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**THE BLACK IRON**

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In grandfather's garden, on one side of the path leading to the door of the house, there was a little round space, a hidden place almost entirely overgrown with hazel branches that shed their nuts in autumn. There grandfather would be sitting in a chair, his fleshy hands, freckled with age spots, gripping the armrests, soft, warm hands, which he used to keep his balance, his head slightly inclined above his amply protruding belly, his thighs spread wide. He peered through the branches at the dry soil underneath the abundant foliage, looked at that dusty expanse, where sparse sunspots burned, shimmering heat—holes in the tent of his shade—the blaze of long ago, and I stood next to the bed of roses, barely taller than their thorny stems with the lush foliage, gazing at this hulk of a man who sat there in his inaccessible remoteness. I was waiting for him to come back, back to the garden of A. with the wrought-iron fence and garden gate, outside of which father was just locking the car and mother was waiting so they could enter together. At the slamming of the car door, his head turned, he looked over at me, and his face was an open space, a great plain, run through by dry riverbeds, hills and dales, arid and marked by the heat, a stony desert, with sparse, parched shrubbery, and a sound vibrated in the air, a buzzing of insect wings, cut through by his deep, demanding voice:

--So there you are. Come here!

And I walked towards that landscape of a face, in which the nose was small and sunken, the eyes gazed motionless, without blinking, a good-natured air of amusement lurking in their corners, and the bright iris cast a metal ring around an abyss that was bottomless and terrifying because it led into a void—into an endless night.

And once more—remembering—I see him sitting there in the shade of the hazel branches, his arms resting on the sides of the garden chair, his hands clinging to the wooden knobs like naked animals, his gaze trained at the sand, at glowing patches of sunlight, and once again I must walk up to him, as I did as a boy, those few paces from the bed of roses to the round space, a distance that was infinite back then and is now a zoom through decades at the speed of light: But that is also why I have only the picture, an internal snapshot of the man who was my grandfather, who "ordered us around" on the map, and who wanted me to redeem a part of his past through my existence—and perhaps I must still do it after all those decades. I was his favorite grandchild.

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Grandfather had no history. And so father and his two brothers did not have one either. The H.s were quite simply there, like a natural phenomenon that manifested itself in volcanic eruptions: A force of violent change, not to be stopped by anything and anybody; at least that was what they believed they had to be. They regarded themselves as unique, not tied to anything and superior to everyone else. They were the H.s—and I was meant to be one of them, an H., like my girl cousin and the two boy cousins, but not like my brother. He was nothing. And my mother too was nothing. Once and for all.

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Hans H. emerges in 1908 in the setting of a French *salon* of the fin de siècle. Brocade curtains, a Venetian blind screening the window to the boulevard, on the mantelpiece a candelabrum supported by a winged caryatid next to the pillar patterned after an obelisk, in addition a vase in the style of the Second Empire. And a heavy scent of patchouli infuses that background, which gains definition towards the front in an oriental rug of the sort that one finds in the foyers of upscale tourist hotels—a practical, machine-woven item—or that simply belongs to the furnishings of a photographer's studio, like the one of Mr. Amstein in Olten. And on its foot-worn curlicues stands a twenty-year-old man in a buttoned-up frock coat, his right hand holding gloves and bowler hat. In the

bend of his arm there crouches a tiny hand; it belongs to the bride, my grandmother, who stands dressed all in white, leaning forward a little, the bouquet of flowers in her right hand. Her bearing is tense and so far from natural that Thut Anni completely fails to correspond to the background, despite her veil and her little corsage. Her face is an open landscape of lakes, soft sloping meadows, willows, a sky with white clouds—a little like pictures in a coloring book, of sign-like simplicity, and at her side stands her future husband, this Hans H., who has emerged from nowhere, straight and stiff as a post, masquerading in the coat that does not fit all too well, from which still emanates the mothball smell of the rental shop. One of the wings of the silk bowtie, crooked under the buttoned-up collar, has slipped under the lapel, and his shoes, shapeless, their tips pointing upward, are shopworn like the rug, as if they too belonged more to a hotel foyer than a *salon* and their owner were a waiter or a coachman, placed in this world at most to serve the sultrily decadent world in the background. Hans H. looked worn, used like a tool. He sported a mustache, whose tips were wiped unceremoniously with the back of his hand. His hair was cut into the shape of a brush. The face looked hard and angular, as though hammered into shape by daily adversities; the eyes peered out in distrust through narrow slits, always on the "qui vive" for an advantage. And as he stood there, he had made it to this point, to the rug of this photographer's studio: He had achieved the bourgeois convention of the wedding photo that had become fashionable since the eighteen-nineties. But the picture revealed what it was intended to hide, and grandfather realized that only too well. The convention staged in this picture did not conform to reality, the sumptuous *salon*, the black coat, the tie and the gloves were all lies; he himself was an assertion that did not stand up to close scrutiny: Hans H. was not real; he was a nobody from a blank space on the map, and his face bore the traces of it: The forgetting that had drawn under his eyelids a line swollen from the drinking of wine, the pains and strains that had carved premature wrinkles into the skin, the complexion weathered by privations and aged beyond his years. But his gaze,

his features radiated a will that was unconditional and unbending. He would erase the past and with the hardness he had acquired would create a present so unswerving that it would appear as pure ruthlessness to anyone living in the very conventions that this picture simulated.

