

Charlotte Roth

# The World Is One Big Story and We All Play a Part

Michael Ende – A Novel of a Life

Novel



*Translated by Steve Anderson*

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

A novel is a novel—and making things up is helpful at times for showing past events that are in hiding. To gain a look at the inner world, a novelist combines the facts of external life with fictional composites. I've altered the historical chronology here and there in this story. For the sake of dramatization, I've consolidated events, switched their locations and times, embellished, emphasized, and shortened. So let me point out again explicitly that this book is a novel. Not a biography. I'd very much like that people recognize Michael Ende in it—or even themselves. It was never my aim, however, to make all of the facts readily apparent and easy to look up, because as I said: This book is a novel.

For Michael E.,  
who can be a friend that you encounter  
when you've never even known him

E per te,  
Papà.  
Perché non c'era più tempo per farti  
vedere Genzano?

*“The world is one big story and we all play a part.”*  
—*Momo*, Michael Ende

# WARM-UP ON THE FORESTAGE

*You can't go the right way for very long  
on a steamship going the wrong way.*  
—Zettelkasten (Box of Notes), Michael Ende

Train to Garmisch,  
Autumn 1928

# 1

Trains, trains.

Crossing the length of this land that still calls itself a Reich even though it both proudly and desperately insists on being a Republic. Edgar cares little for squabbles. Politics crams the head full like frantic hands crumpling paper into balls and pressing them down in overflowing wastebaskets until nothing is left recognizable—no words, no pictures, no thoughts. He can't deal with such things. He needs his head as empty as a fully erased sheet of his sketchpad. Only in such a void is he able to draw. Only in such a void does the hope exist for something to sneak in and let itself be captured. If he's quick about it. If everything lines up just right. If he's having a good day and nothing and no one blocks his way. Otherwise he must let go of those taciturn creatures, those vague visions, and wait for new ones.

This is why he likes his trip aboard trains. Because nothing remains for long. Because everything coming into view wipes itself clean again on its own instead of clogging up his convoluted brain. Because he's already forgotten it once he steps off and onto the next train. Believing he's forgotten it. The truth is, it's somewhere lying in wait to rise out of oblivion, altered, distorted and shrouded in mystery, and that's exactly how he wants it. He's taken four different trains since Hamburg-Altona, where he spent his first twenty-eight years of life with hardly any notable disruption. This train now, the local line from Munich to Garmisch, is his fifth.

You ride comfortably aboard. And the view—this dragon's back of mountains so violently unfurled from the earth—is fantastic. Edgar likes this word, likes it too much to use it more often. *Fantastic*. It works for anything possessing too much force and freedom and magic to be squashed along that narrow cliff's edge that people concede is reality. To most people, the fantastical is a fake and a fraud. To Edgar though it can't be separated from the real, as far as he can tell, no matter if it's a white sleeping

dragon inhabiting those mountains out there or a phenomenon of natural science. Both exist, to Edgar's mind. As do plenty of other things. But that all gets to be too much for people, so they continue flogging away along that straight and narrow cliff's edge of theirs.

People—Edgar has a problem with them, to be honest. Here on the train they're consuming their sausage rolls that make a smacking sound when bitten into and spray drops of saliva and crumbs from all the excitement.

"Are you on the way to Garmisch?"

"I am, yes, a charming little spot, used to be so lovely for relaxing. Yet these days a peaceful citizen has no idea what to expect anymore."

Edgar has brought a book to read, Rudolf Steiner's *The Riddle of Man*, but he doesn't want to unpack it here in this compartment. The book might frighten people like their sausage roll-sounds do him.

He sometimes likes to draw a dividing line separating the "human beings" from the "people" that he can retreat behind. That's because he understands the former and not the latter. Maybe he doesn't really understand either, but at least he can dare to circulate among the human beings. He is considered gregarious. "So, my man about town," his brother Helmuth calls him, being one himself. With or without him Edgar hits the artists' bars, opening receptions and studio parties because conversing with human beings fuels him despite his dread for people. He feels attracted to human beings—to some so much so that it makes him addicted, that he must stick close to their heels like a panting hound on the scent.

*Elis. Elis.*

Her name—stressed on the second syllable—rattles around in his head like the rhythm the train's keeping: *rah-tahm, rah-tahm; E-lis, E-lis*. Elis is a human being in the same way that these mountains flashing outside the train window are mountains. There's no jolting them, nor is there Elis. He met her in the Hamburg Kunsthalle, in the Contemporary European Art exhibit



where she came to have a look around with her clear head and alert eyes. Seventeen years old. Others will reach seventy with their eyes knowing nothing but sleep.

