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## I AM ADELE BLOCH-BAUER, I AM HESTER PRYNNE

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I AM ADELE BLOCH-BAUER, I AM HESTER PRYNNE

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A THESIS  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

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BY

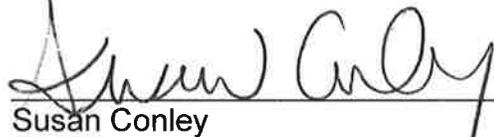
Laurie Lico Albanese

June 2016

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2016

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Laurie Lico Albanese entitled *I AM ADELE BLOCH-BAUER, I AM HESTER PRYNNE* be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



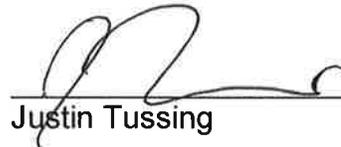
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## Abstract

*I AM ADELE BLOCH-BAUER, I AM HESTER PRYNNE* is a compilation of fiction and nonfiction written at Stonecoast. This cross-genre thesis includes two excerpts from historical novels with female protagonists, and an essay on women's historical fiction.

For the study and creation of female-centered historical fiction I researched and wrote in a wide range of areas, both intellectual and temporal. First, I read and traced the emergence of female-focused American historical fiction that began with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and continues today with historical fiction based in fact such as Lily King's *Euphoria* and Paula McClain's *The Paris Wife* and *Circling the Sun*. Second, I examined the origin of American feminist thought and literature from Margaret Fuller's *Women of the Nineteenth Century* to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and beyond. Third, I researched fin-de-siècle Jewish Vienna at the dawn of the twentieth century to write and re-envisioned the life of the modern art patron Adele Bloch-Bauer (1881-1925) for the novel *Stolen Beauty*. Finally, I researched 19<sup>th</sup> century Concord, Massachusetts and the roots of Transcendentalism, as well as the 1848 Italian revolution, to draft a new novel in which I re-envision the relationship between Margaret Fuller and Nathaniel Hawthorne as it drives the creation of *The Scarlet Letter* in the years 1840-1850. This new novel is titled *I Am Hester Prynne*, and a small selection is included herein.

## Acknowledgements

Many talented and generous teachers, staff and friends at Stonecoast contributed to the creation of Adele Bloch-Bauer's voice in *Stolen Beauty* and to all of my work in this thesis. To Susan Conley, my generous, brilliant and outstanding thesis and third semester mentor, thank you for your guidance, enthusiasm, and for holding the torch at the finish line. Aaron Hamburger put Collette in my hands and helped me find Adele's voice – for this amazing gift, I owe you a great debt. Jaed Coffin said, roughly, 'why write that, when you can write this?' and clarified so much for me. Robin Talbot, Matthew Jones, Justin Tussing, Suzanne Strempek Shea, Debra Marquart, Elizabeth Searle, David Anthony Durham, Ted and Annie Deppe on the faculty, and my friends Sally Donaldson, Vicki Hamlin, Julia Munemo, Shannon Ratliff, Clif Travers, Anya Mali, Ellie O'Leary, Maggie Almdale, Bill Stauffer, Lauren Liebowitz and the rest of the Howth gang, thank you for encouragement, camaraderie, and lots of kayaking, swimming, lobster, whiskey and Guinness. Friends, students and fellow teachers at The Writers Circle, I learn so much from all of you. Heather Schroder, thank you for recognizing what Adele's story could be and for making it happen. Laura Morowitz, your friendship and scholarship mean the world to me. Finally, thank you always to my beloved husband Frank, amazing daughter Melissa, and extraordinary son John -- big-hearted and excellent readers, critics, travel companions, teachers, athletes and cooks. Our home and your love are at the center of my life and everything I do. I am so proud of you, and so grateful.

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## Preface

I was ten years old when I learned that my Hungarian-born great-grandmother had been raised Jewish and not Roman Catholic as my sisters and I, and our parents, and all of my cousins and aunts and uncles had been raised.

“I don’t go to church,” she said in her charming accent. “I go to synagogue.”

It was Easter Sunday, circa 1969. I was standing in her old house in Seaford, Long Island, looking through a peephole into a delicate candy Easter egg the size and shape of a football. Inside the decorated egg, which my great-grandmother held for me, little white bunnies and their well-dressed offspring frolicked among pastel-colored flowers and houses made of spun sugar.

“But you celebrate Easter,” I said.

“No. I celebrate Passover,” she said quietly.

That was all. My young age, and the circumstances of the holiday, kept my many questions from rising to the surface. My father later said he’d been told the same thing when he was a child, but no one seemed eager to talk about my great-grandmother’s early life. As time went by, everything about that day came to seem magical but also imaginary -- a fragile confectionary of a pastel memory.

Eventually, I learned this much: Regina Solitar, daughter of the Hapsburg Empire, had been born and raised Jewish in Budapest. She was a teenager when she followed her older brothers to America, where she fell in love with an

Italian barber named Gennaro Falcone. Her family disowned her when she married him. Her Judaism, along with the rest of her past, had been vanquished and replaced by a life of raising Italian-American children, making a living as a seamstress and finally, quilting for her family.

Although we never spoke of it again, I felt a great kinship with my great-grandmother and her Judaism. Long after she passed away I held onto the secret desire that I might one day write a story about a Jewish woman who immigrates to America and raises her family here.

Maria Altmann, Gustav Klimt and Adele Bloch-Bauer gave me that opportunity when Dr. Laura Morowitz, a brilliant art historian who is also my dear friend and co-author of *The Miracles of Prato*, suggested a novel about Gustav Klimt. That was in 2010. A few months later my brother-in-law, John Albanese, gave me a stack of *Art & Antiques* magazine, where I found Salomon Grimberg's article about Klimt and Adele's alleged love affair. Slowly, I recognized my chance to write a novel about two Jewish heroines who had grown up, like my great-grandmother, separated from their faith and yet bound to it in ways both beautiful and terrifying. From this, my novel *Stolen Beauty* was born. But it wasn't simple, and it wasn't easy.

To write a fictional story about real people is no small challenge. Klimt, Adele and Maria proved worthy of the burden my fictional scrutiny put upon them, and I will address, later, what it takes to create a vibrant, believable female protagonist based upon the life of a real woman. *Stolen Beauty* required years of reading and

research into the art, architecture, lifestyle and politics in fin-de-siecle Vienna. Many books, court records, news accounts and films informed the story, including extensive records that Maria Altmann's lawyer, E. Randolph Schoenberg, made available on line for a time, as well as *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* by Sophie Lillie and Georg Gaughusch, *The Lady in Gold* by Anne-Marie O'Connor, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna* by Carl E. Schorske, *The World of Yesterday* by Stefan Zweig, and *A Nervous Splendor* by Frederic Morton. I also highly recommend the documentary films *The Rape of Europa* and *Maria's Story*.

During these years of research I travelled to Vienna and also to Budapest. In Vienna I walked the streets and rode the tram from the Margareten District where Maria lived, to Schwindgasse where Adele and Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer lived. I waited in line to climb the narrow staircase into Freud's original home office, where I studied his collection of ancient artifacts and considered their influence on art and the psyche in the early years of the Secession, the birth of modern psychology and the unleashing of long-repressed impulses borne of that world.

All of this helped me construct the timelines of Adele and Maria's lives and to realistically depict and imagine the milieus and settings of the novel – from fin de siècle Vienna and Jewish life in the Hapsburg Empire, through the roots of anti-Semitism that culminated in the atrocities of World War Two and the mass emigration of Jews to America.

In the spirit of storytelling, I strove to create a canvas large enough to convey the timelessness of art and the passionate desire for life and liberty that

united Adele and Maria. Just as I held my great-grandmother's Easter egg up to my eye and imagined another world there, I tried to do the same with this story -- evoke the legacy of family, art and memory, while telling an exciting and true tale of creation, destruction and survival.

I AM ADELE BLOCH-BAUER, I AM HESTER PRYNNE is comprised of three sections: a lengthy excerpt from *Stolen Beauty*, which is slated to be published in March 2017 by Atria Books; the essay, "Voices from the Margins in Women's Historical Fiction," which examines the feminist implications and impetus for the creation of novels based on the lives of real women in history; and a short excerpt from my new novel-in-progress *I am Hester Prynne*.

All three pieces are concerned with the creation of the historically-based female protagonist who overcomes gender and societal obstacles to self-determination and emancipation, defies the odds, and arrives at a new understanding of her purpose and place in the world.

It was my great pleasure to devote my time at Stonecoast to the creation and study of American female-centered historical fiction. Having published one work of historical fiction before beginning the program, I chose to examine the intent and value of this "genre" for today's reader, so that I might better understand the body of work I'm creating and ensure that what I write is grounded in intention and purpose that serves the evolution of women's struggles for self-expression, freedom and liberty in literature and in life.

To this end I studied select fiction and nonfiction of early American feminism from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Margaret Fuller's *Women of the Nineteenth Century* (1841) to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) to today's fictional heroines from history, including my own historical protagonists. These building blocks of American literary heroines span almost 200 years, and enthusiasm for the genre is certain to continue as the desire to rescue, resurrect and recreate women's stories from the margins of history continues to grow. It's a good time to be working to recreate American historical figures in fiction, as Lin Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton* has likely created a new appetite for historical fiction that will last at least a generation, if not longer.

The female characters in my work range in time and place from early 1840s Massachusetts to late 1840s Rome during the Italian revolution for independence; 1881 Vienna of the Hapsburg Empire through the birth of modern art in Austria, the advent of WW1, the rise of the Nazis and the Jewish post-WW2 diaspora in California.

Adele Bloch-Bauer (1881-1925), Maria Altmann (1916-2011) and Margaret Fuller's (1810-1850) -- fictional characters in *Stolen Beauty* and *I am Hester Prynne*, respectively -- are based on the lives of real women who struggled to define themselves in various times and places when and where women were not free to decide the course of their own lives or their own fates. Their lives were rife with internal and external challenges, small victories and many setbacks. This makes them ideal subjects for fiction that concerns itself

with the feminist struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

To reach and shape my own understanding of the “genre” of women’s historical fiction I read (and re-read) women’s historical fiction and fiction about women written in the nineteenth century, especially *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne), *Claudine at School* (Colette), *Daisy Miller* (James), *The Paris Wife* and *Circling the Sun* (McClain), *Orphan Train* (Baker-Kline), *The Signature of All Things* (Gilbert), *Euphoria* (King), *The Nightingale* (Hannah), and *Freud’s Mistress* (Mack and Kaufman) for an understanding of the protagonists’ journey and challenges, and the arc of a self-determined female character as she has evolved through American literary history.

I discovered a number of similarities in the novels, specifically concerning the arc of desire and obstacle. Hester Prynne is the original single mother, Beryl Markham a badass pioneering aviator out of Africa, Nell Stone a singular maverick anthropologist modeled on Margaret Mead, and Vivian Daly a courageous orphan train rider who survives abandonment, abuse, poverty and grief. Their stories are heroines’ journeys toward home and the struggle to live beyond gender roles and expectations. I surmised that the authors’ intention in creating their heroines as strong women challenging cultural norms is deliberate and purposeful, and this was borne out by interviews and conversations with McClain, King and Baker-Kline. From Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne to McClain’s Beryl Markham, each writer seems fully aware of resurrecting a specific woman or a particular female experience from edges of history and giving voice and power to otherwise silenced women.

