



**Peter Flamm**

**Me?**

**A novel**

**160 pages**

**A gem of a book from 1926, rediscovered in the archives of S. Fischer**

**Who am I if my experiences have made me someone else?**

Hans, an esteemed surgeon, returns home from the battlefields of the First World War – or rather to what is meant to be his 'home'. What he has been through has pulverised his certainties, leaving only an indelible sense of alienation. His wife Grete and his friends recognise him and he goes reliably about his work, but his dog smells a rat. Has the war turned him into someone else? Or might he actually be another man who has wormed his way into Hans's life?

This breathless monologue exposing the self-doubts of the protagonist and raising many existential questions turns Peter Flamm's slender, powerful novel into a thrilling reading experience.

"Writers and non-writers alike are doomed – or blessed – to battle the ghostly bubbles that emerge from the dark, boiling waters of their unconscious."

Peter Flamm

"What is a classic?

Is it a book that is in the canon and whose plot everyone knows? The condensed expression of a specific era to which the general public can refer back through changing times?

The new classics of our own age are created. Discovered in archives, they show a previously unknown facet of history. They reveal our desire for stories that explain past times to us and provide authentic testimony of how things once were. *Me?* by Peter Flamm is one of these classics. This debut novel was published by S. Fischer in 1926 and then slipped into decades-long oblivion. Now, though, *Me?* is available again, every bit as fresh as when it was written, to be read and rediscovered by each and every one of us."

Sebastian Guggolz, Classics Editor at S. Fischer Verlag

**Peter Flamm**, whose real name was Erich Mosse, was born in Berlin in 1891 and began writing columns and short stories for the newspapers belonging to his uncle, Rudolf Mosse, while still a medical student. His psychological debut novel *Me?* created a huge stir when it was published by S. Fischer in 1926. In the following years he published three further novels while continuing to practise as a doctor until, as a Jew, he was forced to emigrate from Germany for Paris with his wife Marianne in 1933 and on to New York in 1934. He settled in the city, where he worked as a psychiatrist. Famous figures like Albert Einstein and Charlie Chaplin were regular guests at his home. He died in New York in 1963.

**Translation: Simon Pare**

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**Not I, your honours, but a dead man is speaking through my lips.** It is not me standing here, not my arm rising, not my hair gone white, not my actions, not my actions. You won't understand. You think, this must be a living person, this is a human being speaking – or a madman. I'm not mad, I don't know. But I've been lying in the ground for ten years, my limbs have rotted, my bones are grey powder, my breath . . . I have no breath left. It is all silent. It is all over. I am lying in the ground near Verdun. Up above are the ruins of Douaumont, the wind is blowing across abandoned graves, abandoned ground, the abandoned dead. Go there, dig in the sand, chip away to the left in the large shell crater, it has water in it, maybe soft mud. Don't be afraid – the war is over, no grenade will fall and splatter you into pieces, no screams ring out now, no limbs fly through the air, no blood, no shredded bodies. It is quiet. Not a sound. For ever. Now you bend down. You scrape away a bit of earth. And you find . . . me. Yes, bones and skull and dust and my name, which isn't and yet is my name, my fate that belongs not to me but to someone else and has now befallen me, just as suffocating as my own.

How am I supposed to relate this with a tongue not mine in a mouth not mine? How are you supposed to believe me when I cannot even believe myself? But that is how it was, that is what happened, it was real, it was a day like many others, no, not like many others because Lieutenant Basch told us there was a revolution, a revolution in Munich and Berlin, the war was over, after four years it was over, no more shells, no death, no mud, no coercion, no laws, no iron or pressure: everything was dissolving, everything was falling apart, a new era, a new life.

I was drunk, we were all drunk; something was singing inside me and rushing to the surface, so I climbed out of the trench, my senses reeling, it couldn't all be over so suddenly after all this time, we had been waiting for this for so long that we no longer believed it would ever end. Now, a new gateway, a new life, we wouldn't have to lie around in the dirt any more, we would be back in a room lying on white sheets, we would have a future. A future? We would work, we would have to start again from scratch, where are the white sheets, we will sit at the front in the dirt again while the generals at the rear, the



generals are always at the rear, these rich people driving cars, with the glory, the grub and the women, while the others croak, while we –

