

Lukas Hartmann: *Ein Bild von Lydia*

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Lukas Hartmann
A Picture of Lydia

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Chapter 4

The days grew longer, and the first cherries of the year were picked. Then, one day, the artist Karl Stauffer arrived, he had travelled from Berlin to paint Frau Lydia's portrait. The servants knew all manner of things about him; the coach driver, who always smelt unpleasant, particularly excelled himself with such rumours. Apparently Stauffer used to go to school with the master of the house, in Berne, which was of course where Welti had grown up as the son of a Federal Councillor, and the artist let his good friend, for they were on first name terms, buy his pictures for a fine price. He had now been commissioned with creating Frau Welti's likeness on canvas. The estate manager had allocated him with the large guest room on the lower floor, where he stored his painting utensils: numerous paint boxes, the large easel, canvases, expensive handmade paper and pencils for his sketches.

The couple and the painter were sat at the round table when Luise saw him for the first time. He had arrived two hours earlier; the driver had picked him up from the railway station. Once again, Luise served tea and pastries, this time vanilla kipferl dusted with icing sugar, but Stauffer requested beer, given the heat of the day, a modest beer with a nice frothy head, accompanied by some good-quality bread with a little butter and ham, and Luise, at Lydia's nod, hurriedly fetched what he wanted from the kitchen. The beer glass was promptly declared to be too small, but he drained it with relish, using the back of his hand to wipe the foam off his moustache, which was smaller than Welti's and showed his full lips. The serviette that lay alongside his place setting remained untouched. He wore light-coloured, voluminous Turkish-style trousers, and a grey, loose-fitting shirt with short sleeves which revealed his muscular arms, an unusual sight for Belvoir. He conversed with the couple in a jovial and ingratiating manner, repeatedly glancing at Luise, who came and went multiple times and so heard him talk in fragments, about Berlin, and after that about the ancient Greeks, whom Pastor Meyer had also spoken of so enthusiastically. To start with the men both spoke at once, but Welti, the former school friend, fell increasingly silent, while Frau Lydia voiced her admiration for

Greek sculptures and architecture in a lively manner. Stauffer stretched his legs wide, sunk down deeper into his chair and demanded that Luise light a cigar for him, which he had pulled from some pocket or another in his loose clothing. She gave a start, having never done that before, stammered something by way of apology and hesitantly approached Stauffer, whose facial expression was unreadable.

"My God, just do it yourself," said Welti mockingly, pushing a box of matches towards him.

The next time Luise entered the drawing room, Stauffer was partially shrouded behind clouds of smoke, puffing away at his cigar. Welti was sucking at one too, and asked for an ashtray, which she fetched from the buffet and placed before the men, while Frau Lydia fanned the smoke away with her hands and motioned for Luise to open a window. A while later Luise entered the salon again, summoned by the bell, and this time no one was smoking, but the torrent of words coming from the artist, who wouldn't tear his gaze away from Frau Lydia, hadn't yet dried up, and Luise carried the ashtray out with the smell of stubbed-out cigars in her nose. One of them was almost whole still, probably Master Welti's; it seemed to her that he didn't actually like cigars, and preferred to partake of dessert wine, swirling it around in the glass and letting it sparkle.

Stauffer stayed at Belvoir for many weeks. He was a strange individual, a strapping fellow with a gentle side, completely unlike the young men Luise met at the church fair, who only wanted to slip their rough hands down the neckline of her dress. Stauffer, meanwhile, provoked an uncomfortable tension in her with just his gaze, which ran over her appraisingly.

Once when she came into the drawing room to clear up, she saw a sketch laying on the table, of a naked girl asleep on a bed sheet, her back to the viewer, with disheveled hair that tumbled down the back of her neck. It wasn't shameless on the girl's part, but the painter's, whom no detail of the body had escaped; it looked so three-dimensional that Luise almost believed she could touch it. Stauffer was stood outside the open terrace door in the bright daylight, smoking, and came back in immediately when

he spotted Luise, turning the picture over before her eyes and sending her out, brusquely but with a certain undertone.

On Frau Lydia's instructions, she regularly cleaned the guestroom in which he was staying, cautiously seeking out a path with her feather duster through the paint boxes, canvases and easel. She also had to make the bed, and sometimes the sheets and woolen blanket lay there in a heap, as though Stauffer were a little boy who had trampled them all off him. There was a strong smell in the room even though the windows were wide open. On one canvas, she recognised Frau Lydia's face, depicted in a hat, swiftly painted with just a few brushstrokes.

One day he caught Luise unawares at an unusual hour. He was probably coming from the park, where he walked up and down with Frau Lydia on an almost daily basis, she beneath the parasol, he with a floppy hat, usually half a step behind her, but still talking away insistently. Luise had never seen them touch one another. He stood in the doorway in such a way that he was blocking her path, and pushed the hat back from his sweat-soaked forehead. Without any word of greeting, he began to speak. "You have to help me take all of this into the front conservatory. That's where the light's best. I want to paint her there, and she's agreed." It was clear whom he meant.

"Right now?" asked Luise with reluctance.

He hesitated, as though he hadn't expected an answer. "Yes. Or no. We'll do it tomorrow, one of the boys will help. The glass roof has to be painted over in white first, so that the shadows fall right." He was suddenly talking to her as though they had known one another for a long while, yet at the same time acted as though she wasn't even there.

"As you wish," she said, noticing that there was a small flare of protest in her voice. "But now I must be getting on."

"You're pretty, you know," he said, in a tone of voice that went right to her core. "I should be painting you, not her." He chuckled to himself.

She shook her head vehemently, thinking of the drawing she had seen. "That's not possible, I'm working."

"I don't mean right now. Later."

"But I don't want you to!" She was astonished at herself, that she dared to be so outspoken, and stepped towards him, pushing her way past with the feather duster and cloth. He moved to the side a little and she grazed past his hips, his upper arm, with the feeling that this had been his intention. A summery warmth radiated from him, and this time it was soap she could smell.

That afternoon, while she was helping the cook prepare the vegetables, Luise told her that she felt a little uncomfortable around the artist.

"Was he bothering you?" Johanna asked watchfully.

"No," Luise fended off the question. Why had she even mentioned him?

