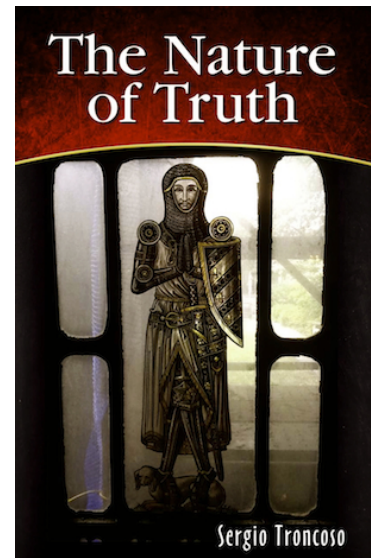


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 First Three Chapters



Chapter One

Helmut Sanchez yanked the steel ring of the creaky wooden door and stepped blindly into the dark castle that was Yale's Sterling Library. He pushed open the inner foyer door. A puff of steam hissed from a radiator in the shadows. The air inside was cold and damp. In front of him, two lines of students waited to check out books at the circulation desk under the watchful eyes of the mosaic of the Goddess of Knowledge. Another line surrounded the copy machines, which flashed and droned like baby dragons trapped in boxes. Without stopping, Helmut displayed his ID to the bored security guard and veered into the first floor stacks, toward Mr. Atwater's office. Jonathan Atwater was the assistant librarian responsible for interlibrary loan requests.

"Hello?" Helmut said with a studied meekness, knocking twice on the oak frame next to the opaque glass, like a gumshoe's door. A genteel older gentleman, about forty-five, hunched over Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*, his spectacles on the bridge of his pink nose. Puffy light brown eyebrows and a head of thin gray hair distinguished Mr. Atwater's patrician face. He wore a candy-apple red bow tie and a perfectly starched blue oxford shirt. A dozen books, in German and Spanish, were fastidiously arranged on his desk in front of him like a mini-fortress. Helmut noticed a small red leather edition of Goethe's poems atop a stack of white papers and manila folders.

"Helmut. Please, come in," Mr. Atwater said, warbling just a note higher than normal. "Sit down. Here. Take a look while I bring you a cup of coffee. Bought it on Saturday at an old bookstore in Meriden. Only thirty dollars for that edition!"

"But I was on my way—" Helmut protested weakly, but Mr. Atwater was already out the door and bounding down the hall. Helmut glanced at the poetry book in his hand, a leather-bound edition with gilded pages from the late nineteenth century. He reluctantly sat down on the black wooden chair emblazoned in gold with the crest of Yale. *Lux et Veritas*.

"This is what you came for, I presume," Mr. Atwater said, striding into the room, handing Helmut four volumes, and placing a Harvard-Radcliffe mug of coffee on the edge of the desk in front of Helmut.

"Thank you very much, Jonathan."

"Here's the confirmation for *Geschichte und Literatur Österreichs*, just sign at the bottom."

Mr. Atwater handed Helmut two sheets of paper, the first a barely legible pink carbon of Helmut's original request, the second an agreement to return the books by such-and-such a date to Yale, which would return them to the library or archive that owned them. "What a *quest* for those!" Mr. Atwater continued. "At least we finally found them."

"Thanks." Helmut drank half a mug of coffee and pushed the four volumes into his backpack. All morning his head cold had dizzied him at the oddest moments.

Suddenly Helmut had the eerie feeling that something was wrong, that he had seen a mistake but had not recognized it for what it was. He signed the second sheet of paper. He folded it back and glanced at the first sheet. Ach! he thought. He had originally requested *Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur*. There it was, in fading blue ink. This was the *wrong* literary review for the years 1957, 1961, 1965, and 1970. Mr. Atwater had made a rare mistake. Helmut's shoulder's slumped. He felt bloated and depressed. He handed back the sheets to Mr. Atwater.

What would be the point of telling Mr. Atwater he had wasted a month looking for the wrong review? Helmut gulped down the rest of the coffee and stood up. "Thanks again. I'll give you a call next week."

Helmut smiled politely and marched toward the circulation desk. Outside, it was gusty and warm for March. He might as well peruse these four volumes of *Geschichte und Literatur Österreichs*. He didn't have much to lose. If Mr. Atwater was right, they were obscure, if not rare, reviews. What would have been the point of deflating Atwater's enthusiasm when precious few cared as deeply about books anymore? Helmut's back ached, but the bike ride to Orange Street was quick and his backpack didn't seem too heavy.

Not until a few weeks later on April 29th did Helmut open the 1961 volume of *Geschichte und Literatur Österreichs*. The Thomas Bernhard article for his boss Professor Werner Hopfgartner had been mailed weeks ago. The semester was near its end, and finals would begin in a week. Helmut was putting the final touches on Christa Wolf. Before Hopfgartner left for his summer vacation of hiking on the Alps, the professor and his assistant would bounce the essay back and forth a few times. Helmut had indeed discovered a few articles in *Geschichte und Literatur Österreichs* he might include in the professor's Compilation.

Before his retirement, Hopfgartner envisioned the Compilation as a synthesis and expansion of his ultimate views about literature and philosophy. German culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the professor wrote, had achieved a community as distinct about the good and the right as that of classical Greece. What the professor's clear and convincing prose advocated, in an almost revolutionary tone and certainly with a poetic cadence, was the creation of a set of real community values. Then, and only then, would adherence to such values be authentic to a culture. Individuals in such an authentic society would blossom into *true human beings*, the full

potential of man. Anything less would be "fakery" or "decadence" or "the moral abyss of modernity" or "the bleakness of the soul." Modern society, Hopfgartner concluded, was on the bleak and lonely road of pernicious individualism and nihilistic hedonism.

Wednesday night-Thursday morning Helmut was reading an article in *Geschichte und Literatur Österreichs* on the American revival after the Kennedy election. It was 2:30 a.m. and Helmut desperately needed a distraction from the brain chatter that kept him awake. Suddenly, in the table of contents of the second quarter issue from 1961, he noticed that a W. Hopfgartner had written a lengthy, three-page letter to the editor. Helmut's heart leapt. What a fantastic coincidence! he thought. Perhaps Mr. Atwater's efforts had not been in vain.