I clambered out of the dugout, fell over hills and holes, stumbled over corpses and tree trunks, it was a cold night, the moon was shining, music came trickling out of the dugout, fever was burning in my blood, I was so tired I could have toppled over and yet I was driven, driven, driven by anxiety – suddenly there was something lying in front of me, a dark mass, I almost fell over it. I wanted to walk on, back to the dugout, why on earth was I out here anyway instead of being with my comrades, singing with them, celebrating, what had lured me out here in the middle of the night, alone among wrecked vehicles and collapsed walls, alone among – dead men? Yes, it was a dead man, I knew obviously, he had gone on patrol yesterday, twenty-four hours before the end, the war was over, and he had been killed a day earlier, the last bullet struck a mother too, couldn't we have stopped a day earlier, it's stupid, now he was dead, lying there, the doctor, an 'educated' man, what good was that to him now, he was only a sergeant like me, ought to have been a lieutenant – now he was dead, and I – -. My hand reached down to his body, I didn't want to, it happened automatically, I had walked here automatically, had I wanted to or known I would? Automatically. How? My hand was trembling as it patted down the body, mud, sticky blood, I turned on my torch, its small, blunt beam groped spookily through the shadows; then two eyes were staring up at me, dead empty eyes twinkling between sunken lids, I started back, my hand was shaking – wasn't the head nodding, wasn't there a mischievous grin on the cold, blue lips? I was lost; back in the dugout I clutched my chest, my heart was beating as if in a race, but above the pounding I felt with a surge of excited joy the small, grey booklet, the passport I'd taken from the dead man, his passport, his name – and his destiny.

I didn't know that at the time. No one asked you – hurray for the revolution – who asks for papers, who checks it, who knows a name? We are all human, we are all brothers, and the other guy was dead, he couldn't care less, rotting in the mud with twinkling eyes, bones and dust – yuck!

I was sitting on the train, an express, first class of course, how easy it is to get used to, how strange too that all the excitement was gone, quite natural the whole thing. Did I use to stand by the oven door, get out of bed in the middle of the night? And the dough had risen



and was hard, and through the door the embers stabbed you right in the face and singed your skin, and little Hennings burning his apron and one hand and screaming – no way, no way, that wasn't me, that isn't me, I was on this train, an elegant, educated man, a rich man reclining on a padded red seat, first class, of course you can pity the other, packed into fourth class like animals, like cattle, they can't even sit and are so tired and their knees are shaking but they have to stand, all of them, even the small, thin dragoon, pale faced under his black parting, who stared and stared at me with such pain in his eyes earlier until he fell over, face suddenly all white. Or did I only dream it or see it in a picture once, and it is a memory of something that exists – or doesn't?

'If you come to Berlin,' says the fat baldie on the padded seat opposite. 'Revolution – whoever would have thought it! You are going to Berlin?'

'Is this train going to Berlin? It is? Yes. I actually wanted to – -. Of course I'm going to Berlin.'

Of course? Why did I go? I didn't mean to, but I was drawn there. I thought it was my choice, but how then could I forget my mother and my sister in Frankfurt, how could I? Hadn't seen them for a year, all the same, now Berlin? Berlin, of course. It wasn't even difficult, it wasn't even an issue. I smiled, I had to smile the whole time, but there was still a darkness over my soul, a strange shadow that wouldn't go away, heavy and smothering. Outside in the corridor a man was leaning against the window, watching the landscape flash past. I couldn't see his face, but his narrow back, his skewed shoulder, the left pulled higher than the right, the curious tension in his neck, it all seemed familiar to me, something bubbled up inside me, a peculiar agitation, an unprecedented hatred, an almost physical revulsion. I couldn't take my eyes off him. Was I hypnotised? I was travelling First Class and I didn't know anyone! Why should I hate a stranger, a neck, a back with such pointless, unprovoked hatred? What concern was he of mine?

Now the back turned, the neck creased with diagonal folds, now the head was in profile – a stranger. And yet I knew him, still all my blood shot into my forehead, still there was a darkness there that scared me, it was like taking a blow to the head, my thoughts became confused, I wanted to stand up, turn away; but the man had noticed me now and jerked his body round towards me, a pair of eyes turned hard and fierce until the whites looked as if they were popping out, the nostrils began to quake and the hand to clench into a fist, for a second it looked as if the fist was going to rise and punch the narrow, thin pane of glass



separating our faces – then with a start he lowered it, turned away contemptuously and disappeared with quick spasm of movement.