Johanna gave her upper arm a squeeze. "Well, if he does – and you know what I mean – tell me, I'll have it out with him." She stood there in front of Luise with her legs wide. "It's better I don't say anything to Frau Welti. Stauffer was a guest here last year too, after all, and he behaved very boorishly at times. God knows why, but she protects him like a mother her spoilt child."

The uneasiness that had already accompanied Luise the entire morning grew. "Nothing even happened. I just wanted..." She didn't know to how to continue, and Johanna, who suddenly seemed affronted, turned away from her in her resolute way.

Stauffer's work in the conservatory lasted for over three weeks, well into July, and mostly accompanied by good weather. At around nine in the morning, Frau Lydia, having breakfasted in the drawing room with Stauffer, would go to her room and put on the white, exquisitely ruffled, almost cream-coloured satin dress, which the artist had selected from Lydia's bountiful supply after lengthy deliberation. Luise helped her as best she could, doing up the hooks at the back so that the top of the dress lay close to the breast and traced its contours, the long sleeves, too, had to lie without creases, and the fully flared skirt had to be smoothed a little. Then she accompanied Frau Lydia, whose leather shoes were also white, over to the conservatory, where the painter was waiting for her impatiently, already making corrections on the canvas with his palette in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. A stolen glance revealed to Luise only the outlines of

the figure, the intimation of a face, still without eyes. Frau Lydia was surveyed critically by Stauffer, then she pulled on the white gloves, put on the tulle bonnet, whose ribbons Luise tied loosely beneath her chin, sat down on the wooden chair, which forced her into an upright posture, and Stauffer laid the equally white, closed parasol across her lap, the tip and handle at both ends pointing into nothingness. Stauffer, as Frau Lydia had explained it, wanted to create a study in white, in all the nuances of the colour which in actual fact wasn't one, and the background was to be white too, not cream-white, but more of a bluish white like in certain portraits by the early Italian masters, while the face was to stand out from the canvas in an almost tangibly lifelike way, with eyes that would contradict all the white. Stauffer was always seeking out new challenges, she said; hardly any of his contemporaries would dare attempt a portrait in white. The pots containing the little orange trees had been pushed to the side, and the gardeners had opened the doors in such a way that there was always a gentle breeze wafting through the room. Lydia, who now sat there motionless, didn't seem bothered by the warmth, unlike the sweating artist, who, mostly while talking to himself under his breath, paced up and down in front of the picture. Luise was able to observe a great deal in these first few minutes of the sitting, then she went out and only returned an hour and a half later, when there was a break and the bell had been rung, with coffee and a little something to satisfy the sweet tooth. Lydia wanted a little mound of whipped cream on her coffee, while Stauffer drank his, in his own words, as black as night. Nor did he have any of the Berliner *Pfannkuchen* that the baker had delivered early in the morning, saying that they were too sticky for him. Lydia, who had walked up and down a little without her gloves, ate two or three pancakes, then wiped her hands on the little towel that Luise handed to her. As black as night. Stauffer's hair was black too, and stuck out from his head with a rare thickness.

The artwork advanced, day by day, just like the summer moved towards its high point. Welti was mostly off attending to business matters, returning to Belvoir only in the evenings, but on a few occasions he took the trouble between important meetings to

stop by the conservatory atelier and comment on the emerging work. Luise, who was awaiting instructions, stood nearby unnoticed.

"The air's very close in here," sighed Welti, pushing back his hat then setting it on a wooden rack.

"There will probably be a storm soon," replied Stauffer. "So, what do you think?"

Welti narrowed his eyes. "The dress is looking marvelous." He pointed here and there with his walking stick. "The way you've capture those folds. It's deceptively real. But the face..."

"The face is always the most difficult," Stauffer interjected. "It's supposed to depict the character, be recognisable, but at the same time express far more than a photograph."

"The eyes...", Welti began.

"Precisely, the eyes," said Stauffer heatedly. "I'm not anywhere near finished with them. They need to delve into the onlooker, but at the same time repel him." He smiled furtively at Frau Lydia, who was stood half a step behind her husband while he inspected the picture as though hoping to wrest a secret from it. Was it possible that Frau Lydia looked a little embarrassed by Stauffer's words?

"I have faith in your skill, Carlo," said Welti. "It will turn out well." He had stepped back abreast with Lydia. "And if it turns out to be as masterful as I think it will, no doubt we'll increase your fee." He gave his wife's elbow a friendly squeeze. "Isn't that right, my love?"

She nodded, and Luise saw that the artist and his model fixed their eyes upon each other for a moment.

"I have to go," said Welti. "I'll probably be back for dinner. Until then." He bid them farewell, and was already at the glass door when he turned back around to Lydia: "Isn't it much too taxing in this ambience...?" He corrected himself. "I mean, much too hot in that dress?"

"Oh no," she said, in her dignified way. "You know I'm not warm blooded. And the material stays cool and caresses my skin."

Luise followed Welti with the hat he'd forgotten, and also handed him the light cloak that kept off the dust in the open carriage and pair. She could just as easily have been an astral spirit for all the notice he paid of her. Only once he was in the high-wheeled carriage did he lean down towards her: "See to it that the painter doesn't drink too much. Don't always fill his glass again immediately, do you understand?"

She knew what Welti meant. It had already transpired that Stauffer, towards the evening, once the portrait sitting was over, had asked for some cool white wine and then emptied the bottle far too quickly. He appeared for dinner already swaying a little, stumbled over his words, and inadvertently addressed Frau Lydia by her first name, while Welti sat there with a sour expression and only thawed out after he himself had drunk a second glass. At the weekends the two of them would sit there together for a long time, to Lydia's evident displeasure, and on one occasion with the poet Keller too, who, despite her best efforts, she was unable to entice away from the men. Luise only heard the talk and anecdotes causing the laughter when she was summoned, about school pranks which Stauffer and Welti had contrived, and then about art again, of which Luise only grasped that Stauffer didn't like the contemporary artists, who had recently begun to paint outside – rivers, clouds, even bales of hay – and accused them of betraying art. Keller, already an old man, had fallen asleep at the circular table with his head propped on his hands, and they had to be careful not to startle him, otherwise he would jump up and – as had already happened – knock over the half-full glass in front of him. By the time Luise was able to clear up, the hour was late and Frau Lydia had long since retired to bed.

