



Halbmichel

Harstein

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Before...

...they had all been in agreement. A close-knit group. Roderich had felt comfortable among them. In the circle of the Futurists, he found answers to questions that he hadn't even known he was asking himself.

The fact that they all needed money did not bother him.

They respectfully called him "Mr." Harstein. And no matter how often he waved them off in embarrassment and asked them to just call him Roderich, they only nodded eagerly—and didn't do it. He remained Mr. Harstein, who had been so generous to them.

Roderich thought that was a shame.

Andrea loved to barricade the gates of libraries. He made the newspapers with it, because he stuck locks and latches with hot pitch. In Genoa he helped caulking ships so that he wouldn't starve. That's how he got the hot pitch. And that's how he made his point—that of the Futurists—clear. He spat on the accumulated stories of the past. Andrea believed that they not only gathered dust in libraries, but also in the heads of the unsuspecting, who searched for new ideas in those old pages. He himself lived by the ideals of futurist literature. His own works he freed from any respect for the glorious history of Italy. He wrote directly, unembellished, unpretentious. Even the letters in his pamphlets and essays bristled with energy: they were wildly mixed, composed of different lettering, of different sizes. Andrea had neither time nor sense for the backward-looking order of the classical scribblers.

Roderich didn't understand everything Andrea urged in the essays he sent him. But he did not tell the Futurist that. He was impressed with the latter's chutzpah, a determination to leave no stone unturned. Roderich was more than happy to pay for that.

The pictures that Michele painted, Roderich understood them all. At least in his own way, he told himself. They were just the way he liked them: full of tension, free of kitsch. Unlike Andrea, Michele had nothing to do with sabotage. Of course he approved of it—that was part of the futuristic tone. Michele liked to explain that he simply didn't have time for it. He had to paint, and he had to paint fast! It was not about money for him. Nor was it about hanging his works in galleries or museums. Oh no! It was the first and greatest mistake of the elders to want to embalm the status quo of their fame in museums. Michele didn't give a damn about fame, he assured his patron. Roderich liked that. Michele was driven by revolution, nothing else. He preferred to put his time into new works and to bring them to the people, rather than into sabotage. And that was to convert as many of them as possible to Futurism before they would waste their lives unproductively.

Blurring ruled Michele's paintings. He captured speed in color, moments fueled by horsepower. Harstein could feel the headwind that Michele's planes, locomotives, and sirens encountered. He would look at these images for hours.

Roderich Harstein also particularly liked to support Ornello. The young man came from the mountains, north of Bergamo. For such a peaceful area as Roderich supposed it was, Ornello was beyond riotous. He liked to show off, and when the Futurists roamed the bars, as they often did, they could count on Ornello to instigate a brawl. But physical fighting was not at all the rather small man's greatest strength. No one fooled him acoustically. This was his area of expertise: he built all kinds of impressive apparatuses that were supposed to give the well-tempered classical instruments a run for their money. Ornello made them make noise—the most beautiful noise he could imagine. With his shellac players and other playback devices, he brought the noise of construction sites into concert halls. He captured the most sensational sounds of progress with his boxes, from chimneys whistling in chorus, to hissing molten steel, to the monotonous rattle of diesel engines.

Harstein was still waiting for the day when he would be recorded by Ornello with one of his automobiles. He had bought especially loud ones.

Andrea, Michele and Ornello. These three were Roderich's favorite of the whole hot-headed camp. And they were, without exception, thrilled before the war by the idea of what the former would be able to do for the collective development of mankind. They spat in front of Roderich on Italy's timid role in the war. Libya? The government had made a mess of that. Surely he would see it that way?

Harstein saw it that way.

And anyway, they continued, this campaign would not have been worth the trouble. Now completely different resources were at stake, namely those that decided on the further maturation of the intellect! Andrea, Michele and Ornello broke it down for Roderich, although he didn't ask for it: Italy would finally have to enter the world war if the nation wanted to escape hunger and regression. The three of them were fed up with the supposedly neutral role that the politicians were still playing.

But there was also the political wing of the Futurists, Harstein remarked.

They chided him for remembering this stain on the movement, as Andrea, Michele and Ornello called the politicians in their ranks. No, grenades should finally be heard in the valleys of the Alps! The young men of the fragmented lands would find their lost nation on the battlefield. When the howitzers would clean their minds through their ears!

The three were annoyed that they could not already be at the front themselves. He, Mr. Harstein, would not blame them if it came against the Germans. They always hurried to make it clear that they saw him first as one of their own. Especially since he also spoke Italian completely without accent! They were proud of him, their comrade....

Harstein did not take offense. He did not care that in their eyes he belonged to the potential enemy—the neutral government had not yet taken a side. More importantly, he himself did not know whether he was German or not. At some point in the last few years, Roderich had seemingly irretrievably forgotten where he came from, where he had grown up, ...why he spoke so many languages without ever remembering any lessons. Or about his parents.

He kept all that to himself. He would rather toast to the triumph of technology with his three favorite Futurists. He would rather imagine with them a future that would be shaped by war. They had all agreed on that.

Before, they had all been in agreement...

Afterwards...

...there was little left of this unity. And of the three. Ornello had been particularly stricken. Roderich visited him in the hospital. The hothead was missing a lot, among other things a part of his jaw. He could not speak to Roderich, but his eyes spoke volumes.

The visitor left the hospital disappointed.

A few weeks later, he ran into Andrea. Roderich had to chase him down an alley, because the writer had not heard his calls several times. He was terribly sorry about that, as Michele assured his former patron. He was simply in a hurry, ...and, moreover, he could hear hardly anything. He pointed to one of his ears to prove it. Roderich saw what Michele meant, but did not know what the painter wanted to tell him with the demonstration. So he asked him if he wouldn't be proud of his scars. Hadn't they all always emphasized how there should be no cult of the flesh? That the ideal lay in the machine? In the replaceability, in the wear and tear?

Michele had stared at him. Then he nodded, then affirmed every futuristic demand that Roderich cited with great enthusiasm. Yes, yes, good Mr. Harstein was right, of course....

Roderich did not believe Michele.

Only Andrea he saw returning to the circle of Futurists who met in Milan despite the ongoing war. The writer looked unscathed. And Roderich secretly wondered why that disappointed him. A strange thought, he found

himself thinking. Especially since it was so hard for him to shake it off. But to shake it off he could, because Andrea was making quite a scene. The decimated ranks of the Futurists—many chairs remained empty—had hardly turned to the agenda when Andrea sprang up from the last row and rudely insulted all but the last comrade present. A real speech! It culminated in a double climax, dramaturgically well-coordinated. Roderich would have expected nothing less of his protégé.

First he accused the scattered group in dazzling words that they were naive. That they were too vain and stubborn to admit their mistake. What mistake? A few defiant ones would not let the shouting stand. Not to have acted early enough? Not being radical enough? What?

Michele shouted it in their faces: to have thought they were men without ever having looked the monster in the mouth!

An uproar followed, of course. But Michele used this for the second highlight of his performance. If he had first let words speak, now followed action. He rushed to the exit, drew a knife, presented it with a raised arm, and cut himself across the open palm of the other. The paths of knife and blood parted ways at once. The former, in a rage, Michele hurled toward the podium, where it merely bounced weakly off the wood. The latter Michele smeared generously over the handle of the door in front of which he stood.

Then he departed.

The hall was left in awkward silence. Harstein hoped that after the intermezzo the Futurists would get their act together and hold a proper meeting. But many faces remained pale with shock, and a few comrades slid unobtrusively from the room. Harstein saw grown men hiding tears....

He did not understand all this. It was only on the way to his quarters that Roderich realized that Michele had performed his usual sabotage ritual in that hall. Whereas in the past it had been pitch with which he had blocked the libraries, this time it was his own blood that had to be used. Roderich was briefly pleased that he had recognized this intellectual gesture, even after the fact. But then he got in a bad mood, because he didn't see the point.

Now...

...he sat before the doctor who was so expensive. And the man, despite all the laurels with which Roderich's manufacturer friends had showered him, did not strike him as being any wiser than he was. After all, he was only supposed to tell him what the point of Michele's action might have been.

"Mr. Harstein?"

"Huh?"

The doctor looked at him questioningly.

"What?" grumbled Roderich.

"Do you understand?" the doctor inquired. "That's not how our relationship works. Our relationship between doctor and patient. I can't tell you what to think about Michele..."

Harstein eyed the man skeptically. They had said the doctor was a pioneer. The first of a new breed that would overturn everything society knew about the soul and its sensitivities. Roderich had liked to hear that, after all he understood the head—for all he cared even the soul—as a rather unreliable component of the human machine. And he definitely saw himself as a machine. Futurism spoke of optimization, of efficiency and effectiveness of any performance. Harstein found it obvious from the beginning that the brain would be no exception. Up there, behind the bones of the skull, which did not protect the gray mass in it without reason, a high-performance machine was waiting to be set up correctly.