Helmut didn't immediately read the letter, and instead checked the biographical lines at the end. The author *was* indeed a W. Hopfgartner who had also been a professor of literature. So there was a chance, however slim, that this W. Hopfgartner was the selfsame Werner Hopfgartner who now employed him.

The year 1961 was the year Professor Hopfgartner had arrived in America as the newest tenured professor at Smith College. After the Wall had gone up in Berlin, a spiritual incarceration had been plastered atop the existential malaise of the Continent. A double burden, Hopfgartner had once mused to his research assistant, which had simply been too much to bear. Helmut dropped the 1961 volume into his backpack. He would copy it tomorrow. Maybe he'd read it over the weekend. The Christa Wolf final rewrite had been delayed long enough. Helmut turned off his reading lamp and reset his alarm clock.

The sun was bright overhead by the time Ariane Sassolini, Helmut's girlfriend, drove him back to Orange Street, about a twenty-minute drive from her apartment in Hamden, Connecticut. They had spent another delicious Saturday night together. Helmut's bicycle was still locked to the backyard fence. His apartment upstairs was quiet, clean, empty. Finally, he had a little time to relax and be peacefully alone. He changed into shorts and a T-shirt, and bounded down the stairs. He bought a copy of the Sunday *New York Times* at the grocery store on Pearl Street. This was definitely a day for the back porch. He shoved open the kitchen door, which he rarely opened, and it led, through a murky and filthy hallway, to the back staircase and to another rickety door with peeling lime-green paint. Beyond this second door was the back porch of the third floor. Tender, mint-green leaves had sprouted from the old elm that hovered over the porch like a gnarled hand. Last year's leaves—dried-up, yellow-brown, and crunchy—were packed into piles in each corner.

Helmut dragged out an old beach chair, a mug of coffee with milk, a milk crate to use as a small table, the newspaper, and a stack of photocopied articles, including W. Hopfgartner's "Why I Am Neither Guilty Nor Ashamed." The chair was as comfortable as he remembered it had been. A perfectly cool breeze meandered in from the north. The air was finally dry after the rainstorm last night. A squirrel pranced across the porch railing, unafraid. He pushed the newspaper away and refilled his coffee mug and settled himself on the porch again.

"Why I Am Neither Guilty Nor Ashamed" was short enough, just three pages. Helmut started to read it. Immediately his stomach twisted into a knot. His left foot, dangling over the railing, at once stopped bouncing to an unknown beat. The letter was a response to a prior issue of *Geschichte und Literatur Österreichs*. That previous issue had been dedicated to expurgating Austria's complicit role in the *Anschluss* and the Nazi atrocities of the Second World War. Of course, it was true that the cultured citizens of Vienna had cheered the triumphant Adolf Hitler on Währingerstrasse with an evident proto-fanaticism. And who didn't already know that the dreaded SS had been composed of more Austrians than Germans?

In any case, the letter from this W. Hopfgartner derided all such pandering as "weakness and indecision." Vague "foreign influences" were at work. It declared, in a staccato prose, that Austria had done nothing wrong in the war. In fact, the premise of the war had been "correct" in any case. Only its "practical implementation" had been distorted by the excesses and digressions of a few idiots. What had been this correct premise? The letter mentioned only an amorphous "authentic value system" for the German people. Only with this value system would the genuine Teutonic character be realized, in itself the highest embodiment of man. The rambling letter ended with a call to all Germans and Austrians, especially the new generations coming of age and those about to be born in the next decade, the future leaders of the Third Millennium.

"Rid yourselves of this guilt and this shame!" the letter exhorted its readers. "Believe not, in such a blind fashion, these accusations of what your parents did during the war. These lies will emasculate you. The German self will thus be destroyed! The great German spirit, so corrupted by guilt and shame, will not even be capable of correcting past excesses. How will we ever soar back to our splendor, creativity, and productivity? This is the only way. A future free of guilt."

Helmut Sanchez felt sick to his stomach. How could anyone have written this garbage, in 1961 or at any other point after the war? What kind of sick mind would rationalize away this massive moral black hole? Millions of Jews murdered simply because they were Jews. Millions of gypsies and Catholics and countless political prisoners and so-called subversives slaughtered by a regime gripped by a frenzy of murderous thinking. And this, exactly, was what had always troubled Helmut about the Holocaust and the war in general. That Germans, he felt, had a tendency to think too far, to an abstract and rigid self-righteousness that could all-too-easily devalue the simple aspects of daily life. Such a murderous abstractionism could be used to justify crushing something today for the sake of an escapist ideal of a far-off tomorrow.

Of course, the student Marxists at Freiburg were also like this. Religious terrorists who killed in the name of God were no different. So this fanaticism of the ideal was not limited to Germans, nor to fascists, nor even to the field of politics. It was a beast of the mind! Helmut thought. Elusive. Multifarious. Immortal.

Helmut had once dated a younger student from Karlsruhe, Stephanie Henke, a special girl. At a concert, she had been so overwhelmed by Beethoven's *allegro assai* conclusion to the Ninth Symphony that she cried and shrieked non-stop into the deathly silence at the end of the concert. An incredible orgasmic fury! What was even more shocking was that those around her, the prim and proper of Freiburg, approved of this primeval release with their admiring looks. Apparently

this wild girl had really understood the heart of the music. Little did they notice the desperate gleam in her eyes, the spasmodic little twists of her head processing in a rapid-fire loop, the slash scars on her wrists.

During finals the previous semester, Stephanie had locked herself in the bathroom and screamed, "I will die a complete failure!" After a tense hour, Helmut had forced open the door and saved this beautiful creature from herself. So Helmut understood only too well that this murderous thinking was still pervasive and even part of his blood.