The next morning, Stauffer was utterly concentrated on his painting; Luise barely recognised the man from the previous evening, whereas Welti, before he set off, complained of a headache. Although he was by far the wealthier of the two men – not by his own merit, as everyone knew – he was seen in the house as the weaker one, a judgement Luise concurred with yet spoke to no one about, and she acted deaf or ignorant in response to the cook's enquiries. Only with Aloysia did she make the occasional exception; with her she could vent her secret wrath and aversion.

The storms which now moved across the town every second or third day were pleasing to Luise, even though she had no idea why, considering that so many others were afraid of them. She liked the darkening skies. When the lightning flashed down and the claps of thunder echoed in her ears, she waited by a window until the first drops fell. Once, she saw Frau Lydia and Stauffer running through the pouring rain from the conservatory to the main house. She then had to bring her dry clothes, even though she hadn't gotten that wet. Stauffer changed his clothes in his room. Luise wished she could run out into the rain barefoot and dressed only in a nightshirt, and spin around like she had as a child back in Bergamo, together with her brothers and sisters, laughing as they held onto one another's hands. But behind these images was another, a bewildering one that she wanted to banish. So she stayed inside, as was proper, rubbed Frau Lydia's hair dry, and wiped up with a floor cloth the water which had pushed its way under the terrace door into the drawing room and left puddles on the parquet.

Chapter 5

At the end of June, Stauffer declared that the white Lydia, as he called her, was almost ready, and the figure genuinely looked so lifelike that, despite her calm posture and cut-off feet, it seemed she was about to stand up or address the onlooker. But it took longer. One morning, when Luise was about to bring in the coffee, she saw through the reflecting glass door that Stauffer was walking back and forth, she heard him talking loudly, even shouting, and all she could make out was a repeated, anguished 'No' and then: "This won't do, it's not you, it's someone else!" Not daring to enter the room, Luise then heard the soothing voice of Frau Lydia, who was concealed by a large potted palm tree. What she said wasn't clear, but Stauffer contradicted her, and suddenly picked up a towel and rubbed it furiously across the painted face. Frau Lydia, raising her voice too, called the painter a fool, demanding to know what it was that he wanted. He shouted: "The truth, my God, the whole point of art is the truth!" At that moment Luise decided to nudge open the door, which was ajar, with her foot and put down the tray as discreetly as possible on a wooden box that stood by the glass wall. The air inside smelt of plants and equally strongly of paint. On the canvas, where just the previous day Frau Lydia's face had drawn the gaze, all that now remained was a greasy, pale pink smear. Stauffer really had wiped it away, with turpentine. "I'll paint it again from scratch," he professed, breathing heavily and waving the oily, paint-covered cloth around in front of Frau Lydia, who had now stood up, and for the first time Luise saw that her employer could be indignant and angry without saying even a word.

"Yes, yes, I will. And better than before! I promise!"

Stauffer's voice broke and he began to sob, but stopped again almost at once, and Luise saw as she was retreating that he wiped some of his tears away with the cloth, dirtying his face and giving himself the appearance of a clown, because the pale red of Frau Lydia's lips coloured the skin beneath his eyes. It was an almost laughable sight. But then Luise made a sound and Stauffer spun around. With a "ssshht!", he shoed the

girl away as though she were a dog. "Get out of here, God dammit, you have no right being here! Leave us in peace!"

Luise quickened her steps and was outside in next to no time. The speedy flight left her wheezing, but the shortness of breath came from the shock too.

The face came into being once more. Frau Lydia, as she had agreed with Stauffer, didn't have to sit for it again, since he had already made numerous sketches – which were now spread out around him – during the preliminary study. He hinted that he would create the esteemed Frau Welti's features predominantly from his mind's eye. It almost sounded as though he had the right to form her according to his will; to Luise, something about that felt abhorrent, even a little sinister.

It was now an increasingly frequent occurrence for Frau Lydia to take her lady-in-waiting, as she sometimes called Luise in jest, into her confidence, even if it were only some casual observation that she would have held back if more people were there: "You know, Stauffer can be very highly strung. But great artists are like that". Or: "One has to let him have his whims, he needs them."

In the afternoons she paid regular visits to Stauffer in the conservatory, and mostly requested that Luise accompany her, two steps behind, with some refreshments. In this way she could observe from close quarters, at least for a short while, how the face was growing into the picture once more and, with almost tangible vividness, out of it too.

It was always impossible to predict what mood Stauffer, who wore the same artist's smock day after day, would be in. Sometimes he seemed despairing or defeated, because of some detail which he would accusingly point out: the arch of the eyebrows wasn't quite precise enough, the outer ear muscle too obvious. Or he would boast, commending himself for having captured the expression more successfully – a small cheekiness in the gaze, the friendly reserve which was simultaneously so alluring. A single dab, he said, presenting the fine brush between his thumb and index finger, could change everything, that was the secret of his craft. Lydia listened to him, never

contradicting, looking at herself on the canvas – or the woman he had made out of her – warily.

The resemblance to the living Lydia seemed less to Luise than with the previous, now-vanished face, which had in actual fact been complete. In real life, if one were to be honest, she was less beautiful, with somewhat coarser features and skin that wasn't as flawless as on the painting. But Luise's opinion wasn't sought, neither by Frau Lydia nor by Stauffer, and especially not by Welti, who barely made an appearance now.

When Stauffer was finally more or less content – he was never completely content, he said – Lydia suggested putting on a small unveiling ceremony with a gathering of friends. After some initial resistance, Stauffer agreed. The party was set for a day when the Federal Councillor Emil Welti, Lydia's father-in-law, would be in Zürich, for he had expressed interest in commissioning Stauffer to do a joint portrait of he and his wife, albeit, if he could have his way, preferably without the torment of long sittings. Father and son Welti stood there in the grand drawing room in front of the veiled easel; Lydia, a little indisposed, sat on a chair, not in the white dress but a red one. Stauffer had dressed elegantly for the occasion, for his standards at least, and was concealing his agitation behind cosmopolitan yet jovial behaviour. Among the guests were a frail Friedrich Gustav Ehrhardt, who had lived in Belvoir for many years and whom Lydia had regarded as her guardian and mentor, Friedrich Bürkli and the poet Keller; Lydia spoke of the three old gentleman affectionately as her special trio, for they had cared for her in her youth, when her father was mostly either away or ill. Luise went around, as she had learned to do from the mistress of the house, offering champagne in crystal goblets and small meat-filled pastries on a silver platter. Johanna didn't make an appearance at such events, as per the younger Welti's wishes; he claimed that the cook's figure didn't make her a very becoming picture, and Lydia let him have his way.