How was the doctor going to do that if he blocked his questions?

"Shall we recap what I can and can't do?"

Roderich waved it off and puffed.

"Not much, obviously," he said.

"Why do you think that is?

"I have questions, but you're dodging them!"

The doctor withheld a reply.

"There! Again!"

"Do permit me," the doctor pressed out as he glanced at his writing pad, "to take notes, Mr. Harstein!"

"Of course I permit!" murmured Roderich with a sneer. "May I also read what you are writing?"

The doctor looked up, and Roderich calmly in the face.

"Thought so...", Harstein added.

In his career, the doctor had had amazing success in many scientific fields. Quite often, he had also taken the very first steps. It simply appealed to him to think further than others. He did not consider himself particularly collegial, in this respect. This had no doubt cost him a position or two. At least he was honest with himself about his unsuitability for happy research circles.

No, the doctor preferred to explore on his own. That way, he didn't have to wait for flashes of inspiration from third parties, who he rarely found useful anyway. Only Professor Freud from Vienna was explicitly excluded by the doctor from this scathing judgment. A great man! The founder of their craft. The doctor strove to emulate him.

"It occupies you again today, the fate of your three protégés..."

"Meaning?"

On the inside, the doctor shook his head. He took good care not to do it on the outside.

"How do you feel about none of them pursuing their art anymore?"

"That's not necessarily true..." objected Harstein.

"Let me elaborate," the doctor offered. "The three of them no longer accept gratuities from you. And they have withdrawn from the Futurist circle, haven't they?"

Harstein puffed bitterly.

"I wish there was a circle left at all..." he said quietly.

The doctor paused here briefly with the notes, which he now wrote down blindly on paper, because he did not want to give his patient another reason to complain. This last remark of the same, he found highly relevant. Not that it surprised him. He had, on the contrary, been waiting for these very words for the last two sessions.

"Tell me more about it, please," he asked. "Did something happen?"

Harstein took his time. He found the doctor's curiosity suspect every time it forced him to explain things at greater length.

"There just aren't any more meetings," he finally elaborated. "First, those who were at the battlefield were missing. Of course, that had to happen! And we solemnly toasted to the empty seats. Finally, the revolution got going!"

The doctor nodded knowingly. Since the first session with the patient, he had known everything about the revolution and the futurists' views of the future.

"But then more and more stayed absent. And those who came..."

"Yes?" the doctor encouraged when he noticed Harstein anxiously fumbling at his collar.

"What about them, Mr. Harstein?"

"They were..., how to put it? ...Mute, sort of," Roderich groaned. He didn't like to remember the faces.

The doctor scribbled something in his pad. Harstein continued.

"Well, they did still talk. But only misgivings and hushed words came out of the bunch! As if they had lost all courage."

Harstein looked at the doctor, who gave him a nod.

"What?"

"Where do you think their courage went?" asked the doctor.

"How would I know?"

Silence.

Here it was, the doctor thought. The tiny clue, so fleeting, so inconspicuous. Other representatives of his field might have overlooked it for lack of experience. The doctor, however, guessed that he had only to pull a little on this minor clue to see it tear open to a crack.

"Well, weren't they all on the battlefield?" he asked into the room.

"So?"

Silence.

Pull a little harder...

"They've all seen war, Mr. Harstein."

Roderich nodded.

"Yes, of course!"

"...What do you think it has to do with the misgivings and the hushed words that bothered you so much?" the doctor added.

"The front?" Harstein pondered. "I don't know..."

The doctor's chair creaked. The man corrected his sitting position and took a deep breath before venturing forth with his mouth as well.

"You know," he began. "You came to me because of your insomnia, because of uneasy thoughts, as you call them. Our conversations have led us to your old circle of friends. Would you agree with me that the war has wrought as great changes for it as it has for all other people?"

"Greater!" hastened Harstein to confirm.

"And yet the condition of your former protégés seems a mystery to you. Whenever we talk about their changes of mind, you avoid the word 'war,' Mr. Harstein. What do you make of this?"

Harstein thought about it, earnestly.

"It's unclear to me what the war has to do with it!"

The doctor seemed puzzled. Harstein saw it in his face. The doctor chided himself for the gaffe as he noticed his counterpart's reaction.

"What are you trying to say?" asked Harstein.

"You avoid relating the war to your disappointment in the Futurists' change of heart..."

"Nonsense!"

"I mean the pain," the doctor added seamlessly, "that the experiences at the front inflicted on the men."

Roderich waved it off in agitation, as if he had just come up with the better argument in a debate club.

"You haven't been listening very well!" he said. "I did indeed tell you about the jaw and the ear! And I know a few more people who have taken a good beating."

"Not the physical pain, Mr. Harstein. It's the mental pain. It's very likely that Michele, Andrea, Ornello—and all the others—have been shaken to the core by the war. Real traumata!"

The patient clearly had to let this explanation sink in. He hung expressionless on the couch, soon fiddling with his collar again. The doctor could virtually see it boiling inside him, at first barely noticeable, then with considerable force.

"You don't blame all this fussing on the war, do you?" he fumed.

"You don't?"

"Certainly not!" blustered Harstein as he sprang from a semi-recumbent position to an upright one. Everything in him objected to the idea the doctor seemed to be putting forth.

The fact that the man was now scribbling even more notes made Harstein quite furious.

"One has nothing at all to do with the other! We all wanted to see fighting finally take place. The war is a gift!"

The doctor had to clear his throat. He struggled with the force of the rebuttal, if only because of the sound pressure the extraordinarily compact patient was able to generate.

"A gift?"

"Indeed!"

"Doesn't it also bring countless deaths?"

"Otherwise it wouldn't be a real war..." grumbled Harstein.

This last remark, however, came much more quietly from the big man than the indignant reactions before. Roderich's face turned red.

"Don't you see anything negative in all this violence?" the doctor wanted to know.

"For example?"

"People lose their children on the battlefield," the doctor said deliberately gently. "Or they leave behind children who grow up without a father. Widows, orphans. Some return home but have left any will to live in the trenches. The atrocities that young men in particular see in battle never leave them..."

Roderich seemed to bite his lip. Briefly, the tension he was under was abundantly clear to see. But suddenly it disappeared and gave way to an embarrassed expression that the doctor had never seen before in his patient. From one second to the next, he looked intimidated, almost desperate. So this is how he must look when he's troubled by the dark thoughts that keep him up at night. The doctor was sure of it.

"Mr. Harstein?" he tried to build a bridge for the patient. "Please, by all means, voice what you're thinking!"

"I don't care," Roderich whispered so softly that the doctor genuinely didn't understand him.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"That I don't care! But it's not right to say that!"

"It's not right?"

"No!"

"It doesn't matter here."

Harstein gave the doctor a puzzled look.

"Don't you have decency? Do you not count?" he scoffed.

"If you put it that way, ...then no. As long as I'm sitting here in this room with you, I'm your doctor. I don't count. Look, I'm not here to judge your opinion. You don't have to earn any points here, Mr. Harstein! The opposite is true, in fact: We have to get closer to what is bothering you at the core. We would only go around in circles if you repeated in here what you think you have to say outside."

The patient considered this.

"Look at you!" he finally said. The doctor accepted this without changing his waiting posture.

"I couldn't care less what the widows and orphans whine about," he finally blurted out. As he did so, he glanced at the parquet floor at his feet. When he could hear no reaction from the doctor, he raised his head and scrutinized the man, who was sitting peacefully.

"Go on, please!" the doctor encouraged him. "Tell me what you really think—not what you believe you have to tell your environment. Don't pretend! Be yourself!"

Harstein nodded.

"Why does the argument always end with the dead and injured?" he asked. "We all agreed that the old idols must fall. Among the Futurists, I mean! True divinity lies in the primal power of mechanics, Doctor! What drives us, pushes us, catapults us, makes us faster and stronger, that is to be honored. Old rules and decency are a joke in comparison! A fired bullet

splits the air sharper than any theorem, faster than sound. There's more beauty in that than in daubing and opera trilling. It's poetic, doctor! The greater the violence we force out of objects, the more glorious the act of creation, you see."

The doctor wanted to write down much more than his fingers his fingers had time for. They couldn't keep up.

"But it is important that we be honest with ourselves! Inconsistency is the enemy of mathematics and engineering. Now, if the bullets at the front do what we cast them to do, what's wrong with that?"

No answer from the doctor to the rhetorical question. That is, he decided it must be rhetorical and Roderich wouldn't hear any answer to the question other than his own.

"Nothing, of course!" the patient continued. "A skull shattered like that, as if by an invisible hand, from a hundred yards away ... it proves our evolution better than any book! It's beautiful, doctor! It's just unusual for the spoiled masses who have been fed all those supposed artists as a measure of beauty since childhood. If it were up to me..."