Her parents had the honor as well, the Herr Councilor of Commerce together with wife, there not to look around but to dictate to their Fräulein daughter what ought to be seen and what not. Pictures by young Herr Ende ought not to be, it went without saying. Surrealism: An elegantly overblown word for subversive scribblings.

“Everything’s naked and distorted, it’s torture for the eyes. Should one really be hanging such things in the salon when one has the von Zeisigs coming for coffee?”

Edgar never personally described himself as a surrealist. He didn’t describe himself as anything at all. He only wants to paint, not to give the riddle of the world some ringing new name but to circumnavigate that riddle using his gentle brush, without disturbing it. At the School of Arts and Crafts in Altona they had dismissed him as a pseudo artist and pauper and even still do, as a surrealist and symbolist and whatever else entered their heads. It wasn’t his concern that people whittle down his pictures to make them fit inside their drawers. If it’s so important to them, why even include him at all?

Elis never stuck anything into drawers or whittled down. She stood before his drawing—“*Treibhaus*”—and looked at it and allowed him his secret without adding a thing, no artsy commentary, no clever bon mot. Elis gazed at Edgar’s paintings, and Edgar gazed at Elis, and the two fell in love. Only when Elis turned around did she get to see the face of the painter—Edgar—but by then it was too late.

Her eyes are bright. Her feet are like little dancer’s feet yet are rooted firmly to the floor. The bright eyes and delicate feet are not all that Elis has to offer, of course. Those who think that erotic desire is determined only by pointy breasts, slim thighs and a curvy backside also think that all hunger is satiated by sausage rolls.

Elis is the type who can still feel wonder, and that alone is enough to be crazy about her among all these people who think

they know so much. Edgar and Elis feel wonder together, for three blissful weeks in late summer.

“I don’t comprehend how you do it, Herr Ende. Rendering what’s floating around inside my mind without my even being able to describe it or know where it comes from.”

Things float around inside his mind as well. Perhaps this is how human beings differ from people, by having things wandering around inside their minds, by having a mind’s eye that they use to see things that to people are just figments. Figment is a lovely word. Tender yet hard. As if the brain were fabricating a translucent thread that will become a translucent carpet, invisible to people.

“I don’t comprehend it either,” he says to Elis. “It’s still incomprehensible to me that anything can be rendered at all let alone rendered by me.”

He’s asking too much of her. She’s still young. Next to her he comes across as a grandfather not yet grown wise. “I don’t understand much,” she says, “about art.”

He laughs. “I even less so.”

She laughs as well. “Herr Ende, please!”

“My name is Edgar,” he says. “And yours? I can’t possibly call you Fräulein Schmidt; that sounds like a chaperone in a girls’ boarding school.”

“Elisabeth Anne,” she says quite carefully as if first having to try out the name on the tip of her tongue.

“Elis,” he concludes.

Sneaking onto her fragile face is an even more fragile smile, and when he offers his hand she places hers inside.

Then comes autumn, and the magic is over. The Herr Councilor of Commerce together with wife put a stop to it. After all, as everyone knows: The surrealists are undermining the pillars of society and endangering the young. Edgar would’ve liked to explain to them that you can’t judge that which you do not understand, but they wouldn’t even have listened to him. Their

endangered youth—their Elis—is to be removed from the endangering Herr Ende's sphere of influence.

By force. Whenever Edgar closes his eyes he inevitably sees force being used and in his chest senses a noise like someone breaking a branch. His delicate Elis isn't there anymore. She's been dragged away from him by force, and it costs him seven nearly sleepless days and nights during which he knocks on every conceivable door before he finds out where they've carried off his girl who is still able to feel wonder.

To a boarding school. On the other end of the Reich-Republic. No one who's willing to disclose it to him knows exactly where. They think it's a place named Garmisch.

He's on the way there now, and he doesn't know where he's supposed to look once arrived. Only that he must find her. One of the sausage roll-eaters stuffs his last couple bites into his mouth and his still-greasy fingers grasp at the walking stick he leans on when standing up. Edgar imagines it like so: Elis is my cane, my fingers now threatening to slip off all the time, yet without her I have nothing left to hold onto. He's not a nobody anymore and is gradually becoming known as an artist. He's survived a decorative painting apprenticeship, his arts and crafts school education, and an unwanted marriage to boot. But all of that is wiped clean now. If I am to love, Edgar thinks, then I am to love outright. I can't hold anything in reserve, can't be cooking my meager lukewarm soup on low flame. I can only do it all, or nothing.

When painting. When loving.