"You're a lovely little person," the poet, who was usually very quiet, whispered into Luise's ear. Everyone toasted, unable to agree at first who should pull the white cloth off the canvas. The choice eventually fell on the younger Welti, who set about the task with a flourish and let the cloth simply fall to the floor. An "Ahh" and "Ohh" rippled

through the onlookers. An almost life-size Lydia Welti-Escher sat before them as a *grande dame*, with the living model opposite her in red.

"A masterpiece!" cried out the older Welti, whose face was etched with the heavy under-eye bags of worry. Luise had heard Frau Lydia say he had been a Federal Councillor for a very long time, and that the sensible decision would be for him to step down and look after his sick wife.

The guests admired the white dress on the picture and then the face, especially the face. "Lifelike, very lifelike," said the younger Welti, who hadn't even taken a close look. "A toast to the artist!" He lifted his glass and clinked it against Stauffer's, and the others did the same. Praise and congratulatory remarks buzzed around the room. Stauffer, who was posing alongside the picture, caught somewhere between pride and embarrassment, emptied his glass in one go and immediately had it refilled. The guests clamoured for him to make a toast too.

"White on white," he said, laughing. "That says it all. It reveals the essence of the lady of the house, our highly esteemed and eminently revered Frau Welti-Escher." He bowed awkwardly in her direction, but she waved his praise away in an almost surly manner and asked, without addressing anyone in particular: "Is that really me?"

"It's you," said her husband, and murmurs of agreement came from the three older guests.

"I for one," said Keller with distinct irony, "certainly wouldn't mind being portrayed like that. Unfortunately though, our kind aren't quite so suited for it as your esteemed wife in her delicate white."

"Why ever not?" cried the elder Welti. "Our great poet is long overdue a fitting portrait." He looked at his son as though presenting him with a challenge. "Agreed?"

The younger Welti nodded and said to Stauffer, who was already emptying his third glass: "It won't be at your expense."

The painter broke out into mirthless laughter: "Of course. Drawing, etching, painting. Anything you want."

Keller's face contorted into a skeptical grimace. Both Weltis refused as Luise tried to top up their glasses, but she was sure that the son would later drink more than his fill. A light evening breeze swept in through the open window, cooling her face. How Frau Lydia had endured it in that high-necked dress for hours on end, without showing even a sign of tiredness or overheating, she couldn't imagine. If it were her she would have run away or fallen unconscious, she had said to Aloysia, and the two of them, loosely dressed as they lay there on the bed, had giggled. Once the guests had gone and the couple had also retired to bed, Luise cleared up in the salon. Stauffer was still stood in front of his painting, gazing at it, barely breathing, just sighing intermittently. Luise crept around him, trying to be as quiet as possible. Suddenly, in a tone that was better mannered than normal, almost polite, he asked: "So, do you like it?"

"The picture?" stuttered Luise.

"What else?"

She thought for a moment. "It's... well painted."

He laughed in amusement. "I see. You mean the technique?"

She didn't understand what he meant. "It's... very beautiful."

"Do you recognise the woman on it?"

Was that supposed to be a joke? "Yes. Of course."

"I've made her more beautiful, don't you think?"

"But that's part of it."

He laughed again, a little bitterly. "Not always. It depends on the size of the fee. But I'll tell you this: She's a clever woman, and that's more alluring than beauty and smooth skin."

She didn't respond.

He stepped over close by Luise's side. He smelt better than before, perhaps of cologne. "Why she didn't want to wear the white dress, today of all days, I don't know. Do you?"

Luise shook her head, then spoke after all, almost defiantly, as though she had to defend Frau Lydia: "The thick material was probably too warm for her."

"No. She wanted to make a point. She wants to be independent, the *grande dame*." He inspected the picture closely once again. "There's this little smile that plays around her mouth. Secretly she's mocking all the affectation around her. I've captured it well. Don't you think?"

The conversation was making Luise feel uncomfortable. "I have to go," she said. "I have things to do."

"Fine, fine," he said, absent-mindedly. "Then go." And more quietly: "I'll stay a little longer. As of today it no longer belongs to me, my picture. They're giving me ten thousand Francs for it. Just imagine: ten thousand!" He shook his head in disbelief, and Luise pretended she hadn't heard the sum.

She loaded the empty glasses and bottles onto the serving trolley, along with the pile of plates containing one last pastry with a bite taken from it, and rolled it out. Stauffer, who had watched her go, caught up with her in a few long strides, grabbed the pastry with a conspiratorial grin and popped it in his mouth.

Chapter 6

Stauffer stayed in Belvoir a while longer. Lydia had convinced Keller to sit for the painter after all, or, as he put it, to keep his old pate propped up and have a little doze on the comfortable armchair whenever it were permitted. It was the same one Lydia had sat on, and the sittings also took place in the conservatory, since, as Stauffer pointed out, everything was already set up there. And even the sketches that Luise saw in the first few days were astoundingly similar. No flattery, but rather the picture of a man who has aged with dignity, who no more concealed his tiredness and the line of resignation about his mouth than the painter did. Stauffer was alert, deeply focused, completely different to how Luise, who also served the two men with refreshments, had seen him with Frau Lydia. When darkness fell, Keller made his way out to the carriage with his softly padding footsteps and was driven home.

Stauffer spent most evenings with the Weltis, holding uncontrollable monologues about the unparalleled art of the ancients, which captivated Frau Lydia and seemed to bore her husband. Then, at the end of August, he set off back to Berlin, where, he said with a wink, he had a great many things to see to. He didn't know when he would be back, perhaps not until the following year. Luise didn't miss him; he was unpredictable, his physical proximity repulsed her and yet, in a mystifying way, also drew her in.