But what was his blood? Who was Helmut, really? That was the question that had tormented him all his life. Helmut Sanchez had always hoped his Mexican blood would save him from a free-fall into his German heritage. Yet certain parts of this heritage also captivated him, especially German philosophy and poetry. So instead of saving him outright, these mixed legacies confused him. He had never really felt at home with German culture, but in many ways he had harbored the same doubts about American culture. He was neither American nor German nor Mexican. He was neither here nor there. Sometimes he still felt like a fat, lonely, little boy. In any case, now he was on his own. He could still pull himself above his own wretched ambiguity about who he was. There was no need to doubt himself when his heart was clear. He could still feel repelled by W. Hopfgartner's letter. Helmut could still understand what was right and what was wrong.

Before he tucked the letter away in an empty blue folder, Helmut read it again Sunday night. He memorized the flow of thought. The ridiculous justifications and qualifications. The conviction and exhortation of its style. Even the seeming plausibility and rationality of what it said. In Helmut's head, there was still one well-formed doubt: perhaps this W. Hopfgartner was not the Werner Hopfgartner at Yale with the endless stream of inamoratas. Hopfgartner was indeed a common German name. Also, Professor Hopfgartner had been a professor in the Federal Republic of Germany, and the journal was from Austria. But more pressing in Helmut's mind was the need to find out more about *his* Werner Hopfgartner. Could the professor be the same vile character who wrote "Why I Am Neither Guilty Nor Ashamed"?

Chapter Two

On Cross Campus, a festive air seemed to soften the edges of the pale yellow stone walls of Yale. Four male students, two of them shirtless, tore through the newly planted grass at the center of the quadrangle, grunting their way through a game of Ultimate Frisbee. One young woman, wearing white shorts and a Harvard T-shirt, lay listless on the edge of grass, her back against a blackened wall. Her eyes were closed. Her face was pockmarked with acne scars. Three blue examination books rested carelessly on her lap. Subject: Organic Chemistry. Grade: in the thick red slash of a hurried marker, ninety-three. Her hair was scraggly and unwashed. The armpits of her T-shirt had yellowed. Yet a beatific smile was on her face. And the sun seemed warmer than ever.

At the other side of the quadrangle, another young woman, in a short, black skirt and a black blouse that seemed a second skin over her slim and attractive body, danced wildly on the grass. From the third floor of Calhoun College, Madonna's "Holiday" pulsed through two speakers. Her name was Alesha Brown. A piece of paper was in her hand. *Hol-i-day! Cel-e-brate!*

"Alesh! Hey! I just *heard!*" another girl shrieked from the dorm window with the blaring speakers. "Aiyyyi! Three ninety-two kicks ass in Cambridge!" *Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah!*

Alesha Brown smiled and danced and waved the piece of paper over her head as her roommate started dancing, too, each mimicking the other and swaying to the rhythm of the music, their hands outstretched toward the heavens. *Let's celebrate!*

"Alesh! To Rudy's, honey pie! I'll call Marla and Tina! Pa-r-ty!"

"Can't! See ya at dinner, Sweet Face! Got one last thing to do! And I'm outta here!" Alesh yelled, still swinging her arms as she planted her bare feet in the espadrilles she had shed on the grass. Her shoulder-length chestnut hair shimmered in the sunlight. As she skipped toward Harkness Hall, her pointy breasts bounced against her blouse. One of the boys playing Frisbee missed a long pass because he was staring at this beauty sprinting past them, at her sleek, long legs and tight waist, and that magnificent, perfectly protruding ass so out of reach for all of them. Alesha Brown was gorgeous. She was savvy. Now she was on her way to Harvard Law School. Almost.

She pulled open the heavy wooden doors of Harkness and immediately dashed into one of the restrooms next to the German department's office. Alesha strode into an empty stall, peed quickly, and brushed her hair with a long pocket comb from her purse. She splashed water on her face, rinsed her mouth, and double-checked the row and schedule of birth control pills on the small pink plastic grid of pills. She glanced at her watch. It was five minutes past 4:00 p.m. She stared at a test schedule somebody had pilfered from the hallways of Harkness and posted in the restroom. TAKE BACK THE *DAY!* somebody had scrawled on it in heavy, blue ink. Two full weeks of finals remained for everyone else, but not for seniors. *Cel-e-brate!*

Alesha Brown knocked on Werner Hopfgartner's door. She imagined the old professor looking up slowly and frowning. He was probably reading the article on Max Frisch he had just published, the one he had bragged about in class, the kind he had regularly published with the greatest of ease years ago. Alesha remembered a conversation Hopfgartner had casually mentioned before, that "young bastard Rittman" cutting Hopfgartner with, "You must be *so* looking forward to doing nothing," and Hopfgartner stiffening angrily in his chair as if the Jonathan P. Harkness Professor of Literature and Philosophy should be ready for the trash heap!

She rapped sharply on the door again, and heard a chair slowly drag across the wooden floor. Professor Hopfgartner had also bragged to her about other forthcoming "excellent articles" on Thomas Bernhard, and another on Christa Wolf, and another, all in one final, glorious year for old Werner Hopfgartner. It was as if Hopfgartner were collecting gems and admiring them. But of course, Alesha had never seen the prof in the stacks, only Helmut, his little gnome, oblivious to the world, to everything and everybody, in the darkness surrounded by books.

"Yes? Alesha, *mein hübsches Mädchen*, please come in."

The professor's large basement office in Harkness Hall resembled a grand, disheveled closet. An ornate wooden desk was positioned diagonally across a far corner, facing out, so the old man could easily scan his lair. Behind the professor, near the fireproof ceiling, a row of rectangular windows revealed, through heavy wrought iron bars, an occasional pair of sneakers pounding the sidewalk of Wall Street.