I sat there numbly. What was that? Had I dreamed it? Was I hallucinating? The war had certainly had an effect on my nerves, no wonder, but it would probably pass. When I had settled down, was back at work –. I wiped my brow with my hand. Strange, how white my hand was, very thin and transparent, thin blue veins snaking as if through wax, as if it wasn't my hand, as if –

'Strange,' the thought went through my mind, 'what kind of person am I, what am I, sitting here, and what strange hands I have!'

The train pulled into the station. I had never been to Berlin but I knew this was Berlin and I was stunned. I walked along the platform, down the station steps and left down

Königgrätzer Straße to Potsdamer Platz. In Bellevuestraße a man came towards me, made to pass me by, then gave a start, stopped, greeted me and there was a sparkle in his eye and then a rejoicing hand grabbing me vigorously by the arm.

'Gosh, you, doctor, you're here, you're alive? What's Grete going to say? A rumour that something had happened to you – of course you've sent her a telegram? I was with her only yesterday and your mother happened to be there too. They were all very worried. And your last letter was so strange, deathly premonitions, my God, no one should write such things, and then that rumour, and now you're here, how wonderful, I'll walk a stretch with you if you like, of course, come on, a car, how can you walk so slowly, and wasn't there anyone to meet you at the station?'

I sat in the car, next to a stranger who was driving me to a destination unknown to me. I couldn't think straight, I was not at all surprised, everything was happening automatically, I was floating on a river, on a cool, silvery surface, there'd been a war and now there was peace, I was walking along in the crowd and then someone comes and takes me in a car. Isn't that only normal? Everything is normal. Luck strikes everyone once, you just have to seize it, and the miracle lasts only so long until it becomes reality.

The car turned into the street. The purr of the engine suddenly ceased and a strange silence enveloped my brain, I got out mechanically, watched unthinking as the other man counted, scanned the house, the row of windows, a particular one – suddenly my heart stopped, the ground seemed to tilt and the world started to spin in green and gold circles

before my eyes. But her image was always part of it, standing up there at the window, who? a woman, girlish in appearance, shining golden-brown Titian locks above a paling face, a face full of sweetness, fear, pain, longing and so much love – who for, who had made this woman, this love their own, who possessed them: I would give a whole lifetime, no I don't want to move, why is he pushing me towards the door, I want to stay standing here and looking up for ever – – the stairs, where am I supposed to, why is my heart hammering like this?

My God, a door opened, it was on the second floor, there were sixty-two steps, why did I count them, counted them for no reason, the door swung open, it was already ajar, an old woman was standing there in a white bonnet with trembling hands, and then, appearing from the narrow hallway, in the draught, in the flickering white light – suddenly the girl was there, the woman from the window, standing there palely and smiling with a faint, sickly, humble smile, a small, pallid, twitching mouth, her shining eyes blue and looking radiantly into mine until a shudder ran through her slender limbs, her eyes sank behind long, dark lashes and her body, waxy all of a sudden, began to sway. She would have fallen but in one leap I was at her side, she was lying in my arms, her blanched lips moved quietly, her warm breath brushing my face and, shaking, I held the warm body in my embrace, then she raised her thin hand as if in a dream, touched my hair disbelievingly, tentatively, the lashes slowly rose, a blue beam of indescribable tenderness shone forth from her eyes and while tear after tear trickled unstoppably over those cheeks, the lips opened moistly and softly for a binding kiss.

How long did we stand there? I was oblivious to time, oblivious to the world, noticing only that something was tugging at my leg, kept on coming, jumping up and falling back while something hot seared down my leg – a hot, numbing, piercing pain. I wouldn't even have noticed it even now, but there was her scream and her horrified face, her forehead flushed red again, suddenly her hands were no longer above me, her wide-open eyes were staring sideways now, I felt as if I was in some terrible danger, as if I had to wrench myself back to my senses with all my might, wake up, defend myself, but I was gripped by such confusion, intoxicated by the scent coming from her hair, by the scent of her skin, all I kept seeing was her face, there was no one there, I wasn't here myself, it was all a dream, happiness seemingly hanging in the air, that was real, you mustn't wake up, you had to be very quiet



– what was screaming, why were the lips moving away, they had just touched me, they had just kissed me, what is twitching, why is this face grimacing, what is happening, what is tearing at me?!