Harstein paused.

"What would you do," the doctor helped, "if it were up to you?"

"You don't want to hear that...", Harstein deflected. His forehead suddenly shone, the doctor noticed. Sweat.

"Please, I want to hear it," he assured.

"I'd show them how to deal with pain. How they have to embrace the rumble of war! Pound it into them, I want to!"

"Into who, Michele and your other protégés?"

Harstein nodded impatiently.

"Not just them, Doctor," he admitted, in a whisper.

"Forget for a moment what is appropriate and what is not. Imagine you and I carrying this like little packages just outside the door right now.

That's where morals stay, okay? Outside the door. Only you and I are still here. And it's just us. Nobody's listening. No one will ever know what you're telling me, Mr. Harstein. Close your eyes if you want. But speak! Tell me exactly how you would convince Michele and everyone else."

"By force!"

"How exactly?"

Harstein wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was breathing heavily. In the doctor's face he read determination.

So he spoke. The doctor listened, as promised.

It turned out to be the longest fifteen minutes of his life. And the man would grow exceptionally old.

Later...

...the doctor would often rack his brains over how it had all come about. What once had guided him, spurred him on. As a gardener, he would later—much later—find the peace of mind that was to elude him for decades. He would even manage to think back only rarely to his days as a doctor.

It had been his passion, listening had. The doctor felt born for the task. And he had passed baptisms of fire with thoroughly difficult patients. He had heard confessions and accusations that would have spoiled this peculiar profession for less strong minds than his won. The doctor could handle it. Even more, he was absorbed in the responsibility for his patients, who had suffered tragic fates.

But now, less than four weeks after his last conversation with Roderich Harstein, the doctor no longer had a practice. He still owned the rooms, but the sign with his name had been removed. The doctor had ordered this himself with a heavy heart.

He no longer felt like a doctor, even if he couldn't get rid of the title as easily as of the sign on his door. When neighbors addressed him, naturally with the academic title, the doctor flinched imperceptibly. That prefix in front of his name sounded wrong. He felt like a fraud.

How quickly it had happened! About this the doctor pondered many a sleepless night in his bed. The morning after the last conversation with Roderich Harstein, he had gone to work as usual, even though he had been late seeing patients and had had to ask the receptionist at noon to cancel the rest of the day's appointments. He would not feel well...

Two days later, he had tried again, to work. But he found himself sitting mute and inattentive before the lady who was about to reveal her innermost self to him. She had talked at him like a waterfall, with teary eyes. This was the moment when the doctor was confronted with the truth. He didn't want to listen to the lady anymore. He was afraid of hearing something he couldn't handle. Actually, he was already afraid of the patient sitting so close to him. He had persevered, drenched in sweat, and then complimented the lady out. Afterwards, he remained standing in the middle of the room for a long time. When life came back into him, he had decided to stop being a doctor.

The receptionist received an extremely regretful dismissal the same day, and took it home, quite shocked. That same evening, the doctor cleared out the records—and the address file of the former receptionist. He destroyed all those under the abbreviation "H," as in Harstein. Above all, he collected all documents in a box, on which his own home address was noted.

And that was it. For the last few weeks, the doctor had not gone anywhere near his former practice. Some unavoidable legal business had been assigned to his attorney, who, somewhat concerned about the doctor's state of mind, arranged for the business to be closed.

There was a knock on the front door.

The doctor flinched, startled. Then he caught himself, shook his head at himself, and remembered that he had to do something to prevent his newly developed jumpiness from becoming a habit.

There was another knock, more impatient than before. The doctor could hear that from the sound of the tapping. They were no longer knuckles pounding on the wood of his door, but thumps of the fist.

"Patience!" he cried angrily.

With a few steps he reached the stairs to the foyer and hurried down them. Even before he reached the door, he could hear the heavy rain slapping against the window panes. It was not an evening for social visits, truly not. Perhaps the lawyer had finally done his overdue chores?

"For heaven's sake, in this foul weather..." the doctor called hospitably as he tore open the door. He failed to finish the sentence, however. Too jarring was the difference between the expected silhouette and the one he now found on his doorstep.

He wanted to call him by his name, wanted to convey casualness, to ask calmly about the reason for this visit. None of this the doctor accomplished. Before him, the impressive physique of his former patient quivered with exertion. Harstein had always seemed like an exceptional person even in the thoughtful quiet of the office. The most massive figure the doctor had ever seen. But now, in the twilight between the foyer and the pitch-black night, the rain lashing against his monstrous coat from behind, Roderich Harstein looked even more formidable than ever.

"Doctor!" the drenched man blubbered. "Explain yourself!"

The doctor was unable to do so. To see the very man standing in his doorway, whose words had given him nightmares, was too much for him. He stumbled backwards, fell on the bottom of his pants and in this position crawled a few steps away from the unannounced guest.

Harstein commented on this sight with wordless, heavy breaths. He seemed to be beside himself without question. However, since he had not

expected such a physical reaction from the doctor to his visit, he calmed down a bit. Under the mutual silence that drowned out even the pattering rain, Harstein's agitated breathing became calmer, more controlled.

"So that's how it is," he finally said. "You see a monster in me!"

That was true. Only the doctor would not have allowed himself that choice of words, nor the truth behind it. He might have quit his profession unrepentantly and with deep conviction, but his professional honor cared little for it. He could not call a patient a monster. He was not even allowed to think it. Even if he was afraid of Roderich Harstein. And fear for any human being who would provoke this sick man too far.

"That's not true," he stammered.

"Just look at yourself!" returned Harstein. He pointed at the doctor. "You're fleeing from me like a dog with its tail between its legs..."

The doctor forced himself to stand up. He also wanted to walk towards Harstein, but while the former succeeded, his body refused him the latter.

"...I wasn't expecting you," he tried to explain himself.

"But I did expect you!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harstein," the doctor tried to apologize. "I..., I can't practice anymore. It all happened so fast..."

"And you're leaving me alone? You can't leave me like this, man! I don't want these thoughts! Make them go away!"

The doctor shook his head. He looked paler in the dim light of the foyer than the light wallpaper. That was all he could think of: to use his head to vehemently deny. He had nothing more to offer Roderich Harstein than absolute and irrevocable negation towards him. How was he to explain this to him? How to make him accept what the doctor himself did not want to admit? That he had indeed fled from him. That he had hoped in his shocked naiveté that they would never run into each other again. That he regretted the insight into this soul of his, and tried to forget it every day. That he would have preferred to undo everything and never take Harstein as a patient.

He couldn't say that.

"I can't remove what's in you," he heard himself say.

"Then it was all for nothing? Charlatanism?" cried Harstein angrily.

"...You are the key, only you!"

The doctor did not know what struck him. He said these words without thinking about them. They came of their own accord, perhaps fed by the experience of thousands of conversations. No matter from where and how, he was grateful for this automatism.

Harstein regained his composure.

"I wish I wasn't like that...", he countered. "But I can't stop wanting these things! Every time I read the newspapers, see the marches, I..."

Harstein gripped his soaking wet hair. He was suddenly shaking all over.

"You can't escape them when the world around you is in this war," the automatism said.

"That war is everywhere!" complained Harstein sullenly.

"Not everywhere..."

Harstein straightened. He shot a questioning look over at the doctor.

"Withdraw!" appealed the latter in a quivering voice. "Go away! Far away, where war cannot find you. Find a peaceful place where nothing can feed your fantasies about atrocities."

Now the oversized man in the open front door began to think. It was written all over his puzzled face. The doctor was glad of the break he was given from accusations and questions. He still had not ruled out the possibility that his ex-patient, in the heat of overflowing emotions, would reach out and unceremoniously break him in two.

But Harstein did not lay a hand on him. Instead, he suddenly paced restlessly from one wall to the other in the small foyer. He grabbed his temples, rubbed them. And he was silent.

"Go!" the doctor pleaded softly.

"Where to?" asked the restless man just as quietly.

"As far as you can..."

Harstein nodded and stopped.

Across...

...the Great Pond? Going there had been quite an adventure for many of his contemporaries. Before the war. Now, for most of those fortunate enough, it seemed more like redemption. A very different kind of redemption than Roderich Harstein sought, no doubt. While those wanted to flee from death and destruction into a new world because they were afraid of it, he did it because he lacked that very fear. He did not fear war, but his love for it.

Even Nova Scotia was not far enough from the excesses of war. But it was a start, Harstein told himself. The ship, which he was allowed to board without a ticket by cashing in some outstanding favors, set sail for Halifax. This voyage across the Atlantic led away from the major cities in America, and yet at its end lay only a stopover. Halifax was used to deliver materials and food as supplies for the battles in Europe. The port city had by now become a veritable hub for the military.