Against one beige wall was a row of metal cabinets, about chest high, on top of which were more books, piles of papers, and a Styrofoam cup. In front of these cabinets, a bare, wooden chair was angled toward the professor's desk, for supplicants. Here Alesha sat, crossing her legs tightly in front of her. Against the other wall was a comfortable, blue sofa with a glass-topped coffee table in front of it, strewn with more papers and copies of articles. Surrounding the hallway door, like a multicolored arch, were teak bookshelves. Alesha tapped her foot impatiently on the linoleum floor and possessed a cheery look about her.

"Well, Alesha, your final, right? Excellent as always," Professor Hopfgartner said in a thick, German accent, yet still enunciating every English word clearly, tediously, as if he directed a spelling bee. He handed her the blue books, glancing at the supple roundness of her breasts. Werner Hopfgartner's eyes, like quivery blue moons, darted to and fro. His face had the chiseled look of salmon-colored granite. He flicked off his reading glasses and poured himself another shot of bourbon. The liquor was never far from his fingers.

"My God! Didn't know you'd already finished grading. I'm so psyched! This is great!" she squeaked, sliding her body forward to the edge of the chair.

"You need only apply yourself, my dear girl. I've told you that many times before. Remember last year? One of the best in *Contemporary German Literature*. And you did it all on your own," Professor Hopfgartner said, not looking at Alesha, flipping through a stack of term papers

on his desk. Apparently he had the wrong class. "I don't know what happened at the end of this semester. I didn't see you at the seminar for—what?—the last four or five weeks?"

"I'm sorry, Professor Hopfgartner. Really and honestly. God, this last semester was a killer. Law school apps, my senior paper—I pulled two all-nighters in a row, and almost a third one, to finish it! I almost *died*," she said, not really worried, tapping her heel against the floor to some unknown rhythm. She crossed her legs again, dangling her arms indifferently by the sides of the chair. Even if it took three hours and she missed dinner, she wasn't coming out of this room until it was over. This was it. She had just won her own glorious ticket to ride. Just this, and she could finally walk away from Yale, free and clear.

"I know you're a smart girl. *Lebendig*. I saw it in your eyes immediately as soon as you walked into my class last year. A smart girl with a great future. Beauty, a good mind, and something special. Something *extra*. A thing many others don't have and can't learn. Guts. Fight. *Hunger*," he said, still pretending to look for something she knew he didn't have. "But this semester, well. Maybe it was just too much to do. Too short a time."

"I almost did everything. Except for this class. I thought I could catch up later," Alesha said in a pleading voice, high-pitched like a plaintive, feline growl. "I loved your class last year! You're the best professor I've had at Yale! I just had to take your class this semester. Absolutely had to! And now I've ruined everything! Don't know what I would have done if you hadn't *saved* me at mid-term! Don't know what I'm going to do now." Tears were dripping over her rosy cheeks. She stared directly at Hopfgartner. Her foot was still rapping the floor.

"Now, Alesha. Everything will be fine. You are an excellent student. There's no need for this. Your final paper isn't here, right?"

"Oh, my God! I tried so hard! I was trying to do everything! I just simply couldn't! I don't know what to do, Professor Hopfgartner. Please help me! This is the only thing I have left," she said, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "What am I going to tell my parents if I can't graduate?"

"*Nein, nein*. That's not going to happen, my sweet Alesha. We have an understanding, *richtig*? No need for panic. But you do know, that paper was worth a third of your grade. It was an important paper. Some of your classmates spent months working on it. I don't know how I can dismiss it completely."

"Maybe this is asking too much. I'll say it. I don't know what you'll think of me. I enjoyed being with you in March. It was the best thing that happened to me all year. I mean it. It was absolutely thrilling! I dreamed about it over and over again. There! I've said it! I just don't know what to do," Alesha said seductively, in a husky voice this time, at the edge of her chair. She brushed back her chestnut hair again, thought about winking at the old geezer, but knew she had to play her part in this pleading, painstaking chase. A crude move could easily ruin it. As soon as he stood up, she stood up, too, seemingly quivering, her back straight like a rod, waiting with her eyes as wide open as his.

Professor Hopfgartner strode slowly toward her until his bluish, burgundy jacket brushed against her chest. Although he was taller than she—just under six feet, while Alesha was five-feet-eight inches tall—she was statuesque, muscular, angular, even lithe, but he only stocky, creakily slow, stiff, like an upright turtle just in sight of a delectable treat. Werner Hopfgartner raised a chubby, blotchy hand to her cheek of silk and light and caressed it, almost as a grandfather would.

"Are you sure about this, *mein Liebling*? Do only what is right. For *you*."

"Yes," Alesha whispered, edging closer to him, "This is what I want."

She reached up and kissed him slowly on the mouth. His whiskers were rough, and he smelled of bourbon and stale cigar smoke. Her lips fluttered over his mouth, and just before she pulled away she flicked her tongue ever so delicately over the dry edge of his upper lip.

"I enjoy being with you," she repeated as she stepped back, clasped his hand between hers, kissed it, and lifted it gently to her left breast. Werner Hopfgartner's eyes were owl-like. He took another step back, almost coming to attention as he gazed at a full view of his prize. He marched to the door and locked it.

The professor turned off the fluorescent light above them and flicked on the reading lamp on his desk. As he pulled the window curtains shut, she glanced at the wall clock and noticed it was just past 4:30 p.m. Almost perfect, she thought. Already the halls were quiet without classes, and the finals that had started at 2:00 p.m. were about to end. The last secretary would also be gone exactly at 5:00 p.m. She would give the old man a splendid farewell to his penultimate year. He turned around, and Alesha was already waiting for him on the couch. He took off his jacket and folded it on the seat of his desk chair.

"My dear, come here," he murmured to her hoarsely, and she slid closer to him and began kissing him ever so slowly on his neck, over his cheeks, on his lips. At mid-term, Alesha had been too quick, too aggressive. Oh, how the old man had chastised her! He exhorted her to take a certain pace, stepping back and threatening to stop, then and there, if she insisted on her haphazard idiocy. But Alesha Brown was a smart girl. She learned quickly. She had been almost delicate by the end of that first tryst, pleasing him to the very pit of his stomach. Much, much better than a Sarah Goodman, Hopfgartner had once mumbled, who would always be cursed with a certain clumsiness.