Two dog's eyes are spurting green flames, a black shaggy body, a wild shaggy head, bared white teeth sunk and snagged in my flesh, and blood is flowing, my blood trickling hot and sticky towards my foot, down my sock, a small, dark stain there on the rug, a strange red mass, the man by the door shouts, his heavy hand digs itself into the animal's coat, he drags it backwards, again it charges forwards, he kicks it on its muzzle, at last it lets go, its jowls flap, its red tongue hangs out bloodied and powerless, sheepishly it creeps away to the wall, growling, keeping its eyes on me, keeping its eyes on me –

'How could you, Frau Grete,' the man's panting voice says, 'a fine welcome! The beast is mad, it could have torn him apart. It might be rabid. And why don't you defend yourself? Look at the slobber flying from its jaws, how it is looking and staring at you like . . . a human being.'

'That has never happened before, not once,' she shudders helplessly, then suddenly: 'Hans, Hans, here you are, suddenly you're here, my God, I'm going out of my mind, the animal is crazy, it bit you, why did it bite you, don't just stand there, go and fetch a doctor, it's bleeding.'

'It isn't serious, forget it,' the man says, 'a little gauze, a plaster, in the building you have –'

'Oh yes.' And she goes off and comes back and the trouser leg is rolled up and the wound bandaged, without asking they take off my coat, why should they ask, don't I belong here, isn't this my building, my room, my flat, my . . . wife?! My wife! This girl, these hands, lips, hair, these eyes – my wife!! This is madness, what is going on, this cannot be happening.

Who is this? I am in the home of strangers. I don't know anyone. Who is she? What's her name? Who do these people think I am? It's a misunderstanding. Who am I? Who am I??

'You have to lie down now,' she says now, and her voice comes like a ray of sunshine through all the dark clouds. 'You mustn't think or say anything, first you must sleep. There's enough time for everything. The war is over, and you are with me. Everything is fine now, isn't it? Oh Hans –'



What should I say to her? I have no idea, I don't understand any of this myself. Too much at once. I have done something, but I can't remember what. And I am tired. I want to sleep.

Everything is fine, isn't it? Everything's fine.

I am lying on the divan. My leg is hurting. I have closed my eyes. When I peer under my lids, the animal is over there, crouching in the corner, growling to itself, sucking in the air through its raised muzzle, eyes trained on me. I would like to sleep, but I am haunted by anxiety, there is a dull pounding behind my forehead, I am very alone. My mind is in an extraordinary state. For no reason I add up the yellow and black squares on the wallpaper, then count the black ones separately, there are one hundred and thirty-six, I feel my body lying on the divan, I myself am sitting inside my body and can feel it lying here, hands on the blanket, backside on the soft fabric, my brain is swimming in my skull, white nerves and brown veins run through my muscles. Who am I? Who am I?

My hand glides over my chest, moving mechanically back and forth as if caressing it.

Something crackles. In the left pocket, on the left of my chest something curls forward, something feels furry. All of a sudden, this one touch makes my heart begin to pound, suddenly a catch is sprung in my brain, an abrupt crack rends the wall: the passport!

How could anyone forget such a thing? Where was I all this time? Such fog, such ghostly twilight! Here in my pocket, a stranger's passport. Stolen: what does it matter. A

defenceless corpse: what harm does it do to him. He is no poorer for it, but I am richer.

What is a name! Have I not suffered enough from mine? 'Bettuch, Wilhelm Bettuch?' Is that a name? A name for a person? Bedcloth? At school, out in the playground, they would stand around me, pulling at my trousers, my jacket, my shirt. Bettuch, you cloth! Like in the fairy tale, lay the table yourself! Did you sleep well? Give us a wave! Come on and we'll beat the crumbs off you! You're dirty all over! We'll put you in our pockets! Handkerchief, pillow case!