Frau Lydia slept badly after his departure, sometimes lying awake for hours on end. She complained about it when Luise brought her morning tea to her bed. That she was allowed to do this, was, as Johanna emphasised, a clear sign of trust. Luise made the greatest of efforts to be quiet at that early hour of the morning, to talk in hushed tones, because Frau Lydia loathed any kind of noise, and sometimes Luise was sent outside to reprimand the gardener and his helpers, who were in the process of sawing a tree trunk amidst loud shouting or digging out roots with the pickaxe. At moments like these, Frau Lydia seemed to Luise like an invalid. But for the most part her strength returned by midday, and she would walk around the house, giving instructions, drawing attention to things that had been missed or left lying around. Her preference, however, as Luise soon

realised, was to sit in her room by the window reading and writing, even in the most beautiful weather, or to receive a relative or acquaintance in the drawing room for an afternoon chat, when she would be the sovereign hostess. From time to time Luise would take a letter to the post office for her, addressed to Karl Stauffer, Artist, Berlin, and would wonder what might be in it, she was tempted to hold the thin envelope up into the light in the hope of deciphering one word or another. But she forbade herself from doing so. The cook claimed that the Weltis were planning to spend the winter in Italy, and wanted to invite Stauffer to accompany them. Perhaps there was something about that in the letters.

As autumn approached, Luise noticed that Lydia's complexion was far from healthy, she was very pale, walked slower than usual, and one morning she admitted to Luise that she feared the nervous disorder which she had already endured in a previous phase of her life had returned, hence the insomnia, which apparently was getting worse and worse. No, she couldn't possibly travel to Italy in this condition; her doctors had advised her against it, but instead she would go to take the waters for a while, either in Baden or at Hotel Gießbach on Lake Brienz. Johanna later told Luise that, during a rainy December, shortly after the death of her father and a month before her marriage to Welti, Frau Lydia had jumped out of the window. The softened earth had cushioned her fall, preventing the worst from happening, and she had only injured herself slightly, but my God, was she dirty! The bridegroom, she said, hadn't been informed about the act. No one had really understood the reasons for it; the doctor had later spoken of a nervous disorder on that occasion too.

Luise could barely believe it. Was it conceivable that this woman, who usually seemed so self-assured, had wanted to kill herself? Had the death of her father left her utterly distraught? Had she perhaps regretted agreeing to the marriage with Welti? And yet, amongst the many whose hands she had refused, apparently she herself had chosen this one, Friedrich Emil Welti, the son of a Federal Councillor. Johanna, who had prepared the wedding banquet in Belvoir, said that although Lydia was more of a serious than glowing bride, she nonetheless seemed to be convinced and even halfway

happy. But whether the two of them really suited one another, it seemed that no one had found out yet. As she said that, she screwed up her mouth and gave Luise a playful pinch on the cheek: "You find yourself a man you'll be happy with, okay?"

"There's plenty of time for that," answered Luise in embarrassment, flinching back from the cook; sometimes she couldn't bear the penetrating smell of onions that so often emanated from her. As she tried to fall asleep that night, she was tormented by the image of the woman in the nightdress, jumping out of the window and lying outside in the rain, crying for help. She tried to banish it; she didn't want to picture a dirty, dead Lydia any more than she did the drenched, dead father who appeared in her wake.

The next morning, Lydia told her that she had chosen to go to Gießbach, and wanted Luise to accompany her. Other than that, she said, she didn't need anyone else from Belvoir with her, for Hotel Gießbach had sufficient domestic staff.

Luise didn't know whether to be pleased or feel confined by the prospect of so much closeness. But she had no choice in the matter, after all, and she enjoyed the fact that Aloysia was envious of her.

She spent two days packing, partly under the direction of Frau Lydia. She filled three large steamer trunks with painstakingly folded undergarments, gowns and skirts, with shoes and boots, with hats, hoods, a multitude of utensils for personal grooming and hair care, a casket of jewellery and a coat too, as well as a number of books. Luise herself was entitled to a small suitcase, which she had barely filled.

Frau Lydia bid farewell to her husband as matter-of-factly as though she were merely popping into town, yet the idea was to be away for at least three weeks. Luise was stood alongside them, and their lips and skin barely seemed to touch as they kissed one another on the cheek. Welti did, however, at least wave off the carriage as they drove to the railway station.

There were only a few passengers on the train, and Lydia allowed her chambermaid to sit with her in one of the first-class compartments, where the upholstery was so soft that Luise sank deep down into it. As they crossed the Berne

railway bridge and the green dome of the government building came into view, Lydia said only half jokingly that her father-in-law was sure to be sat brooding over his files behind one of the many windows. He was a very thorough man, she said, and had been in the Federal Council for more than twenty years; her own father wouldn't have been able to cope with all the limitations that came with being in office, he would have wanted to create new things, not protect what already existed; in contrast to her father-in-law, he had been impetuous, demanding and audacious.

In Interlaken, they transferred onto the ship. Lydia stayed in the enclosed area, where the sea spray from the paddle wheel trickled down the windows. Luise, however, went out onto the main deck. It was a mild day in early autumn, and the light had a rare clarity to it. She sat down, with her back to the direction of travel, on an empty wooden bench, feeling the gentle breeze on the back of her neck. The ship made furrows in the lake, and the small waves streamed away to both sides with a little foam dancing on top of them. Close to the shore, the water was an intense, almost eerie blue. The roaring sound of the Gießbach Falls began to drown out the pounding of the pistons and announced the proximity of the landing jetty. Loud cries came from the waiting baggage porters. Frau Lydia gave a start when Luise addressed her, as though she had been woken from a deep sleep. With a slightly lost smile, she smoothed her skirt down with both hands, then got to her feet and gave instructions to one of the ship's boys. The steeply ascending forest stood before them like a dark green, almost black wall, while on the other side of the lake, the sun still shone with glaring brightness. Finally, the sound of the horn, the footbridge descending with its clanking chains. Frau Lydia swayed a little as she walked across it, and Luise had to support her. While their trunks were carried onto land and handed over to the porters on the shore, the captain said a verbose goodbye to Madame Welti. Presumably he was expecting a tip, but Frau Lydia didn't give him one. Other passengers left the ship at the same time as them, some with far more luggage. They all boarded the waiting funicular, into which the trunks and bags were loaded at the rear. The ascent felt strange and somehow magical; accompanied by the ever-increasing roar, they glided, almost floated, into the main building, which stood