Harstein did not want to stay in Halifax any longer than necessary. He would continue west—and north, away from places where there were crowds of people. Up to Hudson Bay and then into Manitoba, where the business of fur traders flourished. North of there, he would hardly meet another soul.

The first few days at sea he had enjoyed exercising his legs on deck. Then he struck up a conversation with a man as a squadron of planes flew overhead off the Irish coast. The man told Harstein, without being asked, that they were fighters of the "1½ Strutter" model, which he considered obsolete. Roderich could not resist and asked the man for details—which the latter was obviously only too happy to give. Among other things, he mentioned the machine gun that could shoot through the propeller thanks to a breaker

mechanism. Harstein asked for the technical data of the machine gun, and the man had them at hand as well. They engaged in illustrative attempts to make each other understand the force of the 7.62mm bullets. The man related—suddenly more meekly—what he himself had seen in the way of results of such bullet impacts. Harstein explained how he himself would handle such a weapon. The man could not resist asking whether Harstein would rather be at the front. Better not, he was told truthfully. Unfortunately for the man, he did not leave it at that. He asked about it.

So Harstein told him about the hunt a few years ago, where he had been one of the guests and had been asked to try out a whole range of firearms. He cleared his throat at various points during this anecdote, which, in short, had as its punch line that the shotguns and knives had to be taken from him by force. And that the hunt had to be terminated prematurely.

The conversation with the man had broken off at this point. He had stared at Harstein in disbelief for a moment. Then the man had thrown up over the railing and left without a word.

Since then, Harstein stayed in his cabin. He cradled himself in his own arms on his bunk during the day while he silently recited the doctor's advice over and over again. At night, he barely slept a wink. He feared that the captain or some emissaries would come knocking and take him into custody.

But that did not happen.

—
5 December 1917

Halifax
—

Beyond...

...the pier, the hustle and bustle of the harbor quickly died down. Harstein left the ship as one of the last passengers. He did not want to be seen. And he avoided the groups that inevitably formed on the pier. People were being intercepted, questioned, some greeted by welcoming committees. Harstein did not bother with questions of orientation. He slipped into an alley as quickly as possible and made his way away from the harbor.

He enjoyed the walk after not having left his cabin for days. His legs demanded redress. In general, his whole body vibrated with energy. With every yard up the slight incline that led behind the harbor into the wider neighborhoods, Harstein felt more unobserved, more free. Here, not a soul knew him. Here, he wouldn't run into familiar faces on every corner, as he had in Italy. And that meant he would get less opportunities to open his mouth and talk his head off. Sure, he could have gotten that elsewhere. He wouldn't have needed the trip across the ocean for that. But the very idea that these alleys here were only his gateway to a much emptier world in the north of this gigantic continent drove out the dark thoughts of the voyage.

So Harstein walked aimlessly for quite a while until he had long passed the crest of the small hill. His suitcases, which would have been a burden on less colossally built persons, he carried thoughtlessly in his hands.

They were swinging in his paws as if they were just barely filled grocery bags. The good mood of the carrier had an effect on his gait. He walked

briskly without knowing exactly where he was. The ship had docked around noon and he had now spent perhaps an hour wandering up the hill and around the area.

He decided to look for a place to stay for the night. For that, it would have been smarter not to stray so far from the harbor. Harstein had been able to spot the train station from the pier. Nothing rushed him now, but he wanted to start his journey inland the next day if possible. One night, maybe two, no more. He was looking for nothing more than a bed in a dry place.

Soon he found a house that seemed to have its best days behind it, but which identified itself as a boarding house by means of a painted wooden sign. He quickly proceeded to enter, turning onto the sidewalk to the door with his vigorously swaying suitcases.

The first knocks went unanswered. Harstein was already about to leave when a woman opened the door a crack for him. She forestalled his greeting by yanking the door open for Harstein after a second of musing. Wordlessly, she turned and disappeared behind a belly-high wooden plank in the hallway that was the front desk of the establishment.

As Harstein squeezed through the entrance with his suitcases, the woman began to chuckle quietly under her breath.

"Excuse me, please," she snorted.

Harstein paused in his walking.

"Your hat!" the woman explained from behind the plank.

Roderich set down a suitcase to put his hand on his head. This did not help the egghead woman to calm herself. Harstein on the other hand harvested a wet feeling between his fingers. He took off his hat—spreading the loaded snow across the floorboards.

"Oh!" he grumbled in surprise.

"How long have you been out walking, dear?" the woman asked.

Harstein shook out his hat through the open door. Then he turned back into the house, picked up the suitcases again and shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "Wanted to stretch my legs..."

"You sure picked the right day for it!"

"It's my first..."

The woman nodded.

"I have one more room, upstairs. Pay in advance."

Harstein produced a banknote from his jacket, which brought amazement to the woman's face.

"That's enough for a month!"

"I don't know yet how long I'll stay," Harstein replied impassively. "A few days, maybe..."

The woman promised to pay him the change whenever he would leave. They entered the store and the woman directed the new guest to the upper floor, where Harstein took a look at the small room. It had everything he needed: namely, next to nothing. The bed looked rickety, but at least it was bigger than the bunk on the ship that Roderich had had to squeeze in and out of every time. There was also a mirror above a sink, a wardrobe that seemed to creak just from looking at it, and two windows. One looked east, where the next house was a few yards away. The other looked north. It had a clear view for many hundreds of yards. There were almost no houses in this direction.

But tombstones.

"Is that a cemetery, back there?" asked Harstein of the woman who was still waiting in the doorway for the guest to finish his inspection of the room.

"Fairview Lawn," she said.

They were both silent for a few moments. Harstein went to the window and squinted across the patches of snow covering the untilled field between the house and the cemetery to the rows of countless stones.

"If this bothers you..." the hostess finally put in.

"Huh?" murmured Harstein, preoccupied with his thoughts.

"I have another room. I don't like to offer that one because it has no windows. But, if the sight bothers you, that is, the cemetery, I mean..."

"Do I look superstitious?" asked Harstein.

He turned to the woman.

"Not at all," she said with a grin.

"I'm sure the dead have better things to do than scare me."

They exchanged a polite smile. Then Harstein swung one of the suitcases onto the bed and promptly fumbled with the locks. The woman took this as confirmation that all was well with the room.

"They've more than earned their rest, too," she said casually.

"Have they?" commented Harstein just as casually as he opened the suitcase. He didn't even look at the woman as he did so.

She stopped in the doorway.

"Apologies! That's where the *Titanic's* dead lie. I meant them."

Harstein let the suitcase be. Now the woman had his full attention.

"Well, you know..." she said softly.

"I'm afraid I don't."

"The *Titanic*?"

Harstein nodded.

"You've heard of her," the woman added to this silent reply. She said it more to herself than to her guest, for she was still a little embarrassed that she hadn't just walked out of the room—without uttering her remark.

"Everyone knows the story of the *Titanic*," Roderich clarified. "But..."

He paused, trying to put his thought into words.

"They're not all buried at sea," the hostess helped out.

"They're not?"

"Ships were sent out at the time to recover the dead. Whoever they still found, they brought back, here. Back there..."

The woman pointed her arm to the window facing north.

"...more than a hundred buried passengers. Except the ones who were taken back to their home countries by their families or by the authorities."

"I see..."

Harstein went to the window and sat down on the bed. The woman watched him do so until she realized that her guest had no intention of adding anything else to the conversation. He just squatted silently in front of the

window and looked out. She herself now found the silence far more uncomfortable than the exchange before.

"Terrible thing, that!"

It was all she could think of as a farewell. She stepped quietly out the door and closed it behind her.

By...

...late afternoon, Harstein had to get out of the room, out into the cold again. Perhaps he imagined that he would wander aimlessly through the neighborhood again, under the last rays of the setting sun. However, by the time he reached the cemetery wall, it must have been clear to him that he was by no means strolling at random. He had been drawn here. The unexpected information from the owner of the guesthouse had not failed to leave its mark on him. He found himself thinking about it, again and again.

The gate to the cemetery stood open. Harstein put his hands in the pockets of his jacket and slipped through. Not that he needed to hide from anyone. The area beyond the wall seemed deserted. In front of him Harstein saw only the silhouettes of numerous trees, in between many rows of the strange tombstones he had already spotted from the window. Roderich had never seen such in Europe.

He did not have to search long. A sign showed him the way to the graves of the victims of the disaster.

Above the cemetery, the sky turned dark red. The sun had now set so far that only a glimmer of its rays spilled over the horizon to the hill. It bathed the stones in a warm hue that did not quite match the barrenness of the frozen ground with its thin snow cover. Roderich found the almost glowing ornamental stones out of place—just like his own presence. As he walked

through the slightly curved space between two rows of graves, he was not comfortable. He became restless, felt somewhat misguided.

