

One Sunday, in the late summer of 1937, an unusually violent thunderstorm swept over the mountains of the Salzkammergut. Until then, Franz Huchel's life had trickled along fairly uneventfully, but this thunderstorm was to give it a sudden turn that had far-reaching consequences. As soon as he heard the first distant rumble of thunder, Franz ran inside the little fisherman's cottage where he lived with his mother in the village of Nussdorf am Attersee and crawled into bed to listen to the unearthly racket from the safety of his warm and downy cave. The weather shook the hut on every side. The beams groaned, the shutters banged outside, and the wooden roof shingles, thickly overgrown with moss, flapped in the storm. Rain pelted against the windowpanes, driven by gusts of wind, and on the sills a few decapitated geraniums drowned in their tubs. The iron Jesus on the wall above the old clothes box wobbled as if at any moment he might tear himself from his nails and leap down from the cross and from the shore of the nearby lake came the crash of fishing boats slammed against their moorings by the pounding waves.

When the storm finally died down and a first tentative ray of sun quivered towards his bed across soot-blackened floorboards trodden by generations of heavy fishermen's boots, Franz felt a sudden small rush of contentment. He curled up

in a ball, then stuck his head out from under the quilt and looked around. The hut was still standing, Jesus still hung on the cross, and through the window, which was sprinkled with drops of water, a single geranium petal shone like a pale red ray of hope.

Franz crawled out of bed and went to the kitchen alcove to boil up a saucepan of coffee and creamy milk. The firewood under the stove had stayed dry, and it flared up like straw. For a while he sat staring into the bright, flickering flames, until the door flew open with a sudden crash. In the low doorframe stood his mother. Frau Huchel was a slender woman in her forties, still quite good-looking, though somewhat gaunt, like most of the local people: work in the surrounding salt mines or cattle sheds or the kitchens of the guesthouses for summer visitors took its toll. She just stood there, panting, one hand resting on the doorpost, head slightly bowed. Her apron stuck to her body; tangled strands of hair hung down over her forehead, and drops of water were forming and falling one by one from the tip of her nose. Behind her the peak of the Schafberg reared up ominously against the grey, cloud-covered sky, in which blue flecks were already reappearing here and there. Franz was reminded of the lopsided, oddly carved Madonna that someone in the olden days had nailed to the doorframe of the Nussdorf chapel, and which was now weathered almost beyond all recognition.

‘Did you get wet, Mama?’ he asked, poking about in the

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fire with a green twig. His mother raised her head, and then he saw that she was crying. The tears mingled with rainwater, and her shoulders were heaving.

‘What’s happened?’ he asked in alarm, shoving the twig into the smoking fire. His mother didn’t answer; instead, she pushed herself off the doorframe and took a few unsteady steps towards him, only to stop again in the middle of the room. For a moment she seemed to look around, as if searching for something; then she raised her hands in a gesture of helplessness and fell forward onto her knees.

Franz stepped forward hesitantly, placed his hand on her head, and started awkwardly stroking her hair.

‘What’s happened?’ he repeated hoarsely. He felt suddenly strange, and stupid. Until now it had been the other way round: he had cried, and his mother had stroked him. Her head felt delicate and fragile under his palm; he could feel the warm pulse beneath her scalp.

‘He’s drowned,’ she said quietly.

‘Who?’

‘Preininger.’

Franz paused. He rested his hand on her head for a few moments longer, then withdrew it. His mother brushed the strands of hair off her forehead. She stood up, took a corner of her apron and wiped her face with it.

‘You’re filling the whole cottage with smoke!’ she said, pulling the green twig out of the stove and stoking the fire.

Alois Preininger was by his own account the richest man in the Salzkammergut. In fact he was only the third richest; this annoyed him intensely, but it had made him the man he was, notoriously ambitious and pig-headed. He owned a few hectares of forest and pasture, a sawmill, a paper factory, the last four fisheries in the area, an unknown number of plots of land, large and small, around the lake, with the buildings upon them, as well as two ferries, a pleasure steamer, and the only automobile in a radius of more than four kilometres: a magnificent, claret-coloured Steyr-Daimler-Puch. The latter, however, whiled away its time in a rusty tin hut on account of the roads, which were constantly streaming with the incessant rain typical of the Salzkammergut.