The train stops. The little station cowers before those giant shimmering icy-blue mountains. It has two tracks, a train-ticket window, and a colorfully painted little waiting shelter like out of a children's book. The sausage-roll eaters step off. Edgar does as well, only he does so more slowly. While the others haul half of their earthly possessions off the luggage rack, he's brought little more than a little cardboard suitcase and a bag for his sketchpad and charcoal sticks. He lets the loaded-down people go on ahead. In contrast to him, they are greeted at the station with shouting and open arms.

Edgar, on the other hand, doesn't even know which way to go.

## 2

With every passing hour he spends in Garmisch, it becomes clearer to him that he's been deceived. They fed him the wrong message in order to mislead him. There's no boarding school here for Elis to have been carried off to. His reckless departure, for which he's dropped everything, has reached a dead end.

In Nirvana. At least that's what the guest house is called where he's rented a room for three days. The area is teeming with guesthouses that no doubt enjoy immense popularity among summertime visitors and autumn visitors as well. Everything here looks charming and cute, a toy chest emptied out, the homes and steeples dotting the town like candy sprinkles. The Nirvana is the only building that lacks fresh and friendly paintwork on its façade, which is exactly why Edgar picked it. There's nothing fresh and friendly about him. There are signs of a storm about him.

The Nirvana not only lacks the paintwork; it also lacks the usual vacationers. In the room neighboring Edgar's is Heinrich Mann, whose younger but significant swaggering brother Thomas has been considered a coming Nobel Prize winner for several years now. Edgar has read one book by him—by Heinrich, not by Thomas. For some inexplicable reason he has a weakness for the non-award winners, for those who insignificantly trot over the finishing line in second. The novel by Heinrich Mann he'd read is called *The Little Town* and seems to fit him well in this place. Not because Garmisch is small, but because storms are raging in the novel's story as well; because everything burns with desire, lust and longing in the end.

In any other situation Edgar probably would've enjoyed talking to his next-door neighbor about his book, among other things. This older brother of the coming Nobel Prize-winner is not an uninteresting thinker, even though having such conversations are a bit like the eyes of needles that Edgar has trouble threading even on a good day. And these are not good days, but harsh days.

He hardly gets any sleep, prowls the streets of town like a wild dog, and can't even figure out what he's still searching for now that Elis is lost to him.

Still he must continue. He must roam around with his nose to the ground, cannot give up, cannot get over his loss. Even less so the betrayal. His own friends were involved—"half a handful," they like to call themselves. They were the ones assuring him that his Elis had to be in Garmisch. They told him they had this from a reliable source even though they could not give away that source, as he please must understand. Playing such a foul trick on Edgar was easy. He wasn't worldly, hadn't been around the block a few times. He just sat there with a nice expression on his face and, despite the vague distrust nagging at him, suspected nothing of the ruse he fell for.

Only now—all too late—does he recall their whispering, their shady talk that had already begun while his love was still new and shining, besmirched by no one: "Don't go saddling yourself with this, Edgar, not now that there's a real chance things are finally looking up for you. The people who pay money for art all have daughters. They'll forgive you for many things, but not for defiling innocence."

Edgar wasn't listening. Why should people concern him? Besides, you could spend a whole year pondering what exactly was innocence or not and never reach a conclusion.

He hadn't allowed himself time to ponder anything. Instead he'd shot off to the train station with sparse details and his silly cardboard suitcase. So now here he is. In Nirvana. He prowls the streets without purpose, has forgotten his scarf and on the back of his neck feels the sun growing weak and the icy winds blasting him. Edgar lowers his eyes to the bumpy cobblestones, counting each and every one he's able to put behind him. When he raises his head again, he sees a bluish-black curtain closing between him and the sky—not translucent but downright leaden.

The storm approaching there is keeping pace with the one inside him. The sky bursts open with a crack, and all his wounds unleash torrents without warning. For a second Edgar wants to simply stand still, to submerge himself, to lie down prostrate

before the raging elements and remain there on the ground just as miserable and as helpless as he feels. Only for a second. Then his legs start running with a mind of their own. He's fleeing as if all those people mocking and betraying him were right on his heels, as if their echoing scorn were droning in his ears. He doesn't get far in escaping though—after a few strides his strength soon abandons him, overpowered by the storm.

He peers through the sheets of rain for a refuge and discovers a long low-rise building at the end of the street, a few shops lined up next to one another along the ground floor. He pushes open the first door available and hurls it shut behind him, making its glass panels clang and a small brass wind chime jingle. Panting now, he takes deep breaths and feels the wet dripping down him in streams as if he himself were reduced to liquid, dissolving in the water from which he came.

“Can I help you?”

“No, no.” Or maybe so? He glances around the jam-packed shop for something he could buy out of courtesy. Among the goods for sale there seems to be no item intended for any practical purpose, and there's no clear theme either. He likes this. Rolls of slightly yellowed lace fill the shelves rising all around the room. In between are all conceivable kinds of containers, from jewelry boxes to small cardboard cartons, these showcasing a curious collection of minute objects.

The word precious most aptly describes the twinkling stones, the charm bracelets, diadems and chokers and necklaces, the trinkets and ornaments. Edgar reaches indiscriminately for a gemstone of milk quartz with a naked man etched into it, rather rough in execution but original. Under his clothes the water's still running down his body. He shudders.

“Don't worry about buying anything if you only came in to escape the rain,” the woman says.

She's not very big, not a shimmering pale blonde like Elis but short with hair like a dark wood. Judging from her age, she could be Elis' mother.

“Go ahead and get warm in here.”

“But you won’t make any money from that.”

“Who knows? It’s not doing me any harm. There’s enough air for the both of us.”

“You really won’t think I’m a freeloader by coming into your shop and getting myself warm from this fire you’ve made?”

“Why should I?” asked the small and no longer young woman. “My fire won’t burn out any faster from getting one more person warm. A fire can’t count, plus I don’t know you. If I go denouncing everything I don’t know before ever giving it a chance? I’d only die stupid, from never learning a thing from life.”

Edgar looks at her and feels wonder. She’s not what people call pretty but she does have a high forehead that her part divides in the shape of a heart. And she has dignity, and poise, a little of the oriental princess enthroned behind her *mashrabiya*, her artfully carved latticework, watching the world without anyone being able to see her inside. Her eyes searching. The furrows etched below them are less from age than from her pain. Loneliness.

The rain pelts against the display window pane like hail. “Did you make all this here yourself?” asks Edgar. He too wants to keep learning from life, and now gives the shop another look around.

She nods. “Johannes Müller proclaimed that a woman’s actual calling is fulfilling her role in marriage and the family. But when marriage and family do not materialize, a woman still must live off something. Not only involving money, I mean. Involving her mind as well. I wasn’t born with much, so I’ve taught myself all sorts of things instead.”

Making lace. Cutting gems. All sorts of things indeed, and Edgar starts to sense that she really does live by what’s inside her mind. “Johannes Müller? The theologian?” He’s heard of the man. Müller promotes living life according to Christianity’s principles—simplicity, freedom, community—and has bought an isolated farm somewhere for putting it into practice. People like that arouse Edgar’s curiosity, the ones who sense more to life than what’s obvious, who devote themselves to seeking. Even if this Müller seems plenty stubborn and therefore suspect to him, he



does tackle many of the same issues that Rudolf Steiner is concerned with. Steiner does interest him. Edgar far too seldom has an opportunity to speak to anyone about the man's ideas. Nobody likes tackling questions that offer scarce hope of any answers.

"That's him," says the small woman with the lonesome look. "I've been trying to live life according to his principles, but it's not easy. Not when you're alone and it's probably going to remain that way . . ."

She touches him somehow, inside. Her openness, it simply observes, without complaint.

"My name's Edgar," he says. "Edgar Ende. Painter by profession."

"And what's your star sign?"

She has his attention. Ordinarily they'll ask him about his income, about where he lives, about the establishments where his works are on display. But not about what sign of the zodiac he was born under. "Pisces," he says. "And you?"

"Aries, Cancer ascendant." An unamused smile flits across her lips. "Fire all the time, too quick to anger, too much emotion getting in the way. That's not always a good mix." She steps out from behind the shop counter and thrusts a hand out to him. "Name's Luise. Luise Bartholomä."

He likes the name. He likes her. She doesn't shrink when his rain-soaked hand wraps around hers. "Do you know of Rudolf Steiner?"

"One of his books is on my nightstand, about the riddle of man. But I'm no scholar and finding it a little tough."

Edgar Ende cannot get over his wonder. He's not sure what love is, but Steiner writes that it's experiencing another person in your own soul.

"You're soaked through and through," she then states. "You'll need more than that fire." She leaves and grabs a cobalt blue-checked blanket. She brews tea too, an earthly, bitter blend in two dainty cups with chipped rims.

"We could discuss Steiner, if you'd like," he says.

She likes. It keeps raining. After it's grown dark beyond the rain and Luise has had to close her shop, they still keep talking.

"Why don't you come upstairs?" she asks. "My apartment's above the shop. Nothing big, but it's lovely living here in Rainbow House. View of the mountains, and the neighbors are nice."

Rainbow House. He's already taken with the name. Oscillating between Nirvana and Rainbow House does fit his life, and there's something protective about Luise that needs protecting itself. He goes with her, and they talk. They still haven't tired of talking as the nighttime blackness fades to gray above the peaks. That's unusual, Edgar thinks. He's known women with whom he could do this or that well, but the way he's talking with her is something he's never been able to do with anyone. She's nine years older than him, an orphan since she was four years old. "I don't have anyone but me," she says.

"I had someone," he says. "Or maybe I didn't." The rain has stopped.

Four months later, in February, they celebrate their wedding. He's only just twenty-eight, she thirty-seven, and their witnesses are Fritz and Hedwig Staackmann as well as the architect Arthur Holzheimer, three of their neighbors in Rainbow House.

# ACT ONE

*In every person lives a child  
who began as otherworldly.  
The rulers from this world  
won't accept their validity.*

—*Kindermord* (Child Murder), Michael Ende

Garmisch and Munich,  
War and what calls itself peace  
1929–1943

### 3

Luise Ende was coming home from the doctor. Ordinarily she was as healthy as a brewery mare, despite her tender nature, and cured the occasional chill with chamomile brew and an onion compress. This time though a customer had recommended she go see a doctor—no, she wasn't recommending, she was outright urging Luise.

"You look pale, my dear. Pale as death, if you'd be so kind as to not hold that observation against me."

As a principle, Luise never held anything against customers who brought money into the shop. She tried at least. "I was sick. An upset stomach."

"Another one?" The pressed the back of her hand to Luise's forehead. "You shouldn't eat so much cabbage, you'll put a strain on your digestion. That nightgown I made you force on me recently? Our Anni can barely get the reek of poor folk washed out of it."

Luise had no reason to be ashamed of her life. She was no longer an unwed orphan without kith and kin. She was the wife of an artist, even though it would take a while for Edgar to make it, and the money that was so far supporting Luise alone now had to last for two. She also saw no reason to justify how she lived, not to a customer married to a Jewish patent lawyer from Ludwigstrasse. How she and Edgar craved spiritual wealth, how they had a magic crystal ball encircling them that Luise wouldn't trade for any mansion in Grünwald.

So she spared herself the reply and sorted lace trim.

"Are you having to throw up? All coming out at once? And is there blood?"

"Definitely all at once." Luise didn't look up. "Blood? Not sure, I wasn't looking that closely."

"You should be. What does your doctor have to say?"

"Nothing."

“Just what is that supposed to mean?”

“That I don’t have one.”

The lady customer groaned. “I sometimes wonder how you people stay alive.”

Then she leaned forward and hit Luise with a sharp little barrage of words, right in her soft spot where she was most vulnerable. “So what happens when this thing you’ve caught is something serious—poisoning, say, a malignant growth? You do carry a responsibility. How is your husband supposed to manage if something happens to you?”

Luise lay down her arms at that point. Nothing could be allowed to happen to her, at least nothing that threw her husband off balance. Until now she’d been determined to ignore this stomach misery of hers, but her customer’s ominous murmuring was invoking images of a hospital bed surrounded by doctors with worried faces, of customers taking their money to other shops, of Edgar roaming distraught through the unheated kitchen, and of overdue bills overflowing from the cutlery drawer.

That could not happen. Possessions weren’t important to them but no creditors could be allowed to come hound Edgar, to fluster him, to divert his gaze away from what was most essential. She’d ripped a page out of her receipt book and asked the customer to write down the address of her doctor. “That’s prudent of you, my child. Get your blood pressure checked, and then at least you’ll know where you stand.”

That was how it came to be. The doctor had his practice not far from Ludwigstrasse, in a little house entwined with roses on all sides. He wasn’t all that interested in her blood pressure, but Luise now knew exactly what she was facing. Feeling a little overwhelmed, she’d waited until the doctor instructed her to put her clothes back on, then did as he told her and was on her way.

Her plan had been to stroll through the little market on the way home and buy a little something for dinner. A quarter of smoked meat, she was thinking, a few small new potatoes to go with it, their flavor not smothered by thicker skins, and spring vegetables—tender baby carrots, little onions, little sugar peas.

She'd sold quite a lot this week and wanted to surprise Edgar with something nice. Edgar wasn't the type to make a fuss about meals, and Luise wasn't the type to win a prize for her cooking. But she was his wife, and a good wife wants her husband to feel good being with her.

The same applied in reverse.