Like Hester Prynne, these protagonists are women whose gender nearly stood in the way of their personhood. The books are heroines' journeys, and the protagonists' struggles are intricately bound in the role of maternity denied, disrupted or destroyed. Their stories show us how to survive and thrive in a world still unfriendly to young women who dare to be wild, passionate, and recalcitrant or, heaven forbid, unfeminine. Defy cultural norms and expectations, these novels warn, and mother and child will pay the price by being outcast, separated, or killed. This seems a worthy warning for every generation of young women to consider, and to challenge.

As novelist writing in first person I have inhabited the voice of Lucrezia Buti, a nineteen-year-old novice in 1456 Florence who modeled for the artist and priest Fra Filippo Lippi and became his lover. I have been Adele Bloch-Bauer, the wealthy, brilliant and beautiful young Jewish woman in Vienna at the dawn of the twentieth century who was desperate for a life filled with art, education and freedom and who became Gustav Klimt's muse, patron and lover as well as the model for his golden portrait; and I have been Maria Altmann, the newlywed Austrian in 1938 who had to first rescue her husband from Dachau before they could escape the Nazis.

Now I am writing a novel based on the life of Margaret Fuller, friend and confidante of Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne, famous New England Transcendentalist feminist and "most famous spinster" who travelled and reported from Italy during the uprising in 1848, where she met and bore a child out of wedlock with an Italian ten years her junior.

To imagine the interior and exterior lives of these women required a combination of research, on-location reporting, extensive reading about the art and the period in which they lived, and an understanding of all the elements of narrative fiction, character arc, world building, desire and obstacle, dialogue, denouement, as well as the determination to write and sell a story that would entertain, educate, and excite my readers. I also wanted to be sure that I would do justice to these tales as feminist journeys about women overcoming obstacles in a male-dominated and often misogynist world.

The excerpt from *Stolen Beauty* includes interstitials in the order in which they appear, two chapters in Maria Altmann's voice, and subsequent chapters alternating Maria's and Adele Bloch-Bauer's first person narration. It is written in interweaving first-person narratives from the perspective of two real women whose lives bookend the creation, near destruction and ultimate recovery of Gustav Klimt's most remarkable painting, *Adele Bloch-Bauer 1* (1908).

*I am Hester Prynne* imagines and recreates the story behind the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*: a tale of intrigue, sex, revenge and the struggle for personal and political freedom. To save his former lover -- the feminist Margaret Fuller -- from emotional, social and financial exile in Italy during the 1848 revolution, Nathaniel Hawthorne confronts his own guilt and remorse and writes a groundbreaking novel that will forever change the way America views infidelity, single motherhood and Puritan values.

The novel is set in the years 1848-1850, during which time Hawthorne wants to write an important novel that will challenge the Puritan views of sexuality

and chastity that dominate New England, while also helping his friend Margaret Fuller return to America and be accepted into the society that has rejected her because she has had a child out of wedlock with the Italian Marchese Giovanni Angelo Ossoli.

Concerning the protagonist's desire, Fuller wants to find love and a man with whom she can have a profound connection, body and soul, without surrendering the keen intellect for which she is known throughout America and Europe. She wants to survive the war in Italy, make her living as a writer, and return to New England to support her new family. What happens during the present time of the story pits those desires against the secret that Nathaniel and Margaret share: their brief sexual liaison at Brook Farm in 1841, the revenge Waldo Emerson took when he realized Margaret and Nathaniel had been lovers, and the importance, for both of them, that their affair remain a secret even as Hawthorne is using it to fuel the white-hot creation of America's first feminist heroine, Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter*.

To research this novel I visited Concord, Massachusetts and have read a number of biographies and books on the lives my characters, most notably Megan Marshall's *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, Brenda Wineapple's *Hawthorne: A Life*, Susan Cheever's *American Bloomsbury*, *The Portable Margaret Fuller* edited by Mary Kelley, and Joseph Jay Deiss' *Margaret Fuller: The Roman Years*.

It is my hope to write a novel that returns Fuller to her place in the history of American feminism, to raise awareness about her remarkable career as an

investigative journalist and international correspondent, and to examine the writing life and its requirements and expectations...and how that differs in the lives of men and women.

Fuller's path has been my own; Adele's path has also been mine. In pursuit of a creative life and a creative voice, I discovered the roots of my own feminism and the trajectory of my own story. Once, I was little girl with my eye pressed against the viewfinder of a sugar-spun imaginary world. My great-grandmother held that world to my eye like a looking glass; she invited me to enter the fantasy with her. I did. I became a writer. I came to Stonecoast. In the past two years the rigor of the work helped me to recognize my own story in my great-grandmothers, hers in mine, and ours in the universal tale of women finding their way in a new place, in a new world, among people who may not like what they is doing or approve of how they live.

My great-grandmother, Regina Solitar, was disowned by her family because she married an Italian man. I cannot right that, nor make up for it. But I can dedicate my creative life to giving voice to every woman who reaches within herself to discover she has, within her, everything she needs. I can be a feminist writer, and I can understand that the roots of that are as much in my blood – in the lifeblood of Regina Solitar – as they are in the literary legacy of Hester Prynne.

## STOLEN BEAUTY

*The Portrait of Adele measures 54" by 54" unframed, and weighs 8 pounds, 22 ounces. She has sixteen eyes, fifteen grams of gold, and seven grams of silver. Her dress is decorated with erotic signs and Egyptian symbols: the eyes of Horus to defend against evil, the three-sided ka that infuses the portrait with an indelible spirit. She's a queen and a seductress; a Jewess trapped in a lost world. Her lips are parted, as if she is about to say something that we will never hear.*

**Maria** 1938

I was a love-struck newlywed when Hitler came to Austria.

Outside, the Ringstrasse was streaming with cars, trams, and pedestrians in belted trench coats. Inside, we were waltzing and drinking French champagne. My dear friend Lily had just become engaged to a Catholic man, and the glittering ballroom was in full swing. Music was playing – it was Schubert -- and men in bowties were circulating with trays of crab cakes and miniature mushroom tortes. Someone toasted the happy couple. There was crystal, and dresses the color of hyacinths and tulips. The dance floor was a blur of pastels.

It was a long time ago, but I can still see everything clearly.

I was wearing violet perfume, and dusk was approaching. Fritz moved like a panther in his tuxedo as he crossed the room toward me. My mother was wearing a shimmering gray dress, and my father was holding his bow over the cello strings when someone shouted, "The chancellor is making a speech."

Aunt Adele was long in her grave, but I saw my Uncle Ferdinand put a hand out to steady himself near the cocktail bar.

"Schuschnigg is on the radio," the man shouted again in an angry voice. "Silence, everyone."

The violinists ripped their bows from the strings, and our host turned up the volume on the radio. The chancellor's voice rang across the room just as Fritz reached my side. Every bit of my husband's childhood in the Jewish ghetto had been polished away by then, replaced by elegant manners, a starched white shirt and a clear, operatic baritone. He put his arm around my shoulder and his ruby cufflink brushed my cheek, a cool spot in the warm room.

"Men and women of Austria: this day has placed before us a serious and decisive situation," Chancellor von Schuschnigg said.

He took a deep, choked breath that we could hear through the radio waves. Men I'd known since I was a girl turned pale. They lowered their champagne flutes and balled up their cocktail napkins. Lily wilted against her father's thin frame. Someone tipped over a glass, and it shattered.

The chancellor said that Hitler's army was at our borders, and for one more second I believed our small country was about to go to war. I thought we would fight the Germans, and that we could win.

“We have given orders to our troops to retire should an advance continue,” the chancellor said. “So I take leave of the Austrian people with a word of farewell uttered from the depths of my heart -- God Protect Austria.”

A strange sound came from my husband’s throat. I saw my mother mouth my father’s name – *Gustav* – and my father mouth hers – *Thedy* – in a single moment that seared itself into my mind like a photograph. A woman fainted, and sirens began to wail in the streets outside. I saw Uncle Ferdinand waving in my direction, but my parents circled around us saying *Secure your money. Secure your jewels. Go home. Lock your doors. Get your passports. Get out* and then Fritz and I were pouring outside into the fading evening with everyone else.

Church bells were ringing, and hundreds of people were crowding into the streets waving Nazi flags. I had no idea there were so many Austrians just waiting for the Fuhrer. But there they were, hordes of ordinary Gentiles who thought Hitler was right and the Jews were to blame for their problems – poverty, sadness, cold, whatever it was they were angry about, Hitler wanted them to blame us. And they did. They were smiling and laughing and waving their swastikas. They were shouting, *Germany is united -- long live Hitler.*

We all knew what had been happening to the Jews in Germany, but until that moment it had seemed a world away. If that makes us willfully ignorant or foolish and naive, then that’s what we were. There’s no other way to say it.

Behind the wheel of our new black sedan, Fritz stared straight ahead. Men in brown uniforms marched arm-in-arm through the street as if they’d stepped right

from the thick walls of the Ringstrasse buildings. Soldiers stood like hard marionettes with their chins thrust into the air. I wanted to ask Fritz where they'd been hiding with their pressed uniforms and shining swastika pins, but when I saw tears on my husband's face, I bit the inside of my cheek and swallowed my words.

By the time we reached the Altmann Textiles Factory grounds, where we lived in our newlywed apartment, Fritz had composed himself and looked as much like the vice president of the business as he could manage.

"Four men were here asking for you," the gateman said. Otto was a strong man with a clean, square jawline and two lovely children. He secured the padlock behind us, and for the first time in my life it occurred to me that I was locked inside the gates. "They wanted to see the man who runs the factory."

"What did you tell them?" Fritz asked.

"I said Bernhard Altmann is away on business, and Fritz Altmann is here in Austria."

"What did they say?"

Otto blanched.

"They said, 'There is no Austria anymore.'"

Inside the apartment we bolted the door, turned off the lights and crawled under the blankets. We'd been married only four months; I was twenty-two and Fritz was thirty, but we held each other like frightened children.

“You’ll leave right away,” Fritz whispered. He smoothed my hair from my face. “Tomorrow, if it’s possible. You go with Uncle Ferdinand and I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

My Uncle Ferdinand and Fritz’s brother Bernhard had both tried to warn us about Hitler, but their fears had seemed hazy and improbable and we’d listened the way most of Austria had listened: with one hand on the radio dial, searching for music and entertainment.

“I’m not leaving without you.” I said. “We’ll wait until your passport is renewed.”

I had a valid passport, but Fritz’s had expired after our honeymoon. We’d filled out the paperwork, filed for a renewal, and forgotten about it. That had been a month ago.

“I’m not going to get a passport now,” Fritz said. Lights from the factory grounds shined through our bedroom window, illuminating his face in zigzagged shadows. “The Nazis aren’t going to give me one. You go first, and I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“Go where?” I asked. “I don’t want to go anywhere without you.”

“Go with your uncle to Jungfer Brezan,” he said. “That’s where he said he would go if Hitler came. Czechoslovakia will be safe.”