Alois Preininger's sixty years didn't show. He was still in the prime of life. He loved himself, his home region, good food, strong drink, and beautiful women — though beauty was subjective, and therefore relative. Essentially, he loved all women, because he found all women beautiful. He had met Franz's mother years earlier at the big lake festival. She was standing beneath the old linden tree wearing a sky-blue dress, and her calves were as light brown, smooth and flawless as the wooden steering wheel of the claret-coloured Steyr-Daimler-Puch. He ordered fresh grilled fish, a jug of cider and a bottle of kirsch, and as they ate and drank they didn't even try not to look at each other. Shortly afterwards they danced the polka, later even waltzes, and whispered little secrets in each other's

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ears. They walked arm in arm around a lake dotted with stars, found themselves unexpectedly in the tin hut, and then in the back of the Steyr-Daimler-Puch. The back seat was sufficiently broad, the leather soft, the shock absorbers well oiled: all in all, the night was a success. From then on they met frequently in the hut. Their meetings were brief, explosive, and free of all demands or expectations. For Frau Huchel, however, these pleasantly sweaty encounters on the back seat had an additional side effect that was perhaps even slightly more pleasant: punctually at the end of each month a cheque for a not inconsiderable sum of money fluttered into the Nussdorf savings bank. This regular windfall enabled her to move into the former fisherman's cottage right by the lake, to eat a hot meal once a day, and to take the bus to Bad Ischl twice a year and treat herself to a hot chocolate in Café Esplanade and a couple of metres of linen for a new dress from the draper's next door. For her son Franz, on the other hand, the advantage of Alois Preininger's affectionate generosity was that, unlike all the other young lads, he didn't have to spend the whole day crawling around a salt mine or a dung heap somewhere, earning a meagre living. Instead, he could stroll about the forest from dawn till dusk, bare his belly to the sun on one of the wooden jetties, or simply lie in bed when the weather was bad and lose himself in thoughts and dreams. All that was over now, though.

As had been his habit for almost forty years — interrupted only by a very few adverse events, such as the First World War

or the big fire at the sawmill — Alois Preininger had spent this Sunday morning at the regulars' table at the Goldener Leopold inn, where he had partaken of roast venison with red cabbage and sliced bread dumplings, as well as eight pints of beer and four glasses of double-distilled schnapps. He had held forth in his deep vibrato bass, making all sorts of important comments about maintaining Upper Austrian customs and traditions, about the Bolshevism that was spreading through Europe like scabies, about the idiotic Jews, the even more idiotic French, and the almost limitless opportunities for development in the tourist industry. At about midday, as he was finally staggering home, rather sleepy, along the path beside the shore, all around him was oddly silent. There were no birds to be seen, no insects to be heard, and even the bluebottles that had buzzed about his sweaty, gleaming neck back at the inn had disappeared. The sky hung heavy over the lake; the surface of the water was completely smooth. Not even the reeds were moving. It was as if the air had congealed and encased the whole landscape in motionless silence. Alois was reminded of the jellied pork at the Goldener Leopold: he should have ordered that, not the roast venison, which was sitting in his stomach like a brick, despite the schnapps. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve and gazed out over the expanse of water that extended before him, blue-black and soft as silk. Then he took off his clothes.

The water was pleasantly cool. Alois swam with calm strokes,

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exhaling into the dark, mysterious depths below him. He had more or less reached the middle of the lake when the first drops fell, and after another fifty metres it was already bucketing down. A steady pattering lay on the surface of the water: hammering drops, thick cords of rain connecting the blackness of the sky to the blackness of the lake. The wind picked up and quickly turned into a storm, whipping the waves into foamy crests. A first flash of lightning momentarily bathed the lake in unreal, silvery light. The thunder was deafening, crashes that seemed to tear the world apart. Alois laughed out loud and thrashed his arms and legs wildly. He shouted with delight. Never had he felt so alive. The water around him was bubbling, the sky above him collapsing, but he was alive. He was alive! He thrust his torso out of the water and crowed up at the clouds. At precisely that moment a bolt of lightning struck his head. An incandescent brightness filled the inside of his skull, and for a fraction of a second he had something like a premonition of eternity. Then his heart stopped, and with an expression of astonishment, and wrapped in a shroud of delicately glistening bubbles, he sank to the bottom of the lake.