Alesha breathed heavily, and fluttered tiny kisses over the professor's face, waiting for his next move. If it took a century, she didn't care. This was easy, it was relatively quick, and last time—although she hated to admit it to herself—she had almost finished. The old guy could really do it if he was given half a chance. Soon she would be off to Europe for two months with her roommates.

She felt one of the professor's hands, a gnarly, impatient claw, grab one of her breasts, and she moaned softly. The hand jumped from breast to breast, intermittently squeezing hard and fingering her nipples lightly. Alesha closed her eyes, rested her head against the back of the couch, and pushed her chin up as Werner Hopfgartner greedily licked her neck and panted, "*Ja*,

meine Schöne, ja." Suddenly, another hand swooped in between her legs and grabbed her crotch roughly. She was reminded of a wrestler hoisting an opponent by the trunks for an explosive body slam. Alesha spread her legs willingly. She thrust her hips into that clamp of fingers, yet he pulled quickly away. Only a test, a taunt, a declaration to invade a boundary at will. The swoon and whim of power. "*Ja, mein Alles.*"

"Please," he said quietly, tugging at her blouse. Alesha pulled her black blouse over her head one hand at a time. This time she didn't immediately remove her brassiere, but waited for him to do it. Professor Hopfgartner pinched it open from the front, with nearly a casual ease. Alesha's big, brown eyes feigned surprise. He kissed her lower neck, his face like sandpaper, and plunged into the soft whiteness of her breasts, sucking them in spasms, as if gagging on the plethora of skin and fat, and—Alesha swore later—biting her nipples until they were raw. Oh, and how delicious these pinches were! Her skin almost breaking. A precipice. Then a sweet reprieve. Was she already somewhere high above Place de la Révolution or Montparnasse, a light breeze dancing across a darkened terrace of red and yellow roses? Or was she actually still at Yale?

She sensed another hand rub the inside of her thighs rhythmically, the gray and shiny head still attached to her chest like a lamprey. Alesha stared at the gray cabinets in front of them and imagined a cloudy afternoon, a lonely fountain with cherubic angels. Professor Hopfgartner suddenly grunted in a protracted, phlegmatic cough, and just as abruptly a claw yanked aside the crotch of her panties and thrust two sharp fingernails into her vagina. She yelped, and then exhaled rapidly, rewarding him with another languorous moan. "*Ja, meine Schöne.*" His fingers flickered inside her like tiny ballerina legs. Alesha began to relax and open up and steady her breathing with soft little whimpers. Her skin was radiating warmth, and she was wet. She was a very smart little girl.

"Let me kiss you down there, Professor Hopfgartner. I want so much to please you," she pleaded, almost out of breath, her body arched on the sofa seat and nearly sliding off. So she was fucking a dirty old man who was so insecure, so weird, that she hadn't even seen him naked the first time. That wasn't going to happen today. Hey, doggie-style was sweet for her too. But this time Alesha Brown wanted a good hard look at it.

Werner Hopfgartner stared at her with huge, blue orbs. Astonished? Daydreaming? Simply calculating his fortune? He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his khakis and pulled his pants and boxer shorts to his knees. The professor looked as if he were sitting on a newfangled sofa-toilet. Before Alesha kneeled in front of him, she unhooked her skirt and dropped it on the floor behind her with an effortless twirl of her body.

Even in this near darkness, she could see that his skin was a glimmering white, like the scales on a lizard's belly. His paunch hung above his little soldier and created what seemed like a rocky, white cave. Rocky because enormous ridges of wrinkles, more like wavy folds and creases, crisscrossed his abdomen and dangled from his thighs. And white because his hair was frosty, brittle, only softer and darker atop his testicles. A faint acidic scent wafted up from his loins, as well as the much more overwhelming odor of the elderly. The smell of fine dust and decay. She kissed his little soldier, but she was taken aback. It was *tiny*. A wrinkled, deflated pinky! Could this have been what had really nailed her before?

"Ja, mein Liebling, ja. Nur langsamer, bitte. Verstanden?"

"Natürlich, mein Herr."

It seemed hours before he started to come around. She knew it would take time. In March it had taken at least this long, if not longer, with her hand blindly groping at the bulge in his trousers until her wrist was sore. Now she was clearly focused. The thing-in-itself in front of her without a barrier between them. What would Heidegger have said about possessing such a delicate morsel of an object? Salty and almost creamy. Like the underside of kugel. Alesha nearly laughed, but quickly stifled herself. The professor would not have understood. Ah, was that a tingle? A precious quiver from the near-dead? Finally this old soldier heard the clarion call to another good fight.

Like a water balloon slowly being filled, the professor's penis became erect at a ceremonious pace. And she encouraged it heartily. Alesha licked and caressed it, teased it, and withdrew. She barely seemed to notice his studied silence. She herself was almost hyperventilating, trying to maintain that flow of interest as a torrent. To aggrandize it. To convert play-acting into being. Anything less, and she would have dissolved into tearful laughter. Allow a sliver of doubt into drama, and the impossible would metamorphose into the ridiculous.

"Professor, please, my God! I can't wait any longer!" she screamed and tore off her panties. In the next instant, she was prostrate on the sofa, still panting furiously like a quarter horse, and he was inside of her. His talons clenched her perfect, half-moon hips. His face flushed with blood, gasping.

Perhaps Werner Hopfgartner would have been no match for these muscular thighs and perfectly tapered back and rock-like biceps and triceps had Alesha released herself completely to him. She gave him only what she imagined he could take, and then just a bit more for herself, enough to keep her happy and on the way toward ultimate freedom. Back and forth. Slowly and then a little faster. To one side and then gently to the other. Like the only perfect song they could have between them. She moaned, this time for real. She was definitely on her way out of the nether world of New Haven.