Only then did I remember my uncle waving to me on the dance floor.

“I’ll call Uncle Ferdinand in the morning,” I said. “He’ll make sure we can get out together.”

I pressed my cheek against Fritz's shoulder and recalled the faint cinnamon of his aftershave on the night we'd met. There had been music and men in tuxedos that night, too – a cool breeze coming through a open window at the Lawyer's Ball, and a line of women holding their dance cards and waiting for the second waltz.

"Just look at him," I'd breathed to Lily when Fritz walked by. He'd moved as I thought a lover might move when he wanted a woman, as if there was velvet under his feet. And there was the cinnamon scent, like warm bread and breakfast in bed, lingering in his wake.

"That's Fritz Altmann," Lily had whispered. "He's an amateur opera singer and a real charmer. I admit he's a looker, but don't waste your time on him -- he's crazy about a married woman."

I might have heeded my friend's warning if Fritz hadn't climbed onto the music stage just then and silenced the room with Schubert's aching love song: *You are peace, the gentle peace – you are longing, and what stills it.* Maybe he was a playboy, but his voice had the warmth of a roaring fire. He sang about longing, pleasure and pain. He sang as if he wanted a home, and that very night I'd made one for him inside myself.

I wouldn't leave Austria or Vienna without him. To even think of it was terrifying.

I was swallowing a bite of dry toast the next morning when a delivery boy in a blue hat hammered at the kitchen door. The sky was flat as Fritz gave the boy a silver coin and read the cable from his brother.

*Safe in Paris. Secure the books. Come immediately or await my instructions. Stop. Bernhard.*

“Of course,” Fritz said in a tight voice I barely recognized. “I have to secure the ledgers.”

The newspaper was unopened on our table, with a photograph of Hitler’s motorcade crossing the Danube River above the boxed headline: *EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY Jews must report all property, holdings and cash to the Central Offices of the Reich. Those failing to cooperate will be subject to seizure and imprisonment.*

“I’m calling Uncle Ferdinand,” I said. I hit the telephone receiver twice, then a third time. The line was dead, and that gave me a new sense of urgency. “I’m going over there. He might already have a passport and papers for you.”

“You can’t go out there,” Fritz said. “You have no idea what’s happening in the streets.”

I buttoned up my coat and pulled on my gloves. My resolve was a metronome clacking inside me: *I can’t leave without you, I won’t leave without you, I can’t leave without you.*

“You get the ledgers. I’ll see my uncle, and then I’m going to check on my parents,” I said. “I’ll be home in three hours, maybe less.”

The Altmann Textiles Factory was set on four acres in Vienna's Margareten District, southwest of the city center. The buildings were yellow and whitewashed brick connected by a maze of smooth pathways. There was a modern cafeteria where everyone ate lunch together, and Fritz and Bernhard knew each of their three hundred employees by name.

Fritz walked me to the front gate, where we found Otto still on duty at the guardhouse.

"Where's the morning man?" Fritz asked.

The workers usually began arriving before eight in the morning, but that day the grounds were still empty.

"He didn't show up," Otto said with a shrug. He looked at my sturdy shoes and buttoned-up coat. "Frau Altmann, the streets are dangerous. Due respect, ma'am, I hope you're not going out there."

"You should wait," Fritz said. "I'll go with you later."

"I'm going now." I pressed my face against his. "You take care of the books."

Outside the gates, our street was deserted and the houses silent. Shades pulled low across dark drawing room windows seemed to flutter and blink as I walked away from home. I was much more frightened than I'd let on to Fritz. At the tram stop I kept my eyes on the ground and pulled my collar up around my face. I tried not to think of anything. I tried only to breathe and stay calm.

There was no ticket-taker on the tram. The seats were full of silent workmen and servants in white starched uniforms. I shoved my ticket into my

pocket and held onto a leather strap as the rail rolled beneath me. As we rounded the Mariahilfer District, there was an angry red Nazi banner hanging from a tall building. We all turned to look, and the car buzzed with something that seemed to hang between anticipation and terror.

At the stop near the Naschtmarkt, a big man in a black uniform stepped onto the streetcar and shouted *Heil Hitler*. The entire car saluted back, but I hesitated. I felt the air leave my lungs. The man barked again, *Heil Hitler*, and stared until I put up my arm and mouthed the words. As I did, I saw the Secession gallery slide by on my left. Soldiers stood in a line across the museum steps, unfurling a red banner that covered the slogan that had been there all my life. I struggled to recall the words, but they slid away as quickly as the golden dome slid from view.

The next stop was Karlzplatz, where St. Charles Church anchored the square. I got off without looking back. The church doors were flung open, the bells were ringing, and there was a crowd of people in front of the fountain. I turned the other way, clutched my handbag to my side, and tried not to run through the streets.

My uncle's house was on Elisabethstrasse, overlooking Schiller Park. As I rounded a stand of naked shrubs, I nearly tripped over a line of old women on their knees. The women were dressed in fur coats and patent leather boots, and they were scrubbing the sidewalks with toothbrushes. I lost my footing, and came to a full stop. My hand flew to my mouth to catch whatever might come out of it.

“If you do a good job, filthy Jew, maybe I’ll let you keep that fat diamond ring,” a soldier barked. He butted a woman with his rifle and I felt a sharp pain in my jaw, as if he’d struck me, too. The woman cried out, and he struck her again. I tucked my chin and scanned the old faces, praying I wouldn’t see anyone I knew.

“Join us, *fraulein*,” a soldier leered at me. Another one laughed, and I thought I might faint. “We can use a pretty young one like you.”

I fled from the park, heart racing and coat flying behind me as I hurried up the steps at 18 Elisabethstrasse and banged on the door.

“Uncle Ferdinand?” I called first for my uncle, then for his butler. “Georg? Are you in there? It’s Maria – it’s me, please open the door.”

A gunshot rang out in the park behind me, and my knees went weak.

The door opened and my uncle’s cook was standing in her white uniform, a dishtowel over her shoulder. I was prepared to throw myself into her arms, but she looked at me with a cool eye.

“Your uncle isn’t here,” Brigitte said. “He left before dawn. He’s probably across the border by now.”

“Left?” I asked numbly. I leaned into the doorframe, afraid I would faint. It had not occurred to me that my uncle would leave without us.

“Without a word to anyone.” Brigitte’s mouth twisted. “Georg saw him pack his papers and lock up the safe. He’s probably gone to Jungfer Brezan.”

“Did he leave anything for me?” I asked. “A package or an envelope?”

She shrugged.

“I’d like to check his study.” Even to my ears, it was clear the words were a plea.

“Suit yourself,” she said, and stepped aside.

The grand *palais* was empty and still. The furniture seemed to cast long shadows across the parlor, and the grandfather clock on the landing kept time like ticking dynamite. Upstairs, my uncle’s desk was impossibly tidy. I tried the desk drawers, but they were locked. I looked under the radio and the ink blotter, and ran my hand along the clean bookshelves. There wasn’t even a layer of dust.

I could smell my uncle’s cigars, but very quickly it was clear that he’d left nothing for me. My last chance was Aunt Adele’s sitting room, where her golden portrait hung. The room was a shrine to my aunt, filled with her favorite paintings and books. The curtains were drawn, and the air inside was stale. Her portrait was filled with gold and silver baubles, and strange symbols I’d never been able to puzzle out. I’d often had coffee and cake in that room with my uncle, nibbling on sweets while he talked about the wife who’d died when I was only nine.

“She was celebrated throughout Europe and the empire. One day that legacy will belong to you, Maria,” my uncle had said. He’d leaned over and brushed my cheek. “You’re the daughter we never had,” he said quietly. “The daughter she longed for.”

Outside the *palais* a woman screamed, and gunshots followed. I pushed aside thick curtains and saw two women lying in pools of blood. My knees

buckled, and for a moment my eyes went black. An engine roared, a horn blared and there was the sound of dogs' frenzied barking.

I pulled away from the window and grabbed for Adele's letter opener in a panic. I felt sure there was something hidden in the room for me – perhaps behind the portrait, or slipped into a picture frame.

Another shot rang out, and a jeep screeched to a stop outside. I heard heavy boots on the landing, and loud knocking. Men barked my uncle's name, and blood pounded in my ears like a loud siren.

"Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer? We're here for Herr Bloch-Bauer."

"He's gone," I heard the cook say calmly. "But his niece Maria Altmann is upstairs in the dead wife's sitting room."

**Adele** 1886

I was born on the third floor of our summerhouse just outside of Vienna, and learned to read there the year I turned five. The day was lazy and sunny, and smelled of the briny Old Danube in the distance. Everyone else had gone up the hill to ride horses near the monastery, but Karl and I stayed behind with a fat copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales.

“I hate this thing,” my brother said, tugging at the starched collar of his blue and white sailor suit. He was fourteen years old, and desperate for long pants and a button-up shirt. “I’d rather wear a dress and corset than this.”

Karl plucked two buttermilk scones from the silver tray and spread them with blackberry jam. I draped myself over a sturdy wicker chair on the shady veranda, and kicked off my shoes. When I rolled down the long cotton stockings, my toes looked like ten white, skinny fish. They made me very happy, and I wiggled them in the air. Karl offered me a bite of his scone, and held his hand under my mouth so I wouldn’t drop crumbs on my apron dress. Then he wrote the alphabet on a slate.

“I already know my letters,” I said. I swatted at a mosquito that had bitten my foot, and rubbed away a spot of blood. “I practiced outside with a stick in the dirt.”

“Then see if you can write them.”

Karl handed me the chalk, and I traced each letter carefully. A was for *Adele*. B was for *Bauer*. It was easier than I thought it would be.

“See here,” Karl wrote out the letters of his name, and when the kitten mewled against my bare leg he wrote out the word, *K-A-T-Z-E*. Soon everything fell into place and I was lost in the swirl of letters and symbols, the possibility of entire words and sentences already forming like a boat on a distant shore, when the others came back and Mother appeared on the porch. My sister Thedy stood behind her.

“Get up at once,” Mother said. Her face was pinched, her hair still tightly wound under her riding cap. “Put on your shoes and stockings. And where is your hat?”

Mother thought I was too young to be taught to read, but the deed was done and within a few weeks I was sounding out long words on my own. I didn’t like making my mother cross, but it happened so often that I’d gotten used to it. I loved the letters that jammed against one another like *TSCH*, the soft *c* nestled against the tall *h* making a sound that could chug across the page or whisper softly enough to put a kitten to sleep.

“You’re much too clever for a girl,” Thedy said when she found me puzzling out the words to a fairy tale at the end of August.

Thedy was my only sister, and she was very kind. Her eyelashes curled up twice as long as anybody else’s, and when she spoke she sounded like she was almost singing. She was three years younger than Karl, and content to play the piano and dress up as Mother liked. She pleased her tutors, but never asked for more books to read or spent extra time on her lessons, as Karl did.

I wasn’t sure if Thedy meant it was good to be clever, or if it was bad. I looked to her for a clue, but her face revealed nothing.

“Adele is the smartest girl I know,” Karl said. He was bent over his desk, tracing out small ferns and tiny edelweiss for his botany scrapbook. When *he* said it, I was positive that being smart was a good thing. “Maybe as clever as me.”

“Yes,” Thedy said with a sigh. “I suppose that’s true.”

We had no pets in the city, but kept two kittens in the country because Mother said they calmed her nerves. The cats slept on the veranda in the daytime, and under my bed at night. They named the kittens after the emperor and empress: Franz was skittish and playful, not at all like the emperor with his stiff red jacket and big black bucket hat; Little Sisi had beautiful, mottled green eyes and warm brown fur.

In the blanched heat of my seventh summer, I studied a portrait of the empress that hung in Father's library and decided to try my own hand at art. With two sharp pencils and a single piece of watercolor paper, I sat cross-legged on the veranda and worked for hours drawing my Little Sisi with a ring of white clover looped around her ears just like the flowers the empress wound through her hair.

When I showed the drawing to my sister, she laughed.

"It's darling," They said when she saw that her merriment had made me cross. "Truly, Adele, it's a very pretty picture."

When I showed the sketch to Karl, he considered it with the utmost seriousness.

"You've got the proportions just right," my brother said, and his praise rang in my ears for days.

In Vienna we lived in a white stone house directly across from the University. Because I was the youngest I had the smallest room, but it had a bright cupola

where I kept my green chaise pushed against the windows. From my bedroom I could see the emperor's palace and Saint Stephen's Cathedral in the Graben, and beyond it the sweep of green toward the Nineteenth District where we summered. When I was alone, I climbed often into the windowsill and peered down to watch University students rushing to and from their classes with books tucked under their arms and neckerchiefs flying.

Although I looked very long and hard, I never saw a single woman among the scholars. Even among the best families, few girls continued their education beyond the age of twelve. Girls who sat for the University entrance exam were gossiped about over breakfast tables and afternoon teas, and only a rare few managed the coursework. Still, I dreamt of myself studying philosophy, anatomy and biology, attending lecture and talking about them around the supper table with my brothers.

When the first Gymnasium for young women opened in Vienna when I was twelve, Mother enrolled me – probably because the school was very exclusive, and the talk of all of her friends.

The first day, I was up and dressed in my blue uniform before anyone else. Nanny coiled my hair atop my head instead of wrapping it in two braids, tucked a lavender sachet into my pocket, and pinched my cheeks so they wouldn't look pale. My stomach was nervous, and I was too excited to eat.

"Toast, at least," Mother insisted. Karl winked at me, and I hurried with my nanny to the school on Hegelgasse, where I entered through glossy brass doors without looking back.

The building smelled of soap and ink, and the halls were lit with gaslights. The classrooms were set with tables instead of little desks, and I was given an assigned seat next to two girls whom I knew because our fathers were in business together. The headmistress wore a white dress with a black smock over it, and took attendance from her desk. My name was first, and I called out, "present."

"What are you?" the headmistress asked. She didn't look up until I begged her pardon. Then her face turned to a prune and she said, impatiently, "Come now, Jewess or Catholic, it's not a difficult question."

"Jewess," I said, although I'd never called myself a Jewess before.

Most of my classmates were Catholic, and straightaway at recess they asked if I'd studied Hebrew or spoke Yiddish -- as if I wore a shawl over my head and smelled of cabbage and herring like the poor *shtetl* Jews in the second district.

"Papa says he hears you Jews wailing your religion songs on Fridays," one of the girls said. She had bright yellow hair and when she tossed her head and laughed, a whole gaggle of girls around her did the same. At that moment I resolved that I would never cackle around with a goose parade of silly girls.

Anyway, my family wasn't the least bit observant. Like all of our friends, my parents had declared themselves *konfessionslos* -- without faith -- because it was better for my father's banking business, and for our standing in society. Emperor Franz Josef had made it easy for us to leave our religion behind. At Christmastime we had a tall tree in our front parlor, and exchanged gifts at the

stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve. We didn't go to church, but we didn't go to synagogue, either. While my Catholic classmates at Gymnasium attended religion class on Mondays and Thursdays the three other Jewish girls and I sat on a hard bench outside the headmistress's office and waited in silence. I didn't like that one bit, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Like all of our friends in Vienna, my family had dinner together every afternoon at two o'clock. Mother sat at one end of our table and Father at the head, the maids served meat and potatoes, and my four brothers took up the center of the table with loud debate.

"God is dead," Karl announced one afternoon when I was still in my first year at the Gymnasium.

Nobody blinked an eye. My mother passed the potatoes, and the butler ladled gravy onto Karl's plate.

"Darwin certainly agrees with that," Eugene said, waving his fork in the air. The other boys all joined in. I wanted to participate, and to know what the boys knew, but I was a girl, and no one paid any attention to me.

Karl had begun reading for philosophy and anatomy at University that same year, and soon after he told us that God was dead, I asked if he would let me read one of his philosophy books.

"Nietzsche is too much for a girl," Karl said. "Even one as clever as you."

I had a sickening feeling.

"Darwin, then?"

He raised both eyebrows, and shook his head in mock terror.

“Well then, anatomy.” I popped out my lower lip in a trick that sometimes worked with him. “Teach me that. I want to know what you know, and learn what you learn.”

“Anatomy is worse than philosophy,” Karl said. “You know a girl can’t have that kind of education.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because it will frighten you,” he said. “Your mind isn’t ready. It may never be ready.”

My brother had never said such a thing to me before. I was more furious than hurt. I left his room without a word, put on my boots and coat, and asked Nanny to walk with me to the Museum of Art History on the Ringstrasse.

“I’d be delighted, Miss Adele,” she said, and found her best hat and gloves for the occasion.

It seemed half the city was at the museum looking up at the colorful murals or marveling at ancient artifacts collected from the tombs of dead Egyptians. I pretended to study the formal portraits that ran up the fresh red walls, while really I peered sideways at a tall oil painting of Adam and Eve standing naked and unashamed beneath an apple tree.

What was dangerous about anatomy, I wanted to know. Why should a girl not learn about the mind and the body, or what lay beneath the skin?

I was never permitted to visit the museum without a chaperone, but at least Mother and Nanny – or Thedy, when I could convince her to go with me –

did not insist on standing beside me while I wandered through the cool galleries. Up and down the marble staircase I searched for large, sweeping paintings of mythical events and stood in awe of pale flesh and naked buttocks. I contemplated Adam and Eve as they covered their bodies in shame, and the three phases of man as he matured and withered away.

Vienna was a city of music, but my interest in art was an acceptable diversion. Mother went so far as to arrange for me to have drawing lessons, which I promptly gave up when I realized I would only be drawing landscapes and flowers, and not the human body.

Karl and I were waving goodbye to Father in the country house courtyard the following summer when his carriage pulled away with a start and my hand was caught in the wagon wheel. It happened very quickly. I saw just a small bit of what was beneath my skin – red blood, a loop of blue vein, something that looked like string – before I passed out and Karl caught me. When I woke, my hand was wrapped in a fat white bandage and I felt as if I were floating.

“I’m sorry,” Karl said. His face was woozy, as if he were a ghost.

“It’s not your fault,” I said, before I fell back asleep.

My hand healed, but the scar was purple and my thumb permanently twisted. Everyone said it was barely noticeable, but I felt otherwise. At school I tucked my right hand in my lap when I wasn’t writing, and raised my left hand whenever I wanted the headmistress to call on me. Karl was especially kind to

me that autumn, and on a snowy evening just past the New Year of 1894 he invited me into his study and told me to close my eyes.

I pretended to do as he asked, but kept one eyelid open just a tiny sliver.

"No peeking," he said.

My brother was twenty-three. He had a thin mustache and serious brown eyes. He had begun courting a girl who was often a guest at the Wittgensteins' music parlor, although he didn't seem to have much enthusiasm for her. His bedroom smelled like freshly starched shirts, and the books on his desk smelled of ink and dust and the mill where the paper had been made.

I ran my fingers blindly over the book he'd slid across his desk. I wanted to eat the words, to feel the paper turn back to pulp in my mouth, to swallow the letters and make them mine

"Is it anatomy?" I asked.

"Tell me again why I should show it to you."

I was ashamed of the way my fingers had been twisted and scarred by the accident. That's why I thought Karl was being kind to me. But that's not what I said.

"Because I'm clever, and because I want to learn what makes us human," I said. "And because you cannot think of a reason why I should not be allowed to study what you study."

"But you can't tell Mother," he said. "She can't know I've shown you. Ever."

"You can trust me with your life," I said.

“I believe I would,” Karl said. “I believe you would be worthy of it.”

My brother told me not to cry out when I opened my eyes, and so I was prepared for the worst thing I could imagine, like my hand when it had been ripped open.

Instead I saw a man without skin, his blue and red veins beneath his skull as if his very thoughts were mapped beneath my fingertips, the whole universe of his nerves and the very breath in his lungs and the heart right at the center of his chest where I felt my own heart beating beneath my shirtwaist at that very moment. This was what I had been waiting for – a glimpse of what was invisible and yet right there below the surface of everything. In a flash I understood there was a world of hidden knowledge in books, under clothing, and in hallowed lecture halls -- I could imagine entire universes that I did not even know existed and questions I would never know to ask.

“Look here, Adele.” Karl’s hand hovered over the red and blue lines that crisscrossed through the skull. “Here, especially, a man and a woman are the same.”

My brother spoke to me about ligaments, sinews, tendons, veins -- the long torso and the nervous system that moved through the spine, connecting everything. He put his hand upon my mangled one, and traced the two bent fingers.

He told me to pulse my fist, and traced a line on another page where the hand muscles and ligaments were drawn.

“You can make your hand stronger,” Karl said. It was all much more splendid than I had imagined. “Beneath the skin, everything is already being repaired.”

When I next saw Adam and Eve in the museum, I knew how bones, muscle and tendons kept them standing even when God banished them from the Garden of Eden. I knew how their bodies completed one another’s like hand and glove, so that even after God was dead – as I understood, in my naive way, that somehow God had existed but was now gone – their children, and their children’s children, were able to cover themselves in clothing and to go on.

This is not to say I understood the working of the genitalia, for clearly I did not. But I knew what made a man and a woman different, and that it was not the mind or the heart that distinguished one from the other.

I was in my bedroom reading a Jane Austen novel one cool afternoon when the front door burst open and there was shouting on the landing and a scramble of feet up the stairs.

“Hold his head, don’t let go of his feet, damn it!”

I ran into the hallway and saw Karl stretched out between my brothers, his body limp and his eyes rolling up into the back of his head. I started crying *no*, *no*, but very softly, so I wouldn’t scare my brother. He had on a morning coat and striped gray pants, and one shoe had fallen off. His sock had a tiny hole in the toe. It had been a very long winter, and the house was still damp and cold.

“Call the doctor,” Eugene shouted. “And Adele, get back in your room.”

Someone sent for Father, who came home and hurried directly into Karl's room, banging the door shut behind him. I heard worried voices, and my mother telling something to the cook. Thedy came into my bedroom and sat with me. I was shaking and struggling to breathe, and my sister said I was imagining the worst.

"He'll be fine," Thedy said, stroking my hair. "He has a fever, he should have stayed home instead of going to his lectures."

Soon the doctor swept through the kitchen door and up the back staircase, carrying his black bag and the smell of medicine and sickness. Mother was sent from Karl's room, and the whole house was quiet. The church bells rang five o'clock, and then six. I thought the silence was a good thing, and finally stopped crying and curled up into a ball under my blankets. Light drained from the day and I could hear the University boys rushing and shouting in the streets.

When Karl's door opened and the doctor came out, Thedy and I jumped up to eavesdrop on the landing. We pressed against the wall and gripped one another around the waist.

"It's pneumonia," the doctor said. "I've given him a cold enema, and he has to stay wrapped in warm blankets."

Mother's voice was high and frightened, and my father's sounded flat as a wooden plank.

"Will he be all right?" Father asked. "What else can we do?"

"You can pray," the doctor said. "If his fever doesn't break tonight, I'm afraid we'll lose him."

“Lose him?” Father asked. Mother broke into a loud sob. Thedy and I ran into the hallway and flung our arms around her. The other boys came, too, and stood in a stunned circle around us until my mother began to gasp for air.

“Leave your mother be,” my father said. His voice was choked, his face ashen. He put an arm around Mother’s shoulder, and they went together into Karl’s bedroom.

Father didn’t leave Karl’s side, and sometime during the night I crept in and slipped beside him. I’m sure Father saw me, but he didn’t say a word. He didn’t touch me. The room was hot and stuffy, my brother’s face was pale and blank, and every few minutes he opened his mouth and groaned. I knew Father would make me leave if I cried, and so I made myself very strong.

I reached beneath the sheets and took Karl’s hand. It was hot to the touch.

“You’re going to be fine,” I said. We were the same beneath the skin, but he was hot and I was cold, he was sweating and I was shivering, and he smelled of unwashed sheets.

I closed my eyes and prayed with all my might. I’d never prayed before, but I’d heard the girls at school during their Catechism, and knew the words by rote: *holy Mary, mother of god, pray for us sinners*, I whispered. I told myself that if I believed in God, he would help.

“Addie,” Karl whispered. I jumped. My prayers were working. “Addie, listen to me.”

I had to put my ear right next to his lips to hear.

“Don’t let them box you in, do you hear me? Don’t let them do that.”

I didn't know what he meant. I was fifteen, he was twenty-five, his hand was limp and damp in mine.

"I won't," I said.

"Promise me."

He coughed, the sound of angry crows in his lungs.

"You're the cleverest girl I know," he said.

I didn't think he was going to die. I believed he was going to get better. I prayed and prayed for his fever to break, and fell asleep with my face on his bed, the sheets and blankets wrinkled under my cheek.

I woke to my mother's hand on my shoulders, leading me out of the room.

"Is he better?" I asked. "Is he awake?"

The room was cold, and my mother was weeping softly.

Karl's room was locked, and the servants packed away his books and clothes.

"His Darwin?" I asked my brother Eugene. "And his Anatomy, too?"

Eugene nodded sadly, and pressed a slim copy of the Homeric Hymns into my hands the next morning. It had a blue linen cover, and Karl's bookplate with his signature inside. I slid it beneath my pillow, and at night I buried my face between the pages where I inhaled the pulp and ink that had always been part of my brother and that I'd always believed would be part of me, too.

I didn't sit for final exams that year at school. Instead, I sank into my green chair and refused to leave it. My brothers threw themselves back into their work and studies, and Father spent long days in his offices. They played *Moonlight*

*Sonata* on the piano in the foyer every afternoon, and I thumbed through art books I'd dragged out of Father's library. I turned page after page of tinted lithographs, examining saints and goddesses and the way Italian painters depicted heaven among the clouds peopled with winged cherubs. Although I knew heaven was a lie, the pictures comforted me.

Mother came every morning to ask what I wanted for dinner and every day I told her the same thing: potatoes mashed with butter, the way Karl liked them. Then I sat at the table, moving the potatoes around on my plate and drying my tears on the edge of my white napkin.

"You *will* get better," Thedy said.

"You said Karl would get better," I said. I didn't mean it to sound cruel, but I knew it did.

"That's not very kind." Thedy's eyes teared.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "Please, just leave me alone."

I read the *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and tried to take some comfort in the idea that somewhere there was an eternal castle of dark and light memory where Karl might be reading his books at the same time, pondering the same words and phrases. God and my brother were both dead, but I wanted to believe in something more powerful than myself, and I read until I'd worn myself out trying.

Still, my body insisted itself, and every morning my bosom seemed to have grown a tiny bit. When my bleeding came, it was a shock to feel my insides churning and to see the angry red spot on my knickers.

“It’s here,” I told Thedy. “Just like you said. But you didn’t say I would feel so sick.”

“That will pass.” Thedy smoothed my hair and put her cool lips to my forehead. “Just rest for today, and tomorrow you’ll feel better.”

She let me have her belt and a clean supply of rags, but of course I needed my own, which meant I had to tell Nanny, who told Mother, who came to my room and said it meant that I was a woman.

“I’m not,” I said.

I didn’t want to be a woman if Karl wasn’t there to be a man. When he was alive, I’d believed that somehow he would convince Father and Mother to send me to University. With him gone, I felt everything slip away. I was half child, half woman: a sad, thin sprite. I refused to make my debut in the January ball season – Mother didn’t have the heart to argue -- and even the museum, with its silent columns and life size murals, did not appeal to me.

“You’ll have suitors anyway,” Thedy said. “You know Mother will make sure of it.”

“I want to go to University,” I reminded her, but we both knew that wouldn’t happen. I wasn’t courageous. I yearned to study but I also wanted to have children one day – a boy and a girl who would love one another as I’d loved Karl, and he’d loved me. Without my brother I could not imagine defying convention and having both.

*By order of Emperor Franz Josef in 1881, Gustav and Ernst Klimt climb a ladder above the center stairwell in the sparkling new Museum of Art History and slide onto the wooden scaffolding that abuts the arcades and spandrels. The black and white tiled floor is at a dizzying distance below. The brothers wear loose white overalls; their pockets are filled with measuring instruments and straight edge blades. Each young man carries a tubular spirit level in which a tiny air bubble floats in a minute amount of oil and rum. Gustav carries a shallow tray of warm gold paint; Ernst carries a tray of silver. The museum is closed. Light streams through the high windows on either side of the new building. The elder brother unrolls the first long canvas while Ernst opens and mixes the pot of glue.*

*Their mural is on four pieces of painted canvas, a total of 16 feet tall and 30 feet wide. The centerpiece is two Egyptian women: one holds a black ankh, the other a raven. The women's eyes are ringed in heavy black kohl, their costumes are golden and feathered. The painters start at the north end of the spandrel and work slowly, carefully, measuring and attaching the mural to the walls. The mythical figures tower above them, almost dancing across the museum walls.*

**Maria** 1938

There were footsteps on the staircase: the Nazis were inside my uncle's *palais*. I tried to hide by pressing between the silk curtains in my aunt's sitting room, but in an instant two men in black uniforms filled the doorway.

I recognized the younger one immediately: he'd been a lackluster suitor of mine when I'd been pining for Fritz. Now he wore a swastika armband.

"Where is Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer?" he demanded.

"I don't know," I managed to say.

"You don't live here, do you?" I could see he recognized me, and that he didn't wish me ill.

"Of course not. I live in the Margareten District."

"Well then get out of here." He dismissed me with a snap of his wrist. "Go home where you belong."

Before the other soldier could stop me I was flying down the stairs, past the shelves stacked with my uncle's precious porcelain, and out the front door into the shrill morning. If my uncle had left anything for me, it had slipped through my hands.

I didn't dare turn into Schiller Park. Instead, I went into the Ring and walked toward my parents' house. People were crowding into the streets waving flags

and calling to one another as if they were waiting for a carnival. In the distance I could hear drumbeats and the thrum of a parade or an approaching army.

I pulled my scarf tight around my ears, and kept my eyes to the ground. Near the Belvedere Castle I passed a skinny old rabbi chained to a bench with a crooked sign around his neck that read *Filthy Jew*. Yeshiva students were on their hands and knees barking like dogs while soldiers yelled, “louder, bitches, or we’ll whip you.” A young man shouted *Die Jews! Hitler is coming*, and schoolgirls in white knee socks threw rocks at two old men who cowered on a bench.

By the time I turned onto Stubenbastei, I was freezing. My face was wet, so I must have been crying.

When the maid didn’t answer, I fumbled for my key and found my mother alone in the kitchen, still in her bathrobe. There was a cup of coffee on the table, and the newspaper un-opened beside it. The air smelled stale.

“Uncle Ferdinand is gone.” I blurted it out, even though I knew it would frighten her as much as it frightened me. “Did you know that?”

My mother shook her head, and I told her what the cook at Elisabethstrasse had said.

“I hope he’s safe,” my mother began to cry. “Ferdinand wouldn’t have left us unless he was in terrible danger.”

I put my arms around her shoulders.

“What about Leopold and the others?” I asked. “Have you heard from them?”

My sister Louise lived in Yugoslavia with her husband and daughters. My

brother Robert was an attorney. Leopold was the head accountant at Uncle Ferdinand's sugar company; with my uncle gone, Leopold would be his highest-ranking company officer in Vienna. If Uncle Ferry was in danger, then my brother Leopold was in danger, too.

"Louise is safe where she is. Robert and Leopold should be at home or at their offices," she said. She wiped away her tears. "No one called, Maria. No one's been here but you."

"And Papa?"

"He's hardly said a word since we left the party last night."

I found my father in the library cradling his cello. The shades were drawn and the room was dark.

"Papa?" I fell to my knees in front of him. He reached a hand toward my face the way a blind man might reach for the sounds of someone's voice. It was as if he couldn't see me.

"You should go home and lock the doors. Stay inside until it's over," he said, and then he shut his eyes.

Back in the kitchen, my mother was threading a needle with a shaking hand. I asked what she was mending, but she lifted a napkin to reveal a small pile of colored jewels.

"Not mending," she said. "I'm getting ready."

My mother had been raised with dressing maids and cooks. She was one of the most fashionable women in her circle, and had two seamstresses in the Graben who made dresses on custom forms to her exact measurements. Yet

she put the thread through the needle easily, and deftly tied it with a bit of spit. Then she turned a black glove inside-out, slit the lining and tucked two emeralds and a small diamond into the tiny pocket she'd made.

"My sister was never interested in sewing or cooking," Mama said. It was true – my aunt's passion had been for art, books, and what she called a ferocious need for freedom and education. "But I learned what I needed to know."

My mother handed me a needle, and I threaded the eye as she had done. I watched her sew the glove back up, her neat black stitches disappearing into the seam. I did the same. The needle stuck on the first stitch, but then it moved smoothly. The rhythm of the stitches soothed me, and as we worked I told her about Bernhard's cable.

"Yes, Paris will be safe." Mama nodded as if it had already been decided. "Go to Paris right away. Everyone who can get out is leaving."

When she handed me the black gloves, the seams were perfect.

"Wear these. When you go home, take the diamonds out of your rings and sew them into your brassiere just like this."

"You'll need the gloves." I said. "You're leaving, too. We'll go together."

"You've seen your father. He's too frail to travel."

I knew she was right, and yet I argued until finally she spoke the lie that neither of us believed.

"You and Fritz go first. When your father is stronger, then we'll find you."

The next day Hitler marched into Vienna with hundreds of thousands of German

soldiers. While the streets strung with red buntings filled with tanks, motorcars, cheering crowds and marching bands, Jews across the city lit bonfires and burned their bankbooks and business files. Fritz and I didn't leave the house but we could smell the fire and ash in the wind.

The following morning my brother Robert was dismissed from his law firm with a single sentence – “you're a Jew” – and the contents of his desk emptied into the trash while he watched. Robert was tall and ordinarily calm, but he was close to hysterics when he knocked on our apartment door in the middle of the afternoon.

“Leopold's gone,” he said. His jacket and tie were askew, as if he'd been out all night. “He's not at his apartments, and he's not at the offices. I went to 18 Elisabethstrasse and Uncle Ferry's place is crawling with Nazis.”

“What do you mean, Leopold is gone?” I asked.

“I went to his apartment just before I came here,” Robert said. “A stranger answered, and when I asked her about Leopold, she slammed the door in my face.”

I felt close to hysterics.

Robert said, “I'm not going home – Katrine and I are taking the baby to stay in Grinzing with my in-laws. You'll have to tell Mother and Father for me, Maria.”

We didn't know how to say goodbye in those early days. There was too much uncertainty, and too much at stake. So we only said, *Be careful, take care of the baby, take care of yourself.*

“When you see Leopold, tell him where to find me,” Robert said.

“And if you see him first, tell him to stay away from Elisabethstrasse,” I said.

Days passed with no word from Leopold or Uncle Ferdinand.

“Maybe they’re together,” I told my parents as I sat in their cold kitchen. It seemed important to keep up their spirits. “Maybe they’ve gotten safely to Czechoslovakia and are at Jungfer Brezan right now, sleeping in those delicious, big beds.”

But our phone calls to the country house were never answered, and no word came.

A work-stop notice was left at our factory gatehouse that week, and for the first time since we’d been married, the whistle didn’t blow at eight the next morning. Fritz didn’t dare burn anything with Landau and the others right below us. But he cleared out account records, tearing the papers to shreds and hiding them in our trash.

I took apart a diamond bracelet and hid the jewels piece-by-piece in my garter belts and brassier. I tucked the heart-shaped locket my father had given me into a garter belt lining, and used my mother’s needle and thread to sew a few small gold coins into the padded lining of my favorite brassier.

It wasn’t enough: our most valuable jewels were in the jewelers’ vaults, where we’d always felt they were safest. We’d even divided my jewels between two jewelers in case one was compromised – a decision that seemed ill-fated,

now.

After I'd washed our lunch plates and wrapped the leftovers in brown paper, I tucked my safety box key inside the top of my girdle and set out for the jewelers as my mother had instructed. Fritz was going to send a cable to his brother in Paris. He'd decided on a simple phrase -- *we await instructions* -- that could give nothing away.

At the gate, Fritz put his hands on my shoulders, and rubbed his nose against mine.

"Take everything," he said. "Don't leave anything in the vault -- the jewelers can't be trusted anymore."

"The best pieces are at Werner's shop," I reminded him.

"That's right -- get your aunt's necklace and earrings from Werner, too."

I studied Fritz's long nose and heavy brow.

"Remember to salute when they walk by," I said.

"I won't salute the Germans." His eyes were blazing. "I may not be much of a fighter, but I won't surrender everything the first week."

We parted ways at the corner of Talgasse and Mariahilfstrasse, and I walked four long blocks more before I saw the crush of patrons outside the jewelers.

"The Germans are inside," a woman said. She pointed at a ring of soldiers in long coats with shiny brass buttons, who stood facing the crowd. "Those guards bloodied three men who tried to ask a question."

I was stunned to see a familiar face among the guards: it was Rupert, the

gatemanager who'd failed to show up that first morning.

"Get away, filthy Jews!" Rupert shouted and waved his gun. "This store is under German ownership."

Old and young women with their errand coats and market bags were pressed together, smelling of onions and coffee and something unfamiliar. I could smell my own fear coming up from inside my coat.

"He's going to shoot," someone cried. The crowd surged forward and back like a pack of animals. A shot rang out, and another shot seemed to come from behind us. I felt trapped. A woman screamed, and a man yelled. "She's been shot. They've shot my Elsa!"

I smelled blood in the air, and all I could think was to get away. I didn't let myself look at the fallen woman or the man who was holding her and moaning. I inched backward. I ducked under elbows waving in the air, and moved past men comforting their wives. I moved blindly, not seeing where I was going, until finally there was nothing but empty space behind me. I almost fell backward into it, but at the last second I turned. I made every effort to make myself look carefree. With my light hair and round face, I knew I could pass for a Gentile as long as I didn't see anyone I knew.

I reached home to find my apartment door open and two strange men standing in my living room. One wore a black suit, the other a brown uniform.

"Felix Landau," the suited man said. He had dark hair, and had a long scar on his cheek. I sought Fritz's eyes, but they were glazed and unfocused.

“Frau Altmann, your husband fully understands why we’re here and what is to be done.”

Again I looked to Fritz, but his expression was blank.

This Landau had a clipboard and a gold pen, and he waved them in my direction. His voice was clipped, and authoritative.

“As I’ve explained to your husband, we’ve catalogued and Aryanized your assets—they belong to the Reich now, not to you. This is in accordance with the new law. Do you have questions for us?”

My mouth was dry. I shook my head. I’d read everything I needed to know about Aryanization in the morning newspaper. It meant that they could take anything from us, at any time. Any Jew who refused to cooperate would be arrested.

“You have very nice taste in furnishings, Frau Altmann,” Landau said. He reached for my hand and turned my engagement ring between his thumb and forefinger. I forced myself not to pull away. “This is a very fine diamond, finer than anything I’ve been able to buy for my own wife.”

My hands were damp, and the ring slid easily off my finger.

“Of course the Reich has a full list of your jewelry, but I’ll feel so much better if you can give me a full accounting on your own.” He dropped my ring into his coat pocket. “I believe you inherited a number of significant pieces from your aunt, didn’t you?”

A car horn in the courtyard startled me. Fritz and I jumped at the same instant.

“The Koloman Moser necklace,” I said. I felt like a ghost, talking. Fritz made a small noise, but I didn’t look at him. “There’s a very valuable golden choker that belonged to my Aunt Adele.”

“Adele Bloch-Bauer,” Landau nodded. “And matching earrings, I believe.”

“I’ll phone Hans Werner’s shop, he’ll send everything over.”

“Of course he will,” Landau said. He produced a paper that looked like a receipt, and told me to sign it. “Your cooperation is noted, Frau Altman. Now pack your things.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up his hand.

“You’re being relocated to other rooms on the third floor,” Landau said. He looked around the apartment, and ran his hand over my new leather chair. “I’m going to quite enjoy my new home.”

### **Adele** 1898

“Mother will let you do almost anything right now,” Thedy said. “Just to see you smile.”

“Even this?” I asked with a thrill. I held up a sheath of white silk and wrapped it around myself like a toga. “Will she let me dress as a spring nymph?”

I was seventeen, my legs coltish in their new excitement, my hips still slim

as a boy's.

"I think we can convince her," Thedy said. "I think you're still young enough to get away with it, too."

My sister was planning a party to celebrate her engagement to Gustav Bloch.

Engraved invitations had gone out, white lilies ordered, the menu planned. It was in vogue to have parties with Greek themes, and ours was to be a spring bacchanal. It was our first party since Karl's death eighteen months prior, and even I knew it was time.

Thedy's long hair was newly oiled to make it shine, and her complexion was powdered to a smooth ivory. At twenty-three she was almost too old to be a bride, but she'd waited through a period of mourning and then made an excellent match for our family. Gustav was considerably older than my sister and had already proven himself steady, reliable and secure thanks to his family's sugar beet fortune.

Their love and tenderness thrilled me, but it was the suitability of the union that pleased Mother and Father.

People didn't marry for love, at least not the people we knew. They married for station, dowry and dynasty. Even the Wittgensteins and the von Rothschilds carefully cultivated their social standing with marital alliances, annual society balls, and favors for the imperial family. And yet things were changing -- there were hints of passion and rebellion everywhere, if only you wanted to see it. The crown prince had committed a stunning murder-suicide for love, and the

emperor's cousin had run off to Switzerland with her young paramour. My friends and I had been deliciously shocked by a play at the Burg Theater about a man who takes a prostitute as his lover, and Gustav Klimt's new Union of Austrian Artists had raised an uproar with their Secessionist show at the old Botanical House that spring.

The new art was said to be seductive and crude, and Father had forbidden me to see it. I was still too young to go anywhere without a chaperone, and I couldn't have properly asked one of my suitors – even if Thedy had agreed to accompany us -- without causing a ruckus.

The suitors bored me, anyway. Fair-haired Klaus Fleischer was frightened of my father, Edward Krauss was handsome but unadventurous, and it was impossible to talk with the lawyer Pieter Nebel about anything artistic. They all thought I'd be a sweet, steady girl like Thedy, enchanted by domestic life and eager to be a bride. But I was not. I still felt my brother's spirit urging me on, telling me I was clever and warning me not to be put in a box. I'd begun to suffer terrible bouts of insomnia that year, and neither the suitors nor Mother and Father understood my nervous impatience or the dark circles under my eyes.

Thedy understood me, though. Thank God there was dear, tender Thedy.

"I have an idea," my sister said. "If you tell Mother you want to recite a poem for the party, and dress as a spring nymph –"

"Athena," I said, interrupting her. I still had mythology books stacked beside my bed, and had worn the pages thin reading through the night. "The goddess of wisdom and poetry."

“Nothing too complex,” Thedy said patiently. “Just a spring nymph, reciting a poem. That will appeal to Mother’s sense of proper aesthetics.”

“I’ll write a love poem for you and Gustav,” I said. I don’t know what prompted me to say that. I’d had few crushes in my short life, and sometimes wondered if perhaps I’d be passed over when it came to romantic longing. But Thedy smiled, and that was that.

“A love poem,” she said. “I like that idea. I’ll tell Mother you’ve written it for us already. The rest will fall into place, I promise.”

She reminded me that I would meet Gustav Bloch’s brother at the party, and that she thought he would make an excellent match for me.

“Ferdinand’s not a very cultured man, but he’s smart and rich, and he built the family’s sugar beet fields into a dynasty,” Thedy said. “He needs a young wife – someone like you, Adele, who can give him élan and style. If we marry brothers, the family will be united through blood on both sides,” she added. “And you’ll find you have a lot more freedom as a young bride than you have here at home with Father.”

I was happy for my sister, but had no intention of letting Gustav’s brother court me. My head was full of myths and poetry about unrequited love and passion that swelled but was never satisfied, and I wrote a poem that I thought answered those ideas with a rebuttal: Thedy and Gustav, at least, had found love together.

Ferdinand Bloch wasn't handsome, but he was substantial and striking in the newest style from London – black tuxedo, ruffled shirt, and a velvet trimmed top hat which he handed to the maid when he arrived the following Saturday for my sister's party. His beard was laced with bits of gray, his eyes were soft brown, and his lips were full. He was old – nearly forty – and looked more like one of my father's important friends than the sort of sharp young man I expected to marry.

I felt light and unencumbered in my white toga when I greeted him at the foot of the iron staircase.

"Please come with me, Herr Bloch," I said, slipping an arm through his. When he smiled, he revealed a gap in his front teeth. He wore cologne, and a medal of honor from Emperor Franz Josef pinned to his lapel. I wore a wreath of hyacinth and violets, and in my bare feet I led him to a seat between the groom-to-be and my brother, David.

Mother had ordered the parlor decorated with white orchids hung from the ceiling, ferns in pots along the windows, and thirty white folding chairs adorned with paper flowers and netting. A pianist began to play Beethoven, and on cue I ducked out from behind a white curtain and recited the verses I'd written.

"Do you know me?" I called out. I was holding a cornucopia of greenhouse lilies and orchids across my chest. "I bring you joy," I said. "I bring you lust for life!"

The poem was juvenile, but I was very proud of it. When I was finished there was applause, red roses for the pianist, and then dinner my mother and sister had carefully planned. We started with cold Grüner Veltliner from Father's

favorite vineyards, shrimp and oysters on beds of ice, little blintzes with caviar, and pickled asparagus that I saw Ferdinand spit into his napkin.

When Ferdinand caught me watching him, he winked and I giggled. I hated pickled asparagus, too.

“Your sister tells me that you appreciate fine art,” Ferdinand said later.

Dessert had been served, and he was stirring sugar into his coffee. At Mother’s insistence I’d been laced into a proper corset and gown before sitting for dinner, and I felt a bit breathless. We’d been in a hurry, and I think the corset was laced too tight.

“Did you see the Secessionist show at the Botanical House?” he asked.

“No.” I was surprised that he would mention the modern art show, and flattered to be asked. “Although I wanted to. And I’d like to see the new gallery they’re building over on Friedrichstrasse, too.”

“Would you?” Ferdinand let out a small laugh. “I suppose it’s quite a sight to see the emperor’s artisans working alongside Magyar laborers.”

I cast about for a word I’d read in an obscure French journal that one of my brothers had brought into the house.

“It sounds quite *avant garde*,” I said. “I admire that, Herr Bloch.”

“As do I,” he said. I couldn’t make out if he was humoring me or not, but I liked the easy way he said it. “I admire ingenuity, and anything that advances the empire.”

The intelligence and tenderness in Ferdinand's face appealed to me. So many people I knew were dull or cruel. Ferdinand was neither. I tilted my head at him and smiled. He put down his coffee, and folded his hands on the table.

"I hope you don't think me too forward, Fraulein Bauer," he said "I'd be honored if you would come for a ride in my carriage to see how their work on the new Secession gallery is progressing."

It was a formal and proper invitation. Because he was my future brother-in-law, he was all the chaperone I would need -- and that, alone, was novel for me. I was tired of being tethered to my mother and sister. When I glanced over at Mother, she was nodding approvingly at me.

"I would enjoy that very much, Herr Bloch."

He smiled broadly

"I have a friend who's a great admirer of Herr Gustav Klimt's," he added. "Frau Berta Zuckermandl, do you know her?"

Berta Zuckermandl was the daughter of a newspaper publisher, and the only female writer in Gustav Klimt's new circle of artists. I had read her cultural commentary, and was dazzled by her acceptance of all that was dauntless and modern.

"People say she's quite radical for a woman." I dared not look at him. The thought of romantic love with Ferdinand did not excite me, but intellectual and artistic freedom surely did.

"A strong man has no need to fear a woman with a strong mind."

Ferdinand sounded almost jolly. "I think that's what you mean by your French

words,” he added, and then butchered the expression *avant-garde* into four distinct syllables.

It was clear his French was terrible, and when I barely suppressed a smile I saw a flash of annoyance and what I would learn, soon enough, was his bottomless pride.

Ferdinand’s Lipizzan horses had been trained at the Spanish Riding School with the emperor’s own stallions, and when we rode along the Ring in his carriage the following week, heads turned and children waved as if we were royalty ourselves. Even my father’s wealth paled in comparison to Ferdinand’s, and that gave me a heady rush. I could feel what such wealth might do for a young woman of uncommon ambitions.

I watched out the carriage window as we approached the Vienna River, where the new Secession gallery was a brilliant white building rising at the edge of the proper city. On one side of the construction site were fishmongers and bakers stocking their wooden stalls, and on the other side, only a short distance away, the Academy of Fine Arts stretched the length of Schiller Park. The old Elizabeth Era Bridge had just been demolished, and there was a huge field of dust where new roads were being built on raised platforms that crisscrossed a winding patch of the river.

“It’s outside the Inner Districts, so the building isn’t a blemish on the Ringstrasse,” Ferdinand said. “I think it was a wise decision to keep it at a distance from the palace.”

The Secession gallery was much smaller than I'd expected, a fraction of the size of our grand art history museum with its dazzling marble columns and enormous murals. Square and sleek, the new gallery looked as if it had been built of small geometric patterns and white rectangles piled atop one another like a bright white wedding cake. I said as much to Ferdinand.

"You have a language for art that I don't have," he said, as he motioned for the driver to stop on the square.

Set directly atop the center of the gallery, framed by four white squared dormers, an intricate gold dome rose like a moon on the horizon. Men in white overalls balanced on a maze of scaffolding supported by pulley ropes, and we watched as they worked with small tools, as if chipping away the edges of the gold to reveal a delicate filigree of golden leaves.

It was a warm day, and some of the men were working in their shirtsleeves, their hard muscles rippling in the sun. I couldn't help but notice how much older Ferdinand's jowls made him look in the daylight, and how soft his body was in comparison to the young laborers.

As if he'd realized suddenly that it was rather scandalous to have me in the midst of so many workmen, Ferdinand directed his carriage driver across the road to St. Charles Church, where we stopped at the edge of the green square. He produced a small silver cup so that I could take water from the public drinking fountain, and we walked away from the noise and dusty gallery construction. The church square was full of nannies and nursemaids with their charges, and older couples who were taking the air. We found a bench closer to the Ring, and

watched a woman with a purple feather in her hat walk by with a little dog on a leash.

“Have you been to Paris?” Ferdinand asked.

“I’ve never travelled beyond Lake Attersee or Bad Ischl. I’ve spent most of my summers in the house where I was born.”

“If you were my wife I would take you to Paris,” Ferdinand said. I was startled by his directness, but I don’t think that showed on my face. “And it would be in your power to bring the *avant garde* here, to Vienna, if that’s what you wanted.”

His French pronunciation was remarkably improved – as if he’d studied and prepared to say that word for me. Beyond that, all I could do was smile and look away. The subject of marriage had been broached, and if I wanted to cut off such an idea I would have had to tell him right then and there that he was wasting his time with me. And I didn’t. I didn’t feel romantically inclined toward Ferdinand, but it was thrilling to consider the freedom that he might give me. It was exciting to be at the edge of Vienna, where shirtless workmen were building a gallery and women with boa feather hats were walking little dogs alone, by themselves, without an escort or chaperone.

I’d feared that I would be lonely when my sister married. Instead I was free to go about with my new brother-in-law as I pleased. We went to an outdoor symphony on the great lawn behind the Schönbrunn Palace, and rode into the countryside with his horses flying along gravel roads. We spoke about the great architectural

accomplishments along the Ring, and debated the newer, simpler styles that Olbrich and Wagner were bringing to Vienna.

“The Ringstrasse buildings are majestic,” Ferdinand said. “I applaud cultural advancement, but I’m not sure how Vienna is improved with a building that resembles a cake, or one that’s decorated with red poppies like Wagner’s new apartments.”

The chance to have my opinion taken seriously excited me.

“The opera house and the new history museums are grand and beautiful,” I agreed. “But what’s the purpose of simply repeating what’s been done before? Vienna deserves an identity of her own, separate from Rome and whatever the Germans are doing in Berlin now.”

Ferdinand seemed to weigh my words carefully. Then, he smiled.

“Frau Zuckerkandl wrote something quite like that in last week’s *Tagblatt*,” he said.

“I read it,” I said. “And I agree with her.”

He asked me to say more; to explain why, exactly, the new style appealed to me.

“Perhaps you’ll think me improper,” I said, although I knew that simple declaration would arouse his curiosity.

He urged me to go on.

“I wore a white toga the night of Thedy and Gustav’s party,” I said. “It was loose and free – a very simple Greek design.”

The edges of his ears pinked, and I felt a strange new power.

“The new architecture seems the same, to me,” I said. “Pure and also simple.”

“Less structured,” he said.

I had to resist the urge to add the word *un-corseted*, but I believe we both understood the allusion, and that I had somehow made my point in the most proper and yet personal way.

In early June, Ferdinand and I spent a long afternoon in the *heuriger* wine gardens in the hills of Grinzing, where I enjoyed too much chilled Muscat and paid the price the next morning.

Father was off on business, but at breakfast my mother quizzed me about the colored lanterns hanging in the trees in the wine gardens, and the subject of my conversations with Ferdinand.

“All I can tell you, Mother, is that he’s a gentleman at all times,” I said. Then I excused myself and went back to bed with a terrible headache.

Ferdinand lived in a light-filled apartment not far from the Belvedere Castle, and collected landscapes by the best old Austrian painters. While Thedy and Gustav were honeymooning in Switzerland, he invited Mother and me to see his collections. His prized paintings were by Waldmüller and Alt, each a sentimental representation of the idyllic days I’d been enjoying that very season: rolling hills, red-cheeked girls, landscapes with yellow wheat fields and fat apple trees. The works hung in a huge parlor filled with stately furniture and wine-red

carpets, where tall white shelves displayed dozens of beautiful pieces of gold-rimmed ivory porcelain from the eighteenth century.

“What inspired you to collect porcelain?” Mother asked.

Ferdinand was a practical businessman. I expected him to speak of the value of the collection, or its connection to imperial history. Instead, he reached for a delicate teapot, and traced the slender spout.

“It’s important to preserve what’s old and beautiful, even as we welcome what’s new.” He glanced in my direction and added, “the collection has been broken up, and it’s my intention to bring all the pieces together again, as they belong.”

“Like a great extended family,” Mother said, with one of her satisfied nods.

Ferdinand had my mother’s approval, and he knew it.

Not long after Thedy and Gustav came home from the Alps, he took me to meet Berta Zuckerandl in a new café near the art museum. Women didn’t generally visit coffee houses, and I knew Father would forbid it -- but Ferdinand held open the door for me, and I entered with a high head.

“Welcome to Café Central,” a young woman in a starched white apron said in a bright voice.

The tall, arched ceiling and marble columns resembled a museum or library, but instead of studious silence there was a cacophony of piano music, clanking tableware, carts rolling across smooth floors, the sharp smell of boiling coffee grounds and bubbling cocoa, a ribbon of cakes and pastries arranged on

plates along a zinc countertop, and women in crisp shirtwaists waiting to serve the pastries topped with fat dollops of whipped cream.