The funeral took place in the Nussdorf parish cemetery and was well attended. Many people from the area had come to bid farewell to Alois Preininger. Above all, a conspicuous number of black-veiled women gathered around the grave. There was a great deal of weeping and sobbing, and Horst Zeitlmaier, the

longest-serving foreman at the sawmill, placed the three finger stumps of his right hand on his breast and wrung out a few words in a trembling voice. 'Preininger was a good man,' he said. 'As far as we know, he never stole from or cheated anyone. And he loved his home like no other. Even as a small boy he always liked to jump into the lake. Last Sunday it was for the very last time. Now he's with God, and we wish him well. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, amen!'

'Amen!' replied the others. 'And he still had such an appetite!' someone whispered, and those standing around nodded sorrowfully. A choked sob was heard from beneath one of the black veils, a few words were exchanged here and there; then the crowd dispersed.

On the way home, Franz's mother lifted her veil and blinked, red-eyed, at the sunshine. The lake lay quiet, shimmering dully. In the shallow water a heron stood motionless, waiting for the next fish. On the far shore one of the ferries hooted to announce its departure. The Schafberg stood behind it like a painting, and swallows darted through the clear air.

'Preininger's gone,' she said, placing her hand on Franz's arm, 'and the times aren't getting any better. Something's in the air.' Franz instinctively looked up at the sky, but there was nothing there. His mother sighed. 'You're seventeen already,' she said. 'But you still have such delicate hands. Delicate and soft and white, like a girl's. A boy like you can't work in the forest. Certainly not on the lake. And the summer visitors wouldn't

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know what to make of you, either.’ They had stopped walking; her hand lay light and warm on his arm. The ferry had cast off and began to pound slowly across the lake.

‘I’ve been having a bit of a think, Franzl,’ said his mother. ‘There’s this old friend of mine. He spent a summer splashing around in the lake with us once, many years ago. Otto Trsnyek’s his name. And this Otto Trsnyek owns a tobacconist’s, right in the heart of Vienna. A proper tobacconist’s, with newspapers, cigarettes and all the trimmings. That’s already something, and what makes it even better is that he owes me a favour.’

‘What for?’

His mother shrugged and plucked at a fold in her veil with her fingertips. ‘It was a hot summer that year, and we were young and foolish . . .’

On the shore the heron suddenly lifted its head, stabbed the air twice with its beak, spread its wings and took off. They watched it fly for a while until eventually it descended and vanished behind the line of reeds.

‘Don’t worry, Franz, this was long before you fell into my lap,’ she said. ‘Anyway, I wrote to him. Otto Trsnyek. To see if he had any work for you.’

‘And?’

Instead of answering, his mother reached into her black knitted jacket and took out an official-looking slip of paper. It was a telegram in neat blue capitals: THE BOY CAN COME STOP BUT DONT EXPECT TOO MUCH STOP THANKS STOP OTTO STOP

‘And what does that mean?’ asked Franz.

‘It means you’re off to Vienna tomorrow!’

‘Tomorrow? But I can’t . . .’ he stammered, aghast. A moment later his mother wordlessly slapped his face. The blow caught him so suddenly he staggered sideways.

The next day Franz was sitting in the early train to Vienna. To save money he and his mother had walked the thirteen kilometres to Timelkam station. The train was on time, their leave-taking brief; everything was already said and done, after all. She kissed him on the forehead; he acted a bit grumpy, nodded to her and boarded the train. As the old diesel locomotive picked up speed, Franz craned his head out of the window and saw his waving mother on the platform grow smaller and smaller until she finally disappeared altogether, a faint speck in the summer morning light. He fell back in his seat, closed his eyes and exhaled until he grew slightly dizzy. He had left the Salzkammergut only twice in his life. Once they had gone to Linz to buy a suit for his first day of elementary school, and another time there’d been a class trip to Salzburg where the students had listened to a dreary brass concert and spent the rest of the day stumbling around the ancient walls. But those were merely excursions. ‘This is something different,’ he said quietly to himself. ‘Something completely and utterly different!’ In his mind’s eye the future appeared like the line of a far distant shore materializing out of the morning fog: still

a little blurred and unclear, but promising and beautiful, too. And all of a sudden everything felt somehow light and agreeable. It was as if much of his body weight had remained behind with the hazy figure of his mother on Timelkam Station platform. Now Franz was sitting in the train compartment, almost weightless, feeling the rhythmic juddering of the sleepers beneath his seat and hurtling towards Vienna at the unimaginable speed of eighty kilometres an hour.