in the middle of a large clearing that had been transformed into a terrace; they passed through a fir tree gloom into the open air, saw green meadows, flower beds, graveled walkways, the towers which endeavoured to make the hotel into a castle. Everything seemed to happen of its own accord, and Luise found herself stood in the entrance lobby of the hotel alongside Frau Lydia. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, shining brightly even though it was only afternoon, oriental rugs muffled the sounds. Men in braid-trimmed livery smiled behind the reception desk. Low-voiced conversations amongst the newly arrived guests. Tea was being served in the loggia. And the constantly audible roaring of the brook. Even a servant could feel important here. But Luise didn't get a room directly next to Lydia, as she had hoped, instead she had to content herself with a small room in the newly erected building for the guests' domestic servants, which stood at the edge of the clearing, towards the slope and closer to the falls. Its facade looked no less grand than that of the hotel, but inside, all splendour had been dispensed with; there were no rugs, wooden floors instead of parquet, and on each floor there was just one toilet, with a lavatory cistern that had to be topped up with water from one of the fountains. Furthermore, it was considered inappropriate for the servants to dine with their masters and mistresses, so they ate in a narrow adjoining room with long tables, where the talk that went back and forth was far louder than in the elegant dining room. This wasn't the only aspect that reminded Luise of Belvoir, it seemed the habits there had multiplied and unfolded in just the same way here. To be amongst their kind outside of working hours, to return coarse jokes with similarly coarse ones was abhorrent to her, and she didn't respond to any of their advances. In any case, she didn't understand English, which was often spoken here, and only rarely heard the Italian that she hadn't forgotten.

Frau Lydia was always friendly towards her. But in this public environment, the intimacy between them vanished. In her efforts to relax and recuperate, Frau Lydia spent part of the mornings in the hydropathic spa, in an adjoining building behind the tennis court. On the recommendation of the hotel doctor, she took alternating mud and mineral baths, then re-appeared for lunch, still pale and with shriveled fingers, for Luise

to accompany her up to the reserved table she shared with a chatty couple from Winterthur. Afterwards, Frau Lydia retired to her room, where she read or, somewhat ill-humouredly, attempted some piece of embroidery or other. In the afternoons they usually went for a walk, which led them in a zigzag along the waterfalls, up high and then back down again. At two sections the path crossed the frothing brook via a narrow but solid wooden bridge, and at one point the curtain of water even crashed down from above them, making the world, amidst the thunderous roar, appear out of focus. Luise grasped onto the railing to steady herself, while Frau Lydia strode forward on the wet planks, seemingly unperturbed. On some days she stopped in the middle of the bridge and stared out for a long while into – or through – this inconstancy. Luise would have liked to know what was going on in her mind. The incessant roar merged with the impression of the cascading water into a monotony that made Luise lose track of time, and even though she was starting to feel cold in the mist, she wanted to stay on the bridge for a good while longer. Afterwards, she would no longer have been able to say who was the first to continue on, she or Frau Lydia.

The roar, the constant roar of the water. "I can't get used to it," said Frau Lydia, "especially not at night. It wakes me up, and I have to listen to it whether I want to or not."

"But it's always the same sound," said Luise the following day, when they were far enough away from the brook, which crashed down tempestuously over the rocky steps.

"No," Lydia contradicted her, stopping abruptly and pulling off her close-fitting gloves. "Always the same? If it were I could bear it. But there are all these voices fighting within it, higher and deeper ones. They roar, they howl, they whimper, they hiss. A frightful hubbub, if you listen closely." She whipped one of the gloves against her wrist. "How could one possibly sleep through that?"

"Perhaps you should put some cotton wool in your ears," Luise suggested. "Or a little piece of fine material. That's what my mother did once when she was ill and we children were being too loud."

"Impossible!" cried Lydia. "That's too artificial for me. And over time it hurts, having a stopper like that in your ear." She laughed at herself a little. "Oh, just see how complicated I am." She walked on over the thick layer of pine needles, which cushioned the path here.

The days at Gießbach stayed fine, the temperatures were pleasantly mild, and almost summerlike by midday. From time to time the slopes on the other side of the lake were hidden by clouds, which rose, sank down, dispersed, offered glimpses of the forest and meadows, then densified and darkened again, a perpetual change which Luise watched wistfully from one of the park benches while Frau Lydia lay in bed. Not a single drop of rain in the first two weeks, nothing but morning dew. And the roaring sound that never stopped, that filled their ears and yet was sometimes forgotten after all. One night, when Luise was feeling incredibly restless, she got up and went outside, where the cool air greeted her like an embrace. The moon was shining. It was almost full, with a wan, lopsided face. The lake lay there motionless, in an indefinable colour, not grey, not silver. Only by the mouth of the Gießbach were there eddies, ripples, but even those looked as though they were frozen solid, and seemed to contradict the continual roar, the liveliest thing in the night. There was no one around, no animal to be heard. The roar had canceled everything out. Luise stood there barefoot in her nightdress, feeling the damp of the grass beneath her feet. What would become of her? Was her fate now inseparably tied to Frau Lydia's? She didn't want that, and yet perhaps she did, because there was a bond between them that strengthened day by day. They didn't discuss it, but it made itself known in small gestures, sometimes a touch, a smile. Luise shivered, she had to go back to the room, dry her feet, warm herself beneath the blanket. Strange, how little homesickness she felt, how rarely she thought about her brothers and sisters.

During the third week of their stay, Luise was alarmed when Frau Lydia announced, with a telegram in her lap, that the artist Stauffer would soon be here, as soon as tomorrow or the next day, as they had a number of things to discuss. He was en route

from Berlin to Biel, in order to visit his mother, a strong woman who nonetheless wasn't very well at the moment. He had spent two nights at Belvoir, talked at length with her husband, and was now making a detour to meet with her too. The prospect of his visit seemed to enliven her, her face was flushed, and she gesticulated as she spoke. Then she looked at Luise, who had been listening with her head lowered. "Aren't you pleased?" she asked. "Stauffer is such an interesting person, after all!" She let out a small, almost girl-like laugh.

Luise nodded, but said nothing.

Frau Lydia's expression became serious again, and she studied Luise with slight concern. "Does he scare you?"