And then again, he didn't.

What was he doing here? Cemeteries didn't interest him. He couldn't relate much to the memory of people who no longer existed. A strange concept, he thought. The Futurists had rejected any cult of the past. Harstein still thought that this was right, putting aside the recent disappointments about the change of heart of many comrades. Graves were necessary, sure. But for purely pragmatic reasons, not for the mourners. It was all in their heads: the grief, the love for the idea of someone else. There was nothing left. Pure introspection. And that distracted from the essential—from progress.

Harstein noticed that he encouraged his thoughts by nodding.

Would he talk to himself next? Why, that would be something else!

One of his feet kicked violently against an oversized pebble that sat on the hard ground as if on display. The pebble promptly turned into a projectile that bounced off one of the gravestones with a loud clang.

Harstein winced slightly at the unexpected sound. He turned around in all directions. No one had seen it. As before, no one was here.

He went to the grave whose stone he had hit. The surface was rough and bright, with no sign of damage from the shot. This relieved Roderich, even if it was not in accordance with his conviction that this ritual of tombs with headstones was superfluous. This one didn't even have a name, just a number. As he continued through the row, Roderich understood the pattern: some stones had names emblazoned on them, but many had only ascending numbers. Apparently, not all of the bodies had been identified.

He had to pause. Shortness of breath was not an affliction he knew. Still, he now bent over to catch his breath. The restlessness was still in him. Even more, he now felt downright nauseous.

The sun finally disappeared and Harstein had to sit down in the snow. With his back, he leaned against a tombstone that, like the other one, carried only a number instead of a name.

"Don't complain," he said moodily. "What other company you got, eh?"

As expected, there was no reply. Harstein shook his head. Now he was indeed talking to himself! On top of that, the movement of his head now launched a whole battery of stabbing pains behind his forehead. He grabbed his skull, massaged his temples, ...but it didn't help. He was now feeling miserable all over. So much so that he wondered how he would make his way back to his guest room in this condition.

This helplessness was unacceptable! He decided so. He hadn't given up everything on the other continent and crossed the Atlantic for such humbug. If this day was to stand for anything at all, it should stand for a new beginning. Spontaneous ailments, complaints from his body, were of no use to him. The body existed to help the mind unleash progress. How did his own come to deny him the designated service? Even more so in a cemetery in the wastelands? Presumably such had also cost the passengers their lives who were buried here around him, Harstein told himself.

He remembered the launch of the *Titanic* well. His hostess need not have asked him if he had heard of the ship. Of course, he was familiar with this masterpiece of engineering. Unlike most people, he had been interested in the *Titanic* not only after the sinking, but long before.

Just not in the people on board.

The symbol behind the ship was what Harstein found sensational. He had been interested at the time in the sheer mass, the inconceivable dimensions. It should have been a floating triumph, if only the largest ship ever built had made the Atlantic crossing in record time. Harstein didn't give a damn about the luxury, which probably outshone everything that had ever been seen before. Such things mattered not to him. It was the performance that counted! And the truth was that the *Titanic* had failed miserably at that. The human errors did not change anything, he thought. If this work of wonder had been as good as the owners had promised, then an iceberg like that wouldn't have been a problem for it. No, Harstein had expected more of the *Titanic*. To be the symbol, namely, of things to come. He thought of

floating cities or gigantic ocean liners that were so much longer than the *Titanic* that there would be room for an entire tarmac on them.

It was time for man to venture onto water—not just to be a guest on it, but to rule it! Instead?

The famous ship had simply sunk. All of those great announcements exaggerated, if not outright lies, in the first place. No symbol in Harstein's sense. Perhaps this tragedy, as the newspapers called the debacle, was ultimately hampering progress! Suddenly, the shipping companies had become cowardly about their construction plans.

Harstein spat reluctantly in the snow beside him. Actually, he thought, it had served the *Titanic* right that she had disappeared into the depths, never to be seen again. No doubt it had been a spectacle....

He felt better! Once Harstein took a deep breath after he had finished with the internal argument about the lost ship, it struck him. It almost seemed to him that his body had just been waiting to get properly worked up about the *Titanic's* lost opportunity.

Good, it could have that...

Harstein had no sympathy for those buried here. Something bigger had been at stake when the ship went on its maiden voyage. And even in its sinking, the passengers played only a minor role. A spectacle of natural forces against technology! Too bad there was no record of it. Harstein knew the stories of the survivors. But they were just stories, told under the same premise: The returned ones remembered full of fear. They wanted to share their grief, complain about lost relatives, and so on and so forth.

Harstein thought that was the wrong perspective.

He thought of how a bow as wide as a row of houses slowly sank beneath the mirror of the ocean. He thought of the noise of bursting pressure vessels, of steam pushing out of all the rivets. He pictured the smokestacks snapping off one by one with a roar —tons of iron crashing to the deck. And, above all else, Harstein thought of how this metal skyscraper of a boat must be relentlessly compressed the deeper it sank. Like a tin can.

A hell of a ride into the darkness! Harstein wished he could have ridden the ship like a cowboy rides a wild horse. High up, on the bridge, but not in the bridge, up on the roof! From there he could overlook from fore to aft the ship as it plunged through the water. Like a speck of dust on a bullet, inexorably making its way. It would crackle around him and hiss as the last fires would die reluctantly. Debris from the deck, torn away by the pressure! Planks, life preservers, anything that needed to float upward....

He would be the conductor in this chaos, and point down to where the grand finale was waiting: The steely salute of human superiority would crash so violently on the sea floor that the last welds must burst. The ship would leave a scar on the untouched bottom that could never heal. A warning to Mother Nature! Thanks to Futurism, people would learn from this mistake.

He would be the conductor in this chaos! And he would point tirelessly down to where the grand finale was waiting: On the bottom of the sea, the steely salute of human superiority would bounce so hard that the last welds must burst. The ship would leave a scar on the untouched bottom that could never heal. A warning to Mother Nature! Thanks to Futurism, humanity would learn from this mistake. It would be victorious!

Harstein laughed so loudly that it resounded across the dark graveyard. The stabbing headache was gone, the paralyzing nausea vanished. He jumped straight out of the snow and knocked its remnants from his pants.

"Take care, then!" he bade farewell to the tombstone that had served as his backrest. He felt full of energy. Only at the doctor's had he allowed himself to say aloud such thoughts as the present ones. Having them had always worried him. But not this time! Now they made him feel better, not worse. Whatever had been troubling him this afternoon had been overcome. By his free thoughts, without feeling guilty or all wrong in his head!

Harstein stomped toward the exit of the cemetery. He marched in the direction where he saw the most lights. He reckoned that this tactic would steer him back to the waterfront. And that was good, because there he would inevitably find a pub. For he noticed a tremendous thirst in himself.

In...

...the early evening, the waterfront lay silent. Harstein found his way back, but there were only a few lights left along the main road that ran along the shore. He was one of only a few people still up and about here. The hustle and bustle abated quickly as daylight faded. In the morning, the noise and scurry that Harstein had witnessed upon his arrival would rise again. Now he followed the few men on the side of the road who presumably had the same goal as he had.

He opened the door to the nearest pub, marched up to the bar under the eyes of a few regulars, and sat down in front of the bartender.

"What'll it be?" he was asked.

Harstein looked around. To his left sat two other men, each with a glass full of cloudy liquid. Beer, Harstein guessed. To his right sat another guest. This one had a smaller glass with thick rims. It smelled like whiskey all the way over to Harstein.

"That...", Harstein muttered to the bartender.

Not a minute later, he had a beer in front of him. He set it to his lips and emptied it halfway in one go. The bartender got ready to tap another glass for the new guest. In his experience, anyone who set such a pace didn't leave it at one or two beers. In a moment, the reorder would follow. It was just fine with him if this guest brought a proper thirst with him. The man was quite a specimen. Without a doubt, he had practice when it came to drinking. He didn't look poor either. A good combination on a weekday.

The bartender was wrong. Not about the order. In fact, Harstein demanded a refill right away. But Harstein had no practice at drinking. When he had been out with the Futurists, he had drunk a wine now and then. He did so out of conviviality. It seemed to him that this was what people did

when everyone else had a glass in hands. Alcohol, however, did nothing for him. He avoided it when he was alone or when he wasn't being asked to drink. Then he would not refuse a toast. It didn't matter to him. He never got drunk. He would feel no change in himself, as his fellow drinkers usually did. They became more talkative, laughed more—or got more upset. Harstein was puzzled by this.

Why didn't they act the way they normally did?

Tonight was different. Harstein felt something when he downed the drink. It was a completely new feeling, hard to describe at that. He had to order refills again and again because he couldn't get a grip on it. The man sitting closest to his left tried to keep up as they struck up a conversation. He failed miserably at it, however, and within an hour was thoroughly drunk. The barman was on the verge of asking this regular to go home, but he didn't have to intervene. The door opened just as Harstein was about to explain something about high-speed trains to his drinking buddy.

"Walter!" the newcomer said, slapping the drunk's shoulder amicably with his hand.

"Huh?"

"Jeez, you're a mess..." the newcomer muttered.

"Vince?" the drinking buddy asked somewhat aimlessly.

"You were supposed to be home two hours ago!"

"Huh?"

"Mary sent me. You hear?"

The newcomer wasn't sure he was getting through to his acquaintance. In his perplexity, he looked over the bent back of his drinking companion, right into Harstein's face.

"Did you do this?"

"Me?"

"Walter can take quite a lot. What did you get him drunk on?"

Harstein pulled the corners of his mouth down in an innocent expression. He silently raised his glass of beer and shook his head.

"My, Walter, you're getting old," the newcomer summed up. "And you're coming with me now. Giddy up, we're going home!"

"Do you work at the railroad, too?" asked Harstein.

The fact that the man didn't slur his words and seemed quite sober in every other way threw the newcomer off. Enough, anyway, that he didn't want to fail to give an answer.

"...And on the early shift, tomorrow," he confirmed.

"Walter, fortunately, is not," Harstein chuckled in amusement.

Then he raised his fingers to his forehead in salute, while his counterpart pulled Walter's arm over his shoulder.

"Roderich Harstein," he introduced himself.

"Vince Coleman."

"You know, Vince Coleman, your friend and I were just talking about steel supplies for tracks ...once the war is over."

"You mean you were talking?", the other stonewalled the introduction. "Walter isn't capable of another sentence, is he? Thank you for that!"

Harstein acknowledged this barely concealed telling off with a snort. Then he took a swig and decided not to let this man off the hook so easily.

"What do you do for the railroad?" he asked, unimpressed.

"I dispatch trains," Vince Coleman muttered. He had some trouble getting his acquaintance up on his feet.

"Wonderful! I'm passing through. Where can I go from here?"

"Via Truro to Moncton. From there you can get anywhere..."

"To Quebec?"

Vince Coleman did not consider answering this question. He now had Walter successfully fixed over his shoulder and was on his way to the door.

Harstein watched the mismatched duo, the sober part of which walked with a steady stride toward the exit while the drunken body dangled limply from it. Not ten seconds after Harstein's inquiry, the two had disappeared.

This did not sit well with Harstein. He could do without the drinking companion. But who did the other think he was? Coming in here, tight-

lipped, in a bad mood—and then not even deeming it necessary to answer him? Harstein was annoyed by this disregard. So much so that he suddenly felt uncomfortable again. No comparison to the strange nausea that had struck him in the cemetery, but still he hastily grabbed his shirt collar. Too tight! All at once it felt too tight. In general, Harstein's back, shoulders and even thighs felt tight—as if his clothes were shrinking around his body.

He took a deep breath, downed his beer and asked for another.

The bartender began to feel uneasy about this consumption. It got later and later without the guest slowing his pace. In the meantime, soldiers had come and gone. The last customers were leaving as if driven by a time clock as it approached closing time. He didn't even need to ask anyone to leave.

Only Harstein stayed.

"I'm closing up now," the bartender finally announced as he wiped down the bar and pulled up the few chairs.

"What?" grumbled Harstein, under his breath.

"Closing time!"

"Not for me..."

The bartender hoped he had misheard. He knew about troublemakers, but this one hadn't struck him as one of the difficult sort.

"You must pay," he clarified.

Harstein did. Without hesitation, he presented the barman with the considerable sum he had drunk in the last few hours. And although his counterpart could not remember many tallies of such magnitude, there was now even considerably more money in front of him than he intended to claim.

"That's too much," he noted meekly.

"I'll be staying," he received in reply.

It took the bartender a split second to deduce that a change problem had just turned into a fundamental one.

"I told you I have to close up!"

Harstein replied wordlessly, pushing the small stack on the counter closer toward the bartender.

"No can do..."

Now Harstein rose from his stool. In the bartender's eyes, he looked different as he did so than he had at the beginning of the evening. He had seen the guest come in and remembered a rather compact man. All the time he had not noticed anything unusual about him. But now, as Harstein reared up threateningly in front of him, it seemed to be a completely different person. The guy was literally bursting at the seams. The barman had not even seen such a stature among carnival boxers.

"You can do that!" corrected Harstein the last statement.

The bartender could not match his guest's gaze. He tried hard, but in vain. He was no wimp himself and had had to use his hands in argument more times than he cared to remember in order to remove reluctant customers from the pub. This one, however, he would not touch. Something in the man's eyes shone differently than in others. This was no alcohol-fueled cockiness, no harmless overconfidence. The bartender felt challenged, and sincerely so. As if his counterpart could hardly wait to take him apart. For once, he had no doubt that was exactly what would happen, too, if he weren't careful.

The bartender averted his eyes. He let them wander to the money on the counter. What remained to be done was a simple calculation: there was more money there than the unwilling man could drink away in the night. The bartender could have fetched him a barrel of beer from the cellar, or presented all the liquors behind him right away—there would still have been profit. The bartender didn't have to be afraid of vandalism either. With this amount of money, he could buy new furniture if necessary.

He slid the money toward him to drop it into his apron.

"Now, there you go...", Harstein hissed.

"I'm going home now," the bartender demurely replied. He caught himself being relieved when this announcement was not followed by any rebuttals. What was it about this guy that he had such deference for? The bar couldn't just be left to the customers, money or no money. And yet the bartender trotted to the door now, amazed at himself. Before he pulled the

door shut behind him, he wondered if he should tell the man at the bar where the spare key was hidden. And ask him to lock up after him later....

No, that would be too much! He'd rather leave the pub unlocked for a night. What could happen? No boozier would suspect it, thus wouldn't even think of trying to force his way in. The bartender would simply stop by in the morning and clean up what was left to clean up after the unexpected night shift. So again, what could happen?

The bartender went home. For all his calculating thoughts, he didn't expect the pub to no longer exist the next day. That he wouldn't feel very sad about it, either, because he would be happy to be counted among the living.

It...

...was a busy morning, out on the water in front of Pier 6. Ships were leaving the harbor, others were coming in. Two booming horns blared warnings to each other as the hands of the wall clock behind the counter read 8:35. Harstein saw it because he had been staring at the clock for hours, even though he had lost all sense of time.

One of the horns belonged to the *SS Imo*, which was on its way to Belgium with relief supplies. The other sounded aboard the *SS Mont Blanc*. Unlike the *Imo*, which had a banner with human-sized letters hung over its railing proclaiming the purpose of its voyage, the *Mont Blanc* bore no sign of what it was carrying in its belly. And that was by design. On board were 200 tons of explosives, plus masses of benzene and gun cotton. The war in Europe demanded new ammunition, and the *Mont Blanc* was on her way to deliver it. Fearing a torpedo attack, the ship sailed without the usual red flags that signaled dangerous cargo to all other ships.

No one on the *Imo* suspected what was literally coming at them. Both

ships were on a collision course because the morning bustle in the harbor basin defied the established navigational rules.

The muffled shouting of the horns was in vain. The officers misunderstood each other. A last-second evasive maneuver only resulted in the *Mont Blanc* presenting her broadside to the *Imo's* bow. The relief transport scraped into it, tearing a hole into the metal that was several yards wide. While the two ships drifted apart, the benzene on the *Mont Blanc* caught fire. Sailors jumped overboard.

Harstein didn't hear the urging horns or the noise of the collision. That was out on the water. In the dark pub, Harstein sat as if in a far away country. No one disturbed him. Nothing distracted him from watching the clock in its trusty march. It calmed him—or rather his upset thoughts. Although it had been many hours, he was still hung up on the conversation with the train dispatcher. He had not managed to make peace with the latter's departure during the night. He had drunk countless beers in encouragement, even a few whiskeys, for which he had gone behind the bar. But to no avail. The drinking had as little success with its task as the two ship's horns had with theirs.

The *Mont Blanc* burst into flames. She was ablaze even before she reached the shore. The now abandoned ship drifted patiently toward Pier 6, where the pub lay not a minute's walk away. Even though the pub's door remained closed, the news of the disaster spread like wildfire elsewhere. People stopped what they were doing in the harbor and turned their eyes to the burning ship. Some onlookers guessed the course of the helplessly drifting *Mont Blanc* and made their way to Pier 6.

There they could see better.

Harstein could positively see the train dispatcher's face before him. And his whole silhouette. The man was not much shorter than he was, but in his memory he seemed tiny to Harstein. Who did he think he was? Harstein could not let it go. Had he not addressed the man politely? Not simply asked him the questions of a traveler? He deserved an answer, and always, Harstein thought. After all, the other man had no idea of the burden he had just

traveled halfway around the world with! He, Roderich Harstein, carried the most savage battlefields around with him—in his head. Compared to that, the entrenched fronts in the Old World were nothing! Whatever was wrong with him, Harstein was now sure that he was looking at it from the wrong perspective. For years he had been ashamed, hiding his true opinions, visiting this doctor as if he had a contagious disease. But now, a mental U-turn....

Maybe it would be good if he were contagious!

Out on the pier, the burning *Mont Blanc* ran aground. The dockworkers were joined by women and children to see the massive blaze up close. It wasn't long before the first sailors who had jumped ship were struggling to drag themselves to shore. Some collapsed and received help from those who rushed over. Others freed themselves frantically from the hands that reached for them. Instead of accepting help, they began to wave their arms and shout at the people on the pier. The fact that they spoke French while doing so delayed mutual understanding at first. But soon the rudimentary bits of English that some sailors managed to muster and the sweeping gestures revealed meaning:

Danger of explosion!

What was he doing here anyway? All the way, Harstein had been so sure he was doing the right thing. Listening to the doctor! Escaping all the violence and the talk about it. He was, after all, one of the few who could even afford to do that. And, no doubt, it had been such a relief to go ashore and walk the streets of this foreign city. He had even managed to mentally clear the landscape of soldiers who were everywhere. This here was just the beginning, just the gateway into the solitude where he would take refuge.

And then this rascal! He had ruined everything with his disdain. His condescending wordlessness interfered with Harstein's new beginning. Yet he shouldn't care about this man! He should wake up in his room, pack his things and go to the train station. Not get upset about a person who had only crossed his path for half a minute. The man was nothing! And yet Harstein imagined in his mind again and again what he would do to him as punishment for his disrespect. Unlike normally, he no longer imposed any restraints of

etiquette on himself, no pre-emptive fear as to how he should explain this to the doctor. He just felt very hot—and constricted. Everything was much too small! His shirt, the pants, the bar stool on which he felt like a schoolchild who had outgrown his chair a while ago. The bar was too short! He thought he could almost grab it with outstretched arms at both ends.

The whole room, too small!

Harstein felt dizzy. He took a deep breath, as if he realized that he had forgotten to breathe. Two buttons of his shirt burst off and flew as projectiles over the counter. Somewhere in his back, fabric was torn apart.

As the general commotion outside the door erupted into panic, Harstein suddenly heard the screams from outside as well. Because they didn't stop, he angrily grabbed his beer glass, crushing it in the process. Blood ran in streams down the heel of his hand. He watched, more out of curiosity than pain, as the jagged splinters of the glass protruded from his skin.

The area around Pier 6 began to lose its bustle. Within minutes, it turned into a ghost town. Only a handful of confused people hurried from house to house. Harstein shook the splinters from his palm. Then he kicked open the pub door with such force that it hung askew in the frame afterwards.

"Explosion! Get the hell out of here!" a skinny man yelled at him. Harstein was unable to react, neither with a question nor with a thought. In a flash, the man was gone around the next corner. This is how it had to look, Harstein finally concluded, when someone ran for his life....

With no one else in sight, Harstein started off. He didn't have to go far for a clear view of the pier.

The *Mont Blanc* was burning with glaring brightness. The flames covered the entire deck and even burned on the water around the ship. Harstein could feel the heat all the way to where he stopped, perplexed. He had never seen a fire like this before.

Or had he?

It seemed strangely familiar to him, this flurry of scattered fires that together created a huge ball. He found it majestic. It almost forced him to straighten up, to stand as straight as possible, out of respect for the violence before his eyes. As he did so, another seam in his back gave up its struggle against the tension in the fabric. Absently, but with exasperation in the unconscious movement, Harstein reached over his shoulder. The tangled grip tore a large triangle from the shirt but he didn't notice.

He noticed little at all. Neither the absence of people nor the wailing sirens in the distance. Nor did he notice the nausea rising within him that he knew from the cemetery. It was now even more overwhelming than the one that had brought him to his knees. It did not affect his state of mind this time. He felt strong, felt wide awake. The burning in front of his eyes did that.

It gave him power.

The ship was blazing away, perfectly calm. Harstein couldn't get enough of it. Nothing in his life had ever felt so familiar as the almost insurmountable heat that stood in the air before him like a towering wall—and would not give way, to anyone.

Something on board burst.

Harstein did not move from where he stood. Nor was he startled. He only wished that the wall of fire was a hundred times as wide, as high, ...would glow like a small mountain. Yes, there was such a thing! He had seen such a fire. He was quite sure of it now. Where? Where, had it been? And when?

Another man came running out from behind the pier. He wanted to head straight for Harstein, but the heat of the ship pushed him off his course. He held his arms protectively in front of his face as he stooped to make an arc around the burning wreckage.

"Run!" he shouted to Harstein. "Run for your life!"

Harstein stared at the man. He didn't say anything nor moved a muscle.

"Are you deaf?"

The man reached Harstein and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"There are explosives on board! Tons of it! It's about to go off!"

"Yes..."

That was all Harstein wanted to say. He was glad to hear the message. If anything, the warning only tied him more to his spot.

"It'll wipe it all out! Do you understand? Everything!"

The man broke away from Harstein and took to his heels. Never in his life had he run so fast. He turned away from the harbor, up the hill into the heart of the city. And he wasted no further thought on the fate of this strange man, who seemed slow on the uptake.

All the other people the runner met on his route understood him immediately. They did as he did and ran. As normal people would do, in a matter of life or death. They didn't grin, unlike the guy by the ship.

Harstein sucked in the smoky air as the ship burst, hissed and cracked with increasing speed. The burning smell would have taken other people's breath away, but Harstein enjoyed the toxic swaths like a fresh breeze over a mountain meadow. This, all of it, was tailor-made for him! He felt more at ease than ever before. This elation could best be compared to his early days with the Futurists: when he would get excited by any idea, by any fantastic demand. But that was a long time ago—and it hadn't been real. Not as real as that infernal fire before Harstein's eyes. Not as real as the panic in the countenance of the man who had tried to warn him.

This was to be a day of devastation, the likes of which did not appear in the newspapers with their reports of the war. This one had been waiting for Harstein. He felt it in his bones....

At first he didn't even notice the train dispatcher. Instead, Vince Coleman was shocked to recognize the fleeting acquaintance of the previous night. The image seemed so bizarre that he broke off his running stride and proceeded to walk very slowly. Ahead of him he saw the man from the pub, no doubt. But his clothes were hanging in tatters. And he looked grotesquely grown, downright distorted.

Vince Coleman rubbed his eyes.

"It's you!" exclaimed Harstein, as the other man's movements pulled him from his memories.

Harstein had not expected this encounter. It came upon him so unexpectedly that it blindsided all the reprimands, incivilities, and provocations that he had racked up in soliloquies during the night. With these he had wanted to challenge the ignorance of the train dispatcher, if he should get hold of him ever again.

And now all the words dissolved into perplexity. There was no more hostility in Harstein, no wounded pride. He was just surprised to see the man.

"Vince Coleman!" he greeted.

The train dispatcher stopped. He clutched his head, visibly confused from one second to the next.

"The ship is about to explode," Harstein explained in a matter-of-fact tone that was utterly incongruous with the situation.

"I know..." Vince Coleman hurried to say. "I..."

Harstein waited for the end of the sentence, but it didn't come.

"You're coming to keep me company?" he asked.

"I have to go back..." the train dispatcher mumbled to himself.

"Where to?"

"To the station!" shouted Vince Coleman, suddenly wide awake. He pointed his finger down the riverside road, at the end of which were the terminating stubs of the sidings.

"Isn't that where you came from?" asked Harstein.

"There are trains approaching!"

Across the short distance between them both—and in front of the blazing *Mont Blanc*—Vince Coleman shouted it at Harstein. As if that realization had gripped him at the very moment.

"I have to warn them!"

"No time!" barked Harstein. "The fireworks are about to start!"

Vince Coleman was too preoccupied with the prospect of a packed train pulling into Richmond Station to wonder about Harstein's choice of words.

Once again, he left him standing. The train dispatcher turned and hurried back from whence he had come.

Harstein watched him go. One last thought popped up in his head. One last attempt not to be ignored by this person.

"If you want to save someone, start with yourself!" he shouted after the hurrying man. "Do you want to die?"

No answer. Vince Coleman vanished in the distance. Harstein could see him disappear through a door into the dispatch office.

To die...

Harstein was thinking about dying now—for the first time since he had stepped out of the pub and discovered the literal powder keg of a ship. What about himself? He was stunned by how late he came up with that question.