An hour and a half later, when the train emerged from the Alpine foothills and the broad, bright, hilly landscape of Lower Austria opened up before him, Franz had already consumed the entire contents of the pack of maternal provisions and felt, once again, as heavy as he always did.

The journey passed without notable incident; in fact, it was rather boring. The train had to make only one unscheduled stop, on the stretch between Amstetten and Böheimkirchen. A violent jolt passed through the carriages and they rapidly lost speed. Items of luggage tumbled down from the nets, there was an ear-splitting screech, cursing and shouting all around, then another jolt, even more violent than the first — and the train came to a halt. The train driver had had to hang his entire body weight from the cast iron brake lever as a large, dark, heaped-up sort of object — a suspicious one, at any rate — had suddenly appeared on the tracks a short way ahead. ‘Probably the Socialists again,’ growled the ticket inspector as he hurried through the carriages to the front of

the train, ticket pad flapping. ‘Or the National Socialists! Or whatever — they’re all the same riffraff!’

It soon became clear, however, that the suspicious object was just an old cow that had chosen to die on the tracks of the western railway, of all places, and now lay heavy and stinking on the sleepers. With the help of some of the passengers (and closely observed by Franz, who stood at a safe distance with his soft girl’s hands clasped behind his back), they managed to drag the cadaver off the tracks. The cow’s dark eyes shimmered beneath a mad crawl of flies. Franz was reminded of the glistening stones he had so often collected from the shore of the lake as a boy and carried home in the bulging pockets of his trousers. Every time he shook the trousers out over the cottage floor he had been surprised by a twinge of disappointment as the stones rolled dull and dry across the floorboards, their enigmatic lustre gone.

When the train finally pulled into Vienna West Station, only two hours late, and Franz stepped out of the station concourse into the bright midday light, his little moment of melancholy had long since passed. Instead, he suddenly felt slightly sick and had to hang on to the post of the nearest gas lamp. How embarrassing if the first thing you do is pass out in front of everyone, he thought crossly. Just like the pasty-faced summer visitors: year after year, scores of them would collapse on the grass, stricken with heatstroke, soon after arriving at the lake and would have to be revived by good-humoured locals

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with a bucket of water or a slap or two. He clung even tighter to the lamppost, closed his eyes and didn't move until he could feel the pavement safe beneath his feet again, and the reddish spots slowly pulsing across his field of vision had dissolved. When he opened his eyes again, he gave a short, startled laugh. It was overwhelming. The city seethed like the vegetable stew on Mother's stove. Everything was in constant motion; even the walls and streets seemed alive, breathing, bulging. It was as if one could hear the groaning of cobblestones and the grinding of bricks. The noise — there was an incessant roaring in the air, an incomprehensible jumble of sounds, tones and rhythms that peeled away, flowed into each other, drowned each other out, shouted, bellowed over each other. And the light. Everywhere a flickering, a sparkling, flashing and shining: windows, mirrors, advertising signs, flagpoles, belt buckles, spectacle lenses. Cars rattled past. A truck. A dragonfly-green motorcycle. Another truck. A tram rounded the corner with a piercing ring of the bell. A shop door was wrenched open, car doors slammed. Someone trilled the first few bars of a popular melody but broke off halfway through the chorus. Someone cursed hoarsely. A woman screeched like a hen being slaughtered. Yes, thought Franz, in a daze: this is something different. Something completely and utterly different. And at that moment he became aware of the stench. Something seemed to be fermenting beneath the pavement, and all sorts of vapours hovered above it. It smelled of sewage, of urine, of

cheap perfume, old fat, burned rubber, diesel, horseshit, cigarette smoke, road tar.

‘Are you feeling unwell, young man?’ A little lady stood in front of Franz, looking up at him with red, inflamed eyes. Despite the midday heat she wore a heavy loden coat, and a shabby fur hat on her head.

‘No, no!’ said Franz quickly. ‘It’s just so noisy in the city. And it stinks a bit. I suppose it’s the canal.’