And then something awfully strange happened. Stranger than even a 74-year-old man having sex with a young vixen of twenty-one. Just as she had almost willed herself to the precipice, despite flashes in her mind that she was fucking a bowl of oatmeal, a sharp slap stung her behind like a splash of acid. Slap! Slap! Slap! Alesha tried to wiggle away, but *he* had her now. The pain was bright against her skin. She thought she saw red spots in the darkness. She pushed against him more forcefully. Slap! Slap! Slap! She liked it. Oh, such exquisite pain! Slap! Slap! Slap! She pushed harder and screamed. Who was fucking whom now? Slap! Slap! Slap! His fingers were like bait hooks on her thighs. Slap! Slap! Slap! What utter, impossible sweetness! What tremendous power! Slap! Slap! Slap! She exploded like a super nova. For years thereafter, she would fondly remember that moment of heaven and think of how he had done her such an unexpected favor. When Alesha Brown finally came down from her

black universe, she heard the professor's own sonorous explications of joy. "*Mein Gott! Mein Gott!*"

After a few minutes of silence, she finally wiggled free. He immediately turned off the reading lamp, and they dressed in complete darkness.

"Ready, Alesha, my dear?"

"Yes. Here I am."

The fluorescent lamp above their heads flickered and snapped into an almost painful brightness around them. Alesha sat on the sofa, combing her hair, not one stitch out of place. The professor stood at the doorway, still without his jacket but otherwise unruffled, the crease on his khakis razor-sharp. Only his hair betrayed any evidence of the previous tussle, spiky at the temples, matted down with sweat on his forehead. Alesha stared at the professor and almost giggled, but said nothing. A wet spot, the size of a quarter, punctuated the round bulge on his crotch. Suddenly it seemed to her an endearing symbol to remember him by.

"That was quite wonderful," he said, still motionless by the door, ready for this final exit.

"For me too," she said, picking up her purse and slinging it over her shoulder. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"You have been a wonderful student. An *excellent* one. And I am confident about your future. If you ever need my recommendation, I will give you only the best one. You deserve nothing less."

"Thank you, Professor Hopfgartner. Maybe I'll stop by before graduation. Please take care of yourself."

"I'll certainly be here. Good luck, again," he said, the door open. She reached up and kissed him on the lips again, and this time he seemed shocked, his eyes bulging out of their sockets in a fiery azure. But the hallways were deserted. There was no one around. Only a few hallway lights were still on.

As Alesha Brown walked away and pushed through the hallway doors—she turned around for one last look—she saw Werner Hopfgartner felt quite satisfied with the perfection of all of this, as if he had just sipped the last drop of a fine and exquisite whiskey. That was the look on his face. Soon the old man would begin his long walk home, and that wonderful burning sensation around his loins would make his face glow pleasantly too. She imagined before the professor readied himself to leave that he would listen carefully, because if Hopfgartner was anything he was careful to the point of paranoia, trying to detect any inadvertent squeak of a chair moving, or a sneeze, or even the *click click click* of a computer keyboard. But if there was nothing, if Harkness Hall seemed empty of life, then Professor Hopfgartner would lock his office door, walk home, and relive every second with her in his mind.

Chapter Three

Helmut Sanchez, even at twenty-six, appeared far too serious for his own good. Everyone had said he looked like his mother. He looked like his mother, yet he acted like his father. His thick black hair had a tendency to grow too fast, so that if he waited four weeks between haircuts his hair became helmet-like. His face possessed high cheekbones, an angular chin, a Roman nose. The skin pale, not ruddy, more the color of a contemporary Greek or Italian man, for whom he was repeatedly mistaken. And yet, Helmut was in fact half German and half Mexican, or at least *New Mexican*.

Only its practical implementation had been a distortion? The excessive digression of a few idiots? I must be going out of my mind! Of course, it can't be the same person. I should just forget about the whole thing. It's none of my business anyway.

There was a knock at his office, a converted small storage cubicle in the basement of Harkness Hall. Helmut glanced at the battered—yet still accurate—wall clock above his metal bookshelves. It was almost 1:00 p.m. Before he said a word, the door opened.

"Hi," said Ariane, her brunette hair shimmering against her olive skin.

"Let me just save this," Helmut said, punching his keyboard. He should stay and finish Hopfgartner's essay. The old man would surely be looking for him today.

"Missed you." She swooped down to kiss his cheek. "Forgot to shave this morning?" She rubbed his neck as he exited the word-processing program.

"No time to take a shower."

"So that's what that smell is."

"Thanks."

"You know I *love* it. Every last bit of it," she whispered into his ear and took a nip. A sudden spasm electrified his neck and shoulders; at once his back was rigid. Helmut stood up, pulled her gently against him, his hands on her hips, and imagined, in a lingering kiss, he was about to shatter like a statue of mica.

"Did I tell you the Eggman gave me a raise on Friday?" Ariane said as they walked on Chapel Street.

"That's great! I'm proud of you, I mean it." Helmut squeezed her hand. As they crossed the corner of High Street, at Yale's British Art Museum, a little boy approached them. His trousers were shredded at the ankles. He wore the few remaining threads of filthy high-top sneakers. On one cheek, the black skin suddenly switched to bright white, as if the boy had been burned and the skin grafts had not matched. This black-and-white boy was about eleven or twelve years

old. But what struck Helmut was how this chubby boy smiled shyly at them. A fat little boy alone.

Helmut and Ariane stepped inside Atticus Book Café. The little boy held out his hand and looked at the ground, as if Helmut's stare had been too forbidding. But many memories had simply been flooding Helmut's mind. Before the glass door slammed shut, Helmut stopped it with his heavy shoe, waved Ariane forward, and bent down to find the little boy's eyes. As the little boy grinned, Helmut took out a five-dollar bill and planted it in the small palm. Yet instead of feeling better, Helmut at once felt cheap and stupid. It was now much worse leaving the little boy in the street. It was much worse when the glass door shut between them.

Helmut and Ariane sat down at a table next to the section on European History and Philosophy, the air thick with the steamy aroma of cappuccino, blueberry muffins, ham-and-cheese croissants, and chamomile tea. The tables in the café section were half-full. The coffee bar was empty except for a young woman reading Thomas Mallory's *The Tales of King Arthur*.

"You know, that's how I looked when I was in grade school," Helmut said, glancing at the glass door. The little boy stood like a sentinel at the doorway, his back toward them, occasionally fingering something in his pocket. Suddenly he popped a handful of raisins or chocolates into his mouth.

"Like that?"

"Yeah, I was fat. Nobody liked me and I don't think I liked anybody either. Nobody likes you when you're fat. They tease you," Helmut said. "I can only imagine what it's like for him, with that face."

"Children can be cruel. I was teased because I looked like a horse. Or so they said. All arms and legs. Big nose. I was clumsy."

"In Germany, kids called me 'fat little brown turd.' Once, I was 'invited' to a birthday party, but when I arrived—my mother had dropped me off—they handed me a brush and a rag and said I was only there to clean bathrooms," Helmut said quietly. "They pinched my nipples and my butt. They chased me into the bathroom. I cried and cried— for hours, it seemed. Finally after the party was over, I heard a sharp knock at the door. It was Frau Schnell. She yelled at me for being an 'ugly little boy,' and told me to go home to 'your people.' Everybody can be cruel. Especially when you're not like them."

"That's awful. But you're not fat now."

"I know. But you never forget. Even when I'm old, I'll probably still think of myself as a fat little boy."

"Hey! Look," Ariane said, handing him a book off the shelf next to them. It was Werner Hopfgartner's treatise on Nietzsche and Heidegger. "Read it already?"

"Not really. You know, I'm not a bleeding heart." He flipped through the first few pages with little interest. "I don't think caring means giving money away. But nobody's going to take the time to help that boy. Where the hell are his parents? I won't help him either, I'm guilty too. I can hardly take care of myself."

"I'll take care of you, my sweet." She reached out to hold his hand, then took a bite of her muffin and drank her coffee.

"I loved being with you Saturday night," he said quietly, still feeling guilty and ashamed about all sorts of things. "You know, you're the best thing that's happened to me since I came here." He was a coward, he thought. Why couldn't he simply say to her, *I love you*. Was it too much? Was it saying something new, an irreversible step into an abyss?

"*You* were quite thrilling this weekend. Over two hours." Ariane's whisper was low and husky, and her big brown eyes opened wide and stared at him in mock astonishment. Her hair flickered between blue black and dark brown. The silky smooth skin of Ariane's oval face glowed warmly. Only her aquiline nose seemed out of place. Helmut and Ariane, in fact, looked like distant cousins from the same cluster of villages on the Mediterranean.

Helmut at once seemed lost in Ariane. The Florentine with a green card who made love like a jaguar. He really did love her. Without her, he'd be alone and unhappy. And it wasn't just the pleasure of their lovemaking. It was the whirlwind she created around her. This kindness mixed with steely determination. Ariane had assumed her place next to him, sure of what she wanted. She expected the rest of the world to play along with her or move aside. She was the way she was. Nothing hidden, yet still a surprise. She smiled at you and took you in but never seemed to lose her own self. He, however, was here and there and nowhere, in exile.

If Ariane was also a young immigrant trying to gain a foothold in the land and promise of America, why was Helmut Sanchez the one in exile? Over the many years, he had heard different, more complex versions of his fateful beginning, and filled in the rest with what his imagination. His mother, *née* Eva Sanchez, had insisted to her husband that their baby be an American citizen, especially after the German authorities had refused to give the couple a straight answer about whether their child was entitled to German citizenship. "Morons!" Mrs. Hirsch screamed, "Let those *cabrones* keep this stinking country to themselves! My son's an *American*, and damn proud of it too!" Johannes Hirsch didn't say much, embarrassed about this misunderstanding. He knew his wife's German was not more than a mishmash of German words, English phrases, and exasperated, virulent denunciations in Spanish, particularly when someone offended her pride. Quietly, without letting her know it until the very end, the dutiful Sergeant Hirsch had used his few military connections to speed up approval of little Helmut's German citizenship papers. So, by the time Helmut entered the *Gymnasium*, the fact that their son was a citizen of both Germany and the United States was almost forgotten. But instead of granting him an embarrassment of riches, this dubious beginning had bestowed upon Helmut the child, and now Helmut the young man, a sense of being adrift, away from home, in between two worlds.

After finishing his *Bakkalaureus der philosophischen Fakultät* in Freiburg, Helmut took a stab at determining his ambiguous homeland, once and for all. Perhaps it was another rash act in a series of such acts. But then again he knew he had to decide his future, and only that might bring him the chance of peace. So at his university graduation, Helmut renounced his German citizenship, changed his name to his mother's maiden name, and set off for America. After her. By this time, his father was already dead, inadvertently crushed by a Bradley Fighting Vehicle during routine NATO military exercises near Marburg. His mother had returned to New Mexico, begging Helmut to follow her when he was finished with school. What choice did he have? Helmut had to follow his mother. Eva Sanchez was the only real family he had left. His father's family was completely alien to him. But by chance, Helmut had landed in New Haven and discovered it wasn't so bad, after all, to be on your own. And so his mother was still waiting for him in the scenic Sacramento Mountains, increasingly frustrated by the son who was merely as impetuous as she had been.

"Helmut, *m'ijo*," she would plead to him, "You don't need a job on the *East Coast*. Come over here. You don't need to work at all. I've got plenty for both of us. It's so beautiful here. I've got *five acres*! Bear and deer are everywhere. Pine trees!

"Everyone here is beginning to think I lied about you. You know that? Pedrito told me the other day—he thought it was *funny*—that maybe I just paid some guy for his graduation pictures, for his pictures as a little boy! They don't think you exist, *m'ijo*! I'm beginning to have doubts too," she said over the phone, more resigned than ever to the stubborn independence of her son. Indeed, he had put himself in exile.