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One year after the wedding, grandfather had new pictures taken, of himself and his wife, but no longer together and without the French *salon*. The portraits, narrow and long, mounted on brown cardboard, lack a background: And Hans H. is already the man that he will remain, immutable like the sculpture of the two foundry workers on the shelf in the verandah, even though he will of course age, his hair will be white already at thirty-five, and the mustache, trimmed now on the picture, will have completely disappeared by then. The dress—a solidly made three-piece suit—will remain the same in its style, and he will wear it even on the very day when his knees buckle, his life is torn asunder, and he plunges thundering down the stairs with his weight and his bulk, like a piece of rock, leaving behind a cavern which will only then yield a find, and with it a secret, that explains why grandfather left the background of his life blank: Grandmother found, hidden in the attic, the uniform of a sergeant in the Foreign Legion.

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In his memory grandfather carried a blaze, a fire that was refracted in rocks and stones, fanned out to a rusty red, to bluish tones of gray, changing the air to a mass of shimmering streaks, filled with a silence in which the sounds of boots, of the hooves of the mules were smothered, sucked in by the plain, and all that remained was the panting body that was yourself, unreal except for the thirst, the pain, the nausea—and Hans H. stood in the foundry, kept returning to the soot-covered hall, which was pervaded by a smell of burning oil, peered into the casting pan that held the same blaze as his memory, the same heat, and a wild strength gushed up in him, an inner certainty that he was superior because he was still alive. And he screamed against the hostility of the blaze that nobody

knew as well as he knew it: --Watch-it-there-goddamnit-Suter-you-sonofabitch-bicot[?]-and-you-Weberli-hurry-up-don't-just-stand-there-like-a-zombie-or-else …

"Or else." A word like "cleaning up" and "pulling away." A hovering, hanging word that slipped out over the jutting chin, flashing and filling the room like acrid smoke.

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And with his gaze fixed on the path in front of him, Director H.—the "slave driver," as the foundry workers secretly called him among themselves—was slowly walking through the crowd of striking workers in front of the factory gate, his hat pulled down over his face.

--O.k. Time to get out, he had said to Sonderegger, his chauffeur, as they had driven along the road to the iron and steel works and had seen the pickets of the striking workers. In the wake of his cane, Hans H. was walking towards the office building without paying attention to the men in their workday clothes, their caps on their heads, cigarettes between their lips, foundry workers, pan cleaners, core makers, who were standing around, pale, strained faces with a disgruntled or uncertain expression, who were looking at him, some even with hatred. Hans H. nevertheless took notice of them; it did not escape him that those who stood in his way stepped aside, and while he again jabbed his cane into the asphalt, walking on unwaveringly and straight ahead, he was waiting, waiting for what had to happen without fail, as it had happened back then as well, when there was a mutiny at the legion post: Someone would not step out of his way, because his insistence on walking straight through the crowd of strikers provoked precisely that. One of them, Bolliger, Wehrli, Suter, would simply remain standing in his path, perhaps even assail him, because that man's temper would be a little like Hans H.'s own, and the latter knew from way back how people felt who lived in the straw houses and the day laborers' hovels of yore and still farmed a piece of land to supplement the income from the work in the factory. They had had enough of the inhuman work hours, the ever repeated

draft notices, the loss of wages, the military service on the border, where they sat around waiting, while at home their wives and children were left to their own devices, fell ill and went into debt. The demands of the Olten strike committee for higher wages and shorter work hours were nonsense; if worst came to worst—so the management had been informed by the government—a cavalry regiment was standing ready in Lupfig, but that too was nonsense. The workers had to do what they were told to do, and it was the company that decided how much work was done and how much money was paid, not some committee. But "his people" did not belong in the poor house, where these gentlemen officers like Wille and von Sprecher, whose goose was now finally going to be cooked, had almost driven them. Like that Yehudi, they had to receive their share of the profits, but in exchange they had to obey, or else they would be "shown who was boss." But when, shortly before he reached the office building, the event that grandfather had been waiting for while he was walking through the crowd of striking workers did occur and a foundry worker, well known as a "red," jostled him—Your turn will come too, sonofabitch! —he turned in a flash to the stocky man in the tight dark overall, more swiftly than anyone would have expected of him, looked into the eyes of the man, who was about his own age, and grandfather's face changed; his eyebrows arched up to the brim of his hat, his widened eyes radiated brightly, his mouth became round, his lips pursed, a quiver ran over his shaved cheeks, and from his massive body, so snugly encased in English cloth, there came a deep, mocking "Ho! Ho!"

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Traduction: Peter Jansen, Chicago