She had always been someone special, someone who rubbed the wrong way, was out of the ordinary. He was someone special, someone who did not understand the world. They both were *Baraitot*—two standing apart like those Aramaic schools of thought that weren't accepted into the *Mishnah*, the writings in the Torah. Though they did have friends, flocks of them, creating whole universes with word and thought while staying up all night under their own roof. Their friends were *Baraitot* themselves. And they were telling Luise: "You two have something that doesn't exist anywhere else. You are something special, Edgar and you."

The usual standards didn't apply to them. While other couples saved up for little plates, little chairs, and little blankets to creative their small world, Luise and Edgar sat in empty rooms and for nights on end discussed worlds inside their minds that were too big to ever grasp. Yet now and again Luise was overcome by a fear of not satisfying her husband according to the usual standards. Then she'd want to do something usual for him. Cook an evening supper. Make sure he got healthy meals while seasoning and serving everything just right. Place a mug of beer next to his plate. "Here you go. Enjoy it."

But now there was no more money in her wallet for all those things she'd been fantasizing about. What she had instead was the doctor's bill that she hadn't yet paid in full, and she didn't know how that was going to play out. But who ever knew how things were going to play out? How could she ever have known last year at this time that today she'd be strolling through Garmisch as a married woman, that acquaintances would be doffing their hats and greeting her with "If it isn't, Frau Ende"? There was no way. How could you? So why worry about eggs before they were hatched?

In secret Luise knew there was a dreamer dwelling inside her, a yearner, a love goddess, and a warrior. But the Luise everyone knew was a pragmatic woman. For once, she would spare herself that detour through the little market. The head of cabbage she still had in the pantry would have to suffice for supper—no one had ever died from having white cabbage for supper as far as she knew.

It was a splendid spring day for sighing, the first this April. Blues and whites, Bavarian, pointy peaks, polished shiny with care. Luise came from the Saarland and would never get used to that snowy summit against the bright sky. A lurking demon, disguised as a marmot, Edgar said about it. The things Edgar didn't sound nearly as sweet as those wise proverbs on the tear-off calendar that their neighbors Fritz and Hedy Staackmann had given them as a wedding gift. The Staackmanns were poor people like the Endes, so the tear-off calendar they gave them—thirty pfennigs from Briese Stationary—came with a heap of good thoughts. The latter cost nothing, which by no means meant they had no worth.

"If you poor church mice had a penny for every good thought I have for you? You could make a good man out of the dear Lord himself," Fritz Staackmann had said in the Blue Hare, where they'd celebrated their wedding on credit and with no more than nine guests.

"Don't need pennies to make a good man out of him," his Hedy had said to cut him off. "Sit down and drink your punch, Fritz. We have a nice life, doesn't matter if we're lacking this or that, and Edgar and Lizzy will be having one too."

With that, they'd gone to the bar and asked Johann, the Hare-keeper, to put on a record from that huskily chirpy Helen Kane, "That's My Weakness Now."

*Look what you've done to me!*

*The things I never missed*

*Are things I can't resist!*

"This a wedding or not?" Hedy had shouted, clapping her hands and turning around so that the cheaply printed fabric of her

skirt swung around her body, wrapping her legs and hips in its ample folds. “Doesn’t look like it, not with no one dancing!”

*He’s got eyes of blue*

*I never cared for eyes of blue*

*But he’s got eyes of blue*

*And that’s my weakness now!*

Fritz, disabled from the war, had to be dragged along by Hedy dancing, and neither the bride and groom nor the rest of the guests ever had much practice—their landlady Erna Gumprecht, Miss Schiele from the fashion boutique, the young architect Holzheimer, Edgar’s father, and his brother Helmut. But they had all danced spurred on by Hedy, swinging her skinny hips like a flapper, an invisible cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. “It’s going to be wonderful,” she had whispered into Luise’s ear when they crossed paths dancing. “Who needs money anyway? Two of you? Fortune’s just grinning at you.”

Luise, who was very short, had looked up to Edgar, who was very tall. His eyes weren’t blue but she had thought: *That’s my weakness now.* She still thought so. Who needs money anyway?

At the moment Fritz was limping by the Rainbow House’s shop window façade, back and forth, leading their frail old dachshund around by the leash while sweeping the street. He cut a comical figure since he was wearing a nice suit and strutting along holding the broom as if on parade. He’d never quite shed the pride left over from his soldiering days even when those four years he was so proud of had cost him his even stride and ability to think clearly. Since getting wounded, he wasn’t able to have the kind of job that might’ve supported him and Hedy. So Hedy ran a lending library inside the archway of Rainbow House, for which Fritz purchased books and arranged them on the shelves with meticulous care. He needed something to do, he shouldn’t feel useless. But whenever he was feeling useless despite all his arranging, Hedy put a broom in his hand and claimed that a freshly swept street was crucial for business. No books were getting loaned out where dirt was collecting.

“A man like that goes kaput inside if he’s not the one bringing home the money,” she’d told Luise, patting her on the chest. “My



Fritz wanted to provide for his family, but life had a different plan in mind, and now there are days when the dumb guy's telling me he's not worth a thing no more, isn't a proper man at all."

Luise had thought of Edgar. He brought a little money home by painting portraits that well-heeled people commissioned from him. Those well-heeled people often didn't like the portraits though, because what Edgar saw and painted didn't match what they themselves saw and wanted painted. So they'd refuse to pay the agreed price, and one client explained straight out that he'd rather commit murder than hang that deviant piece of junk Edgar was trying to palm off on him as his likeness. Not amid such upstanding harmony inside his mansion.

Luise was thinking all of this while watching Fritz swing his broom around so diligently. Edgar was lacking income as well, and the ones bringing the money home were likely to remain that way for some time. But he still must know his worth. He couldn't really believe that this made him less of a man, could he? Before the wedding, they had been in agreement: Luise would continue running her shop; they would live frugally until Edgar's breakthrough came as a painter. Neither of them had any doubt that this would come, nor did they doubt that they'd survive the lean times until then.

Would any of that be changed by what she now had to tell Edgar? Could it already have changed long ago without her noticing between the long days in the shop and rushing around to take care of the household? Recently Edgar had seemed quieter, more restless, yet lethargic at the same time as if looking for something he wasn't getting in their cramped apartment rooms. She was getting startled awake more recently at night and wouldn't feel him there next to her in their nest under the bedcovers that she loved so much. Instead he was roaming the building's hallway in the cold, confused, with no idea what he was looking for.

He was a painter. He'd told her that the first night when she was still trying to resist him, because he was too tall, too handsome, too precious for her to be indulging in any hope for him. "People always think a painter's work is like slaughtering

pigs," he had said. "Or building a sideboard. Or carrying corpses to graves. But I'm afraid it's not like that, Fräulein Bartholomä. Not for those who have to endure the one doing the painting."

She had resisted and had failed. *That's my weakness now.* Now she was the one having to endure the painter, and she endured him with utmost pleasure. The only thing she couldn't endure was the thought of losing him from not succeeding in making life pleasant enough by her side. If he'd married someone with money he would not suffer, or worry, or have to eat cabbage. But just the other day there was a gentleman inquiring from one of the big galleries in Munich, and if he was coming then others would follow, and the breakthrough would not be far.

Luise braced herself. She needed to go upstairs and talk to Edgar, and she needed to do so elatedly. How was she supposed to bestow him with confidence if she wasn't feeling any herself?

"How do, Lizzie," Fritz Staackmann said and doffed the hat he wore even while sweeping the street. "Lovely weather, isn't it?" He gestured toward the glittering peaks of the Zugspitze with a sweep of that hat. The old dachshund, indifferent to the outside world, didn't even raise his wart-covered head.

"Yes. Quite lovely."

He now nodded at Luise's bag, empty apart from her wallet and her only partially paid doctor bill. "Get anything good?"

"Yep, sure did," Luise muttered.

"That's nice, gives Edgar something to look forward to." There was something serene about his smile, oblivious to the world, thoroughly all too trusting. "He could use that. I was upstairs at your place earlier, wanted to see if Hedy and I should stop by later for a game of bridge, and he seemed real depressed to me."

"He's doing fine," Luise said hastily. "He's just a painter. He suffers from moods now and then that we regular folks cannot comprehend."

"Regular folks?" Fritz gave a wry smile. "Here in Rainbow House? Apparently not regular enough for unemployment insurance to pay me when I'm in need."

No one had paid Luise when in need either. "It's not always about money, Fritz. You can't buy love."

She went past him, and he put his hat back on. "Right about that, Lizzie. You and my Hedy, you two are always right, and who would we be without you?"

Luise tried to laugh. "A couple of mopes is what."

"Probably true. Back to what I was saying: How about a little game later? We wouldn't be too much trouble, be more than happy with that rosehip tee of yours . . ."

"Another time, Fritz." She waved goodbye and was already inside the stairway. She liked the Staackmanns a lot—they belonged to the circle of daydreamers and night owls who flocked to Edgar like moths to a flame, but what she needed to tell her husband was for his ears only. There was no light in the stairwell, and it stank of cabbage though not from her apartment, since she hadn't cooked anything yet. Instead of knocking on the door, she fished her key out of her nearly empty bag so as not to disturb Edgar in case he was working.

The sharp smell odor of turpentine hit her, overpowering the milder one of the linseed oil he used to mix colors. Their apartment didn't have an entry—you could barge right in as Hedy liked to wisecrack. *Kitchen and living room, toilet and wash basin in the stairway*, was the apartment Luise had rented, complete with the shop. Now though it all blended together, and you could only cross the wilderness through a narrow passage lined with possessions tottering on both sides.

How could a person be poor yet have so much to their name? Luise had a tendency to pile things up, never throwing anything away that you might possibly need. So when Edgar had moved in, with his paintboxes, the easel, the canvases nailed to frames, the apartment soon resembled a drawer into which they'd stuff all their clutter before working together to push it shut. But since Edgar needed open space, in the mornings they'd scoot into the living room everything that could be moved out of the kitchen, piling it all up, burying one thing under another.

Luise now wound her way through the jam-packed room without calling for Edgar. If he was busy painting, her announcement would have to wait. All of the sudden her courage waned and yielded to a despondent daze. How could she have imagined doing this? How could imagine it wouldn't be this tough?

She pushed her head into the crack of the door to the kitchen. When Edgar was painting he locked himself in, and Luise would wait inside the labyrinth of the living room until he came out. He wasn't painting now. He was sitting on the stool and looked up when he heard her. Being so tall, his body looked as if he'd folded it up, making the stool under him a child's toy. He wore his glasses, the lenses so fogged up that Luise could only sense the gray of his eyes.

*That's my weakness now.*

It would be her weakness until she died, and as long as she had him with her, nothing had the power to knock her down. The only thing that drove her crazy was the thought that he could get up and leave this apartment just as suddenly as he'd once entered.

"I'm sorry," he said before she spoke up. For some inexplicable reason, she'd wanted to say the same to him.

"What is it, Ed?" She wanted to go over and wrap her arms around him, but the two of them were never good at that. She would've tried comforting him, reassuring him that they would manage, but right now the full force of what she faced was robbing her of any fight. She, the one wanting to protect him, was herself yearning for protection.

Edgar was still looking up at her through his fogged-up lenses. "I messed up, Liz," he said. "The thing with Köster, it's not happening."

"Who's Köster?"

"That gallery owner from Schwabing, the one coming to see if he could use any of my stuff—remember? The one who wrote that we could talk about doing a showing if we liked, and he was also going to tip off Franz Roh, that art critic who keeps Munich hanging on his every word."

Luise nodded. How could she not remember? Edgar had been putting all his hopes on the visit in the last few days, and her doctor's visit now had her doing the same. "Did he cancel? He's not coming?"

"He already came." Edgar stood up and started wandering back and forth in the kitchen where there was room between the stove and bed and corner bench. "Prancing around here, pulling out his hanky with his fingertips and wiping off the bench so he could plant his genteel behind on it. I explained to him that money is certainly tight with us but that doesn't make us pigs in a sty. I can't handle people like him, Liz. I told him he should go, that I don't have any paintings to show him."

He stopped at the other end of the kitchen and yanked his glasses off. His eyes were red around the edges, looking vulnerable now. *No showing, she thought, no critic from Munich, no money. Not now nor tomorrow, and not in six months either.*

"Say something," he said. "Something you want to say? Why not get it over with?"

"I'm going to have a baby," Luise said.

His expression froze, with horror. He stretched his arms out as if looking for something to hold onto and found nothing.

Her expression had also frozen with horror. She stood there in the doorway with her empty shopping bag and didn't know what to do. *I can't just rip it out of my stomach!* she thought. As soon as the thought waned, her defiance awakened. She looked at the floor, counted the grooves in the floorboards, and pressed her hands to her belly. Until this point, she hadn't been able to believe that a human being was growing inside there. Now she rebelled. *I'm not ripping it out! I want to have it! Why shouldn't I be allowed to be a mother?*

"Liz? Hey, Liz." Edgar cradled her chin with his hand and raised it clumsily. "Don't despair, you hear me? Don't you do it. Nothing knocks her down, not my Liz."

He kept his head lowered, his face real close to hers, his eyes gray like the rain that had washed him into her life.

*I never cared for a rainy day,  
But he likes a rainy day,  
So that's my weakness now.*

"We can handle it." His free hand stroked her hair and got entangled. "I'll think of something. I'll write that Köster a letter and apologize."

Luise's throat was dry. "You want to have it? You're happy?"

He looked at her like he sometimes did when looking across the room and discovering something at the other end that no one else could perceive except for him. Then there emerged, very slowly, from his lips up to his eyes, a smile.

"Do I want it? My child? Of course, what do you think?"