Luise shook her head. "He's just... It's only that I don't know how to respond to his teasing."

"Oh, really? You shouldn't take it too seriously. That's just his nature, I'm sure he doesn't mean any harm by it." She lifted the telegram with the blue handwriting up in the air, as though Luise were able to read it from a distance. "Anyway, he's only staying for one day."

That alleviated Luise's uneasiness somewhat, but didn't dispel it completely. She remembered his broad rib cage, which made the open shirt that hung down over his belt seem too small; his muscular arms; the looks he gave her, which she was unable to decipher.

She was instructed to pick him up at the jetty, and there was no point in protesting. "You'll bring him to me without delay, to my table, yes?" When Frau Lydia raised her voice, it was in order. It would be inappropriate, she added, for a lady like her to play the welcome committee in this setting, that was what the hotel staff was there for. After all, he would probably only have a small amount of luggage with him, and could carry that himself.

Luise was at the pier far too early, of course, together with three porters from the hotel. The ship approached the shore like a slow-moving reptile, its funnel smoking and horns blaring, their echo drifting over from the slopes opposite. After the involved

landing process, around a dozen passengers made their way across the walkway. Stauffer was amongst them, carrying a leather bag, in a broad-rimmed hat and mid-calf height boots, a dashing man, Luise's mother would probably have said, despite his casual dress. She, in contrast to her daughter, liked this type of man; those who had an Italian manner to them. He didn't notice Luise at first, but she stepped into his path: "*Grüss Gott*, Herr Stauffer."

"Oh, it's you," He touched the brim of his hat and intimated a bow, only half in earnest. "I thought ... So where is she, the noble lady?"

"She's waiting for you up at the hotel," answered Luise with all the dignity she could muster. "I'm to take you to her."

"Good, I'll follow you." He downplayed his disappointment with an abrupt laugh that he immediately swallowed again.

She went ahead of him, up the slope. It hadn't occurred to him to take the funicular, and she intentionally moved so quickly that he began to gasp for breath behind her. Only once they reached the top, on the forecourt, did she turn around to him.

"You're in a hurry, aren't you?" he said irritably.

Luise pointed towards the glass entrance door. "That's the way in."

"As if I hadn't noticed." He wiped a few drops of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

Frau Lydia was waiting at her table, alongside a potted palm tree that suddenly reminded Luise of the conservatory at Belvoir; it wouldn't, of course, have been appropriate for her to receive Stauffer in her room. Without standing up, she extended her hand to him, and he leant over to her with a theatrical sigh and kissed it, something he had never done before. The guests at the other tables looked over with curiosity at the scene. Frau Lydia was wearing a light blue dress, with a slightly darker silk shawl wrapped artfully around her neck. Her face seemed softer than usual, her hair – which Luise had helped with – was carefully brushed, her fringe smoothed like on Stauffer's picture. While he stayed standing, concealing his shyness, they exchanged a few pleasantries. Then she invited him to have a seat. Stauffer took a chair and pulled it

closer to Frau Lydia, so close that she seemed startled and imperceptibly backed away from him. Luise was sent out to the kitchen for a pitcher of fresh milk, as requested by Stauffer, brought it to him herself right away, along with two glasses, then filled them until the foam almost spilled down over the rims, and watched as they both drank, Frau Lydia very proper, with small sips, Stauffer nonchalant, with long swigs.

"Freshly milked!" he said, and wiped the back of his hand over his white-smearred mouth. "There's nothing healthier!"

Luise wasn't sure whether she was still needed, and because Frau Lydia gave her no further instructions, she retreated to behind the man-high palm tree and eavesdropped, without really wanting to, on the ensuing conversation; her view, however, was partially obstructed by the palm fronds.

"He's very generous, your husband," said Stauffer. "He wants to send me to Rome, to study, and pay for everything."

"We would have liked to have gone with you, Emil and I. But my health comes first."

"Recuperate as swiftly as possible, my dearest lady. Then come next year. I want to seek inspiration from the temples and sculptures." He flung his arms out wide, almost knocking over the empty glass. "And, as I've wanted to do for such a long time, dedicate myself to sculpting."

"I'm sure you'll have the talent for it. After all, your drawings are so lifelike."

"Yes, I feel the urge to start from the beginning. The only way to master a craft is to have the courage to become a student over and over again. I won't give up the painting and drawing, though. And of course I'll give the works which I create in Italy to my sponsors, as a small compensation for their generosity."

"Oh, we'll see about that later."

Stauffer began to pontificate, and as he did his voice climbed higher, became louder, with the result that the guests at the neighbouring tables began to pay attention. One must visit the ruins in Rome, he declared, the Colosseum, Hadrian's villa outside the city, and grasp their proportions. So far he only knew them from engravings, a few

photographs. He intended to retrieve something of the greatness of this time, to incorporate it into the present, as it were. Human beings hadn't become dumber, after all, they just had to dare to emulate these works, perhaps even surpass them.

"And?" asked Lydia. "Do you dare?"

He paused, then laughed uproariously. "You're trying to provoke me, aren't you?" He had jumped to his feet, and paced back and forth as though wanting to parade in front of Lydia, talking himself into ever-greater excitement. "I'll tell you this: one can't weaken one's efforts. Most of the individuals who want to be artists nowadays are pampered and self-satisfied. One must push oneself to fight against one's own weaknesses. That's the key. We can't hope for perfection. But God knows we can hope for progress."

His tirade caused a stir; at the far end of the room, a few people had stood up to get a better look at the passionate orator. Lydia, who was clearly starting to feel ashamed, waved her hands at him in a placatory fashion, then stood up too and raised her voice above his to an unusually loud volume: "Come, let's go for a walk outside, it will do us good."

Stauffer fell silent at once and laughed again, this time unhappily. "Forgive me, my gracious lady, I'm making you uncomfortable. Yes, let's go outside."

She went up to her room in order to change, and left him standing where he was. Looking lost, he sat down again, after which the gazes of the guests pulled away from him, and his wandered around until he spotted Luise, still standing behind the palm. He waved her over, and she hesitantly obeyed.

"Why are you hiding?" he asked in amusement.

"I'm not hiding," she said. "I just thought that Frau Welti would need me again."

He gestured towards the chair alongside his. "Then sit down."