The little lady pointed her forefinger at him, like a withered twig.

‘It’s not the canal that stinks,’ she said. ‘It’s the times. Rotten times, that’s what they are. Rotten, corrupt and degenerate!’

On the other side of the street a horse and cart rumbled past, piled high with beer barrels. One of the massive Pinzgauers arched its tail and let fall a few droppings, which a scrawny boy, trotting along behind purely for this purpose, scraped up with his bare hands and stuffed into the sack on his shoulder.

‘Have you come from far away?’ asked the little lady.

‘From home.’

‘That’s very far. The best thing you can do is turn around and go straight back!’

A vein in her left eye had burst and expanded into a rosy triangle. Tiny clumps of coal dust were stuck to her eyelashes.

‘Nonsense!’ said Franz. ‘There’s no going back, and anyway, one can get used to anything.’

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He turned and walked off, crossed the ring road in heavy traffic, dodged a speeding omnibus at the very last moment, sprang lightly over a puddle of horse piss and turned into Mariahilferstrasse, the street across from the station, just as his mother had told him. When he looked behind him, the little lady was still standing by the streetlamp at the entrance to the station, a loden-green dwarf with an outsize head and sunlight glowing in the fine tips of her fur hat.

Otto Trsnyek's little tobacconist's shop was in Vienna's ninth district, on Währingerstrasse, squeezed in between Veithammer Installations and the Rosshuber butcher's. A large metal sign above the entrance read:

Trsnyek Tobacconist's

Newspapers

Stationery

Tobacco Products

est. 1919

Franz smoothed his hair with a little saliva, buttoned his shirt right up to the collar, which he felt lent him a certain air of seriousness, took a deep breath and entered the shop. A soft tinkle of little bells sounded from the doorframe above his head. Hardly any light made it into the interior through the posters, leaflets and advertisements that almost completely covered

the shop window, and it took a few seconds for Franz's eyes to adjust to the gloom. The store itself was tiny and crammed to the ceiling with newspapers, magazines, notebooks, books, writing utensils, cigarette packets, cigar boxes and various other tobacco products, items of writing equipment and small goods. Behind the low sales counter, between two tall stacks of newspapers, sat an older man. His head was bent over a file, and he was entering figures, carefully and with great concentration, into columns and boxes clearly designated for this purpose. A muffled quiet filled the room; the only sound was the scratch of pen nib on paper. Dust glimmered in the few narrow rays of light, and there was a strong smell of tobacco, paper and printer's ink.

'Hello, Franzl,' said the man, without looking up from his numbers. He said it quietly, but in those cramped surroundings the words were surprisingly clear.

'How do you know who I am?'

'You've still got half the Salzkammergut stuck to your feet!' The man pointed his fountain pen at Franz's shoes, where a few clumps of dark earth clung to the stitching around the toes.

'And you're Otto Trsnyek.'

'Precisely.' With a weary wave of his hand Otto Trsnyek closed his file and slipped it into a drawer. Then he hauled himself out of his little armchair, disappeared behind the pile of newspapers with a peculiar hop, and came straight back out again with two crutches under his armpits. As far as Franz

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could tell, all that remained of his left leg was half a thigh. The trouser leg was sewn up in a flap that dangled below the stump and swung back and forth slightly with every movement. Otto Trsnyek lifted one of the crutches and with a circular, almost tender gesture indicated the range of products in the store.

‘And these are my acquaintances. My friends. My family. If I could, I’d keep them all.’ He leaned his crutches against the counter and ran the back of his hand softly over the covers of the colourful, shiny magazines on one of the shelves. ‘But still I give them out, every week, every day, at all hours, from opening to closing. And do you know why?’

Franz didn’t know.

‘Because I’m a tobacconist. Because I want to be a tobacconist. And because I’ll always be a tobacconist. Until I can’t do it any more. Until the good Lord rolls down my shutters. It’s that simple!’

‘Aha,’ said Franz.

‘Precisely,’ said Otto Trsnyek. ‘And how’s your mother?’

‘Same as ever, really. She said to send you her regards.’

‘Thanks,’ said Otto Trsnyek. And then he initiated his apprentice into the secrets of the tobacconist’s life.

Franz’s main workplace would be the little stool by the front door. He was to sit there quietly (when there was nothing more urgent to do), not talk, wait for instructions, and otherwise work on extending his mind and horizons, which was to say: read newspapers. Because reading newspapers was the

only important, the only meaningful and relevant part of being a tobacconist; furthermore, if you didn't read newspapers it meant you weren't a tobacconist, or even that you weren't really human. However, the proper reading of newspapers could not, of course, be understood simply as a quick leaf-through of one or maybe two miserable tabloids. The correct reading of newspapers, equally extending both mind and horizon, encompassed *all* the newspapers on the market (and therefore also in the shop), if not from cover to cover then at least in greater part, meaning: front page, editorial, the most important columns, the most important commentaries, and the most important reports in the sections Politics (Domestic and Foreign), Regional, Economy, Science, Sport, Arts, Society, and so on. It was a well-known fact that the sale of newspapers constituted the core business of every serious tobacconist's, and the customer, or rather the newspaper buyer — insofar as he was not one of the many who, for intellectual or emotional or political reasons, were regular readers of a particular publication — wanted the newsagent to advise and inform him accordingly, and if necessary guide him, with gentle emphasis, or emphatic gentleness, towards the paper that on this day, at this hour, in this mood, was the only appropriate one for him, the customer, the reader, the newspaper buyer. Had Franz understood this properly?

Franz nodded.

Then there were the tobacco products. With cigarettes it

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was pretty easy. Any country bumpkin who happened to come along from the Salzkammergut or wherever it might be and accidentally bumped into a tobacconist's could sell cigarettes. Cigarettes were to a tobacconist what bread rolls were to a baker. Everyone knew that you didn't buy either bread rolls or cigarettes for their taste or the way they looked; the only reason you bought them was because you were hungry or addicted. And with that you'd said and noted pretty much everything you needed to know about the sale of both bread rolls and cigarettes. Cigars, now, were a very different matter — *very* different! Only by selling cigars could a serious tobacconist's become the perfect tobacconist's; only the aroma, the scent, the taste and flavour of a proper range of cigars transformed a standard newspaper kiosk with smoking accessories into a temple of mind and senses. Could Franz follow all that, more or less?

Franz nodded and sat down on his stool.

The problem, said Otto Trsnjek, glancing sadly at the wall rack packed tightly with boxes of cigarettes all the way up to the ceiling — the big problem for the cigar business (and for many other things as well, incidentally) was politics. Politics always messed up absolutely everything, so it didn't really make much difference whose fat bum currently occupied the seat of government — the late Kaiser, the dwarf Dollfuss, his apprentice Schuschnigg or that megalomaniac Hitler across the border — politics messed up, screwed up, fouled up and dumbed down absolutely everything, and basically ruined it one way

or another. The cigarette trade, for example. Especially, and above all, the cigarette trade! There were hardly any cigarettes to be had any more these days! Deliveries got held up; they'd become unreliable and unpredictable; the amount of stock varied hugely, with a steady downward trend; the contents of some of the boxes had been sold weeks and months ago: the boxes were just sitting there empty, as decoration, a sort of sad memento of better days!

'That's how it is and no mistake,' said Otto Trsnyek, observing Franz thoughtfully. Then he took his crutches, swung himself back behind the counter with a couple of hops, took his file out of the drawer, stuck the tip of his tongue between his front teeth and went on scratching away at his accounts.

From that day on Franz appeared in Otto Trsnyek's tobacconist's at precisely six a.m. every day. He had been given the little storeroom at the back of the shop as his living-, bath- and bedroom, so the journey to work was pleasantly short. He himself was surprised by how fresh he felt in the mornings; he would leap up from his mattress, put on his clothes, brush his teeth over the metal washbasin, run his wet fingers through his hair and head out front to start work. For the most part he spent the mornings reading the newspapers on his little stool beside the door without too many interruptions. Under Otto Trsnyek's direction he would stack up a pile of fresh morning papers and set about reading them one after the other. To begin with the