Bettuch! What kind of father, what kind of ancestor would wear that name quietly! Let it wear him down without objecting! Without casting off the yoke around his neck! A person has a name that is not his fault, 'what's your name? – 'Bedcloth.' He smiles. Who? Everyone. People. The whole world. Pull their lips into a crooked smile. How can anyone take such a person seriously? Trust him, give him a position, work and status? Shouldn't I have made foreman long ago? Did someone take me on as an apprentice? Of course. But another guy

who was less skilled and had always been less skilled, and I was passed over. Always passed over. Blonde Liesel at the dancehall: looked at me with blue eyes, inclined her neck very gently towards me during the waltz, her little curls brush lovingly and affectionately against my right cheek, I lead her hot and out of breath to her seat, her mother is there, 'Bettuch,' I say and bow, 'Wilhelm Bettuch!' At this Liesel turns red, her small, dark lips become pinched, a giggle is ready in her throat, always the same giggle, it is everywhere, it murders everything, a momentary lustre is dulled, a burgeoning warmth freezes and recedes, and I am left alone.

A name, a word: what does that have to do with me? What is a man and his name? How can you even name a person as you do a thing, name a life that evolves and is always changing? He who was free is now caught from birth in a net – labelled, marked! Always bowed, so what use is strength; always tamed, so what use is wildness, courage and work. Now I have hatched out, now I'm someone else, I have a different name, I am a different person, it is so easy, you need only change your clothing, names make the man, and now I'm a doctor, Dr Hans Stern, yes, that's who I am, me, I'm an educated person, I am rich, an end to all ills, what is a corpse, I took his good fortune!

Over there the dog has got up from its corner and is prowling around the room, its head tilted, its eyes glowing green. After each lap of the room it stops at the foot end of the divan, draws itself up, looks at me, lays its paws on the heavy carpet, lowers its head onto it and begins to whimper, a long, torturous wailing sound.

What's wrong with the mutt? Everyone is good to me, everyone loves me, strange people put me in a car, strange arms drape themselves around my neck, strange hands tremble as they stroke my face. Only this animal is nasty, hates me, tears the flesh from my leg and makes it bleed, glowers at me, wild and testy, a gloomy, skulking enemy.

You have to try and win it over – it is a good animal. It is always good otherwise, so why not now? You have to be nice to it, stroke it: Come here, Nero! How do I know its name? Nero? Yes, here it comes, yes, it has pricked up its ears, the bushes above its eyebrows begin to twitch strangely, the head goes up, the tail is wagging, beating, lashing around, suddenly it jumps up onto the divan, I'm so startled I rear up, but its head is next to mine, its soft, damp tongue next to my cheek, and now its tongue is running over my ears, over my cheeks, chin and hands. The animal is beside itself, out of control, its whimpering becomes a bark, its

voice pierces the air roughly and violently, it jumps up from the divan and back down again, spins around as if it has lost its wits, writhes on the floor, runs over to the table, the wardrobe, the window, its whole body quivering, now it's back beside me, sucking in the air, sniffing at my shoe, up my trouser legs, at the bandage, the barking stops, more pitiful, horrible whining, it lies down flat on the ground, on the floor, on the cold, desolate floorboards. Its tongue hangs out as it pants, its nostrils are dark red, foam is gathering on its nose. 'Nero,' I call in a totally unfamiliar voice, jump off the divan in one leap, next to it, to stroke it, dig my hand into his coat, my head warm next to his – but the movement stops in mid-air, I see the dog in the mirror, I see the objects in the room, the chair at the table, the books on it, the ashtray, the lamp, I see the animal on the floor – and a stranger next to it, dark hair covering his forehead, head over the animal's coat, the hand . . . Rooted to the spot I look up, the other man lifts up his face too, two eyes stare at me, horrified I let go of the animal, so does the other man – what is this, I feel dizzy, the other man turns pale too, lurches upright as I do, leaps towards the mirror, I turn around to look, so does he –: No one, there's no one in the room but me, I am all alone, only the image in the mirror, and that . . . is me, myself, it's the sole possibility, I am all alone, I am lonely, terribly alone, I touch my whole body, arms, face, one hand strokes the other: Me, me, me, someone else is me, I am someone else, the dead man who is now alive, face, another man's body, muscles, flesh, guts, brain and soul. Not me? No longer mine? I myself am no longer me? That which is looking through my eyes, the thing my hands are feeling, my thoughts, my own thoughts – no longer mine?

A breathless horror grips me. I try to think, but everything is frozen, icy silence inside my skull as fearful, marble-white face stares out of the mirror. Suddenly there is a twitch, a burning flush pulsates through me, the hand pats the breast pocket automatically again as before, now everything is clear: the passport, the other man's name, the name brought on all of this, they are mystically connected, face and name indissociable, and now I am the other man and must live out his death, live his life while he lies out there under the ground, in the mud, and I step into his life as if through a picture frame, but I know everything, I stand on the other side like a spectator, am still myself and watch myself being the other man and yet me – a man behind his image.

A calmness has now come over me, a strange silence. Everything is empty, I have no more fear, it was perhaps too much, I am tired, a certain amount is the limit, an instant can never be fully captured, you can only know everything from the past and that is a good thing because otherwise the soul would shatter. A shield, a bulwark against yourself, against insanity, being overwhelmed and madness, everything is fine, the whole past extinguished, no more war, no work, I cannot remember how things used to be, not that it matters anyway, I'm a new person, a new life is beginning, a new future. Now, now is happiness, now, when I go through that door, beyond it lies happiness, beyond it – The door opens, slowly and cautiously, a narrow gap, a head squeezes through it, auburn hair glows in the sunlight, a white hand rests on the handle, large blue, fearful eyes listen out: here she is next to me, her breath touches my face – no, no, no.

'What's wrong, you're looking at me strangely, why do you back away?'

'Nothing, oh, it doesn't mean anything, I was just startled, I'm not used to any of this yet, your being . . . here, I was alone in the trenches for so long, with only men, shelling the whole time, noise the whole time, orders the whole time and being ready to die and now all of a sudden . . . there's someone by my side, a woman, so beautiful –'

'My silly darling, now I'm blushing,' holding my eyes shut.

Should I tell her? Am I obliged to tell her?

'Just look at how I look, my hair, my face, it's all –'

I get no further, she is holding me in her arms, she is clinging to me, I am so weak, I can't help being weak, can't help loving her, that's right, then, right away, I saw her face and I loved her and didn't have the strength to tell her that I wasn't him, that she intended her kisses for someone else, loved someone else, another man, another man!

'Come through now, you have slept enough, the sun is going down soon, the table is laid and has been for a long time, everything will have got cold, and Mother is waiting, Mother is there too, I couldn't stand it so I told her that you are here, no one else though, you first need some peace and quiet today, tomorrow is something else, your friends will surely not be kept away, Bobby has already sent his servant three times, it was nice of him to bring you straight here in the car, Bussy Sandor sent the big bunch of lilac with a pink note, I'm telling it all wrong but you mustn't get angry, and just imagine, Sven Borges has just got back too, I haven't seen him all this time, he only had leave once and was very forward, I'll

tell you about it later, and now half an hour ago, while you were lying in there, the telephone rings – strange, isn't it? He must have come on the same train as you.'

The back, the slanting shoulder, is that him? He must be the guy on the train. The darkness is back, Sven Borges, again I feel a pane of glass in front of my eyes, it should have been smashed but it's unbreakable, unbreakable –

It goes straight on, there's no time to think, it's like a children's book, one new page after another, one surprise after another, and yet it's my own life. I'm in the next room, a table has been set with fine white damask with crystal glasses standing there, green and red goblets, flowers laid out among it all, small violets, in the middle a large, tall vase full of glowing, open roses, right and left two candelabras with nine white candles, so festive, she has taken my hand like a child, just as when it was my birthday, Mother would lead me in by the hand, surprises, presents; there's a hunched old woman there, her sparse white hair is standing up wildly around the old, crumpled forehead, the thin, pursed lips twitch, her still, grey eyes behind the golden spectacles peer unwaveringly at me, large and astonished, now she stamps her stick on the floor, comes step by step towards me, the spectacles slide off her pointed nose, the stick clatters to the ground, the small, parched arms coil around my neck while the small, ancient body contracts with sobs and happiness.

'Mother –'

Tears well up in my eyes, I don't know why. This is my mother. I am seized by a great longing, a nameless ache, I want to fall at her feet but something stops me, crouching heavy and dry, musty and suffocating in my throat.