Did he want to die? Why was he standing here calmly? And why did he not feel the slightest impulse to get to safety, even though he could positively feel that the ship was about to meet its end? He did not have an answer to these questions, but he had a feeling. And this feeling was completely sufficient for him. It told him that he would not die. And it said so emphatically—for it was no ordinary feeling, but one of the tacit sort that suddenly descends upon someone. The kind that tells a toddler he or she doesn't need to hold on to something this time, before taking the first independent steps. The feeling of knowing the right solution to a tricky task—and writing it down before your own head can raise doubts. Such an unspoken certainty now overwhelmed Harstein.

And it did not come alone. With it arrived the memory for which he had hitherto searched in vain at the sight of the wall of fire. Yes, he had seen something like it before. Yes, it had been much larger than this mountain of flames here. And yes, it was a long time ago.

An infinitely long time ago...

The *Mont Blanc* exploded.

The fire mountain of old had been a cannonball. It had shredded the ranks of the angels who had rushed toward Harstein. No, not Harstein! This name had not existed, then. He had been someone else. He had been his true self! And his name was Moloch...

In the blink of an eye, the entire Halifax waterfront disappeared in a blinding light. It swallowed everything within a half-mile radius, ...and returned little of it as its blinding brightness faded.

Moloch had been at the forefront of the battle, Harstein recalled. Lucifer's troops had been forced to retreat, but he himself was reluctant to yield to the enemy. No one had ever been able to match him in battle. If it had been up to him, he would have fought the advancing legions alone. He was the God of War! Crowned at the first stroke of the sword, which had resounded through bone and marrow of all the angels two celestial days earlier. None of them knew the blaring sound of enmity, and to him alone it had seemed beautiful. A wake-up call! His destiny!

After the glaring light came the blast. On the waters off Pier 6, the SS *Imo* still lay adrift. She was pushed through the evaporating water to the opposite shore of the channel by the pressure of the explosion.

The cannon attack had taken the enemy by surprise. It had been Mammon's invention, which the army commander ordered to be created and provided during the night. The noise of each shot made the ether tremble. The shells tore it apart by the hundreds. And they scattered the other angels who did not see such violence coming—could not understand it. Companies were scattered on the horizon in tiny spots, raining down unconsciously, looking like lifeless dolls. Moloch had hardly been able to get his fill! The sight stopped him in his tracks. He drew his sword and roared a battle cry across the fields of battle, causing his own ranks to cower. Then Moloch had charged, ...

virtually flying to the burning cannonballs under which his brothers lay buried by the dozens, trying in vain to free themselves. The heat greeted him, like a long-lost friend....

So it was for Harstein as well. As the memories overwhelmed him, the glaring light of the explosion moved through him. He could still see it coming toward him. And while the *Imo* was carried away by the shock wave in a split second, it was a completely different experience for Harstein: The light enveloped him like a warming blanket. He felt it. He could feel it.

He had time.

To him, the light disappeared after long minutes—although it came and went in a flash. Harstein stood rooted to the spot in a white void where there seemed to be no up and down, where directions were meaningless because immaculate fire had spread everywhere. Harstein could not look away. And, he could see! He realized this when finally shadows appeared in the white space around him, then contours. In the end, perfect brightness gave way to outlines of boards, iron plates, beams, and all manner of materials. Out of the corner of his eye he could make out the canal, and the *Imo* on it.

Then he noticed the blast wave. It pulsed directly in front of him, where the *Mont Blanc* had been. It had no color, but Harstein saw it clearly. The wave distorted everything beyond it. It was responsible for the floating boards, slabs and beams. And it ate its way forward on all sides with agonizing slowness. Beyond it, there were houses still standing. What she reached, however, was being vaporized or shattered into innumerable pieces that joined the floating formations behind the blast wave.

It reached Harstein's hands. The pain that spread from the fingertips through the whole body—at the same speed as the shock wave—was greater than anything Harstein had ever experienced. He wanted to look down, to the fingers that seemed to break in three directions at once with every inch they disappeared into the wave. But he could not move his head. Nor did his eyes follow the instinct. They couldn't, or rather:

Harstein's body was the slowest witness to the inferno.

Maybe it did what Harstein told it to do? Maybe the command in the neural circuits had long been on its way, and the eyes were indeed about to look at the damage to the fingers. Only, the blast wave was moving faster. He could not outrun it. What Harstein could see of the world was floating instead of falling. It seemed frozen, ...out of time.

But it was the man in the middle of the spreading explosion. He had fallen out of time, doomed to stand in his place beyond the natural speed of things. The blast crawled along his arms with the patience of a fearless spider. It crawled on and on until it reached Harstein's feet, then his thighs and chest.

When the front of his body, including his eyes, was covered by the blast, he wanted to scream. But no scream came—not to mention that the noise of tortured lungs would have been lost in the deafening elemental force.

And so Harstein had to silently endure the pain that reduced the harbor district to rubble around him. The shock wave stopped at nothing and no one. Not one stone remained unturned, houses were shattered. Those that had stood directly in the vicinity of the *Mont Blanc* evaporated just as quickly as the water that cleared the way for the *Imo*. The *Mont Blanc's* anchor was torn apart by the pressure. Most of it was hurled high into the air and then sliced through the sky in a nosedive like a falling bomb. The anchor landed in a park about two and a half miles from the harbor.

Hundreds of people died instantly, whether they were fleeing or still holding out in their homes. The shattered glass of countless windows scoured across much of Halifax like a blizzard. People went flying through the air, sometimes hundreds of yards far.

Nothing remained of the harbor.

All of this would be burned into the memory of the survivors as an indescribable moment of violence and stupor, changing their lives forever.

For Harstein, however, it was an eternity.

He did not evaporate. He did not burn. He wasn't hurtled anywhere. His feet remained on the ground, not moving, as the blast wave passed

through him at a snail's pace, all while he was fully conscious. He felt it in his stomach, on all the vertebrae, one by one. And as he did so, it hurt as if he would have to die instantly like all the other victims. Only it didn't happen. It was only when the shock wave exited his back, the explosion having passed him, that time started working again for him, too.

It accelerated like a wagon loaded too heavily—slowly at first, then with more and more momentum. Now Harstein's tongue moved a bit and his jaw began to open. His body was finally ready to let out the scream he had requested minutes ago. When it did, Harstein's roar joined the hailing sounds of debris crashing to the ground everywhere.

He collapsed to the ground. The pain left Harstein's body instantly. The roar seemed to have taken it along with it, on its way up into the air. Harstein heard himself panting, heard sounds around him again: the hissing of burning fires, falling rocks and charred wood. All his senses returned to his body.

Looking down at himself, Harstein found himself on his knees. And naked. What was left of his clothing had been torn away and burned by the explosion. Harstein's skin was bright red. It practically glowed as he carefully felt his belly with his fingertips. Glowing yes, pain no. He still had his skin and it didn't hurt either. Harstein was astonished to find that his fingers didn't seem broken at all, although he could have sworn they were.

Inspecting the rest of his body took a while. A silent while. Harstein squatted on his knees, patting himself down, running his hands over his face and through his unscathed hair—and said nothing. Even if he had, no one could have heard him. The first of those people who had not been instantly killed by the blast wave were out of earshot. Harstein was the only living thing in what had been a neighborhood with a busy harbor just minutes ago.

He himself did not know that. When he was finally able to take his disbelieving gaze off himself, he raised his head. Before him, a column of smoke grew hundreds of feet into the sky. And still material rained down from its center onto the remnants of Halifax.

It reminded him of Pompeii, that column of smoke.

He remembered the image as if he had once seen it with his own eyes. Harstein involuntarily held his breath. Had he? This one, further image brought together all the memories that had pierced him like the blast wave.

He resumed breathing.

Everything fell into place. The memories had an order. Even the image of Pompeii lined up neatly in a precise chain of flashbacks, old feelings, and snatches of conversation.

Harstein rose, his eyes still turned skyward to the gigantic column that would not stop growing. Harstein adored it. The ship must really have been filled to the brim with all kinds of explosives for it to cause something like that. Not that he hadn't seen bigger explosions. But for humans, this was quite a feat. And he was here now, with the humans....

He would continue to call himself Harstein. For the time being...

Harstein started to traverse the debris field to where the dispatch office had been before the explosion. Now the place looked as flat as any other. But Harstein knew he was right. He stopped. This was where the train conductor had disappeared through the door. To warn incoming trains, had he said that? Harstein looked around. He did not find the man. There was nothing here that still had a recognizable shape.

The resentment toward Vince Coleman was gone. As Harstein moved things and ashes out of the way with his bare feet, he realized that he had put the annoyance of those two strange encounters behind him. He now understood why he had been annoyed. And he pitied Harstein, the ignorant human, for his petty anger.

It began to rain.

The only person in the charred remains of the harbor opened his arms wide to catch the drops. They were black and stuck to his skin.

Oil.