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work was arduous, and as he read he was often so tired he had to pull himself together in order not to topple onto the floor. There had hardly ever been any proper newspapers back home, with the exception of the monthly Nussdorf parish newsletter, which the mayor's wife wrote herself. The only place where there was always a little pile of newspaper was in the privy next to the elder bush behind the cottage, ripped by his mother into handy squares. Franz had from time to time read a headline, a sentence or two, perhaps even half a paragraph before wiping, but had never derived much benefit from this. Back then, world events had slipped through his hands and under his bottom without ever touching his soul. Now, it seemed, this was changing. Although for the first few days he made very slow progress, he soon grew accustomed to the reporting style, which was usually rather stilted with many clumsy, recurring formulations; he even found himself increasingly capable of extracting the meaning from the various different articles. Finally, after a few weeks, he was able to read the newspapers almost fluently; if not from cover to cover, then at least in greater part. And although their different, sometimes even diametrically opposed views and positions thoroughly confused him, he also derived a certain degree of pleasure from his reading. It was an inkling that he could sense rustling among all those printed letters, a little inkling of the possibilities of the world.

Sometimes he would set the papers aside and take a cigar out of one of the many brightly painted wooden boxes. He

would turn it in all directions, hold it up against a chink of light from the display window, examine its brittle, leafy skin with the tips of his fingers and, eyes closed, pass it under his nostrils and sniff it. Each brand had its own particular smell, yet they all had this in common: they bore within them the aroma of a world beyond the tobacconist's, Währingerstrasse, the city of Vienna, beyond even this country and the whole wide continent. They smelled of damp black earth, of giant trees mouldering away in silence, of the roars of predators filling the jungle darkness with longing, of the even greater longing in the songs of Negro slaves that rose up from the shimmering heat of the tobacco plantations into the equatorial sky.

‘A bad cigar tastes like horseshit,’ said Otto Trsnyek, ‘a good one like tobacco. A *very* good cigar, on the other hand, tastes like the world!’

He himself, incidentally, was a non-smoker.

Over the first few weeks Franz got to know the clientele. There were a lot of casual customers, harried individuals who came running in, breathlessly panted their requests, ran back out and were seldom or never seen again, but the majority were regulars. Since being granted the tobacconist's shop a year after the end of the war under the compensation law for invalids, Otto Trsnyek had established himself as a permanent fixture in the Alsergrund. None of the locals had known him as a young man. He had simply appeared one day, swinging down

Währingerstrasse on his crutches; he had put up the big metal sign outside the shop and the chimes above the door, sat down behind the sales counter, and been part of the district ever since, like the Votive Church or Veithammer Installations.

‘Watch the customers. Make a mental note of their habits and preferences. A tobacconist’s memory is his capital!’ he told Franz.

Franz did his best. To begin with he found it difficult to match people to their particular habits and desires, but day by day the connections became clearer. Little by little the chaotic, formless mass of customers began to crystallize into individuals with their own peculiarities, until eventually Franz was even able to greet them by name and use the appropriate title — which in Vienna was absolutely essential. There was, for example, Frau Dr. Dr. Heinzl, who would not even have recognized the university building and had certainly never been inside it. Frau Dr. Dr. Heinzl had been married twice, once to a Jewish dentist and later to a lawyer who on their wedding day was already as old as the hills. Both gentlemen followed the majority of Viennese in making their final journey to the Central Cemetery: their doctorates and titles, however, remained, and were proudly borne thereafter by the widow Heinzl. She wore a bluish wig, fanned her face constantly — even in winter — with a pair of salmon-coloured silk gloves, and ordered a copy of the *Wiener Zeitung* and the *Reichspost* every day in a slightly nasal, aristocratic tone of voice. However, the

first customer of the day was the retired parliamentary usher, Kommerzialrat Ruskovetz. Herr Ruskovetz came every morning just after opening time, accompanied by his incontinent dachshund, and asked for the *Wiener Journal* and a packet of Gloriettes. Sometimes he and the tobacconist exchanged a few words about the lousy weather or the idiotic government, while the dachshund left yellowish drops on the floorboards. It was Franz's responsibility to wipe them up afterwards with a damp rag. In the mornings the labourers came crashing in, picked up the *Volksblatt* or the *Kleine Blatt* and asked to buy loose cigarettes, which Otto Trsnyek fished out of a preserving glass and counted into their callused hands. Although some of them already smelled of beer first thing, and they brought in quite a lot of muck from outside on their clumpy shoes, Franz liked the labourers. They didn't talk much, had angular faces, and were generally like the dusty brothers of the forestry workers back home. Then, around midday, the pensioners and students came. The pensioners asked for the *Österreichische Woche*, the students bought a couple of Egyptian cigarettes, plus the *Wiener Zeitung*, writing paper, and the latest satirical magazines. Old Herr Löwenstein appeared in the early afternoon for one or two packets of Gloriettes. After that it was housewife time. The housewives smelled either of cleaning fluid or cherry liqueur; they talked a lot and asked a lot of questions, and in between they requested the *Kleiner Frauenblatt* or other magazines of interest to the modern woman. Herr Kollerer, a

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very short-sighted justice department official, dropped in and bought his daily Long Heinrich, a thin, long-stemmed cigarillo, as well as one copy each of the *Bauernbündler* and the *Wienerwald-Bote*. At irregular intervals Red Egon came into the shop. Red Egon was an alcoholic, well-known in the neighbourhood, and — although the party was banned — a Social Democrat who publicly declared his allegiance at every opportunity and at the top of his voice. He was a gaunt figure with a glowering expression, but somewhere behind his high forehead there burned a fire that never seemed to cool. Scarcely had he pushed open the door than he began talking of revolutions, uprisings, upheavals, takeovers that were already well underway somewhere: they would smash this capitalist society, which was built on mountains of the pulverized bones of the worn-down, broken-down, ground-down working classes and thoroughly deserved its downfall. After this he usually stared gloomily at the shelves for a while, eventually decided on a pack of filterless, paid and left. Schoolchildren would tumble in, asking for coloured pencils or the little cards they collected; old ladies wanted to chat; old men wanted peace and quiet, and to look at the magazine covers in silence. Sometimes one of the male customers would ask, in a hoarse voice, if he could take a look in ‘the drawer’. This was a certain inconspicuous drawer located under the sales counter that Otto Trsnyek was always careful to keep locked, and which was only ever opened at a customer’s specific request. The drawer contained so-called

‘erotic magazines’ (which the tobacconist referred to as ‘wank mags’ or ‘stroke books’ when talking to Franz); they had been strictly forbidden for years. The men would leaf through them for a while, trying to maintain as uninterested an expression as possible; they might then take away one or two pamphlets, which Franz would wrap in brown paper to safeguard them from prying eyes.

‘A good tobacconist doesn’t just sell tobacco and paper,’ said Otto Trsnyek, scratching his stump with the top of his fountain pen. ‘A good tobacconist sells enjoyment and pleasure — and sometimes the pleasures are guilty ones!’

One card a week, no more and no less, that was the agreement. ‘Franzl,’ his mother had said the night before his departure, gently stroking his cheek with the back of her forefinger, ‘send me a postcard every week, won’t you, because a mother needs to know how her child is doing!’

‘All right,’ Franz had said.

‘But they have to be proper picture postcards. The kind with the pretty photos on them. I’ll use them to paper over the patch of mould above the bed, and whenever I look at them I’ll always be able to imagine where you are!’

In a corner next to the window display there was a small rack with a colourful selection of greetings cards and picture postcards stacked one above the other. Every Friday afternoon Franz would stand in front of it and select one. Most of

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them showed one of the famous sights of Vienna: St Stephen's Cathedral in the rosy morning light, the Giant Ferris Wheel under the stars, the opera house, splendidly illuminated, and so on. He almost always opted for a card with a picture that included a park or flowerbed, or at the very least flowerboxes outside the windows of houses. Perhaps the greenery and colours might cheer his mother up a bit in hours of rainy solitude, he thought. Besides, they went better with the patch of mould. He wrote a few lines, and his mother wrote a few lines, and each of them would actually have preferred to speak to the other, or at least to sit quietly beside them listening to the reeds. *My dear Franzl, how are you, dear Mother, well, thank you, the weather's good here, the weather's good here too actually, there's lots to see in the city, there isn't in Nussdorf but that's all right, I'm enjoying the work, the moss needs scraping off the cottage again, with love from your Mama, love from me too, your Franz.* They were calls from home to foreign parts and back again, like the brief touch of a hand, fleeting and warm. Franz put his mother's cards in the drawer of his nightstand and watched the pile grow week by week, lots of little shining Attersees. Sometimes, on quiet evenings, just before he fell asleep, he would hear the lake gurgling softly in the drawer. But that may have been his imagination.