Now we're sitting at the table, the lights flicker, there is not much talk, the old servant carries in the dishes, it is white china, thin and translucent with a red dragon pattern, and over there on the right-hand wall hangs a picture, it must be Grete and a young man next to her in uniform; she must have noticed my gaze because her eyes also turn that way, there is a smile on her face, she has her hand on mine, withdraws it mischievously and, throwing back her head, says:

'Actually, you look a bit shabby in civilian clothes, you know. Do you remember when we had our first photograph taken together, Father and Mother had no idea about our engagement, I was so proud of your uniform. You were just serving until it was time for

your appointment and the official announcement and you would have had to take it off again; we went there, your moustache, you used to brush up your black bristles, thank God it's gone, war is good for something after all, that stupid tickling, and you looked picture-postcard handsome, I was a stupid girl, I liked it back then, look –' and she bounds up and back with the picture in her hand and a burst of bright laughter: 'Your eyes were like saucers, like a marzipan prince, and those silver braids, one of them tore off when we had to part so quickly that evening, and you wanted one last kiss and it snagged on the chair arm, and I hurriedly sewed it all together, and the sergeant noticed and asked, but you wouldn't admit anything and preferred to go into detention, no you were a stalwart tin soldier, you could never shake off that name, my little tin soldier, and now you're a big one and have had enough of it and I have had enough too – even in civvies, it's better like this, it really is.'

She is serious now and pensive, her fine, slender fingers play with the silver knife rest, I turn half towards her, her face is in profile, her white neck bent over the picture, a gentle and moving silhouette, suddenly all her cheerfulness is gone and with a pained, strangely weary and careworn expression around her lips she whispers:

'A piece of life is gone, the war took it from us, cheated us of our life, where is it now? When you're married you must have a life together or what is the point! How often have I sat here and pined for you and wondered what you're doing out there – are you in a trench, maybe chatting with comrades, drinking, maybe with my picture in your hand telling the others, in your thoughts here in this room or somewhere else entirely, over by enemy lines, studying their positions, or a captain is there or an attack is just beginning, and I sit here unable to move, it's all taking place without me while I sit here powerless, as if I were blind, the bullets fly, blood spurts in all directions, arms and legs fly, this one has his guts hanging out and that one his brains, you were only just chatting to them, it is horrific to sit here on my own and Mother always silent and not a word, sometimes I thought I didn't know if you were even still alive, whether you might not already be in the ground, long since an unidentifiable mass, and then I suddenly had this feeling, I am married to a dead man without even knowing it, and then I could have screamed – my own life, sitting here, this body sitting on the chair, then it is over, such a horrible chill rising up inside, like a cold fever; sometimes I sat for hours and couldn't stand up, at night in bed I couldn't sleep, I

saw you lying beside me, on the white sheet, your forehead was completely white, it was half dream, half madness, blood in one hair, and time resting on it like a doll, yes, the time I was living, you were living, a strangely stiff doll, on the middle of my chest, sucking with a soundless breath on my breath, almost choking me.'

'Grete, Grete, my child, you –' For the first time the name has come out of my mouth, it is no longer so bizarre, I have just taken her hand and am holding it in mine, she is very cold and shivering, her face very pale, I run my hand over her hair, again and again, I have no thoughts, her chest rises and falls, a tear runs down her cheek, hot and slow, I stand up, I take her in my arms, I kiss away her tears, silent, excruciating sobs shake her body, I don't let go of her, eventually she calms down, a smile plays on her lips again, she forcibly pulls herself together, takes her white tissue, wipes her eyes vigorously, laughing again and mischievously about mine, sits down at the table again, stabs her fork into the meat, cuts off a large bite, dips it in the gravy, pushes it into my mouth and says:

'Well, this is more important than anything else. I am a stupid, hysterical thing, and now we won't talk about it any more, right?'

No, we don't talk about it any more. But she is pale, her mouth is laughing, she talks incessantly, she jokes and begins a thousand anecdotes, but I know that she isn't with me, only her mouth is laughing, her eye is still large, grave and shocked, and behind that white forehead, a small soul lies sick and bleeding from a thousand wounds.

The meal is finished, we have got up, the old maid clears away the plates; Mother, who has sat chewing away in silence so far, mumbling half-comprehensible things to herself, has now taken her stick, hobbles around the table, puts her arm through mine, points with a near-triumphant expression to the door on the left, I look quizzically at Grete, there is a sweet Madonna-like smile on her face, a delicate, happy blush briefly lights up her cheeks: 'He is in there, sleeping,' she beams, 'but now he can easily wake up, it's not every day that he has a new father return home.'

God on the cross who bears the sins of the world: a wave has caught me and swept me along and won't let go of me, impossible to go back, impossible to undo what has been done, the coast slips away, out into the dizzying sea, out of my depth – everything is ablaze before my eyes.