After lunch, at the southern entrance to Harkness Hall, Ariane wheeled around and kissed Helmut, leaning against him and almost toppling him over.

"I'm going in too," he said, his arms around her waist. Many thoughts invaded his mind. When could he say it simply, without *thinking* about it? He wanted to be with her, and he also wanted to be alone.

"Thought you were done for the day." She yanked open the oak slab of a door. Her biceps curled under her billowy blouse and then relaxed to a flat, taut surface of olive skin. They walked inside.

"I'm finishing some work for Hopfgartner. I'm dead if it's not done today."

"He's taking advantage of you, Helmut. You know that, don't you?"

"I promised to have it done today. I just want him off my back. Hardly have anything to do this summer while he's gone."

"Well, you deserve a break. Twenty hours a week! As far as I can tell, you're here mornings *and* afternoons."

"I'm not always doing his shit, you know. Sometimes I'm just reading."

"Just don't work too hard."

"Call you tonight," he said as he walked down the stairs into the dimly lit hallway that looked like a cave.

Helmut clicked on his computer, and while the virus scan skipped through the files, he started a pot of coffee. The basement offices felt empty. A pair of fluorescent tubes, in the middle of the basement hallway, pushed aside the darkness with a pulsating gray light. The only noise Helmut could hear was the faraway echo of an occasional slamming door one floor above. He imagined he was deep within the bowels of an almost deserted freighter that coursed and creaked across the sea. Who else was on this ship? Did they know he was here too? He left his door open. It was hot enough in this cramped space.

After two hours, Helmut was almost done touching up the Christa Wolf bibliography. There was one reference he'd have to check tomorrow at Sterling. Maybe Mr. Atwater could give him a hand. But the writing was finished, and Helmut could give it confidently to the old man for his final comments, and that would be that. In just under two weeks, Professor Hopfgartner would be in Europe, and Helmut would be more or less free for the first half of the summer. Free, except for *that*. Those pages in a blue folder. An odd and obscure little thing Helmut had almost forgotten about while he had been with Ariane. A couple of pages of German prose that had gripped his heart like a bloody, rotted hand from the grave. A curse, really.

A door banged shut at one end of the basement hallway. Only one final exam was in progress in the Harkness basement, and it had started two hours ago. Helmut heard quick, short footsteps on the linoleum floor. *She* walked by again, without so much as a glance into his open office. In her short black skirt and black blouse, she almost melted into the hallway darkness, except for her beautiful, young legs. Helmut heard her rap against the door next to his.

Was Werner Hopfgartner still here? Helmut had forgotten to check for a sliver of light underneath the professor's door when he returned from lunch. That had been careless of him. Helmut heard the professor's door open, and she walked in. She wasn't of course the *only* she, yet she was certainly the most exquisite: terribly young and tender, absolutely bold, not the least bit careful or doubtful or guilty. In a way, she reminded him of Ariane, and in a way she did not. Ariane Sassolini was loving and passionate, and not just voracious.

Helmut closed his door and locked it. He stepped beside the computer keyboard, saved his work, and turned the machine off. Murmurs now seemed to emanate from the wall he shared with the Jonathan P. Harkness Professor of Literature and Philosophy. He could occasionally hear a sentence or two through a ventilation grate on the wall a foot from the floor. He slid into his reading chair with a book on his lap. The blue folder was next to him. Wild thoughts consumed Helmut's mind like a fire. The professor and one of his conquests. The very best one.

"*Ja, meine Schöne, ja.*"

It comes to all of us from nowhere, this cursed evil. Why me? I am not even a part of that generation. I should simply stop reading these pages. Ignore them. None of my business at all. Let evil fuck up the world for all I care! Why should I give a damn? Please, dear God, what should I do? I'm sick of this feeble mind.

"Ach! Nein! Hier. Besser. Ja, viel besser, mein Liebling."

First I should find out the facts. I don't even know anybody's exact involvement. It could be a horrible mistake on my part. Should I tell Ariane about my suspicions? Maybe I should find out the truth first. Piece by piece. A methodical investigation. Certainly I'm good at that.

"Mein Gott! Mein Gott!"

What terrible rubbish! What abyss of words! It will never end even with my grandchildren. It was simply a nightmare. My blood. I can't escape that. But then, again, why escape? Why not confront and act now? I should at least find out who it really is. Exactly who. These words. The thought and prose of that nightmare. My God!

"Ja, ja, ja! Mein Gott! Ja! Mein Gott! Oh, mein lieber Gott!"

Helmut Sanchez carefully balanced the blue folder on his knee. The room was finally quiet. Slowly he read the German words. These carefully chosen words. The style rhythmic and assured. The logic clear, almost convincing, finally ghoulish. He heard a door slam shut, and the same hurried little footsteps stomped down the empty hallway again. After a few seconds, he heard a faraway door close like a muffled explosion. An echo.

When he had read "Why I Am Neither Guilty Nor Ashamed" for the first time this weekend, he had been expecting nothing out of the ordinary. But as one word led to another, and an idiotic thought connected to a dangerous one, Helmut couldn't believe his eyes. These *words*. He wanted to stop reading. He wanted to *will* himself back in time before he had ever set eyes on these words. He read the pages to the bitter end again, and put them in a blue folder. Maybe the utter shock of reading them was greater because Helmut had been expecting nothing when he had picked up the pages this past weekend. If you open a closet where your winter coats are stored for the season and find, instead, the red, wormy head of Mrs. Johnson from across the street, on a spike, then you, too, might be especially shocked out of your mind.

Helmut heard Hopfgartner's door close with a soft click. The knob was jiggled once and then twice to check the lock. And then more footsteps, plodding softly, nearly gliding, made their way down the hallway too. Did they almost pause in front of his door? Of course not. It was Helmut's imagination again. After a few minutes, he heard the faraway door close again.

These words more than thirty-five-years old. From an obscure literary journal. "Why I Am Neither Guilty Nor Ashamed." The language still evoking the bitter, copper stink of blood in the air. A fog of blood.

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