She shook her head, not knowing whether to leave or stay. But then Frau Lydia reappeared; she had just pulled on a light coat and put on a straw hat.

"Should I...?" asked Luise.

Frau Lydia guessed what she was trying to ask. "No, you stay here. See to it that a lovely bouquet of flowers is put in my room. Lupines perhaps. Or larkspurs. They're in blossom right now. There's no blue more beautiful." She directed that last sentence at Stauffer, who mumbled: "I'm more interested in the physiognomy of humans than flowers."

"One can be interested in both," replied Frau Lydia. They left the hotel alongside one another, followed by Luise. As the two of them took the path to the waterfalls, she branched off towards the gardener's house. Lydia turned around once more before they disappeared into the forest, and called to Luise: "Have the bouquet put on the bill." The distance between her and Stauffer was pronounced, and Luise was surprised that he didn't offer his arm out of politeness, as people of their kind tended to do.

The bouquet had long since been in the room when the pair returned two hours later, just in time for lunch. Luise had used the time to brush and beat the dust out of part of Frau Lydia's wardrobe. There were hotel staff for that, but Frau Lydia preferred Luise to take on such tasks.

They had climbed up high, she said, enthusing about their long walk. Last of all they had followed the mountain trail, between entire fields of alpine roses, one of which she had placed one in her buttonhole. She seemed flushed, almost in high spirits. Stauffer had stayed downstairs. Luise helped her out of her dusty ankle boots, then immediately set to cleaning them with a soft brush and suede cloth, while Frau Lydia slipped into her more comfortable, indoor shoes and complained about a few blisters on her heels.

"Oh, that Stauffer," she continued. "He's such a dreamer. Just imagine, he wants to build a temple with my money, as a kind of museum, with wonderful statues, a mecca for art enthusiasts from all over the world. I can already picture my husband shaking his head over it." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Unless I succeed in changing his mind."

Luise nodded; it was plain to see that this man consistently made an impression on Frau Lydia. She let him talk her into more or less anything, and Luise wondered whether he was making eyes at her, or she at him, and what that might mean.

Stauffer stayed until the evening. They sat at a round table for four, and Luise ordered a meringue for each of them. Her presence wasn't required after that, but she heard, because she stayed nearby, that the conversation between the two of them didn't falter, but instead flowed forth in a stream of Stauffer's sprawling thoughts. When dusk fell, he said his goodbyes and didn't want Luise to accompany him back down to the pier. But he forgot his travel bag. Frau Lydia summoned Luise and instructed her to hurry after him with the bag. It was heavier than she had thought. What did he have in it, she wondered? Books? Painting tools? She caught up with Stauffer just as the evening ship was arriving, already ablaze with light. He took the bag, which she handed to him silently, without thanking her, but then said, before he stepped onto the walkway: "I assume we'll see one another again soon, my love." It sounded like a threat, and for a moment, as the lights from the ship danced over him, he looked like an goblin.

That evening, Frau Lydia invited her chambermaid to her room for a bedtime tea. That had never happened before. Or would Luise prefer milk with honey, she asked, then immediately refused on her behalf, because cow's milk at this hour had the tendency to cause bloating, she said. And so Luise fetched from the kitchen a pot of Gold Melissa tea, which she carefully poured into the porcelain cups. They sat next to one another, the little table with the tea between them, in front of the panoramic window through which the mountain range opposite was still just about visible in the fading light. Above it, the paling sky, streaked with reddish clouds, darkened from minute to minute.

Frau Lydia said nothing for a long while, stirring her teaspoon in her cup, into which she had sunk a cube of sugar with the silver tongs, making a quiet clinking sound, like the chiming of bells. Luise drank her tea without sugar.

After a while, Frau Lydia lit a candle. Its flicker banished the darkness inside, making the darkness outside of the window seem all more intense.

"Do you know," she said, speaking up all of a sudden, "who I'm thinking about right now?"

Luise shook her head, but imagined it was sure to be Stauffer.

"My father," she said, very quietly, almost as though she were talking to herself. "And I don't know why. He was so hungry for power, and had a great deal of influence. And yet he suffered so terribly in his final days." She paused. "I wanted to be there for him, to ease his suffering somehow. I didn't want to miss a single moment with him while he was still alive. He was my father, after all, and I have so much to thank him for. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," murmured Luise.

"He had a terrible, disfiguring tumour on his face, his back was covered with boils, he would scream with pain, was seized by repeated convulsions, almost fainting, and when he was fully conscious, he was so worried about me and my future. Everyone from the house was there, as well as two doctors, in order to help him. But nothing was of any use." She searched for the words, and Luise would have liked to take her hand, but it wasn't appropriate. "The worst thing," she continued, "was that he didn't recognise even me by the end." Luise could hear that she was holding back her tears. "All of a sudden I was a stranger to him... and yet I was his closest confidant for so long. And in that moment, early in the morning when he took his last breath, everything went black before my eyes."

Another long pause, their breathing overlapping, Luise's almost inaudible, Frau Lydia's sniffing and irregular, and behind it the roar of the falls, pushing its way in through the windowpanes.

Luise hesitated, unsure as to whether she should say something. "I..." She began cautiously, "I also lost my father. Much, much earlier than you. I was only six."

"Oh." Frau Lydia sounded startled, and at the same time compassionate. "I didn't know."

"He drowned," said Luise. "They bought his dead body back to the house. Back then, in Bergamo. He had rescued a child and was carried away by the current." Now she

too was close to tears, and immediately regretted having revealed so much. Then she felt that Frau Lydia's hand had moved over towards hers, and first touched, then enclosed it, squeezed briefly and let it go again. Luise was unprepared for such a gesture, it moved her so deeply that she would have liked to rest her head on Frau Lydia's shoulder. But she stayed upright, while the candlelight wandered over her like a ghost, and the window now looked completely impenetrable.

"Drink up your tea, Luise," said Frau Lydia, who had now composed herself enough to speak.

Luise emptied the cup obediently. The tea had already gone lukewarm; she liked the colour but not the taste, which reminded her of stale water, of something swamp-like and slightly putrid. She avoided getting the steeped Melissa blossoms in her mouth, and put down the cup. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, you can go." This was her employer's composed voice once more, and Luise didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved.