and his wife Käthe, who was as convinced as he was. Wilhelm had more to lose, and the longer the strike lasted, the more he felt the weight of

that more.

In the second week the first threats came. Notices on the houses: whoever did not resume work within a deadline would be dismissed, and with the dismissal the house. The pit owned the houses. That was the trump it always held in its hand. A locked-out miner lost not only the wage, he lost the roof, and in January, with a child on the way, a lost roof was a death sentence by instalments.

"They're bluffing," said Heinrich when they sat together in the kiosk in the evening, crowded, many men, little beer. "They can't put three thousand families on the street. Where would they get new men? It's a bluff, comrades. Whoever caves now has lost before we've won. One more week. Maybe two. Then they cave, not us."

The men nodded. They believed him, because they had to believe him, because to believe the opposite meant to have done it all for nothing. And Wilhelm sat with them and nodded along and believed half and feared whole, and on the way home, in the cold January night, he stopped a moment under the stationary headframe and looked up at the wheel that did not turn, and thought: it has to turn again. Sometime it has to turn again. And when it does, I want to be the one turning it, and not the one standing outside.

He was frightened by the thought. He pushed it away. But it was there, once thought, and thoughts once thought do not go quite away. Wilhelm went home to Bertha and the unborn child, and over the town stood the still wheel like a halted heart, and no one knew how long it would stand still, and each reckoned in the dark his own reckoning.

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Chapter 5 - Hunger in the Strike

In the fourth week the festival turned into a siege, and hunger moved in like a third inhabitant in every house of the colony.

The strike fund was almost empty. It had never been meant for so long; no one had reckoned with so many weeks. The soup kitchen cooked thinner and thinner, more water than groats, and the queue in front of it grew longer, because more and more families had nothing else left. Bertha now stood in the queue herself, no longer only behind the pot, and that was for Wilhelm the worst sign, worse than any notice on the wall.

They sold what could be sold. Bertha's good apron, which she had got for the wedding. Wilhelm's Sunday boots. The grandfather clock that Bertha's father had left, the only thing in the house that looked like anything. The rag-and-bone man in town paid a derisory price, for the rag-and-bone man knew that half the colony was selling and no one buying, and a price only one man offers is no price but an alms with a receipt.

And then a child fell ill. Not the unborn one; that still kicked strongly against Bertha's hand. It was the neighbour's child, little Franz of the Schäfers, three years old, who fell ill first, fever and cough, and then died, in a single night, and in the morning they carried the small coffin through the colony, and everyone stood in the doorways and watched and knew it could have been their own child and at the next might be. The doctor did not come into the colony without being paid, and no one could pay any more. But the illness did not ask about the strike fund.

That evening, after Schäfer's burial, Wilhelm sat in the kiosk with Heinrich, and for the first time they did not talk of the victory to come but of the death already here.

"Four weeks," said Wilhelm. "Heinrich. Four weeks, and they hold out, and we starve."

"They won't hold forever." But Heinrich's voice had lost something, a trace of the certainty that usually carried him. "I was in town today, at the union office. They say the first men in Hamborn are going back in. Single ones. Traitors." He said the word hard. "But if the front once breaks, in one place, then it breaks everywhere. That's why we have to hold, Wilhelm. Just now. Whoever caves now robs not only himself of the victory, he robs everyone who held out. Do you understand that? The strikebreaker is worse than the gentleman in the counting house. The gentleman is the enemy, he belongs there. The strikebreaker is the brother who stabs you in the back."

Wilhelm said nothing. He drank the little beer and listened and thought of Bertha in the queue and of Schäfer's coffin and of the child that would come in winter, into this winter, into this house without a wage.

Two days later the messenger came.

It was no one from the counting house, that would have been too open. It was a man Wilhelm knew by sight, a foreman named Linde, who waylaid him on the way back from the soup kitchen, casually, as if they had met by chance.

"Kortmann," said Linde. "Hard times."

"Hard times," said Wilhelm.

"Your wife's having a child, I hear. In winter." Linde let it hang in the air. "Bad time for a child. No wage, no doctor, no bread. A man

might well start to wonder whether the holding still is worth it."

Wilhelm gave no answer, but neither did he walk on, and Linde knew that was answer enough.

"The directorate isn't unreasonable, you know," said Linde quietly, very quietly. "It knows not everyone's the same. There are the agitators, the bawlers, who started the whole thing. And there are the decent men, who only went along because they were swept up. With the decent men who come to their senses, the directorate talks. They keep their houses. They keep their shifts. And whoever shows himself especially sensible may even have a future. Overmen will be needed after the strike, Kortmann. Reliable men. You wouldn't be the first to come out of such a winter with a better shirt."

He left it lying there, the offer, vague, without ever a clear word that could be repeated. Then he touched his hat and went, and Wilhelm stood there with the thin soup in his hand that he was bringing to Bertha, and in his head all was still, as still as the headframe.

At home Bertha ate of the soup, slowly, savouring every spoonful, and pushed him the last two spoonfuls, as she did every evening now, because he was the man and needed strength, she said, and he did not take them, pushed them back, because she carried the child, and so they pushed the soup back and forth between them, two half-starved people who each wanted to give the other the last, and it was the most tender and the most bitter thing at once.

In the night Wilhelm lay awake. The child kicked. Bertha slept, at last, exhausted, one hand on her belly, and her breath went calm in the cold chamber. Wilhelm looked at her in the half-dark, and he thought of Linde's words, of the house, the shift, the better shirt, and he thought of Heinrich's words, of the strikebreaker worse than the

enemy. And he thought: I cannot save them both. The many and the child. I must choose one.

He did not say it to himself so clearly. He would never have dared to think it so clearly. But deep beneath the words, there where a man decides before he knows that he has decided, the choice was already made, that night, at the bed of the sleeping woman, under the still wheel, and everything that came after was only its carrying out.

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Chapter 6 - The Names

He went in the dark. That was the first thing he did, without admitting to himself what he was doing: he waited until Bertha slept, until the colony slept, until only the wind moved and the dogs, and then he pulled on his boots and went out, over to the town, to the house of the foreman Linde, whose address he did not have and yet found, because a man who means to do such a thing finds everything.

Bertha heard him go. She did not sleep as deeply as he believed; she had not slept deeply for weeks. She heard the door, the soft steps in the yard, and she lay still, eyes open in the darkness, and did not ask where to. She never asked him where to. Perhaps because she sensed it. Perhaps because she did not want to know, in order to bear it. A woman who had asked her husband that night, where to, would have got an answer that would have stood between them forever. So it stayed unasked, and the unasked was easier to carry than the truth, and Bertha had already learned that in life one chooses the lighter when the heavier would kill you.

In the counting house it was warm. That was the first thing Wilhelm noticed when they let him in, by the back door, without fuss: the warmth. It was heated, properly heated, a tiled stove, and the man who received him was not Linde but one from above, a gentleman in a dark suit whose name Wilhelm never learned and never wanted to know. The gentleman offered him a chair and even a coffee, a real one, and Wilhelm did not drink it, because he knew this coffee was part of the matter, a piece of the bargain, and that if he drank it he would already have begun to take.

"You're a sensible man, Kortmann," said the gentleman. "So one hears. A good hewer, diligent, no bawler. The pit can use such a man, now and later."

Wilhelm was silent.

"The thing is this." The gentleman folded his hands on the clean desk. "We know most of your comrades are good men. Followers. They'll come back as soon as the hunger is great enough, it's only a question of time. But there are a few who prevent it. The agitators. The ringleaders. As long as they have the say, the strike holds, and as long as the strike holds, your wife goes hungry. Understand? It is not we who let your child starve. It is the agitators. And they must go, so that reason returns."

"What do you want from me," said Wilhelm, and his voice sounded foreign in his own ears.

"Names." The gentleman said it without any sharpness, almost kindly, as if he were asking after the weather. "We know some. But we want to be sure we hit the right ones and not the wrong. Tell us who the ringleaders are. Who talks, who organises, who holds the others together. Those we let go, only those. And the strike collapses, and all the others, all the sensible ones, keep house and shift. You do your comrades no harm, Kortmann. You do them a service. You end their hunger."

It was so cleanly put, so reasonable, that for a moment Wilhelm believed it was true. That was the gentleman's art, and it was no small art: to make a betrayal into a service, the knife in the back into a helping hand. Wilhelm sat in the warmth that was his due if only he talked, and outside the colony lay in the frost, and in the colony lay Bertha with the child, and somewhere little Franz Schäfer lay in the frozen earth.

He named the names.

He told himself later, in the years that followed, that he had hesitated, hesitated long, but that was not true. It went quickly. It went frighteningly quickly, as if the names had only been waiting to be said. He named the fat Polak, who led the meetings. He named Schmidt of the strike fund. He named two or three others. And then, because the gentleman looked at him and waited, and because without this name it would not have been credible, because everyone knew this one was the loudest, the first, the ringleader of ringleaders, he named Heinrich Brass.

It came easily, that was the dreadful thing. Heinrich's name came easier than the others, because Heinrich really was the loudest, really the ringleader, because it was the truth that Heinrich held the strike together. One could speak the betrayal as truth, and that was precisely what made it perfect.

The gentleman wrote it down without moving a muscle, nodded, pushed Wilhelm a paper that Wilhelm did not read and signed, and said the house was safe, the shift was safe, and when the operation ran again they would think of him, of a reliable man with a future. Then he gave him his hand, and the handshake was dry and warm and firm, and Wilhelm returned it, and in that handshake lay the whole matter, sealed, irrevocable.

On the way home, in the first grey light, Wilhelm passed the still headframe and had to be sick. He braced himself against the wall and retched up the thin soup, the last that Bertha had pushed him, and stayed bent over, long, and above him stood the wheel that would soon turn again, that would turn again because of him, and that was no comfort.

When he came home Bertha was awake. She had already made the fire, the small fire from the last wood, and she watched him come in, grey in the face, with the smell of vomit and strange warmth, and she asked nothing. She ladled him a cup of hot water with a few grains floating in it and set it before him and laid her hand a moment on his shoulder, and Wilhelm knew in that moment that she knew, not the names, not the details, but the essential: that he had done something that could not be undone, and that she would carry it with him, in silence, all her life, because she was his wife and the child was coming and because in life one chooses the lighter when the heavier would kill you.

That was the first stone. They laid it together, without a word, that morning, and on it all the others came to rest.

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Chapter 7 - The Blacklist

The strike broke in the sixth week, and it broke the way Heinrich had foretold, only the other way round: not the gentlemen caved, but the front of the men, in many places at once, quietly, ashamed, at first light. It began with the ringleaders disappearing. One morning Polak was gone, the next Schmidt. They had not fled; they had been fetched, by the works police, in the early hours, and dismissed, and with the dismissal came the eviction. Without their leaders the strike committee was like a body without a head. The meetings lost themselves in quarrel. The strike fund was empty. And the hunger, which had been waiting all along, now stepped fully out of the shadow and took command.

Men rode down again. Singly at first, then in small groups, with bowed heads, past the doors of the steadfast, and no one greeted them, and they greeted no one. The wheel of the headframe began to turn, hesitantly, then more steadily, and with every man who rode down again it turned faster, until it ran as before, as if it had never stood still, as if the six weeks had never been.

Heinrich held out longest. Of course Heinrich held out longest. He went from door to door, beseeching the men to hold on, one more day, one more, but his voice, which had once moved hundreds, found no men any more, only doors that closed, and eyes that looked at the ground. And then, on a grey February morning, the works police came to him too.

Wilhelm saw it. He stood at the window of his house, the saved house, and looked across the yard to where they were fetching Heinrich. They did not fetch him roughly; that was not necessary. They handed him the dismissal and the eviction notice, and Heinrich read the paper, and Wilhelm saw how Heinrich read the paper and did not understand, not the paper, which he understood at once, but what lay behind it: how they had come to him. Heinrich had never let himself be caught at anything punishable. He had been allowed to talk; talk was permitted. They could only have blacklisted him if someone had named him. Someone from inside. Someone who knew he was the ringleader.

They carried Käthe Brass's things out of the house. The table, the chairs, the beds, all onto a cart, in the middle of February, before the eyes of the whole colony, which stood in the doorways and watched and was silent. Käthe walked alongside, upright, a bundle in her arms, and looked at no one. Heinrich carried the grandfather clock, their only one, which they had not had to sell, because Heinrich had said better to go hungry than give up the clock, a clock was the last thing that set you apart from the animal. Now he carried it out himself, onto the cart, and set it carefully between the beds, as if it might break.

And then, before they went, Heinrich looked across. He did not search; his gaze found Wilhelm at the window, as if he had known Wilhelm stood there. It was not an accusing look. That was the worst of it. Heinrich knew someone had betrayed him, but he did not know who, and in his look there was still the old trust, the expectation that Wilhelm would come out, that Wilhelm would step over to him, that the butty would stand by the butty in this hour, as one always stood by one another. Heinrich even raised his hand, a small movement,

half a greeting, a summons: come. Stand by me.

Wilhelm did not stir. He stood at the window, behind the glass, in the saved warm house, and did not stir, and after a moment that was an eternity, Heinrich let his hand sink again. Something in his face changed, not to anger, not yet, but to a confusion, a first, distant comprehension that was not yet thought to its end. Then he turned away, took the shaft of the cart and pulled it out of the colony, Käthe beside him, the grandfather clock between the beds, out of the pit's land into the nothing that began beyond it.

Bertha had stepped beside Wilhelm. She had said nothing. She watched the cart pull down the street, grow smaller, disappear, and then she looked at Wilhelm, and in her look there was no accusation, but something heavier: the knowledge that they now belonged together, more firmly than by any marriage certificate, welded together by what he had done and she had not prevented. She laid her hand at the back of his neck, the way you calm an animal or hold a dying man, and said: "The water's boiling. Come and eat."

There was something to eat that morning, the first time in weeks, because the house was saved and the shift and with it the wage that would soon come again. Wilhelm sat at the table and ate, and the food tasted of nothing, of ash, and he ate it all the same, every bite, because a man who has done such a thing has no right to scorn the food he has bought with it. Outside the wheel turned. From now on it would always turn, every day, all his life, and every time he saw it he would think of Heinrich's raised, then sinking hand, and the wheel would turn on, indifferent, for the wheel did not ask who turned it and at what price.

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Chapter 8 - The Overman

In summer the child came, a boy, and they named him August, after Bertha's father, and in the same summer they made Wilhelm a deputy overman.

It went the way such things go: without a word ever falling about the reason. Bröker, the old overman, was transferred, and a new one was needed, a reliable one, and they found him in Wilhelm Kortmann, a good hewer, diligent, no bawler. So it stood in the justification, and it was true, every word, and it was a lie, because it kept silent about the essential. Wilhelm got a different shirt, a white shirt for work that set him apart from the hewers, and a few marks more a month, and the task of dividing up the gangs and checking the tubs and carrying the instructions from above down below.

He stood now where Bröker had stood, at the pit bottom, with the list, and divided up the men who yesterday had still been his comrades. They said "Herr Steiger" to him, and there was something in that "Herr" that drove the blood to his head each time, a tiny pause before it, a barely audible mockery — or was he imagining it? Some did not imagine it. Some knew or sensed, and their politeness was colder than any insult. And when he checked the tubs and had to dock one, because the list from above demanded it, he saw in the hewer's eyes what he had himself seen in Bröker's, and he said the same sentence Bröker had said: "I don't write what gets docked. It comes from above." And it was the same lie and the same truth, and now he stood on the other side of it.

Wilhelm began to help. That was his way of living with what he had done, and he did not himself quite understand what he was doing, only that he had to do it. Where he could, he turned a blind eye. He docked less than the list demanded and carried the difference himself, by doctoring the figures, a dangerous game that could cost him the post. He gave money, secretly, where there was need, to widows, to the sick, to the families of the blacklisted who had stayed. He slipped a hungry apprentice a bread. He did it furtively, almost ashamed, and he did it more and more, and Bertha saw it and did not understand.

"We don't have enough ourselves," she said one evening, when she noticed money missing again. "You give away what we don't have. Who are you atoning for, Wilhelm?"

It was the first time she used the word. Atoning. She looked at him across the cradle of little August, and in her look there was no accusation, only a weary clarity. Wilhelm gave no answer. There was no answer he could have given without speaking aloud what lay between them and was bearable precisely because it stayed unspoken. He bent over the cradle and looked at the boy, who slept, his small fists beside his head, and thought: for him. For him I atone. So that one day he need not go down. So that he has a different life than mine.

It was a lie he comforted himself with, and it was so transparent it barely comforted. For the money he gave away did not undo the betrayal. It only made it more bearable for the one who had committed it, and that was a different thing from making amends, a much smaller thing, a self-serving thing in the garb of generosity.

Käthe Brass stayed in Voßlohe, on the margin, in a damp room in the old town, because Heinrich found no work anywhere in the

district and they could go no further than the money reached, and the money reached for nothing. Wilhelm tried once to help her. He sent, through a go-between, an envelope of money, anonymous, he thought. Käthe sent it back. She did not only send it back; she came herself, stood at Bertha's door, in her threadbare clothes, and laid the envelope on the threshold, and when Bertha opened, Käthe looked at her, long, and spat on the floor before her, on the clean floor, and went, without a word. She had needed no word. She knew. Perhaps she had always known, with the certainty of women who know each other; perhaps Heinrich, who was slowly comprehending, had told her. The envelope lay on the threshold, and Bertha picked it up and closed the door and said nothing, and from that day the friendship of the two women, who had once been neighbours and shared their bread, was dead, and with it a piece of the old colony, in which people had stood up for one another.

At night, when little August slept and Bertha slept, Wilhelm lay awake and listened to the wheel. You could hear it, on still nights, the distant hum of the winding that never quite stopped, and Wilhelm lay and listened and sometimes laid his hand on Bertha's back, in the dark, a plea for something he could not name, and Bertha, half asleep, let the hand stay, and both knew that something lay between them, a third in the bed, that never left, and both had learned to sleep with it.

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Chapter 9 - Essential to the War

When the war came, in August fourteen, they marched through Voßlohe with music and flags, and the young men, who had never got out of the district, signed up as if going on an outing. Wilhelm watched them go and did not sign up. Miners were exempted, it was soon said, essential to the war, for without coal no steel, without steel no shells, and so most of the hewers stayed underground, where the war needed them, alive. It was a bitter mercy. While the farmers' sons bled to death in Flanders, the miners' sons bled more slowly, in the depths, at the rung, at the driven-up quota.

For the production had to rise, always rise. The directorate took orders from the War Office, and the orders meant more coal, and more coal meant more shifts, less safety, more pressure on every man who had stayed. Wilhelm as overman stood in the middle of it. He was to drive the gangs, who were already working at the limit, older men, half-children, for the strongest were gone after all, voluntarily or fetched. He saw the accidents coming before they came, because one hurried, because one set props where one should not hurry and should build the roof properly, and sometimes he could prevent it and sometimes not, and when not, he carried them, one after another, in his already loaded reckoning.

Otto Brass went to war in the second year. He need not have; he had become a miner, somewhere at the edge of the district, where they would still take a Brass who bore the name of his blacklisted father. But he went, half out of defiance, half out of the hunger for some other life than the one the district had left him. Wilhelm heard

of it and thought of Heinrich, who now saw his only son go off to war, the war of the gentlemen, for whom he was nothing, and Wilhelm thought that the poor always bled for other men's causes, underground as above ground, and that no war changed that, but only made it clearer.

At home the hunger became habit. There was bread made of anything that could be milled, and ration cards for everything, and the cards counted for more than the money, because there was nothing to buy for the money. Bertha ran the economy of scarcity the way she ran everything, with iron exactness. She knew where there were secretly eggs, by barter, where a farmwife at the town's edge gave potatoes for a length of cloth. She sent little August, now eleven, foraging through the countryside, with a sack and a face that stirred pity, and August came back with turnips and pride, because he was contributing to the family's survival, and Wilhelm watched with worry, for the boy was growing into the scarcity as though it were normal, and for him it was.

"He's tough," said Bertha one evening, almost in praise, when August slept. "He'll get through."

"He shouldn't have to be tough," said Wilhelm.

Bertha looked at him. "Here everyone gets tough. Or they go under. What do you want him to be?"

To that Wilhelm had no answer. He wanted August not to have to go down, neither into the mountain nor into the war, to get out of the district that wore people away. But he saw no way there, no honest one, and the dishonest ways he knew, one of them he knew very well, and he had sworn his son would not have to walk them. That was his atonement and his hope at once: that out of the betrayal at least this might come, a boy who would never have to betray,

because he would never stand so deep down that betrayal was the only way out.

It was a hope as thin as the war bread, and Wilhelm held on to it because he had nothing else to hold on to, and outside the winding ran day and night, coal for the steel, steel for the front, and the district gave what it had, coal and men, and got back what it always got: cards, scarcity, and the names of the fallen, which the pastor read from the pulpit on Sundays, ever longer, a second blacklist, the one the war kept.

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Chapter 10 - The Turnip Winter

The winter of sixteen into seventeen was hunger itself, made flesh, or rather made the lack of flesh. The potatoes were frozen or requisitioned, and what remained was the turnip, the swede, the cattle fodder, which people now ate, morning, noon, and night, boiled, baked, mashed to pulp, cooked down to a kind of jam that tasted of nothing but turnip and hunger.

In the colony, the old and the small died. They did not die of hunger alone; they died of what the hunger let in, of pneumonia, of dysentery, of the cough that would not stop. Little August survived, because he was tough, as Bertha had said, and because Bertha gave him the best, the little best, and ate the turnip herself. Wilhelm watched her grow thinner, week by week, saw the bones come out in her face that had once been round, and he, the overman, had a little more than the others, a special allocation as was due to the supervisors, and he brought it home, and Bertha shared it out among them all, as if there were nothing special in it.

But Wilhelm also gave outward. He had never quite stopped since the strike, and in this winter he did it more than ever. He took from the special allocation and carried it away, secretly, to the widows, to the sick, to the families of the blacklisted who still hovered in the town. He did it in the dark, the way he did everything that had to do with his guilt, and he imagined no one noticed, least of all Bertha.

But Bertha noticed everything. One evening, when he came home again with a half-empty sack, she confronted him. She did not do it loudly. She stood at the stove, stirring the turnip, and said, without

turning round: "Where was the fat, Wilhelm? The special allocation. There was fat with it. Where is it?"

"Given away," he said, because he was too tired to lie.

"To whom?"

"To those who have nothing."

"We have almost nothing too." Now she turned, the wooden spoon in her hand, and her gaunt face was hard in the light of the small fire. "Your son is skin and bone. So am I. And you carry the fat to strangers. The third time this week, Wilhelm. Who are you atoning for?"

There it was again, the word, and this time it did not hang in the air but fell between them like a stone. Wilhelm was silent. He could have told her, in that moment, everything, the names, the counting house, the handshake; she would have borne it, she already bore the half, the unsaid. But he did not say it. He said: "It can't be otherwise," and that was no answer, and Bertha knew it was none.

"Yes it could," she said quietly. "You could stop atoning and start living. But you can't, because then you'd have to look at what for. Rather you give the fat away than look." She turned back to the stove. "Give it away if you must. But don't tell me it can't be otherwise. It can. You just don't want it to."

It was the hardest and truest thing she had ever said to him, and Wilhelm carried it off like everything else.

Once that winter he tried it with Käthe Brass. He knew she and Heinrich were at the end, in the damp room in the old town, Heinrich ill, without work, without hope. He sent August, the boy, with a pot of soup and a piece of bacon, because he thought the child would be taken in more easily than his own hand. August came back, the pot still full.

"The woman said," August reported, confused, "she eats nothing from the house of Kortmann. She said she'd rather starve. What does that mean, Father?"

"Nothing," said Wilhelm. "Eat the soup yourself."

And August ate it, hungry, asking no more, and Wilhelm watched him eat the soup that Käthe Brass had turned away, rather starving than taking his bread, and he understood that there was a dignity poorer than any poverty and richer than his whole rise: the dignity of the one who refuses the traitor's bread. That dignity Käthe had, and she had bought it dearly, with hunger, and Wilhelm had sold it, cheaply, for a warm house and a white shirt, and between the two lay the whole difference, which no money in the world made good again.

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Chapter 11 - The Councils

In November eighteen everything collapsed, the war, the Kaiser, the old order, and for a few weeks it looked as if the world belonged to those who had carried it until then. In Voßlohe a workers' and soldiers' council formed, as everywhere in the district, and the council took over what there was to take over, and on the Morgenstern pit a man suddenly stood on a tub and spoke, the way Heinrich Brass had once spoken, and the man was Heinrich's son Otto. Otto had come back from the war, leaner, harder, with eyes that had seen too much and feared nothing any more. He had survived four years of trenches and come back another man, one who believed he had nothing left to lose and was dangerous precisely for that, to those who had something. He had joined the party that stood furthest left, and he spoke of councils and of socialisation and of the mines belonging to those who toiled in them and not to the gentlemen in the clean counting houses, and the men listened to him, hungry, war-weary, ready for something new.

Wilhelm stood at the edge and listened, and it was to him as if he heard Heinrich, the same words, the same fire, only without the warmth Heinrich had had; Otto was colder, more honed, more embittered. And Wilhelm understood with a fright that he now stood on the other side. He was overman, he was one of the supervisors, one who carried out the directorate's instructions, and to the council he was what he had never wanted to be to himself: a man of the gentlemen. The council drew up lists of who belonged to the

workforce and who to the management, and Wilhelm Kortmann, who had once been a hewer, stood on the wrong list, the list of those to be watched.

They let him work; they needed the overmen, for the winding had to go on, council or no council, the people needed coal in this hunger winter. But the tone had turned. Where the men had once said "Herr Steiger" with their cold politeness, some now said "Comrade Kortmann" with a mockery that cut sharper, because it came from the other direction.

One day Otto confronted him. It was at the pit bottom, after the shift, the others already in the cage, and Otto stepped into his way, not threatening, only firm, and looked at him with the eyes that feared nothing.

"Kortmann," he said. "Steiger." A pause. "My father stood surety for you. Did you know that? When you started. A thin boy without a father, and no one would stand surety, and my father did. Said, Kortmann, he's all right, I'll vouch for him."

"I know," said Wilhelm.

"And then, nineteen-five, in the strike." Otto looked at him without blinking. "Then my father was blacklisted. Betrayed from within. Someone gave his name, someone who knew he was the ringleader. And shortly after, of all people a certain Wilhelm Kortmann becomes overman. A thin boy without a father, for whom no one would vouch, suddenly wearing the white shirt." He let it stand. "Funny, isn't it?"

Wilhelm held his gaze, because to look away would have been a confession. "You have no proof," he said, and it was the most wretched thing he had ever said, because it was not innocence but only the absence of proof, and both heard the difference.

"No," said Otto slowly. "I have no proof. If I had, you wouldn't be standing here any more." He took a step back. "But I need no proof to know what I know. And you need none to know what you did. That's enough for us both, I think. Glück auf, Steiger."

He went to the cage, and Wilhelm stood at the pit bottom, alone, and the word Glück auf echoed in him like a mockery, because from Otto's mouth it was no wish but a verdict. Bertha, when he hinted at it that evening, without the details, looked at him long and said: "Now the next generation knows. It moves on, Wilhelm. What you did doesn't die with you. It is inherited, like a farm, like an illness. The Brasses will tell it to their children, and our children will feel it, without knowing what it is." She laid her hand on the sleeping August. "This one will carry it, and he doesn't even know yet that he exists."

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Chapter 12 - The Red Ruhr Army

In March twenty the putsch came from above, and the district answered from below. In Berlin the military had grabbed for power, against the young republic, and across the land a general strike was called, and nowhere was the call heard as it was in the Ruhr. But it did not stop at the strike. Out of the strikers grew an army, the Red Ruhr Army, tens of thousands, miners with rifles from the war, who defended the district against the putschists and, when the putsch in Berlin had already collapsed, marched on, because they had grasped that they would now be relieved of their weapons again, and with the weapons of the only power they had ever possessed.

Otto Brass was in the thick of it. Of course Otto was in the thick of it. He led no great troop, but he was one of those who went ahead, and for a few weeks the district really belonged to the men who toiled in it, the first and last time in its history. Wilhelm kept out of it. He was overman, he was too old for an army, he had a wife and a son, and above all he had learned that the many always lost in the end, that the power of the many was an intoxication that wore off, and that afterward the reckoning came.

The reckoning came with the Reichswehr and the Freikorps. They came from outside, well armed, well led, and they put down the rising, with a hardness the district did not forget. It was no battle, it was a punishment. Drumhead courts, shootings, men stood against the wall because they had been found with a weapon or because a neighbour had denounced them. The district, which had just belonged to itself, was occupied by its own republic, and the victors

hunted the vanquished through the colonies.

On one of those nights Wilhelm heard a sound in the stall. He went out, lamp in hand, and in the straw, between the empty rabbit hutches, lay a man, wounded in the shoulder, exhausted, and the man was Otto Brass.

They looked at each other in the lamplight, the traitor's son and the betrayed man's son, and neither said a word. Otto was too weak to speak and too proud to beg. Wilhelm could hand him over; one call to the works police, and he was a reliable man who had caught an insurgent, that would have served him. Wilhelm could drive him off; then he would not be guilty of what happened to him outside. Or Wilhelm could keep him, hide him, one night, against all reason, against his own advantage.

He said no word. He went back into the house, fetched a jug of water and a clean cloth and brought them out and set them beside Otto in the straw. He laid a loaf beside them, the half they had. Then he put out the lamp and left Otto in the darkness, and the dark was now protection, not threat, the first time in Wilhelm's life that the dark helped. He went in and lay down beside Bertha, who was awake and had heard everything and said nothing, and they both lay awake until morning, and in the stall lay the son of the man Wilhelm had betrayed, and ate his bread.

Before sunrise Otto was gone. He had taken the cloth and emptied the jug and taken the bread, and in the straw there was only the imprint of his body and a dark stain where the shoulder had bled. He had left no word, no thanks, nothing. And that was right. For what Wilhelm had done was no making-good. One did not make good a betrayed father by giving the son a night of straw. It was not even half an atonement. It was only a single moment in which Wilhelm

had not done the wrong thing, and a single moment did not outweigh a life.

But between the two men something remained from that night that was neither thanks nor forgiveness and stronger than both: a knowledge. Otto now knew that Wilhelm could have handed him over and had not. And Wilhelm knew that Otto knew. It changed nothing about the old betrayal, did not erase it, but it laid itself beside it, a second truth beside the first, and the two truths would from now on exist together, indissoluble, through the years, through the generations, until one distant day someone would bring them both to light and not know how to reckon the one against the other.

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Chapter 13 - The Boy Wants to Go Down

August was twelve when Wilhelm grasped that he would not be able to hold him. The boy hung about the headframe the way other boys hung about the football pitch. He knew the shift times better than the wages clerk, knew which hewer managed how many tubs, imitated the gait of the miners, the bow-legged, heavy gait of those who had worked too long stooped. He wanted to go down. He wanted nothing in the world so much as to want to go down, and Wilhelm wanted nothing in the world so much as to prevent it.

"You're not going into the mountain," said Wilhelm. "You'll learn a trade. Something up top. Fitter, joiner, anything. You're not going down."

"Why not? You go down too."

"That's exactly why."

But that was no reason for a twelve-year-old, that was a riddle. For August the mountain was not what it was for Wilhelm, not wear and fear and darkness, but the real thing, the manly thing, what the father did and the grandfather had done and everyone who counted for anything. To work up top, to learn a trade, that seemed to August almost a disgrace, something for the weak, for those who did not dare go down. He saw the hewers come out of the washhouse, with the black ring around their eyes, exhausted and proud, and he wanted to be one of them, one whom you knew by the black ring.

Wilhelm saw himself in the boy and was afraid. He saw the same ambition, the same hunger for recognition, the same readiness to give everything for a place in this world, and he knew where that hunger

could lead, because he himself had been led there. He wanted to keep August out of the mountain, not only out of worry for the lung, but out of a deeper fear: that the boy, once as deep down as he, would one day stand before the same choice Wilhelm had stood before, and give the same answer.

It came on top of this that August played with the Brass children. Otto had children of his own now, and there were other Brasses in the wider sense, relatives of the blacklisted Heinrich, and the children did not care about the feud of the old. To them Voßlohe was one single great colony, and you played with whoever was there, and August was often there, and one of the Brass boys became almost something like his friend. Wilhelm saw it and was silent, because he could not forbid it without explaining, and explain he could not.

Bertha mediated, as she always mediated. "Leave the boy," she said. "You won't get him out of the mountain by forbidding him the mountain. That only makes him greedier. And you won't get the old story out of the world by forbidding him to play with the Brasses. Perhaps it's good that the children play. Perhaps it heals, what we broke, by itself, a generation on, if only we let it."

"And if it doesn't heal? If it only sleeps and wakes later?"

Bertha had no answer to that, and neither did Wilhelm, and so they let August play and grow and strive for the mountain, and Wilhelm pushed the decision ahead of him, year by year, in the hope that some other way would open, an apprenticeship up top, anything that would lure the boy from the shaft. But the district offered no other ways. It offered the mountain, and again the mountain, and for those who did not want the mountain, the unknown, the foreign, which frightened more than the depths.

So August grew up, between his father's prohibition and the pull of the shaft, and the nearer he came to the age at which one could begin, the clearer it was to both of them how it would end. The mountain always won. The mountain had won all of them, the fathers and the grandfathers, and it would win August too, and the only thing Wilhelm had to set against it was a prohibition he could not justify, and an atonement no one knew of, and both were too little against the hum of the wheel, which August heard every day and which sang to him that he belonged there, down below, where the men were.

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Chapter 14 - The Occupation

In January twenty-three French and Belgian troops moved into the district, because the Reich was not paying the reparations, and overnight Voßlohe was occupied land. They came with soldiers and officers and the intention of fetching the coal themselves that the Reich owed them, and the Reich answered with what it called passive resistance: it called on the workers not to mine for the occupiers, and paid for it a support, printed money, ever more printed money.

So the headframe stood still again, but this time differently from the strike. This time directorate and workforce stood on the same side, against the occupiers, and that was a strange, almost uncanny unity. Wilhelm, the overman, and the hewers who did not greet him were all at once allies, Germans against Frenchmen, and for a few weeks the old division between above and below seemed overlaid by a new one between inside and outside.

Wilhelm mistrusted this unity. He had learned that unities stirred up from above pursued a purpose that was not his. The directorate was against the occupiers because the occupiers took its coal, not because it had suddenly come to love the fatherland. And when the occupation was over, the unity would be over too, and everything would be as before, above and below, list and pick.

But he kept it to himself. One kept much to oneself in those weeks, for the occupiers were nervous and harsh. There were raids, arrests, expulsions. Whoever was caught sabotaging came before a French court. There were dead. In a neighbouring town soldiers shot workers who tried to stop a train of seized coal, and the shot men

became heroes, and their burial became a demonstration, tens of thousands, and among the tens of thousands walked Wilhelm too, because one walked, because now one was a German above all else, and beside him, a few rows off, walked Otto Brass, and for this one day they were on the same side, without greeting each other.

August, now fifteen, experienced the occupation with the burning eyes of youth. He saw the foreign soldiers in the streets, the patrols, the humiliation, and in him something grew, an anger, a national feeling he did not see through and that was dangerous because it was so easy to steer. He once threw stones at a French lorry with other boys and came home with a split lip and a pride that frightened Wilhelm.

"Are you mad," said Wilhelm. "They could have shot you. Over a stone."

"They have no right to be here," said August, the lip swollen, the eyes shining.

"Right." Wilhelm laughed bitterly. "Who has ever had a right here. The gentlemen have no right to dock us, and do it. The French have no right to be here, and are. Right belongs to whoever has the power, August. Mark that. And throw no stones at those who have rifles."

But August did not listen. He was at the age when one takes the truth of the fathers for cowardice, and in Wilhelm's caution he saw only weakness, a man who ducked, who had always ducked. Had he known how deep his father had ducked and what it had cost him, he might have judged otherwise. But he did not know it, and so in him grew contempt for caution and admiration for the grand gesture, for the stone against the lorry, for the big, the loud, the brave, and Wilhelm saw it grow and could say nothing against it, because the

only thing he could have said was the one thing he would never say.

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Chapter 15 - Inflation

The money died that year, and it died fast. In spring a bread cost a few hundred marks, in summer a few thousand, in autumn millions, then billions. The wage Wilhelm got in the morning was worth nothing by evening; one ran from the wages office to the baker to buy at least something before the price rose again. The women queued with washing baskets full of banknotes to buy a few potatoes, and the money was cheaper than the paper it was printed on, and one heated with it, because coal, which one mined, was scarcer than money, which one printed.

For Wilhelm it was more than a catastrophe. It was a verdict.

For Wilhelm had saved. In the years as overman, with the better shirt and the few marks more, he had put aside what he could, secretly, alongside what he gave away, a small cushion, a beginning of security. It was the money of the rise, the money grown out of the betrayal, for without the betrayal he would never have become overman, never have earned more, never have saved. It was, right at the bottom, Heinrich's money, the money Wilhelm had got for Heinrich's name.

And it evaporated. Overnight, in weeks, it was nothing. The sum that could once have been a small house, a dowry for August, a cushion for old age, was in the end not even a bread. Wilhelm held the worthless notes in his hand, millions, billions, and it was as if he held the wage of his betrayal in all its nullity, and he grasped that he had robbed Heinrich of a life for something that was now worthless paper, that he had sold solidarity for a promise the history redeemed

with nothing.

Bertha saw him sitting at the table with the notes, and she understood, without his saying a word, what was going on in him. She said the sentence Wilhelm did not forget all his life, soberly, almost gently, while she prepared the supper that consisted of almost nothing: "Some things you buy dear and do not keep."

She meant the money, and she did not mean the money, and both knew it.

That winter Heinrich Brass died.

He died poor, in the damp room in the old town, of the lung, of poverty, of the years without work, without hope, without the standing the blacklist had taken from him. He had been a blacklisted man for eighteen years, one who got no shift anywhere in the district, and those eighteen years had eaten him up, slowly, from within, the way the dust eats the lung. He was fifty when he died, and he looked seventy.

Wilhelm went to the burial. He could have stayed away; no one expected the overman Kortmann at the grave of the man the pit had cast out. But he went, because he could not do otherwise, because something in him had to stand at this grave, even if he did not know whether it was remorse or only the need to torment himself. He stood at the back, at the edge of the small mourning party, the few who still held to Heinrich, the old union men, the Brass relatives. Käthe stood at the grave, upright, in black, and did not look over. But Otto looked over.

Otto stood at his father's grave and looked across the heads to where Wilhelm stood, and their eyes met, and Otto said no word. He said the loudest word one can say, by saying no word. In his look lay everything: the knowledge, the accusation, the renunciation of the

accusation, because an accusation without proof would have been only a cry, and above all a bitter, terrible satisfaction that Wilhelm had come, that Wilhelm needed to come, that the traitor stood at the grave of the betrayed and could not bear it and yet did not stay away. That was Otto's revenge, the only one he had: to let Wilhelm watch how he saw the earth fall on his father's coffin, and to let him know that he, Otto, was watching him do it.

Wilhelm did not bear it long. He left before the grave was closed, through the cold streets toward home, and the worthless money rustled in his pocket, and over the town the wheel turned, his wheel, that turned because of him, and Heinrich, who had never ridden down again since nineteen-five, lay now forever under the earth, without shaft, without cage, without Glück auf, and that was the end Wilhelm had prepared for him, eighteen years before, on a warm night in the counting house, for money that was now nothing.

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Chapter 16 - The Old Man

In the same year that the money died and Heinrich died, a roadway was abandoned in the mountain. It was worked out, the seam exhausted, no longer worth keeping open, and so they sealed it, walled up the entrance, gave it over to the rock pressure and the rising water. The old man, the miners said of such a roadway, that was the word for it, ancient, no one knew where it came from: the old man, the worked-out, abandoned district that one gave back to the mountain.

Wilhelm stood before it, on the day they walled it up. It was his task as overman to oversee the sealing, and he watched the men set stone on stone, watched the opening close, slowly, until only a dark hole remained and then that too vanished, and before him stood a wall, behind which lay the darkness, a darkness that no one would now enter, in which there was nothing but hollowed rock and the water that slowly rose.

He stood before it as before his own conscience. Behind this wall lay what was closed off, what one had given back to the mountain because one no longer needed it and could no longer change it. So Wilhelm wanted his betrayal: walled up, given over to the dark, forgotten. But he knew it was not so. The old man in the mountain was truly dead, truly closed off. His own old man was not. That one lived, behind its wall, and pressed, the way the rock presses, and the water rose, slowly, year by year, and one day it would find a wall that did not hold.

Then came the Rentenmark, in November, and overnight the money had value again, a new money, made out of nothing, a new beginning as undeserved as the downfall before it. People settled in again. One could reckon again, save again, hope again. Voßlohe breathed out, and the winding ran, and life went on, as it always went on, above all catastrophes, indifferent and tough.

That autumn August started.

He was fifteen, old enough, and Wilhelm had found no apprenticeship up top, no other way, and the boy wanted it with all his strength, and in the end Wilhelm gave way, because giving way was easier than a fight he lost anyway, and because secretly he knew it had to come, that the mountain always won. August put on the pit clothes that were too big for his boy's body and stood in the morning at the shaft, lamp in hand, his face bright with excitement, and Wilhelm stood beside him, and they waited for the cage.

It was Wilhelm's last chance. He felt it, there at the shaft, in the grey morning light: if he ever wanted to say it, to the son, before the son rode down into the same depths, into the same world in which he, Wilhelm, had chosen what he had chosen, then now. He wanted to say: August, before you go down, you must know something about your father, about this house, about the money that brought us up. You must know what we stand on. So that, when one day you stand before a choice, as I stood before a choice, you know what it costs to choose the wrong thing.

He opened his mouth. August looked at him, expectant, believing his father would give him some good advice on the way down, a miner's counsel, something about the face, about the roof, about the art of coming up alive again.

"Glück auf," said Wilhelm.

He got out no more. It was the one word that contained everything and betrayed nothing, the wish and the silence in one, and it was cowardly, and it was all Wilhelm could manage. August smiled, proud, and said "Glück auf, Father," and then the cage came, and August stepped in with the others, and the cage dropped, and with it August dropped into the mountain, the way Wilhelm had dropped into the mountain every morning of his life, and the square of sky disappeared above the boy, first grey, then greyer, then nothing at all.

Wilhelm stood at the shaft a long time after the cage had gone. Above him turned the wheel, his wheel, and now it carried his son too down, into the same depths, the same darkness, the same world in which a man had to choose between his children's bread and his loyalty to his own kind, and could always choose wrong. The fault Wilhelm had laid now rode down with August, unseen, unnamed, inherited like a farm, like an illness, and somewhere behind a walled-up roadway the water rose slowly, and Wilhelm turned away and went to the washhouse and began his shift, because the wheel turned and the wheel did not ask who turned it and at what price.

ZWEITER BAND

At the Face

Voßlohe, 1929–1948

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Chapter 1 - At the Face

At the face — that was the place above all places, the point at which a man stood opposite the mountain, man against rock, the pick against the seam. Everything else was the way there or the way back: the descent, the roadway, the cage. At the face the real thing happened, there the coal that fed Voßlohe was wrested from the mountain, and there, at twenty-one, August Kortmann was in his element.

He had become a good hewer, better than his father, some said, and August liked to hear it and did not let it show. He had the body for it, broad in the shoulders, and he had the ambition that drove him, to manage more tubs than the others, faster, cleaner. He wanted to be something, and in the district one became something by being the best hewer, and then perhaps overman, like his father, and August was not ashamed of this aim, on the contrary; he wanted to outdo his father, behind whose silence he had always suspected a weakness, a ducking nature he, August, did not share.

What August did not know was everything. He did not know how his father had become overman. He did not know what the house stood on in which he had grown up, and the money that had let him grow up without hunger like the Brass children. He knew the old feud between Kortmann and Brass, but he took it for one of those family stories of which there were many in the district, quarrel over nothing, long ago, and he had even played with a Brass as a boy and thought no further of it. His father had never told him anything. His father never told anything. That August took for weakness, and it

was the opposite, but he could not know that.

That spring August got to know Lena. She was the daughter of a hewer from the neighbouring colony, a dark-haired, slender girl with a straight gaze that August liked from the start, because it pretended nothing. They danced at the pit festival, and August, who otherwise made no grand speeches, found words with her, and she laughed at the right ones and was silent at the right ones, and by the end of the evening August knew he would marry her, the way he knew he was the best hewer: without doubt, without haste, as if it were already settled.

"The Hoffmann girl, Lena," said Bertha when August told of it, and nodded slowly. Bertha had grown old, her hair grey, her face tanned by the years, but her eyes as clear as ever. "A good choice. She has a head on her. She won't be fooled." She looked at August, and in her gaze there was something August did not read, a worry that went beyond the joy. "Take care you don't have to fool her, August. A woman with a head sees through you. That's good, as long as you have nothing to hide."

"What should I have to hide," said August, and laughed.

Bertha said nothing to that. She looked over at Wilhelm, who sat at the table and was silent, the way he was always silent, and something passed between the two old people, a look August did not read, and then Bertha said: "Nothing. Marry her. She's good for you."

In the autumn of the same year, when August was already engaged to Lena and dreaming of a household of his own, the news came from America, from the stock exchange that had collapsed, and no one in Voßlohe at first understood what an exchange in New York had to do with a pit on the Emscher. But they were soon to understand. The coal the district mined went into the steel, and the

steel went into the world, and when the world stopped buying, the steel stopped needing, and when the steel stopped needing, the coal stopped selling. It was a chain, long and invisible, from a counting house in New York to the face where August stood, and at its end stood always the hewer with the pick, who first felt it when the chain drew tight.

Still the winding ran. Still August struck his tubs, more than the others, and dreamed of Lena and of rising. But over the horizon, far off still, there stood a heat-lightning, and the old, who had already lived through crises, saw it and were silent, and Wilhelm was one of them, and he watched his son stand at the face, full of strength and hope, and knew that the strength and the hope counted for nothing against what was coming, and did not say it, because one did not say such a thing and because August would not have listened anyway.

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Chapter 2 - Idle Shifts

They called them idle shifts, and that was the bitterest mockery the language of the district knew. Idle. It meant: the pit does not run, you stay home, you get no wage. No one was idle. One sat in the colony and watched the little savings melt, and waited for the notice that said whether tomorrow one might ride down or must again be idle. The crisis ate its way through the district like firedamp through a gallery, soundless and deadly. First they cut the shifts, then they dismissed the youngest and the oldest, then they shut down whole installations. At Morgenstern they soon ran only three days a week, then two. August, the best hewer, who struck more tubs than anyone, now struck none on most days, because there was nothing to strike, because the coal he mined no one bought. His skill, his ambition, his strength, all of it was suddenly worthless, for it was not needed. There was no worse humiliation for a man like August than not being needed.

The colony grew poor, fast and visibly. Whoever was cut off was threatened with the house, the old threat, always the same: whoever does not work for the pit does not live in the pit's house. Families moved away, to relatives in the country, or they stayed and crowded eight to a room, and in the gardens grew no more ornament but cabbage and potatoes, every square metre, for the garden was now a means of survival.

And politics came into the colony as never before. On the walls hung posters, red and brown, and on the street corners stood the

recruiters, the one lot with the fist and the song of the Internationale, the others with the promise of work and bread and a fatherland that would make everything good again. They courted the same men, the hungry, unemployed, humiliated men, and sometimes one crossed from the one side to the other, depending on who had spoken last, for desperation was no conviction, it was a hole into which anyone could speak who wished.

Otto Brass stood on the red side. He was a man in his thirties now, hard and convinced, a functionary of the party that stood furthest left, and he spoke at the meetings the way his father had once spoken, of the solidarity of the workers, of the overthrow of the gentlemen, of a world in which the mines belonged to those who toiled in them. August heard him sometimes, at the edge, and was not convinced; Otto's fire was too great for him, too demanding, and something in him, which he had from his father without knowing it, mistrusted the big words and the many who were to become one.

Others in the colony went to the brown side. They too came in uniform, marched, sang, and they promised what the men most longed for: not a distant revolution, but work, soon, now, and a pride that cost nothing, the pride of being a German, if one was not allowed to be a fed man. August found that not convincing either, but he found it less demanding, less dangerous for a man who wanted to be something, and that was the first, small difference that would later become a great one.

In front of the kiosk Reds and browns brawled. It was a Sunday evening, and it was about nothing, a word, a look, and then they lay on top of each other, the men who all shared the same misery and beat each other's heads in instead of standing together against those who administered the misery. August saw it and did not step between

them and did not go away either, but stood and watched, and beside him stood an old hewer who shook his head and said: "That's how they win. The ones up top. If we tear each other apart, they don't have to lift a finger." And August thought of it and forgot it again, because he was young and thought of his own happiness, of Lena and of the day the pit would run full again and he would be needed again.

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Chapter 3 - Lena

They married in the middle of the crisis, poor and resolute, in the spring of thirty-two. There was no great feast; there was soup and home-baked bread and a jug of beer, and that was lavish for that time. The neighbours brought what they could spare, an egg, a handful of flour, and that was ample. Lena wore her mother's dress, taken in, and August the one good shirt he had, and they stood before the registrar and then before the pastor, and Bertha wept, which August had never seen in her, and Wilhelm stood beside her and was silent and looked as though he carried something heavier than joy.

They moved into the narrow pit house that had been allotted to August, two rooms, and Lena made a home of it, with the few means they had, and with that competence Bertha had recognised at once. She was not one to complain. She was one to take hold, who stretched the little, who made something out of nothing, and August, watching her come home from the garden with earthy hands and a basket of cabbage, often thought he had been lucky, luckier than he deserved, without knowing how true that was.

At the wedding Otto Brass had been there too, not as a guest, but because he knew Lena's father, from the party, and had stood at the edge. When August once stepped out alone, into the cool evening air, Otto stood there smoking, and for a moment they were alone, the traitor's son and the betrayed man's son, without August knowing either.

"Congratulations, Kortmann," said Otto. "Good woman. The Hoffmanns are decent people."

"Thanks," said August, a little stiff, for he sensed that something lay between Brass and Kortmann, even if he did not know what.

Otto smoked and looked at him, appraising, a long time. "You don't know much, do you," he said at last. "About your family. About what was."

"What's supposed to have been?"

"Ask your father." Otto threw the cigarette away, trod it out. "Or better not. He won't tell you. Your sort tells nothing." He paused, and in his face there was something that looked almost like pity, a bitter pity. "Take care in the times that are coming, Kortmann. Bad times are coming, worse than you think. And in bad times it shows who a man is. Some families," he looked at August, "some families have already shown once what they do when it gets tight. They sell. Take care you don't sell what can't be bought back."

August did not understand the barb. He heard only an embittered Red making dark hints, as was their way, and he did not want to understand them, because it was his wedding day and he wanted to be happy. "I sell nothing," he said, almost amused. "I have nothing to sell."

"Everyone has something to sell," said Otto. "That's just it." And he went back inside, and August stayed in the evening air, and the sentence stuck in him, without his knowing why, a stone in the shoe one does not feel while standing and that presses with every step.

Inside, later, as the guests were leaving, Wilhelm took his son aside and pressed an envelope into his hand, money, more money than August would have credited the old man with in those times.

"For the start," said Wilhelm. "So you don't have to begin from nothing."

August took it gratefully, moved, and did not ask where it came from, where an overman in the crisis, with idle shifts and a cut wage, could still put so much aside. He took it, the way children take, without asking, and Wilhelm gave it the way he gave everything, with a face that carried more than generosity. It was, right at the bottom, always the same money, the wage of the rise, the wage of a name that had once fallen in a warm counting house, and now it passed on, into the next generation, as clean wedding money, and no one saw in it what it had grown out of, least of all August, who counted it and was glad and bought Lena a second bed with it.

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Chapter 4 - The Flag on the Headframe

In the spring of thirty-three a new flag hung on the headframe of Morgenstern, red with the black hook in the white field, and it hung where no flag had ever hung, right at the top, above the wheel, visible to the whole town, and it meant that everything had changed and nothing.

It went quickly. So quickly that people could hardly keep up. The free unions, the union for which Heinrich Brass had once fought and died, were smashed, their houses occupied, their funds plundered, their men arrested or intimidated. In their place stepped the German Labour Front, into which everyone now belonged, whether he wished or not, and which made no more demands but required allegiance. The strike, the weapon of the many, was abolished, forbidden, made unthinkable. What generations of miners had fought for was gone in a few weeks, and most watched and were silent, because talk was now dangerous, more dangerous than ever before.

Otto Brass was one of the first they fetched. He was known, a Red, a ringleader, and such men one fetched first. They came in the early hours, the way one always fetches the ringleaders in the early hours, and took him away, and he vanished into one of the early camps, of which people spoke only in whispers, somewhere in the moors, and for years one heard nothing more of him. Käthe Brass, grown old, did not live to see it; she had died the year before, following Heinrich, and so it was Otto's wife who had to watch them fetch the son too, and the Brasses, who had already lost everything once, lost again.

August saw it, and it was none of his business, he told himself. He was no Red. He had kept out of everything. Politics was nothing for a man who wanted to be something, and now, with the one lot up top and the others vanished, it came down to behaving correctly, inconspicuously, reliably.

And then they offered him the overman's track.

It was the same mechanism that had seized his father twenty-eight years before, only in a new garb. Reliable men were needed, now more than ever, men who did not kick, who carried out, who stood by the new time. A good hewer like Kortmann, diligent, unpolitical, from a good house, that was the ideal candidate, if only he did the right thing: joined the right organisation, showed the right conviction, went along where one had to go along.

August joined. He joined what one joined if one wanted to become overman in those years, and he told himself it was only a formality, only a means to an end, only for the family, for Lena, for the child that was now on the way. He even believed it. He believed one could join without belonging, go along without going along, change the shirt without changing the man beneath. It was the old self-deception, the same with which his father had comforted himself, the same logic in new dress: I do the wrong thing only for my own, so it is no wrong.

Wilhelm saw it. The old man, bent now, his hair white, saw his son put on the white shirt, the overman's shirt, in those years, under that flag, and he recognised himself, recognised the choice he himself had made, returning in his child. He could have said something. He was old, not much more could happen to him, he could have said: August, I know this road, I walked it, and it does not lead where you think. But he did not say it. He was silent, the way he had always

been silent, and his silence now had a new reason: whoever has betrayed himself has no right any more to warn the son against betrayal. The silence Wilhelm had imposed on himself as a punishment thus became the tool with which he let the son run into the same misfortune, and that was perhaps the bitterest fruit of his old deed: that it took his voice in the one moment when the voice might have changed something.

"Congratulations," said Wilhelm when August got the promotion, and it sounded like condolence.

"You're not glad," said August, almost reproachfully.

"Yes I am," said Wilhelm. "I'm glad you made it." And he looked away, over to the window, out to the headframe on which the new flag hung, and said no more, and August took the looking-away for the old man's usual silence and not for what it was: the looking-away of a man who watched his son climb the same wall behind which he himself had walled up the dark.

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Chapter 5 - Coal for the Guns

The work came back, and it came because there was rearmament. Few grasped that, and those who grasped it did not say it. One saw only that the pits ran full again, that the idle shifts ended, that the wage was a wage again, and one was grateful, dully grateful, the way a man is grateful who has long gone hungry and at last eats again and does not ask where the bread comes from.

It came from the blast furnaces that glowed again, because they made steel, and the steel became cannon and tanks and ships, and for that one needed coal, much coal, ever more coal. Morgenstern ran day and night. August, overman now, drove the production forward, as was his task, and the figures rose, and with the figures rose his standing, and with the standing came a modest prosperity: a larger pit house, three rooms now, a garden in which more than cabbage grew, a new suit for Sundays.

Marga was born, thirty-four, a dark, lively girl with Lena's straight gaze. Four years later came Jakob, a quiet, sturdy boy who took after his father. August was a good father, as far as a miner could be a father who was half the week underground; he carried the children on his shoulders, taught them to whistle and the names of the birds, and on the free Sundays they went out as a family, across the fields that still existed then at the town's edge, and for a few hours life was good.

The price of it was the looking-away, and August paid it without looking, the way one pays such a price. People disappeared. The Jewish merchant in town, where Lena had once bought cloth, was

one day no longer there, and his shop neither, and no one asked aloud where to. A hewer who had said something wrong in his cups about the man whose picture now hung everywhere was taken away and came back changed, quieter, and never spoke in his cups again. One learned to see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing. One lowered one's eyes and did one's work and was grateful for the bread.

August was good at lowering his eyes. He had learned it from his father without knowing he had learned it, this art of not seeing the unpleasant, of protecting one's own and leaving the rest to itself. It was a family art, inherited like the broad shoulders, and August practised it with a good conscience, because he told himself he did no one any harm, he only looked away, and looking away was no doing.

Once, on one of those good Sundays, they sat in the garden, Lena, the children, old Wilhelm, who had the grandchildren on his lap, and it was a picture of happiness, a real happiness, not a pretended one. The sun shone, Marga laughed, Jakob slept against Wilhelm's chest, and for a moment everything was as it should be. But over the garden, behind the houses, the wheel turned, mining the coal that became steel that became weapons, and in the distance, where no one looked, something was building up, a pressure, a roof, that would one day come, and old Wilhelm, who held the grandchildren, looked over their heads into that distance and knew, with the certainty of one who has already survived a catastrophe, that this happiness was on loan and that the reckoning would come, the way it always came, and that the children who now laughed in the sun would have to pay it.

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Chapter 6 - War Underground

The war came again, in September thirty-nine, and this time no one marched off with music and flags. The older ones remembered the last one, the names the pastor had read from the pulpit, ever longer, and they were silent when the news came, a silence that knew more than any cheering.

Again the miners were needed, essential to the war, again exempted, for without coal no steel, without steel no war. But this time exemption was not enough. The war ate men at a pace that hollowed out the exemption; ever more hewers were called up despite everything, sent to the front, because the front ate more men than it could spit out. The young, strong hewers vanished, one after another, and behind stayed the old, the half-grown, the maimed, and with them August was to hold the same production, more even, a higher one, for the war demanded more coal than peace had ever demanded.

It could not be done. That was clear to August from the start, and it was clear to the directorate, and it was clear to the War Office that demanded the figures. With half as many men twice the coal, that was a sum that did not add up, and yet it had to add up, by order, and when a sum may not add up and yet must, then someone pays it with his life.

August felt the pressure from above like the roof above him. The directorate passed on the pressure it got from the office, and August was to pass it on, downward, to the men who were already working at the limit. Faster. More. The safety, which had never been great,

became a bargaining chip: a timbering that could still wait, a ventilation that still sufficed, a seam that was really too dangerous, but which had to be worked because the figure demanded it.

August manoeuvred. He was no bad overman; he tried to protect his men where he could, turned a blind eye, reported more favourable figures upward than reality gave, to gain time, to cushion the pressure. But he could not stop the pressure, only distribute it, and to distribute meant to decide who bore it. As long as it was only German hewers, old comrades, August distributed it carefully, fairly, as best he could. But soon came others, on whom one took less consideration, on whom by the will of those up top one was to take no consideration at all, and on them it would show what August really was.

For the production had to be held, and the men were lacking, and so they brought men who had no choice. First prisoners of war, then the deported from the occupied lands, forced labourers, as they were euphemistically called, as if it were a kind of work and not a kind of slavery. They came in transports, emaciated, frightened, in rags, and they were housed in a barracks camp at the edge of the pit, behind barbed wire, guarded, and in the morning they were driven to the descent, down into the mountain that forgave even the free men little and the rightless nothing.

August saw the first transports and lowered his eyes, the way he had learned to lower his eyes. But he sensed that the looking-away would not suffice this time. These men would work in his district, under his supervision, at his face. He would no longer be able only to look away. He would have to decide, day by day, what he did with people who were delivered into his hands, and for the first time in his life August grasped that there was a boundary beyond which the

looking-away itself became a deed, and that he was nearing this boundary, with every transport that halted at the camp.

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Chapter 7 - The Foreign Workers

Tadeusz Wójcik came in the summer of forty-two, with a transport from the east, and was assigned to August's district. He was nineteen, a slight boy with dark eyes and hands that seemed too large for the thin arms, a farmer's son from a village near Kraków, whom they had dragged off his field, into a mountain he had never heard of, into a language he did not understand, into a depth that was meant to kill him and was in no hurry.

On his chest he wore a sign, a piece of cloth that marked him as what he was: a subhuman, in the language of the time, a tool to be used up. He was not allowed into the Germans' washhouse, not at their table, not into their houses. He got less to eat, worse, and more work, harder. He was rightless, completely, a man one could beat, starve, kill with impunity, and everyone knew it, and most behaved accordingly.

August was overman over him. That was the situation, soberly: a man who as a boy had been forbidden to hate with Brass children, who was good with Lena and carried his own children on his shoulders, was now set over another human being like a man over an animal, with power over his life, and the time he lived in demanded of him that he exercise this power the way one exercises power over an animal.

In the first days August lowered his eyes. It was his method, and it had carried him through much. He assigned Tadeusz where men were lacking, drove him where the quota demanded, and did not look at him while doing it, for to look at him would have meant to see him

as a man, and to see a man and treat him so, that even August could not bear. So he looked away, treated the tool as a tool, and told himself it was not him, it was the circumstances, it was the war.

But Tadeusz would not let himself be quite overlooked. He was a good worker, that was the first thing that penetrated August's lowered gaze: the boy could do something. He grasped the mountain quickly, faster than many a German, had a feel for the rock, for the pick, for the rhythm of the work. And he was not broken, not inwardly; despite everything he bore a dignity, an uprightness that shone through the rags and the hunger and the sign on his chest, and it was precisely this dignity that made it hard for August to see him as an animal, for animals have no dignity, only men have dignity.

Lena began to pass bread over the fence.

She did it secretly, in the dusk, when the guards changed, a piece of bread, a potato, through the barbed wire to the men in the camp, who grabbed for it like the starving they were. It was mortally dangerous; whoever supported forced labourers was punished, harshly. Lena did it all the same, without much ado, the way she did everything that had to be done, and she said nothing of it to August, because she knew it would burden him, him, the overman, the man in the organisation, who looked away.

August noticed it all the same, the way one notices such a thing: the bread that was missing, the way Lena went in the dusk, her silence about it. And he said nothing, and in his silence there lay for the first time not only cowardice but also something else, a quiet approval, almost a gratitude that his wife did what he did not dare, that in his house someone did the right thing, even if it was not he. It was little. It was almost nothing. But it was the first crack in his looking-away, a first light that penetrated the lowered lids, and it

came, the way the good often comes, not through him but through the woman at his side, who had a head and a heart and who had not let the circumstances teach her to take a man for a tool.

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Chapter 8 - Tadeusz

It happened in a bad seam, in the winter of forty-three. August was at the face with Tadeusz and two others, a small gang, the timbering thin because the wood was scarce like everything, and August checked the roof, the way he always checked it, with the ear, with the hand, and heard nothing bad and gave the sign to work on. He was mistaken. The roof came without the cracking that otherwise announced it, a sudden break, and August stood beneath it, frozen for half a second, the way his father had once frozen, and in that half second Tadeusz was already at him, tore him aside by the arm, with a strength one would not have credited the thin body, and the roof fell where August had stood, rock, dust, a thundering, and then silence and Tadeusz's hand still on August's arm.

It was the same scene that had once bound Wilhelm and Heinrich, thirty years earlier, in a different seam, under the same mountain. The mountain repeated itself, the way it always repeated itself, and put to August the same question it had once put to his father: what do you owe the one who saved your life?

August stood in the dust and looked at Tadeusz, for the first time really looked at him, the boy who had just saved him, him, the overman, the man of the gentlemen, although to Tadeusz August was nothing but a supervisor, a tool of the power that had dragged him off. Tadeusz could have watched the roof crush August; no one would have held it against him, no one could have proved it against him. Instead he had saved him, out of a reflex of humanity that sat deeper than all circumstances, and in that reflex lay an accusation

sharper than any reproach: Tadeusz had shown himself a man in the moment when August treated him as an animal.

"Dziękuję," said August, the one Polish word he had picked up, thank you, and it was the first time he addressed Tadeusz like a human being.

Tadeusz only nodded, curtly, and took up the pick again, for the quota had to be held, now too, just now, and a forced labourer who did not work on made himself suspect. But between the two something had shifted, irrevocably. August could no longer overlook Tadeusz from now on. He had seen him, and what one has once seen one can no longer unsee.

In the weeks that followed August did what he could, which was little and dangerous. He assigned Tadeusz the less deadly work, where it was possible, without its being noticed. He slipped him bread, secretly, the way Lena did it, August's bread to Lena's bread. He turned a blind eye to small offences that would have driven another supervisor to report him. It was a requital in small things, an attempt to pay off the debt of his life, the way his father had once tried to pay off the debt to Heinrich with charity, and it was just as insufficient, just as self-serving at bottom, a means of living with one's own complicity rather than a real making-good.

Lena saw the change and was glad and worried at once. "Be careful," she said. "They see everything. If they notice you're sparing him, it's worse for him and for you too." And then, more quietly: "But if you help him, then help him properly. Half helps no one. Half is only for your conscience, not for him."

August heard it and knew she was right, as she was always right. There were only two honest ways: to really help Tadeusz, with all the risk, perhaps to hide him, to help him flee, something great,

dangerous, whole. Or to do nothing and let the tool be a tool. Between the two lay only cowardice, the half-helping that calmed the conscience and did not save the man. And August, he sensed with a fright, was a man of the in-between, a man of the half things, and he feared the day when the in-between would no longer suffice, when he would have to choose, wholly, the way his father had once had to choose, and on which it would show whether he was made of different wood than Wilhelm or of exactly the same.

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Chapter 9 - Firedamp

The order came in February forty-four, and it came from the very top, through the directorate, over August, the way the pressure always came from above: the seam in the west field was to be worked, at once, fully, for the figure had to be met, cost what it might.

August knew the west field. It was firedamp-prone, always had been; the gas sat in the rock, the methane one neither smelled nor saw and which with a spark turned the gallery into a wall of fire. The ventilation there was poor, had been poor for months, because the material was lacking, the men were lacking, everything was lacking that the war devoured. A responsible overman would not have worked the seam, not so, not now. But a responsible overman who refused to carry out an order from above, in those years, was no overman any more and perhaps no free man any more.

August stood before the choice, and it was the same choice his father had stood before, only in a new garb: one's own against the others, one's own position, one's own safety, one's own family against the lives of men entrusted and delivered to him. He could have refused. He could have declared the seam unworkable, could have pointed to the gas, could have stalled, dodged, delayed the working, with all the risk to himself. Or he could at least have taken Tadeusz out, the one to whom he owed his life, assigned him to another gang, not sent him into the gas.

He did none of it. He carried out the order.

He did not even talk himself out of it long; that was the frightening thing, how quickly it went, as with his father in the counting house. He saw the list, he saw the west field, he divided up the gang, and Tadeusz's name stood among them, because Tadeusz was a good worker and good workers were needed in the difficult seam, and August did not strike him out. He would only have had to make one stroke, a single one, and set another name beneath it, and no one would have noticed. He did not make the stroke. Out of fear it would be noticed. Out of fear for the position. Out of cowardice, the old, inherited cowardice that set one's own above everything and told itself there was no choice.

There was a choice. There was always a choice. That was the truth August did not want to see and that would pursue him the rest of his life: that he could have acted otherwise and did not.

The gang rode down. August stayed up top; he had business in the supervision that day, he told himself, and it was true, and it was a pretext, both at once. Toward noon the firedamp came. One felt it first as a pressure, a thrust through the whole shaft, then the howl of the siren, then the faces of the men at the pit bottom, grey, and the word that ran through the installation like the gas through the gallery: firedamp in the west field.

They brought up what they could bring up. It was not much. The wall of fire had run through the gallery, and whoever had been in it had had no chance. They carried out the dead, one after another, blackened, contorted, and laid them on the yard, in a row, and August walked the row, because it was his duty to identify the dead of his district, and in the row lay Tadeusz.

August knelt down by him, the way Marlene had once knelt by her brother, the way his father had knelt by no one, because his father

had never seen the dead man. August saw him. He saw the face of the boy who had saved his life and whom he had sent to his death, one stroke, a single stroke, it would have cost to save him, and August had not made the stroke. And there, on the yard, before the other dead and the living men, August was sick, retched up the bile, bent over the dead Tadeusz, the same vomiting as his father after the strike night, thirty years earlier, at the still headframe. The body knew what the head talked itself out of. The body knew the truth and cast it out, and no excuse in the world helped against what the body knew.

The fault had changed the generation. What Wilhelm had done, August had repeated, not in the same form, but in the same truth: saved his own by letting another die, the one who had trusted him, the one to whom he owed everything. And as with the father, there would be no proof, no accusation, no court; it had only been an order, carried out, an accident, a war. No one would ever call August to account for it. Only he himself, every night, for the rest of his life, and the dead boy on the yard, who could no longer look at him and whom August would never stop seeing.

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Chapter 10 - The Bombs

The war, which had long been elsewhere, at fronts from which only the names of the fallen came home, now came itself to Voßlohe, out of the air. The district was a target, a great one: the pits, the coking plants, the blast furnaces, the heart of the armament, and the bombers came, first singly, then in streams, night after night, and laid over the coal town a fire hotter than any blast furnace.

The pit was target and refuge at once. When the sirens howled, the people ran to the shaft, for underground one was safe from the bombs, eight hundred metres of rock above, and so the mountain that had killed so many became the saviour, and the families crowded into the galleries, in the depths, and listened upward, where the earth shook under the impacts, and prayed the shaft would hold.

Lena sat with Marga and Jakob in the gallery, on one of those nights, crowded among other families, the shaking above her, the children pressed to her, Marga ten, Jakob six, and sang to them softly to drown out the howling, old songs that had nothing to do with the war, and the children fell asleep at her breast while above them the town burned.

Bertha was not with them.

The old woman had grown stubborn with the years, more stubborn than she had always been. She refused to run to the cellar every time the siren howled; she was too old to run, she said, and if it caught her, then it caught her, she had seen enough not to beg for every night any more. On that one night she went too late. The siren howled, and Bertha dawdled, fetched this and that, a stubbornness

that became her death, and when the bombs came she was still in the house, and the house took a hit, not a full one, but enough, and under the rubble they found in the morning old Bertha Kortmann, née Sczepanek, the Masurian immigrant's daughter who had held the colony's economy together through three wars and two inflations and a betrayal, and now she held nothing together any more.

August dug her out, with his own hands, between two shifts, for the winding ran on, now too, just now, coal for a war that was already lost and would not admit it. He had no time to mourn. He laid his mother in a coffin knocked together from the boards of another destroyed house, and buried her, and went to the next shift, and that was the mourning the war allowed: none.

Wilhelm outlived her. The old man, nearly seventy now, bent, half blind, outlived the woman who had carried everything with him, had carried the one thing no one else carried with him. For Bertha had been the only one who knew, or almost knew, of the strike night, of the going-off in the dark, of the betrayal she had never named and never forgiven and yet carried with him all her life. With her died the one who knew, the witness, the last before whom Wilhelm had not had to dissemble, because she knew everything anyway. Now he was alone with his betrayal, all alone, in a burning town, a blind old man who could no longer see the wheel and still heard it, day and night, the hum of the winding that did not stop, not even under the bombs.

"She knew it," said Wilhelm once in those days, to August, abruptly, confused perhaps with age and grief, and August did not understand what he meant.

"What did Mother know?"

But Wilhelm only looked at him with the half-blind eyes, and in the old face something worked, a sentence that wanted out and did

not come out, sixty years of silence that got a crack and yet held. "Nothing," said Wilhelm at last. "An old woman. She knew everything and said nothing. Like me. Like all of us." And he turned away, to the window that had no pane any more, out into the smoking town, and August put it down to age and grief and went to his shift, and over the bombed colony the wheel turned, indestructible, indifferent, and mined the coal for the last shells of a lost war.

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Chapter 11 - Collapse

In the spring of forty-five everything was over, the war, the Reich, the flag on the headframe, and it was an end without redemption, only exhaustion, rubble, silence where the howling of the sirens had been. The Americans came, then the British, who took over the district, and the Morgenstern pit lay half destroyed, partly flooded, the headframe damaged, the wheel still, this time not from strike and not from passive resistance, but from defeat.

There came the time of the questionnaires and the tribunals. The victors wanted to know who had been what, who had gone along and how far, and for a man like August, who had joined, who had worn the white shirt under the flag, who had carried out orders, it was a threatening time. Denazification was the word, and it decided over bread and position and sometimes over freedom. August's years as overman under the regime came onto the table, his membership, his responsibility, and August sat there and knew that of the worst thing he had done there stood nothing in any questionnaire, because it had been no crime by the letter, only an order, carried out, an accident, a stroke he had not made.

And then Otto Brass came back.

He came out of the camp, after twelve years, and he came as a shadow of the man he had been. They had not managed to kill him, but they had almost managed; he was emaciated, ill, his face of a gauntness that would never quite yield. But the eyes were the same, the eyes that feared nothing, and the spirit was unbroken, forged harder in the fire that had nearly consumed him. He was one of the

few Reds who came back, and he came with the moral weight of one who had been proved right and gone through hell for it.

The two lines stood facing each other again, after all the years. The son of the betrayed, hardened in the concentration camp, with all the moral right in the world. And the grandson of the traitor, August, the follower, the overman under the flag, who had sent a forced labourer to his death. It was as if history had set up the figures anew for a last reckoning, and all the power now lay with Otto, for Otto was now one to whom the victors listened, a persecuted man of the regime, a witness whose word counted, and August was one over whom judgement was passed.

They met on the street, in the first days after Otto's return. August saw the broken, upright man with the stick, and something in him wanted to dodge, to cross the street, to look away, the way he had always looked away. But Otto stopped and looked at him, and August could not dodge.

"Kortmann," said Otto. "You're still alive."

"I'm still alive," said August.

"Became overman. Under that lot." Otto looked him over, slowly, from top to bottom, with a gaze that knew everything or seemed to. "Your family has a talent for staying on top, no matter who rules below. My father said that too, right at the end. The Kortmanns, he said, they always swim on top. You only have to know which soup."

August was silent. He still did not know exactly what lay between Brass and Kortmann; his father had never told him. But he sensed that this man knew something about him and his family that he himself did not know, and that this man would now help decide his fate, before the tribunal, with a word that counted, while August's word counted nothing.

"We'll see each other before the tribunal," said Otto and walked on, leaning on the stick, and August stood and watched him go and knew that his fate now lay in the hand of a man whose family his own had destroyed, without August ever having learned how, and that history was preparing to settle an account whose entries he did not even know.

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Chapter 12 - Zero Hour

The winter of forty-six into forty-seven was colder than the turnip winter and hungrier, and the bitterest of it was that the town sat on the coal and froze. For the coal the district mined, as far as it mined at all, went to the victors, as reparation, hauled off in long trains, while the people who hewed it sat in unheated rooms and burned the wood of the bombed houses.

So the coal, which had always been the bread of the district, became currency and object of dispute. Whoever had coal had everything; one bartered it for bread, for bacon, for shoes. And whoever had none fetched it where he could, and that meant: from the trains. Coal-stealing they called it, and it was no longer a crime but a form of survival; half the town lived on it, on the coal one wrested from the moving or standing trains, with sacks, with baskets, with bare hands, in the dark, at risk of life.

Marga and Jakob were in the thick of it. Marga, twelve now, was nimble and fearless, and Jakob, eight, followed her everywhere. They climbed onto the standing wagons, threw the coal down, and Lena caught it below in the sack, and together they hauled home what they had snatched, and it was theft, and it was survival, and the boundary between had vanished in the winter of forty-seven like so many boundaries.

August was suspended. Until the tribunal had decided on him, he was not allowed to work as overman, and so he scraped by as a simple hewer, where they let him, or as a day-labourer clearing rubble, and the descent, which was as deep as his rise had been high,

humiliated him and freed him at once, in a strange way. For below, as a simple man, among simple men, August was nearer to what he had originally been, before the white shirt had set him apart from the others, and sometimes, clearing rubble, in the shared toil, he felt something of the old comradeship he had lost as overman, and it did good and hurt at once.

Lena held the family together, the way Bertha had once held the family together; the women carried the district through its catastrophes while the men mined or fought or sat before tribunals. She bartered, she foraged, she queued, she stretched the nothing into a meal, and she did it without complaint, with the stubbornness of the survivors.

One evening, when they all sat round the small stove into which the stolen coal went, Marga asked for the first time what had long occupied her.

"Father," she said. "At night you sometimes talk. In your sleep. You say a name."

August froze. "What sort of name."

"I don't quite understand it. Something foreign. And once you said: I'd only have had to make one stroke." Marga looked at him with Lena's straight gaze, the gaze that pretended nothing and accepted nothing. "What sort of stroke, Father?"

August looked at Lena, and Lena looked at him, and between them passed something, the same that had once passed between Wilhelm and Bertha, the knowledge and the silence. "Sleep, Marga," said August. "It's nothing. Old things. The war." And Marga did not sleep but laid the name and the stroke aside, the way one lays aside pieces of evidence, and Lena saw the daughter do it, and knew that the silence the Kortmanns passed on from generation to generation

had found in this girl a person who would not pass it on but break it open, one day, when the time was ripe. It would take long. But Marga forgot nothing, one saw that in her, and what she did not forget, she would one day bring to light.

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Chapter 13 - Before the Tribunal

The tribunal sat in the hall of the school the bombs had spared, and August sat on a chair before the long table behind which sat the men who would decide on him, and it was, he thought, a strange reversal: all his life he had sat behind the table, with the list, and decided over others, who rode down, who got which face, who had to go into the dangerous seam. Now he sat before it, and others had the list, and on the list stood he.

They read out what they knew about him. Joining the organisation. Promotion to overman under the regime. Responsibility for a district in which forced labourers were deployed. It sounded bad and was yet the usual; thousands of overmen in the district had done the same, and one could not punish them all, so one asked after the degree, after the more or less, after witnesses who said whether a man had been a slave-driver or only a follower who had carried out what everyone carried out.

And then they called Otto Brass.

August sat there and watched Otto step to the table, leaning on the stick, the persecuted man of the regime, whose word counted like no other, and August knew that this man could destroy him with a few sentences. Otto need only say what he thought of the Kortmann family, need only speak the old suspicion aloud, the betrayal of nineteen-five, need only throw his moral authority into the scale, and August was finished, not only as overman, but as a human being in this town.

Otto spoke. He spoke briefly, factually, without hatred, which was worse than hatred, because one could not dismiss factuality as vindictiveness. He said what he knew: that Kortmann had been an overman, a member, a man of the supervision. He said it soberly, without embellishing and without exaggerating. And then, when the chairman asked whether August had been a particularly hard, a particularly zealous representative of the regime, one who had done more than ordered, Otto paused, long, and August held his breath.

A witness stepped forward whom August did not know, a woman who had worked in the camp during the war, one of the few survivors of there, and she testified about the woman Kortmann, about Lena, who had passed bread over the fence, secretly, at risk of life, bread for the starving, and that it had been known in the camp that bread came from the house of Kortmann, and that in those years that had been more than a piece of bread, that it had been a sign, that not all Germans were beasts.

Otto heard that, and it changed something in his face. He could have passed over the woman's testimony, could have stuck with the incriminating. Instead he said, and it visibly cost him something to say it: "If the woman gave bread, then she risked more than most here in this room. And if bread comes from a house, then not everything in that house is rotten." He looked at August. "I have nothing in hand against August Kortmann that would make him a slave-driver. He was a follower like a hundred thousand others. No better. But no worse either."

It was no defence. It was a bitter justice, a truth, no more and no less, and it sufficed for survival, not for acquittal. The tribunal classified August as a follower, with a fine, with a ban on leading posts that lapsed after a few years. August was allowed to stay,

allowed to work again, allowed to go on living in Voßlohe. His civic life was saved, by his wife's bread and his enemy's truthfulness.

After the session, in the corridor, Otto stepped to him once more. They stood alone, the betrayed man's son and the follower, and Otto looked at him, long, and said quietly, only for August: "I told the truth today, Kortmann, no more. The truth helped you, this time. But don't confuse it with forgiveness. Your guilt I do not take from you. That you must carry yourselves, you Kortmanns. Your father, you, your children. Until one of you has the courage to speak it." He leaned on the stick and went, and August stayed in the corridor, survived, saved, and more heavily laden than before, for now he knew there was a guilt greater than his own, a family guilt that reached back to the father and further, and that Otto Brass knew it and he, August, did not, and that he would have to fathom it before he could carry it.

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Chapter 14 - Coal is Bread

Reconstruction began underground, for without coal nothing went, and so the district became again the heart of the country that rose from the rubble. Coal is bread, ran the slogan now, and it was truer than ever: every ton mined was a piece of reconstruction, a piece of future, and the miners, who had just been followers or persecuted or simply survivors, were needed as never before, and being needed gave them something back, a meaning, a pride.

They drained the flooded pit, repaired the headframe, the wheel turned again, and August rode down again, as a simple hewer first, for the ban forbade him the overman's post, and he was glad of it. He had had enough of the white shirt. He wanted to stand at the face, man against rock, in the honest weight of the work that did not lie, that demanded nothing but strength and no decisions over human lives. Underground, at the face, August was almost happy, as far as a man with a dead boy on his conscience could be happy.

The union was founded anew, the Mining Industrial Union, free again, as once the Old Union, for which Heinrich Brass had fought. And it won something that had never existed: co-determination, a word Heinrich could only have dreamed of, that the workers might have a say in the supervisory boards, that the mines no longer belonged to the gentlemen alone. It was not the revolution Otto had dreamed of, not the socialisation, but it was more than the district had ever possessed, and it was, in a way, a late, half victory of those who had lost in nineteen-five, a victory Heinrich did not live to see and Otto, broken, watched with bitter satisfaction.

In those years of reconstruction Wilhelm died.

He died at a great age, nearly blind, in bed, in the makeshift-patched room, and he died slowly, over weeks, and August sat with him, as often as he could, between shifts. The old man talked much in those last weeks, confused often, of things long past, of Bertha, of the strike, of names August did not know. And once, quite clearly all at once, in a lucid moment, Wilhelm reached for August's hand and said: "August. There is something you must know. About me. About the house. How I became overman, back then. It was not—"

And then his strength left him, or his courage, or both, and the lucid moment passed, and Wilhelm sank back and said: "It was not right. Much was not right." And no more came. The sentence he had not said for sixty years stayed unfinished even now, at the edge of death, the way it had stayed unfinished at the edge of the shaft when August first rode down. Wilhelm Kortmann died with his betrayal, almost whole, the way Marlene Aregger would one day die with hers in another valley, and took the essential with him, and left behind only the fault, unnamed, inherited.

August buried the father beside the mother, and at the grave he thought of Wilhelm's last words, it was not right, much was not right, and he did not quite understand them and sensed all the same that they aimed at something greater than the usual, that every old man regrets in the end. And he inherited, without knowing it, the father's silence, completely; he laid it over his own children, the way Wilhelm had laid it over him, not out of malice but because he knew no other way, because silence was the mother tongue of the Kortmanns, inherited from generation to generation, and only Marga, who forgot nothing, who had heard the father speak of a stroke at

night, only Marga already carried in her the seed of what would one day break the silence.

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Chapter 15 - Marga Among the Men

Marga was fourteen when the war was four years over, and she was different from the other girls of the colony, and everyone knew it, and not everyone liked it. She was clever, cleverer than her brother, cleverer than most of the boys, and she was curious in a way one did not like to see in girls. She wanted to know. How things hung together, why it was as it was, what lay behind the words and beneath the silence that filled her father's house.

Above all, she wanted to go down. That was the impossible thing about Marga: that she, a girl, was drawn to the mountain like her brother, like her father, like all the men of the family. She hung about the headframe the way August had hung about it as a boy, knew the shift times, plagued the hewers with questions about what happened below, about the seams, the roadways, the old man. But for Marga there was no cage. Women did not ride down. That was law, old, iron law, as old as mining itself: a woman in the shaft brings ill luck, it was said, and whether one believed it or not, the law held, and Marga stood at the pit gate she would never be allowed to pass through, and watched the men ride down and ride up, and in her burned an anger that never quite faded.

"Why am I not allowed," she asked her mother. "Jakob is, and he's younger and dumber."

"Because you're a girl," said Lena.

"That's no reason. That's only how it is."

Lena looked at her daughter, and in her gaze there was pride and worry at once. "You're right," she said, which mothers seldom said.

"It's no reason. It's only how it is. And it won't change as long as you live, Marga. You'll never ride down. But" — and she laid her hand on the daughter's shoulder — "perhaps that's not the worst. Those down below see the mountain. You, from above, you see everything else. You see who rides down and who doesn't, who wears which shirt, who won't look whom in the eye. Sometimes the one standing outside sees more than the one inside."

It was a comfort and it was true, and Marga remembered it, the way she remembered everything. She stayed outside, at the gate, and she saw. She saw the feud between the families, the not-greeting on Sundays, the cold looks. She saw that the Brasses did not greet the Kortmanns, and she asked herself why, and no one told her, and the untold provoked her more than any information. She saw her father talk at night, of a stroke, of a foreign name. She saw her grandfather die with an unfinished sentence. She gathered it all, laid it aside, piece of evidence by piece of evidence, in the patience of one who knows the time will come when the pieces make a picture.

Jakob, by contrast, asked nothing. Jakob, now eleven, wanted only one thing: to go down, to become a hewer, like the father, like the grandfather. He was no brooder; he was a doer, sturdy, loyal, straightforward, and for him the world was simple because he wanted it simple. The old family story did not interest him; what was past was past. He would become the dutiful son who continued the tradition, who rode down, was a good butty, and who lived with the silence without ever touching it, because touching brought nothing and only hurt.

So the siblings divided the inheritance of silence between two ways, the way the inheritances in this family always divided: the one, Jakob, would carry it on, untouched, into the mountain, into duty,

into the lived comradeship that did not ask. The other, Marga, would one day break it open, because she could not do otherwise, because she forgot nothing, because from outside she saw everything. And between the two, the keeper and the breaker, would be decided what became of the fault a grandfather had laid one warm night in the counting house half a century before.

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Chapter 16 - The Currency Reform

In June forty-eight the new money came, overnight, as once the Rentenmark after the inflation, a new beginning out of nothing. Everyone got forty marks, head money, the same for all, for the hewer as for the director, and the day after the shop windows were full, which had stood empty for months, full of goods that suddenly existed again, as if they had only been held back for this day. It was a miracle and a swindle at once, for the old money, which people had laboriously saved, was with a stroke of the pen worth almost nothing, and whoever had had real assets won, and whoever had saved lost, as always.

For August it was a second beginning, and he took it the way one takes a beginning at his age: weary, without great hope, but resolved to make the best of it for the children. The ban would soon lapse, he could become overman again if he wanted, and the prosperity that would come, one already sensed it, the economic miracle the newspapers wrote of, would reach Voßlohe too, would overgrow the wounds of the war with new prosperity, new houses, new cars.

But August had aged early. The dead boy in the west field had taken years from him that no economic miracle gave back. He still rode down, still stood at the face, but the lung grew worse, the dust took its toll, and sometimes, when he lay awake at night and coughed, he thought of Tadeusz and of the stroke he had not made, and of Otto's words in the corridor: your guilt I do not take from you.

One evening that summer August went down alone, one last time, into a roadway they meant to abandon, worked out, marked for

sealing. It was not his task; he went out of an urge he could not explain. He stood before the place they would wall up, before the dark hole behind which lay the old man, the worked-out, abandoned district that one gave back to the mountain, and he stood before it the way his father had once stood before it, without August knowing it, for the father had never told him.

And August thought: here I could leave it. The dead boy, the guilt, the stroke. Here, behind the wall, in the dark, give it back to the mountain. But he knew it did not work. The old man in the mountain let itself be sealed. The old man in a person did not. That one lived, behind its wall, and pressed, and the water rose.

The next day, when Marga brought him his food, August sat on the house bench in the evening sun, and he looked at the daughter, the fourteen-year-old who forgot nothing, who had heard the father speak of a stroke at night, and something in him wanted to speak. He felt that she was the only one who could one day carry it, not because she was stronger, but because she looked, because she asked, because the silence did not choke her as it did the others.

"Marga," he said. "You asked me about a stroke. In my sleep."

She went quite still and sat down beside him.

"There was a boy," said August. "In the war. Underground. One who saved my life. And I—" He faltered. The sun stood low over the colony's roofs, and the wheel turned, and August felt the sentence rise in him, the whole sentence this time, the truth about the stroke, about the west field, about the looking-away that had become a deed. And behind it, darker, older, dimly sensed, the other truth, the one he did not himself quite know, the truth about the father, about the house, about the guilt that reached back further than his own failure.

"I—," he said once more, and then he broke off. It was too big. It was too heavy. And Marga was too young, he told himself, fourteen, a child still, one must not lay such a thing on a child. It was a pretext, and a part of him knew it, the old Kortmann pretext, rather bury the heavy than speak it.

"Ah, nothing," said August. "Old things. The war. Eat, the food's getting cold."

Marga looked at him, long, with Lena's straight gaze, and she let it go. But she did not let it drop; she laid it to the other pieces, the father's broken sentence to the grandfather's broken sentence, and in her there formed slowly, over the years, a picture, still incomplete, that she would one day complete. Over the colony the sun went down, the economic miracle began, the prosperity would come, and deep in the mountain, behind two walled-up roadways, behind the old man of the first and the second generation, the water rose slowly, patient, and waited for a time in which someone would have the courage to open the walls.

DRITTER BAND

Turning Away

Voßlohe, 1962–1989

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Chapter 1 - Turning Away

In the year sixty-two Voßlohe looked like prosperity itself. The wounds of the war were overgrown, the rubble cleared or built over, the shop windows stacked with goods, the first cars in front of the houses, and the colony, once grey and poor, had grown friendlier, painted, with proper bathrooms now instead of the privy in the yard. The economic miracle had reached the district, and whoever had lived through the hunger winters scarcely trusted the peace that had come so suddenly and so full.

But beneath the prosperity the ground was already beginning to sway, and those who knew did not yet speak it. The cheap oil came, from Arabia, from Texas, in tankers, and it was cheaper than the coal one wrested from the Ruhr mountain at eight hundred metres' depth, with human strength and human lungs. Heating oil instead of coal, oil in the power stations, oil in the factories. The first pits in the district reported losses, the first spoke of closure, and the word August had never heard as a boy went round: coal crisis. That the coal, which seemed eternal, which had made and fed and ruled the district, might itself come to an end, not in the mountain but on the market, that was a thought the people of Voßlohe did not dare to think, and yet they thought it, at night, when the wheel turned and they did not know for how much longer.

Marga was twenty-eight now, married to a man who worked at the post office, and she worked in the wages office of the Morgenstern pit. It was the nearest a woman could come to the mountain: not down, never down, but into the administration, to the

figures, to the lists, into the pit's memory made of paper. Marga kept the wage accounts, and she was good at it, exact, fast, and she saw, as her mother had foretold, more from her place than many who were below: she saw the figures of the whole pit, saw the production costs rise and the coal price fall, saw the scissors opening, and she understood earlier than most that these scissors would not close again.

Jakob was twenty-four, unmarried, a hewer at Morgenstern, like the father, like the grandfather. He was a good butty, well-liked, sturdy, straightforward, one you could rely on at the face and in the kiosk. He did not think of coal crises and scissors; he thought of the next shift, of the girl he wanted to marry, of the motorcycle he would buy. For Jakob the pit was eternal because it had always been there, and a man does not think about the end of what has always been there.

August, fifty-four now and looking older, no longer rode down. The lung no longer allowed it; miner's lung, the occupational disease that took every old hewer sooner or later, had him in its grip, and he sat out his days on the house bench, coughed, and watched the headframe whose wheel turned, all his life it had turned, and he felt, with the certainty of the dying, that it would not run much longer, not for him and not for the pit.

"Turning away," August said once, when a young hewer from the neighbourhood left the pit, dismissed, with a severance, a turning-away bonus, as it was called when a man turned his back on mining. "Once turning away meant a man left because he'd found something better. Today it means the pit doesn't need him any more." He coughed. "Soon they'll all turn away. Not because they want to. Because they're made to." And he looked at Marga, who brought him

his food, and Jakob, who came from the shift, and thought that his children would live through the end, the end of the coal, the end of the world they had been born into, and that no one had prepared them for it, because no one had believed this world could end.

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Chapter 2 - The Recruited

They came in sixty-four, by train, out of Anatolia, young men with cardboard suitcases and addresses on scraps of paper, recruited through an agreement between two governments, one of which needed workers and the other work. The district needed hewers, for the German boys no longer wanted to go down; they had other ways now, in the economic miracle, ways up top, into clean trades, and so one fetched those who still wanted or had to go down, from Turkey, from Anatolia, from the other end of a world they had never seen.

Hasan Yildiz was one of them, twenty-six, from a village near Kayseri, where there were stones and goats and no work. He came with the resolve to stay three years, earn money, return, and build a house, and he rode down at Morgenstern, into the same shaft Wilhelm and August had ridden into, into the same depth, the same darkness, and the mountain did not ask where a man came from.

Jakob got him at the face. It was chance, or it was none; one assigned the new men to the experienced hewers, and Jakob was experienced and counted as easy-going, one who made no trouble. At first it was difficult; Hasan spoke hardly any German, did not know the mountain, and Jakob had to show him everything, with hands and feet, and it went slowly, and many another hewer would have cursed at the foreigner who held him up. But underground, Hasan learned it quickly and Jakob had never known it otherwise, only one thing counted: whether a man held the face, whether one could rely on him, whether he was there when the roof came. And Hasan was there. He was a good worker, brave, reliable, and after a few weeks

the foreigner had become a butty, in the old, hard sense of the word, one to whom Jakob entrusted his back and who entrusted Jakob his, and that was more than any friendship up top.

Up top it was different. Up top the Turks were the foreigners, who ate differently, prayed differently, looked different, and not everyone in the colony was friendly. There was mistrust, rumour, sometimes open hostility. Housing was scarce, and that now foreigners came and needed housing too did not please everyone. One heard sentences one had heard in the war, about those who were different, and some who had themselves once come to the district as Masurian or Polish immigrants, whose grandfathers had been called Sczepanek and Wójcik, now said of the Turks what had once been said of their own grandfathers, and did not notice the irony.

Hasan planned the return, year after year anew. One more year, he said, then the house, then back. But then he brought the wife over, and then the children came, almost German children already, who learned Ruhr German in the colony's yard and knew the snow and the slag heap and the miner's song, and for whom Turkey was a holiday land, strange and hot, not home. And with each year the return grew more distant, a dream one nursed in order to bear the staying, and Hasan stayed, the way so many stayed, in a country that had called them and not expected them to stay.

Marga watched the new men come, from her place in the wages office, where now the foreign names too entered the lists, Yıldız, Öztürk, Kaya, beside the old names, Kortmann, Schäfer, Imhof. And she saw something that gave her pause: that underground a solidarity lived that knew no borders, none of language, none of faith, none of passport. The butty was the butty, Turkish or German, because the mountain made all equal, because the roof did not ask whom it

crushed. And she thought of her own family's history, of the feud with the Brasses, of her father's silence, of the stroke he had spoken of, and she sensed, without yet knowing it, that somewhere in that family history precisely this solidarity had been betrayed that here, underground, between Jakob and Hasan, lived again, as if nothing had ever happened.

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Chapter 3 - The Dying of the Pits

It did not die with one blow, the district. It died pit by pit, over years, a long dying, and every closed pit was a piece of death that moved nearer to Morgenstern, to Vorhöhe, to the Kortmanns.

First it was the small ones, the unprofitable, the old. Then larger ones. The shafts were filled, the headframes blown up or sold, the workforces dissolved, paid off with turning-away bonuses, retrained where possible, or sent into early retirement if they were old enough. Whole colonies suddenly stood at a pit that no longer mined, and the people who had known all their lives who they were, because they were miners, suddenly no longer knew it.

In sixty-six they founded the Ruhrkohle AG, the RAG, into which almost all the pits of the district were combined, one single great enterprise meant to organise the orderly retreat, to administer the dying, in a socially acceptable way, as they said, a word meant to soften the harshness and only named it. The old independence of the Morgenstern pit ended; it was now part of a corporation, a number, a line in a balance sheet, and balance-sheet lines, Marga knew from the wages office, were struck out when they were red.

Jakob and Hasan feared for the shift, as everyone feared. Morgenstern still ran, still mined, but everyone knew it was a reprieve, not a permanence. Families moved away, to where there was still work, or into the new industries one tried to lure into the district, with modest success. The young went first; the old stayed, because they could go nowhere else, and clung to a pit that no longer needed them, the way one clings to a dying man one knows is going

and yet cannot let go.

August lived through the beginning of this dying and grasped it more deeply than the younger, because he had lived through the whole world that was now ending. He had survived three wars, two inflations, the dictatorship, the collapse, and always the coal had remained, the mountain, the wheel, the one certainty under all catastrophes. That now the coal itself was dying, that the eternal was finite, struck him deeper than anything else, for it took from what he had suffered and done its meaning. He had sent a boy to his death for the production, for the coal, for the figure. And now the figure was worth nothing, the production at an end, the coal a discontinued model. For what, then, the boy's death? For what the betrayal, of which he sensed it existed, further back, with the father? Everything the family had built on, the whole fault, all of it had been incurred for something that now vanished, and that was the last bitterness: that the guilt remained and what one had taken it on oneself for passed away.

"It was all for nothing," August said once to Marga, coughing, on the house bench. "Do you understand? The whole drudgery. What did we do it for. For the coal. And now no one wants the coal any more."

"Not everything was for nothing," said Marga. "You lived. You raised us."

"Yes." August looked over at the headframe. "But some things we did that need not have been. For the coal. And the coal passes, and what we did does not pass." He coughed long. "That stays, Marga. That's the only thing that stays."

Marga listened and laid it to the other pieces, the stroke, the name, the silence, and she felt that the father was near to saying something, the whole of it, and that the time for it was growing short, as short as

the time of the pit, and that she would soon have to ask, before it was too late, before both fell silent, the father in death and the pit in decay.

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Chapter 4 - The List

It happened during a work no one liked to do: the sorting of the old holdings. The RAG had the archives of the combined pits put in order, room made, the old weeded out, and because Marga sat in the wages office and was exact and knew her way among the old papers, she was given the task of going through the holdings of the Morgenstern pit, the memory made of paper that reached back into the last century.

It was dusty, lonely work, in a cellar room beneath the wage hall, among shelves full of files, wage books, output lists, protocols. Marga read herself into it. She was curious, she had always been curious, and here was the whole life of the pit written down, generation upon generation, and she leafed and read and found the names of her family, Wilhelm Kortmann, August Kortmann, wage line upon wage line, a life in figures.

And then she found the lists of nineteen-hundred-five.

They were the files of the great strike, which for some reason had been kept, perhaps because no one had ever looked at them again. Strike protocols, correspondence of the directorate, and among them a folder marked "Disciplinings." Marga opened it. It was a list of names, men who had been dismissed after the strike, blacklisted, banned across the district, and beside each name a note: ringleader, spokesman, agitator.

And at the very top of the list stood: Heinrich Brass.

Marga read the name, and something contracted in her. Brass. The feud, the not-greeting, the old story no one spoke of. Here was a

Brass, blacklisted, nineteen-hundred-five, and she read on, and on an enclosed sheet, an internal note of the directorate, in the copperplate hand of a clerk, stood the sentence that changed Marga's life: that the names of the ringleaders had been "supplied from a reliable quarter within the workforce," and that the informant, "a capable hewer," had been promised in reward "the prospect of an overman's post."

Marga sat quite still in the dusty cellar. A capable hewer. An overman's post, in reward. Nineteen-hundred-five. And her grandfather Wilhelm Kortmann had become overman, precisely in those years, the thin boy without a father, of whom the family had always told that he had made it by diligence. She searched further, with trembling hands, and found it: a second sheet, a note, an initial, a hand, and the initial was "W. K.", and the date fitted, and Wilhelm Kortmann's promotion date, which she knew from the wage books, lay three months after the disciplining of Heinrich Brass.

There was no proof in the strict sense, no signature, no confession. But there was enough. There was more than enough for a person who forgot nothing, who had heard the father speak of a stroke at night, who had felt the not-greeting of the Brasses all her life. The pieces fitted, all at once, the picture Marga had been gathering since her childhood became complete: her grandfather had broken the solidarity in the strike, had betrayed Heinrich Brass, had got the rise for it, and on this betrayal stood everything, the house, the modest prosperity, Marga's own secure childhood, her place in the wages office, everything.

She held the list in her hands, long, in the dusty cellar beneath the dying pit. She did not take it; that would have been theft, and Marga did not steal. But neither did she simply lay it back into the folder, to be weeded out, to be forgotten. She knew, in that moment, that she

had to do something with this list, that she would not be able to keep silent like her father and her grandfather, that the silence the Kortmanns had passed on from generation to generation would end with her, because she could not do otherwise, because she forgot nothing and now, at last, knew everything.

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Chapter 5 - Ruth Brass

Marga needed weeks before she found the courage, and for a long time she did not even know what she actually wanted to do. Accuse? There was no one left to accuse; Wilhelm was dead, Heinrich was dead, the strike was over sixty years past. Make amends? What could one make amends to a dead man? But simply to continue the silence, to lay the list back and forget, the way her father and her grandfather had kept silent, that she could not do either. So she did the only thing that seemed right to her: she sought out the Brasses.

It was not hard to find them. Otto Brass had died a few years before, old, embittered, honoured by the party and the union as a persecuted man of the regime, but he had descendants, and one of them was Ruth, his granddaughter, a woman in her mid-thirties, a teacher at the secondary school and active in the union, one who bore the name Brass with pride and knew the family history, or what the family told itself.

Marga wrote her a letter, factual, brief, that she had found something in the pit's archive concerning the Brass family, from the year nineteen-hundred-five, and whether they could meet. Ruth answered, coolly, briefly, that she could meet, and they met in a café in town, two women whose families had not greeted each other for three generations and who now sat at a table, stiff, full of old coldness.

"You're a Kortmann," said Ruth as she sat down, and it was no greeting, it was a statement, almost a reproach.

"Born Kortmann. Yes."

"Then you know our families have nothing to say to each other."

"I know they've said nothing to each other for generations," replied Marga. "I don't know whether they have nothing to say to each other. That's a difference."

Ruth looked at her, surprised by the clarity. "What do you want, Frau Kortmann?"

Marga laid the copy on the table, the one she had made for herself, word for word, of the disciplining list and the note and the entry with the initial W. K. She had taken nothing from the archive, but she had copied it all, and she pushed it to Ruth and said: "Read it."

Ruth read. Marga watched her read, saw the other woman's face change, from coldness to tension to shock. Ruth knew the family legend: that her great-grandfather Heinrich had been blacklisted in the great strike, betrayed by one of his own ranks, and that the family had never recovered, and that the traitor was said to have been a Kortmann. But it had been a legend, a tale passed on without being provable, a wound without proof. And now the proof lay before her, black on white, copied from the pit's archive, by a Kortmann.

"Why," said Ruth at last, and her voice was no longer cool, "why do you bring me this? A Kortmann. Why do you dig up what incriminates your own family?"

"Because it's true," said Marga. "And because in my family silence has been kept for three generations. My grandfather kept silent. My father keeps silent, he's dying and keeps silent. And I can't keep silent any more. I don't know what's right, Frau Brass. I don't know what one does with such a thing. But I know I can't lay it back and forget it. That would be the fourth. Four generations of silence.

And at some point someone has to open his mouth."

Ruth sat there, the copy in her hand, and in her face many things struggled: the old hatred, which now had a proof and was allowed to rage; the shock that the legend was true; and something else, unexpected, a reluctant respect for the woman opposite her, the traitor's granddaughter, who had come to bring her own family's guilt to light.

"What do you want to do," asked Ruth.

"I don't know," said Marga honestly. "That's why I'm here. It concerns you as much as me. Perhaps more. I didn't want to decide it over your head. It's the story of your great-grandfather. You should have a say in what becomes of it."

And that, Ruth thought, that no Kortmann had ever done: let a Brass have a say. She put the copy away, slowly, and said: "I have to think about it." And they parted, the two women, without reconciliation, without enmity, with a shared burden that lay between them like the list on the table, and neither of them knew whether war would come of it or peace, but both knew the silence was over.

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Chapter 6 - Jakob Underground

While Marga wrestled above with the past, Jakob lived the present below, and the present was a water inrush in the east field.

It came without warning, the way water often comes: an old, forgotten body of standing water behind a thin layer of rock, and when they hewed into the seam, it broke through, a black, cold flood that shot into the roadway and swept everything along. Jakob and Hasan were furthest forward, at the face, and the water came between them and the way back, rose fast, and for a moment there was only panic, the verdict of the mountain, the drowning in the dark, eight hundred metres below the sun.

But they did not lose their heads, neither of them. Hasan knew an old ventilation rise, a cross-cut upward, of which the maps no longer spoke, but which he had discovered on an earlier shift, and he pulled Jakob with him, through the rising water, up into the rise, and they climbed, in the dark, the water beneath them, until they reached a higher level and were safe. Without Hasan's knowledge of the forgotten rise, Jakob would have drowned. Without Jakob's strength, who steadied the slighter Hasan at the difficult spots, Hasan would not have got up. They saved each other, by turns, in the dark, and came out alive, and in the washhouse, scrubbing the water from their skin, they looked at each other and laughed, the laugh of the survivors, and Hasan said in his Ruhr German with the Anatolian ring: "Us two, Jakob. Mountain don't get us."

That was comradeship, in the oldest, hardest sense, the same sense in which Heinrich Brass had once torn the young Wilhelm

Kortmann by the collar out of the roof, sixty years before, in the same mountain. The mountain repeated itself, the way it always repeated itself, and created the same situation: two men who saved each other's lives, without asking, without reckoning, without asking after origin or faith or passport. Only this story went on differently from that of Wilhelm and Heinrich. Jakob would not betray Hasan. The thought would never have come to Jakob, as little as the thought would have come to him of forgetting to breathe in his sleep. The butty was the butty. That was all. That was Jakob's whole philosophy, and it was, without his knowing it, the counter-design to everything his family had on its conscience.

That evening Jakob came home, weary, alive, and Marga was there, she was often there now, with the sick father, and she saw at once that something had happened.

"Water in the east field," said Jakob curtly. "Hasan and I, we only just got out." He said it without drama, the way miners said such things. "Hasan knew an old rise. Without it I'd have stayed down there."

Marga looked at her brother, the straightforward, simple Jakob, who owed his life to a Turkish butty and did not think for a second that the Turk was a Turk, and she thought of the list in her bag, of Wilhelm, who had betrayed his butty, and she said, almost involuntarily: "Jakob. Would you ever betray Hasan? If it got tight. If you had to choose between him and yourself."

Jakob looked at her as if she had asked something mad. "Betray? Hasan?" He shook his head, slowly, not understanding why she asked at all. "Marga. The man saved my life today. Underground you don't betray anyone. Never. Sooner bite off your own tongue." He went to the basin. "What kind of question is that."

"Nothing," said Marga. "A stupid question."

But it had been no stupid question. It was the question around which their whole family history turned, and Jakob had answered it without knowing, with the matter-of-factness of one who had never fallen into the temptation and perhaps never would, because he was made of a wood that did not betray. And Marga grasped that it existed, both, in the same family, in the same blood: the betrayal of the grandfather and the unconditional loyalty of the brother, and that the one did not cancel the other, but that it meant nothing was predetermined, that everyone chose anew, that the fault was inherited and the loyalty too, and that what mattered was what one made of it when the hour came.

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Chapter 7 - August's Last Word

August died in autumn, slowly, of the lung the mountain had taken from him, ton by ton, shift by shift. He lay in the room, at the window from which one saw the headframe, and fought for air that no longer came, and Marga sat with him, day and night in the last weeks, because Lena, herself grown old, could no longer manage alone, and because Marga wanted to be with him before it was too late. She had not yet given the list out of her hands. She had spoken with Ruth Brass, once, twice, and they were still wrestling with what to do, and Marga wanted, before she decided, to hear the one thing only her father could tell her. So she asked him, on one of those last nights, when he was clear, clearer than for weeks, in that lucidity that sometimes comes just before the end.

"Father," she said. "I have to ask you something. About Grandfather. How he became overman, back then, nineteen-hundred-five. And about the Brasses."

August looked at her, long, and in his eyes there was no surprise, almost relief. "You know it," he said.

"I found the list. In the archive. The disciplinings. Heinrich Brass. And the note that the names came from someone in the workforce, who became overman for it. Three months before Grandfather became overman."

August closed his eyes. For a while there was only his breath, the rattling. Then he said, and this time he did not break off, this time he said it whole, because he was dying and the dying man no longer

needs the silence: "Yes. He betrayed them. In the strike. Heinrich Brass and the others. He gave their names, in the counting house, in the night, and for it he kept the house and the shift and became overman. My father. Your grandfather. On that everything stands, Marga. The house you grew up in. The money that paid for my wedding. Everything. It rests on Heinrich Brass's ruin."

Marga held his hand. "Did he tell you?"

"Never. In words never. But I knew it, long. One knew it. Mother knew it. Otto Brass knew it. Everyone knew it and no one said it." He coughed. "And I," he said, and now came the heaviest, "I did it too, Marga. Not the same betrayal. A different one. In the war."

And he told her of Tadeusz. Of the Polish boy who had saved his life, at the face, under the roof. And of the order to work the west field, the firedamp-prone one, and of the stroke he had not made, the one stroke that would have struck Tadeusz's name from the list, and of the explosion, and of the dead boy on the yard. "I could have saved him," said August. "With one stroke. And I didn't do it. Out of fear for my position. Like my father. Exactly like my father. The apple doesn't fall far, Marga. We Kortmanns, we save ourselves and let the other fall. That's our inheritance. That's what you carry in you, whether you want it or not."

Marga wept, quietly, and held the dying father's hand, and in her there was horror and pity and something greater than both, a clarity. "You're wrong," she said. "That's not our only inheritance. Jakob would never betray Hasan. Never. That's Kortmann blood too. You didn't only pass on the betrayal, Father. You also passed on Jakob, who is loyal to the death. And you passed on me. And I will not keep silent."

August looked at her, and in his dying face there was something that looked almost like hope. "What will you do?"

"I don't know quite yet. But I won't bury it. Not like you. The silence ends with me, Father. That I promise you. Whatever I do, I'll do it in the light."

August pressed her hand, weakly, and said: "Then it wasn't all for nothing. That I made you." And a few days later he died, at the window, with his gaze on the headframe whose wheel turned, and Marga closed his eyes and remained sitting, long, with the whole truth in her now, the truth of two generations, the grandfather's betrayal and the father's failure, and with the promise she had given and would keep, cost what it might.

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Chapter 8 - What to Do with It

After the funeral Marga and Ruth Brass sat together again, this time not in the café but in Marga's kitchen, for the matter had grown too big for a public place, and they wrestled with the question that had no easy answer: what does one do with a truth that benefits no one any more and harms no one any more, because all who are concerned are dead?

Ruth wanted to make it public, fully, at once. "My great-grandfather was slandered," she said. "For sixty years it was said in the valley, in the district, the Brasses, they were troublemakers, agitators, who had only themselves to blame for their ruin. And the truth is that he was a decent man who fought for the workforce, and that a traitor from his own ranks destroyed him. That belongs in the light. That is the least one owes him."

"And what good does it do him," asked Marga. "He's dead. Heinrich Brass has been dead for forty years. No scandal rehabilitates him any more."

"It serves his memory. It serves his descendants. It serves the truth."

"And it shames my descendants," said Marga. "My brother, who can do nothing about it. My children. It shames half a valley, for you know, Ruth, my grandfather was not the only one. Whoever came up a little in those years probably also failed to make a stroke, or named a name, or looked away. If we open this up, where does it stop?"

She was tempted, Marga felt it, tempted to let it rest. It would have been so easy. No one knew of the list except her and Ruth. She

could lay it back, into the archive, to be weeded out, and everything would stay as it was, the memory and the shame and the silence, sixty years settled, comfortable in its bitterness. It was the same temptation that had bound her grandfather and bought her father, and Marga recognised it: it worked not through threat but through reason, through the quiet voice that said it was better for everyone to let the heavy rest. So all the Kortmanns had kept silent. So the whole district kept silent, about so much. Silence was cheap, and talk was dear, and Marga understood for the first time fully why three generations had chosen the cheap.

She chose the dear. But she chose it her way, not Ruth's.

"I won't make it a scandal," she said. "No exposing, no accusing, no pillory. Nothing gets better from that, it only breeds new hatred, and our families have had hatred long enough. But neither do I bury it. That's the third way, Ruth, between silence and scandal: we name it. We give the truth where it belongs. A chronicle is being written for the pit's closure, a history of Morgenstern, a hundred years of mining. It belongs in there, all of it, the strike of nineteen-hundred-five, the disciplining, the betrayal, with names, certified, readable. Not hidden and not blown up into a scandal. Simply true. Simply there. Whoever wants to know it can read it. Whoever doesn't, need not. But it is no longer hidden."

Ruth thought a long time. "That's less than I wanted," she said at last.

"I know. But it's more than any Kortmann ever admitted. And it's what I can carry without doing new harm. Heinrich Brass gets his name back, clean, in the chronicle, forever. And my grandfather gets his too, beside it, with what he did. Both names, both truths. That is justice, as far as I can give it."

And Ruth, after a long silence, nodded. "Good," she said. "I'll go that way with you. But we write it together, Frau Kortmann. A Brass and a Kortmann, together. So no one can say it's the revenge of the one or the whitewash of the other."

"Together," said Marga, and they shook hands, a Kortmann and a Brass, for the first time in three generations, across the table on which the list lay, and it was no reconciliation, not yet, but it was the beginning of something greater than the feud they had inherited, and smaller than the forgiveness neither of them had to give: a shared looking, a shared naming, the end of the silence.

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Chapter 9 - Rheinhausen

In the winter of eighty-seven the district rose once more, a last great time, and it rose for the steel, not the coal, but it was all one, for coal and steel were siblings, and when the one died, the other died with it. In Rheinhausen, on the Rhine, the Krupp steelworks was to be closed, a works with ten thousand men, the heart of a whole town, and the workforce resisted as the district had not resisted in a long time, and their resistance became a beacon for all who would no longer accept the dying of industry.

They occupied the bridge over the Rhine, the Bridge of Solidarity, as they called it, and day and night they held it occupied, in the cold, with fires in barrels, and the whole district came, from all the pits, from all the works, to show that one was not alone, that the old solidarity was not dead, that the many were still the many.

Marga went there, with Jakob and Hasan and, to her own surprise, with Ruth Brass. They drove together, in one car, the Kortmann and the Brass and the Turk, the three lines that should never have met by the logic of history, and they stood together on the bridge, in the crowd, in the smoke of the fires, and it was cold, and it was full of people, and it was, Marga thought, the opposite of everything her family had on its conscience.

For here it was, the solidarity that Wilhelm Kortmann had betrayed in nineteen-hundred-five. Here, eighty years later, on a bridge over the Rhine, it lived again, unbroken, the standing-together of the many against those who decided over their heads. It was too late, they all knew that; Rheinhausen would be closed, one way or

another, the decision had been taken elsewhere, in boardrooms, in balance sheets, and no bridge in the world would overturn it. But they stood all the same. Not because they could win, but because the standing itself was the thing, because a person must straighten up, even knowing he will fall, because dignity lies not in victory but in not giving up.

Jakob and Hasan stood shoulder to shoulder, the way they stood shoulder to shoulder underground, and sang along when they sang the miner's song, the old song, Glück auf, Glück auf, der Steiger kommt, and Hasan knew it by now, sang it with his Anatolian ring, and no one found it strange, for here, in this moment, no one was strange, here all were only one thing: people who would not let go of what was being taken from them.

And Marga looked at Ruth Brass, in the glow of the fires, and Ruth looked at Marga, and between them passed something, an understanding. "Look," said Marga. "This. This is what my grandfather betrayed. This is what your great-grandfather fought for. And look, it's still here. Eighty years later. They can't kill it."

"No," said Ruth. "They can't kill it." And after a while, more quietly: "Perhaps that's the best rehabilitation for my great-grandfather. Not an entry in a chronicle. But that what he died for is still alive. Here. Today. On this bridge."

They stood until deep into the night, in the smoke and the cold, and it was a defeat they experienced there together, for Rheinhausen fell, the way everything fell. But it was a defeat that transformed something, between the two families, who here for the first time stood not against but beside each other, in the service of the same cause for which a Brass had once died and been betrayed by a Kortmann, and which now, eighty years and three generations later,

brought the two lines together again, on a bridge that bore the name that said it all: Solidarity.

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Chapter 10 - Hasan

When the closure of Morgenstern was decided, the ground swayed beneath Hasan Yıldız for the second time in his life. The first time had been when he left his village, a young man with a cardboard suitcase, out into a world he did not know. Now, a quarter of a century later, he lost the world in which he had become at home without quite having noticed it, and stood again before nothing, an old man this time, with grey hair and a ruined lung and children born here.

"I'm going back," said Hasan to Jakob, in the washhouse, when they talked one last time of the end. "At last. Turkey. Build a house. Like I always said." But he said it without conviction, and Jakob heard it, and both knew it was not so.

For the village near Kayseri of which Hasan had dreamed for twenty-five years, that no longer existed as such. Those he had known were gone or dead or had themselves moved away, to the cities, to Istanbul, to Germany. His children were no longer Turks, not quite; they were Ruhr children, spoke Ruhr German, knew the snow and the slag heap and the miner's song, and Turkey was for them a holiday land, strange and hot, not home. If Hasan went back, he went alone into a past that no longer existed, and left his children behind in a future that was theirs.

"Stay," said Jakob. "Your children are here. You belong here, Hasan. As much as I do. Better perhaps, for I chose nothing, I was only born here. You decided for the district, every day anew, twenty-five years long. That's more home than mine."

Hasan looked at him, the old butty, who owed him his life and to whom he owed his own, and something in his face loosened, a burden of twenty-five years, the burden of the ever-postponed going-back. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Maybe this is my village now. Voßlohe. Who'd have thought." And he laughed, the laugh of the miners, that fit so badly into the end and for that very reason made it bearable.

He stayed. The way so many stayed who had come to go and stayed because life had held them, with children, with friendships, with twenty-five years underground that mark a man like nothing else. It was no triumphant decision, no happy arrival; it was a sober staying, a resigning himself to what was, and a late, quiet dignity in it: that staying too is a choice, no failure, but a resolve.

Marga saw Hasan in those days, taking leave of the pit, and she thought of Tadeusz, of whom her father had told, the Polish boy who had wanted to go home and was not allowed to, because they had dragged him off and sent him to his death. And she saw Hasan, the Turk, who had wanted to go home and did not, because life had held him, in freedom, with children, with a butty who stood up for him. Two foreigners in the district, two men from afar, the one destroyed in war, the other staying in peace, and between them lay forty years and the whole difference between a time that used people up and one that, with all its flaws, let them live. It was no perfect peace, the district of the guest workers, there was mistrust and strangeness to the end. But Hasan was allowed to stay, allowed to grow old, allowed to watch his children grow up, and that was, measured against Tadeusz, measured against what people could do to one another, an immense progress, and Marga registered it and was grateful for it, quietly, without glossing it over.

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Chapter 11 - Reconciliation

The chronicle appeared in the spring of eighty-nine, a slim volume, published for the closure of the Morgenstern pit, a hundred years of mining in Voßlohe, and in it stood, in a chapter on the great strike of nineteen-hundred-five, the truth that Marga and Ruth had written down together, soberly, with evidence, without triumph and without whitewash. It stood there that in the strike the solidarity of the workforce had been broken, that names had been betrayed, that men had been blacklisted, at their head Heinrich Brass, an upright unionist who had fought for the workforce and been destroyed for it. And it stood there, provable and verifiable, that the betrayal had come from within the ranks, from a hewer who rose to overman for it, and that this hewer was called Wilhelm Kortmann. Both names. Heinrich Brass, rehabilitated. Wilhelm Kortmann, named. The truth, black on white, for anyone who wished to read it.

There was no scandal. That was what Marga had wanted, and so it came: the district received the truth the way it received everything, with the old, composed gravity. A few old people, who still knew or sensed, came to Marga, quietly, at the door, in the street, and said it was good it was out now, that their father, their grandfather had always known something of the old story and never dared to say it. Some Kortmann relatives no longer greeted Marga, were ashamed, felt betrayed by the one who had exposed the family. Marga bore it. It was a small price for a great silence she had ended.

But the most important thing happened between her and Ruth.

They stood, when the chronicle had appeared, together at the grave of Heinrich Brass, which had fallen into ruin, forgotten, untended for sixty years, because the Brasses had been too poor and too embittered to care for it. Marga had had the stone restored, at her own cost, without fuss, and now there stood again a name, legible: Heinrich Brass, and the years, and beneath them what Marga and Ruth had chosen together: "He held to the workforce."

"I can't forgive you what your family did to mine," said Ruth at the grave. "That's not for me. Heinrich would have to forgive, and Heinrich is dead. And honestly, I don't want to forgive you either, for forgiveness would be too easy, it would make it smaller than it was."

"I don't want forgiveness," said Marga. "I've done nothing I'd need to ask forgiveness for, and for what my grandfather did no one can forgive me, because it isn't mine. I only wanted it named. That it stops being hidden. No more."

"That's enough," said Ruth. "That's more than I'd ever have expected from a Kortmann." And she looked at Marga, and in her look there was not forgiveness and not enmity, but something new, something that had never existed between Brass and Kortmann: respect. "You know what's strange? My daughter and your nephew, your brother Jakob's son. They know each other. From school. They're friends, I'm told. Perhaps more." She smiled, for the first time. "A Brass and a Kortmann. Imagine."

"Imagine," said Marga, and she too smiled, and over the restored grave of Heinrich Brass, which now bore a name again and a truth, the two women shook hands, a Kortmann and a Brass, and it was no final stroke and no grand reconciliation, but something simpler and more durable: the end of a feud no one would inherit any more, because the next generation was already overcoming it, without

much ado, the way children overcome things that seemed insurmountable to the old.

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Chapter 12 - The Last Shift

On the day of the last shift the whole town came to the Morgenstern pit, for it was not only the end of an enterprise, it was the end of a world, the only one Volkmar had ever known.

They rode down one last time, the last shift, and Jakob was among them, and Hasan, and the others who were left, the old, who had grown old with the pit. They rode down in the early hours, the way they had ridden down all their lives, in the cage that dropped, and the square of sky disappeared above them, first grey, then greyer, then nothing at all, one last time. Below they did what had to be done, secured the roadways, laid down the tools, and then they stood one last time at the face, at the seam, man beside man, in the light of the lamps, and no one said much, for what was there to say.

"Glück auf," said Jakob at last, and this time it was no wish for the ascent but a farewell, the last Glück auf of a hundred-year story.

"Glück auf," said the others, and Hasan too, with his Anatolian ring, "Glück auf," and then they rode up, for the last time, and the cage lifted them, and the square of sky grew above them, first nothing, then grey, then day, and they stepped out into the light, for the last time as miners, and outside the town was waiting.

Up top everything was gathered. A brass band played, the flags of the union, of the clubs, and thousands of people, the families, the old, the children. Marga was there, and Lena, old and bent, in a wheelchair, who had lived through the whole century, from the wedding in the crisis to this day. Ruth Brass was there. Hasan's family was there. The whole town was there, to take its leave.

And then the wheel stopped.

It was the moment all had waited for and none wanted to bear: they shut down the winding, one last time, and the wheel of the headframe, which had turned since Wilhelm Kortmann had been a young hewer, which had turned through three wars and two inflations and a dictatorship, which had turned above all catastrophes, indifferent and tireless, the wheel stopped. It ran slower, slower, and then it stood still, and over the town lay a silence no one knew, the silence of the stopped wheel, the same silence the great strike had once brought, and the passive resistance, and the collapse, but this time it was a final silence, for this time the wheel would not start again.

The brass band played the miner's song, and a thousand people sang along, Glück auf, Glück auf, der Steiger kommt, and many wept, old men who had never wept wept openly, for with the wheel their life stopped, what they had been, what their fathers had been, what their sons would no longer be.

Marga stood in the crowd, between Jakob and Hasan, behind Lena's wheelchair, and looked at the still wheel, and she thought of all who should have stood here and stood no longer: of Wilhelm, who had kept the wheel turning at the price of a betrayal; of August, who had sent a boy to his death for the production that was now ending; of Heinrich Brass, who had died for the workforce; of Tadeusz, who had never been allowed to go home; of Bertha and Otto and Käthe and all the century had used up. They were all here, Marga thought, in this still wheel, all the dead of the hundred years, and they were all gone. The wheel stood still, and with it history stood still, the whole burden and the whole guilt and the whole loyalty, everything held its breath for a moment, and then it was over.

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Chapter 13 - The Old Man, Opened

Before they finally shut down the pit, there was one last descent, a technical one, to abandon the roadways, switch off the pumps, leave the mountain to itself. For when the pumps fell silent, the mine water would rise, slowly, year by year, and flood the roadways that had been kept dry for a century, and the mountain would take back what man had wrested from it.

Marga was allowed to come along. It was an exception, and she owed it to Jakob and to an overman who turned a blind eye, and to the fact that the pit was dead and the old prohibitions with it. A woman in the shaft brings ill luck, it had been said, all her life, and she had stood at the gate and never been allowed through. Now, with no ill luck left to bring, with the pit already lost, she was allowed down, one single time, the woman who had been refused it all her life.

She rode down, in the cage that dropped, and the square of sky disappeared above her, first grey, then greyer, then nothing, and Marga, fifty-eight years old, experienced for the first and last time what the men of her family had experienced every day, for a hundred years: the falling into the mountain, the stomach that stays up, the darkness that the light only briefly pushes aside. She understood all at once much that she had never understood, understood it bodily, and she thought of Wilhelm, of August, of Jakob, who had ridden down here, day after day, and of what the depth does to a person.

Jakob led her. He knew the way blind, the way his father and his grandfather had known it blind, through the roadways, in the heat, in

the dripping of the water, and at last they came to a place before which lay an old, walled-up roadway, sealed long ago, the old man, the worked-out, abandoned district.

"That's one of the oldest," said Jakob. "They closed it before the First War, the old foreman says. Grandfather was still young then."

Marga stood before the wall, behind which lay the darkness, the old man that no one would now enter, in which there was nothing but hollowed rock and the water that would soon rise. And she grasped, without anyone telling her, that this was the place, that behind such walls, over the course of the years, everything had been walled up that the family and the district had buried: the grandfather's betrayal, the father's unmade stroke, the hundred years of guilt and silence, all given over to the dark, given back to the mountain, in the hope it would stay there.

But it had not stayed there. That was the truth Marga now embodied, she herself, a woman in the shaft, before the old man: what one walls up does not stay walled up. The water rises, and one day it finds a wall that does not hold, and releases what it has covered. She had opened the old man, not with her hand, but with the truth, with the chronicle, with the naming. She had done what Wilhelm and August had not dared: torn down the wall before the water tore it down.

"Come," said Jakob. "There's nothing more to see here. Just old mountain."

"No," said Marga. "Just old mountain." And she looked a moment longer at the wall, behind which lay the dark and soon the water, and then she turned away. For it was really only old mountain now. She had brought the story to light, and now that it was named, it was no longer a secret and no guilt that pressed in the dark, but only past,

readable, closed. Out of the secret had become geology again: stone, water, dark, finished. The water could rise. It would release nothing that was not already free.

They rode up, one last time, and the square of sky grew above Marga, first nothing, then grey, then day, and she stepped out into the light, the woman who had ridden down, and breathed the upper air, and above her stood the wheel, still now, forever, and it no longer asked who had turned it and at what price, for it no longer turned.

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Chapter 14 - The Fall of the Wall

In November eighty-nine, a few months after the wheel of Morgenstern had stopped, the Wall in Berlin fell, and Marga saw it on television, the way everyone saw it on television, the people dancing on the Wall, the border opening, a world coming to an end while another began.

It was a strange simultaneity, and Marga felt it deeply. In Voßlohe a world had just been buried, the district of coal, the century of mining, the still wheel. And now, in the same autumn, another wall fell in the east, and another division ended, and the newspapers were full of new beginnings, of future, of unity, while Voßlohe still stood in farewell. Two epochs tipped at once, the one into the end, the other into the beginning, and it was as if history had taken a great breath, breathed out in the west, breathed in in the east, and no one knew what the next would bring.

For the Kortmann family the end of the pit meant something it had never known: freedom. For the first time since Wilhelm none of them was bound to the pit any more. The house no longer belonged to the pit; one had been able to buy it, cheaply, in the RAG's retreat, and Lena, old, owned for the first time in her life the roof over her head, which no one could take from her any more. Jakob, without a shift, got a turning-away bonus and a retraining; he was too young for retirement and too old for a wholly new beginning, and he stood, like many, between the times, freed and adrift at once. Hasan, who had stayed, looked for work up top, found it, lost it, found it again. And Marga, who had settled the truth, who had broken the silence,

stood before a life in which the great task was done and now only life itself remained.

It was an ambivalent freedom. For the bond to the pit had been a burden, a yoke, for a hundred years: it had owned the houses, the votes, the lives, it had demanded and taken and used people up. But it had also held. It had given a place, a belonging, a knowledge of who one was: one was a miner, one belonged to the workforce, to the colony, to the solidarity of the many. With the pit that too fell away, what had given a hold, and what remained was the freedom that was also loss, the freedom of a person who no longer knows who he is, because what defined him is no longer there.

"What are we now," Jakob asked once, that winter, half in jest, half in despair. "If we're not miners any more. What are we then?"

Marga had no answer, not at once. She looked at her brother, the straightforward Jakob, who had been nothing but a miner, with his whole heart, and who was now nothing any more, and she thought a long time. "We're the ones who were it," she said at last. "No one takes that from us. We're the ones who rode down, a hundred years long, and brought up the coal the country was built with. That stays, Jakob, even when the wheel is still. It's not something you must be. It's something you have been. And been one is forever."

It was a meagre comfort, that winter, in which in the east the people danced on the walls and in the west the district buried its pits. But it was a true comfort, and Marga held to it, and Jakob held to it, and outside, over the town, stood the still wheel that no one turned any more, a monument already before it was one, and reminded them of what had been here, a hundred years long, and now was no more and yet, in its way, remained.

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Chapter 15 - What Remains When the Winding Stops

The years that followed changed Voßlohe more slowly than one had feared, and more deeply. The colony was renovated, the old pit houses got new windows, new roofs, some were sold, to those who had lived in them for decades and now owned them. The pit grounds lay fallow for a while, a scar of concrete and rust, and then began the structural change everyone spoke of: they demolished, they rebuilt, an industrial park here, a technology centre there, and the headframe, which could have been blown up like so many others, stayed standing, listed as a monument, a memorial, a landmark, the last thing left of the Morgenstern pit.

The slag heap turned green. That was the image that moved Marga most: the spoil mountain that had grown over the town, a hundred years long, out of the waste rock one had hauled up with the coal and could not use, this black, bare mountain began to green, first with grasses, then with birches, with shrubs, and after some years it was green, a hill people climbed to enjoy the view, a local recreation area where once the refuse of a century had lain.

Marga often went up there, in those years, as she grew old. From the green slag heap one overlooked the whole district, the dead and the newly becoming, the shut-down headframes that still stood, the chimneys that no longer smoked, and between them the new, the business parks, the housing estates, the motorways. She sat up there, on a bench someone had put up, and looked out, and thought about what she had done, and about what had remained.

For this she had learned, in those years: that it was not the truth that redeemed. She had brought the truth to light, named the grandfather's betrayal, rehabilitated the name of Heinrich Brass, broken the hundred-year silence. And she had believed, half at least, that this would redeem something, that a burden would fall from the family, that a peace would come. But it had not been so. The truth redeemed nothing. Wilhelm was still a traitor, August still a failure, Heinrich still a destroyed man, and no naming made that undone. The dead stayed dead, the guilt stayed guilt, the district stayed dead.

What had changed was one single thing, and Marga grasped only late that it was enough: one had stopped administering. One had stopped holding the water over the path, the truth behind the wall. For three generations the family and with it the whole district had held its breath over sunken things, had kept silent, accounted for, inherited, and now, with the kept-silent named, with the walls open, one could at last breathe out. Not relieved, not happy, not redeemed. Only honest.

And that, Marga thought, from the green slag heap, over the dead and the newly becoming district, that was perhaps all a person could achieve: not to expunge the guilt that could not be expunged, not to wake the dead, but only to stop hiding them. The solidarity that Wilhelm had betrayed was not dead; it had only changed its form, from the shift into memory, from the workforce into the history now told honestly. Heinrich, Tadeusz, Wilhelm, August, all got what was possible, the only thing Marga could give them: a name, no verdict. They were named, all of them, with their guilt and their loyalty, and they were no longer hidden, and that was the legacy Marga left behind, the only one that held when the winding stopped: the truth, spoken, and the breath, at last let go.

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Chapter 16 - Glück auf

Years later, on a clear autumn day, an old woman walked across the green slag heap, leaning on a stick, and with her went two children, a boy and a girl, who held her hand and plagued her with questions, the way children do.

The old woman was Marga. And the children were the new: the girl was a Brass, Ruth's granddaughter, and the boy was a Kortmann, Jakob's grandson, and they were second cousins or something like it, for Jakob's son had married Ruth's daughter, a Kortmann and a Brass, and out of the two lines that had not greeted each other for three generations, one had become. And in the boy's class there sat also a girl called Yıldız, Hasan's great-granddaughter, and the three played together, Kortmann and Brass and Yıldız, and none of them knew that this would have been unthinkable a hundred years before, and that was the best of it: that they did not know it, that what the old had paid for with blood and silence was a matter of course to them.

"What's that, Grandma?" asked the boy, and pointed over to where, above the roofs, above the green and grey district, a single headframe stood, still, the wheel motionless against the autumn sky.

"That's a headframe," said Marga. "They used to mine coal there. Deep down out of the earth. Your great-grandfather rode down there, every day, and his father, and his father. A hundred years long."

"And why doesn't the wheel turn any more?"

"Because they don't mine coal any more. That's over. Long over. Now it's only a monument. So one doesn't forget what was here."

The girl, the little Brass, looked over at the still wheel. "Was it nice, in the old days? With the coal?"

Marga considered. It was a child's question, and it demanded a true answer, for children noticed when one lied. "No," she said. "It was not nice. It was hard. The men worked themselves to death, many died, underground, of the lung. And much injustice happened here, in the old days. People betrayed one another, because the times were so hard." She paused. "But there was something good there too. The people held together. Underground one looked out for the other, no matter where he came from. That was called solidarity. And that was the best of it, the only thing perhaps that was really nice."

"Do we hold together too?" asked the boy.

"I hope so," said Marga. "I hope so very much."

They stood a moment and looked over at the still wheel, the old woman and the two children, and the wind went over the green slag heap, over the district that had let the coal go, and Marga thought of all who had been here: of Wilhelm, who had betrayed, and Heinrich, who had been betrayed; of August, who had looked away, and Tadeusz, who had died; of Jakob and Hasan, who had saved each other's lives; of Otto and Ruth and Bertha and Lena and of herself, who had broken the silence. They were all here, in this still wheel, in this earth, in these children who held her hands and did not know on whose shoulders they stood, and to whom one would one day have to tell it, not as a wound, but as a story, honestly, with guilt and with loyalty, so that they would know where they came from, and do better what the old had done wrong.

"Glück auf," said Marga softly, to the still wheel, to all who were no longer there, to the children who were there.

"What does that mean, Grandma?" asked the girl. "Glück auf?"

"It was the miners' greeting," said Marga. "When they rode down, they said it. It meant: come back up. Come back alive. It was a wish that one would see each other again." She took the two children more firmly by the hand and turned away from the still wheel, toward the town, toward life. "Come," she said. "It's getting cold. Let's go home."

And they walked down the green hill, the old woman and the two children, away from the still headframe, which stood behind them against the autumn sky, the wheel motionless, a century motionless, and over the district that had let the coal go and with it at last the fault, lay the clear, cool light of a day that mined nothing any more and hid nothing any more.

Über dieses Buch

The Seam

Ein Schreib-Experiment von aban news, Kapitel für Kapitel mit Claude Opus verfasst und redigiert.

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