Ferdinand put a hand on the small of my back and guided me through the crowd. The gold-embossed wallpaper made the room glow like the inside of a treasure box. Dozens of men sat at round white tables drinking coffee, smoking, reading the newspapers and arguing. The swell of their voices reminded me of the chorus of voices I'd often heard around my family's afternoon dinner table. From each group there were names and words that meant something to me – *the empire's greatest... Parisian women... the exposition...dancers... medical training...Schopenhauer...damn the Italian count...plans for the Jubilee ball*, and so on. It was hard to keep my head from spinning around at each enticing conversation.

I was wearing a smart blue cape and a new hat, and some of the men looked up as we passed. It was clear they didn't often see a young woman there, even in the afternoon, and I rather enjoyed the shocked expression on some of their faces.

We found Berta in a red booth, sitting beneath a large portrait of Emperor Franz Josef. She had a sweep of dark hair coiled loosely around her face, and a square jaw that made her more handsome than beautiful. She wore a bright shawl over her dress -- a touch of the bohemian that I'd never seen another woman dare to wear in Vienna. And she was smoking a cigarette. In public.

In that instant I not only wanted to know and impress Berta but, as much as possible, I wanted to *be* Berta Zuckerkandl.

“My brother Karl was a student at the University,” I told her after we’d been properly introduced. “He was reading Anatomy with your husband, Herr Doctor Zuckerkandl.”

Berta seemed to know all about my brother, and I wasn’t surprised. Our circle in Vienna was small enough so that we had a passing acquaintance with all the best families, and knew their histories even if they weren’t on our regular social calendars.

“My husband said your Karl was very promising,” she told me. “We were all sorry when he passed.”

Dark mirrors hung on the walls, and overhead there were gaslight chandeliers. At a nearby table, a group of young men had opened up a passel of sketchpads, and were talking heatedly about Josef Olbrich and his design for the Secession gallery.

“It’s about ornament and function,” someone said, and another replied with a sharp observation about the contrast of the simple square foundation and intricate gold dome.

“Like a white wedding cake,” Ferdinand murmured, so that only I heard.

“It’s a temple,” another one of the young men said. “A place of refuge.”

I told Berta I admired her opinions, and asked what she knew about Gustav Klimt and the artists he had gathered around him.

“Klimt is the most daring and innovative artist in Europe,” she said without hesitating. “He’s single handedly changing modern art in Vienna, but I’m afraid he may pay a price for his vision.”

I wanted to know more, but Berta would only say that Klimt's new murals for the University were going to be bold, dark and startling.

"He's a very well-liked man," she said. "That may serve him in the end, but one can never tell how useful popularity is in the face of one's critics."

"In the face of critics, one needs powerful allies," Ferdinand said.

Berta smiled, and patted his hand.

"It's wonderful to see you cultivating a patron's attitude," she said.

Coffee was served on a silver tray, with glasses of cold water and a pretty bowl piled with sugar cubes – "from your factory, Ferdinand?" Berta asked – and the taste of chocolate cake was made only richer by the dense cigarette smoke that filled the air. As we were finishing our cakes, Berta pointed out the writer Peter Altenberg sitting at a corner table, scribbling away.

"Schnitzler and Salten should be arriving in about an hour," she said. "The three of them start with coffee and end with cognac. Sometimes they read aloud to one another, and bits of poetry land on my table like beautiful birds."

The café windows looked out onto Herrengasse as if upon another world.

"I do so admire you," I told Berta impulsively. Just being with her made me feel emboldened. She reached across the table, and I barely had time to pull back my mangled hand before she took the good one in her own.

"And I admire you," she said. "You're beautiful and intelligent, with your whole life ahead of you."

She promised to invite me to coffee as soon as she came back from her

months in the country, and pressed her cheek against mine when she hugged me goodbye.

“Thank you, Ferdinand,” I said, after we’d stepped out into the balmy evening and watched Berta weave away into the crowd. “I’ve never met anyone like her before.”

“You are like her, Adele.” He stared at me intently. “Don’t you see that you have just as much spirit, and just as fine a mind?”

Two nights later, Ferdinand took me to ride on the Ferris wheel in the Prater, where we stood in a huge red car the size of two carriages and watched Vienna’s rooftops spinning below us. Maybe it was nerves, maybe it was meeting Berta and thinking of all those years at Karl’s side, yearning to learn everything he knew. Soon I was going on and on to Ferdinand about the books I’d read and the things I still hoped to discover.

He looked at me with great kindness as I spoke about the Eternal Return, about time as a circle, about loving one’s fate.

“*Amor fati* -- love your fate,” I said as the Ferris wheel came to a stop and I stepped onto a ground that seemed to buckle and spin beneath my feet. I felt free, and terribly intelligent. “That’s Nietzsche, in case you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t know,” he said, with what seemed like an indulgent smile. “But now I do.”

Ferdinand bought me a cold lemonade and found us a quiet bench in one of the gardens. A line of tall trees towered over us like sentinels from another

world, polka music from a brass band floated through the air and dropped its tinny notes at our feet, the last dogwood blossoms blew across the gardens and accumulated at the edges of the graveled promenade.

He cupped my gnarled fingers as he might have held a tiny bird. It's strange how it's all so clear and yet so otherworldly, as if he'd manufactured that moment the way his factory manufactured sugar cubes in neat rows and perfect stacks.

"You're beautiful, and I'm very fond of you," Ferdinand said gently. "You can trust me, I'll take good care of you, and I'll give you as much freedom as you want."

He looked at me steadily, his brown eyes searching my face. My brothers played chess, and David had taught me the game one summer in the country. He'd checkmated me dozens of times, and always there was that moment when my heart dropped into my feet and I could see the pieces closing in and could not find a way out. I felt something like that, at that moment.

"Our families are already joined," Ferdinand said. "The Blochs and the Bauers are among the best families in Vienna. If we marry, our union will make us a dynasty."

He said it quietly. I saw the Ferris wheel circling in the distance, and could almost feel the artists on the other side of Vienna, chipping away at the golden dome.

I'd read all the fairy tales when I was a girl, and knew the princes were supposed to be handsome. I'd seen the men working outside the new gallery,

and felt a stirring there. Yet younger men had courted me, and they'd been like bumble bees on flowers, easily swatted away and easily replaced.

Ferdinand had much to offer. I had encouraged his affection, and I knew it. And then there was Thedy, my dear Thedy, telling me what a great honor it would be to marry into the Bauer family.

"I can't give you an answer now," I said.

"Of course you can't," he said. "There's no rush. You'll have all the time you want. All the time you need to consider, and to weigh it all out."

I stayed up all night, my stomach churning. I wondered what it meant, that I'd been more drawn to Berta's intelligence and charm than to Ferdinand, or to any other man that I'd ever met. How I wished Thedy were sleeping in her own room instead of in her new home, with her new husband. I wanted to ask her so many things that I knew I would never be able to ask her in the light of day -- about love and passion, about intimacy and yearning.

Ferdinand was twice my age, but he was wealthy, kind, and unafraid of new ideas. I didn't think I loved him. But did that matter? Should it matter? I thought he would make a fine husband, and an excellent father for the children I wanted to have.

When dawn broke, I made my way down to breakfast early, and asked Cook for a boiled egg and a cup of tea. It was a warm day, and the servants were preparing to move everything to the summer house. My head ached, and

the place where my fingers had been caught in the wagon wheel throbbed as if every wound were open anew.

Soon Mother took her regular seat at the table, and opened the newspaper. She let me be, and I wondered if she knew about Ferdinand's proposal. I wondered about my sister and Gustav, and about Berta and her husband. I thought about what it would mean to have the power to do what Ferdinand had promised, to go where I wanted and read what I wanted. I thought of the years I'd heard Mother crying in her room, and about the mistresses that I'd heard whispered of, the women in loveless marriages. I didn't want that for myself.

I was thinking about that exact question – the question of mistresses and marital intimacies -- when Father came into the room and pointed a finger at me.

"You were seen in the neighborhood of the Secession gallery, watching the men working in their shirtsleeves," Father said. He didn't even sit down. Mother rushed to tell him that I'd gone with Ferdinand Bauer, but he didn't give her the chance to speak. "I was willing to let that go, until Doctor Bratislav told me you were seen in the Café Central with a woman who was smoking cigarettes."

"Yes, Father," I began. "That's Frau Berta –"

He cut me off.

"I don't care who it is. You cannot go where you do not belong," he said in a hard voice. "I will not tolerate it. Not as long as I'm your father and you live in my home."

I felt the brightness in me fading, and that frightened me far more than Ferdinand's marriage proposal had. I tried again.

"Frau Zuckerkandl is married to Doctor Zuckerkandl. Karl read with him at University."

At the mention of Karl's name, my father's face purpled.

"Karl is dead, Adele. And the rebel painters and books, the philosophers, the art journals – those aren't for you. Those are not for a young woman on the verge of marriageable age. You'll learn to behave decently, or you will have a very difficult time in this world."

In a shaking hand, I wrote Ferdinand a long note that afternoon. I said that I wanted to read Philosophy and Anatomy, to study art and go to Paris. I said that if those things were acceptable to him, and if in fact he meant what he said about the avant-garde, then I would be his wife and glad of it.

"*Amor fati*," Ferdinand wrote in return. "If I'm your fate, Adele, I hope you will love it – and me."

"Maybe you don't love him now," Thedy said when I told her. "But you will have a good life with him, and you can learn to love him, Adele. I believe you can and that you will."

I believed I had found a suitable and respected man with whom I could have a family; a man who held the keys to all those doors and books I wanted to open. I believed – at least I hoped -- that all good things were to come for me.

**[Maria** 1938 – chapter omitted for thesis purposes]

**Adele** 1899

I was a virgin on our wedding night, and when Ferdinand made love to me I closed my eyes and struggled to breathe. His fat fingers were gentle, his fumbling sweet and his caresses sincere. There was an instant of pain, the awkward weight of his body on mine, and then it was over. It wasn't so bad, I almost blurted aloud. At least it was quick.

We went to Paris on our honeymoon, as he'd promised, and stayed in a hotel that overlooked the Champs Elysees. Toulouse-Lautrec's bright posters of dancing women in ruffled dresses hung in coffee houses and kiosk windows, and there was heady flirting in the cafes where women and men mixed freely. In Vienna most women still kept their necks and arms covered, but in Paris the women wore low necklines, rouged their lips, and stared boldly from beneath their bright hats.

It was after ten o'clock when Ferdinand slipped the maître de a ten-franc note, and we were led to two narrow chairs at a long table close to the cabaret stage. The Moulin Rouge was smoky and smelled of cheap perfume. Ferdinand ordered absinthe, and I had claret. It was too dark to see his face, but I smiled at him, and looked for the tilt of his mustache that would indicate he was smiling, too. The gaslights dimmed and blinked, and music whirled in a kaleidoscope of

color and noise. Soon the curtains parted and a marching band rolled onto the stage. The musicians wore funny striped jackets and played at a crazy, tilted rhythm. Ladies in short skirts and fishnet stockings pranced a can-can, kicking high above their heads as the music got louder and louder.

The performers made bawdy jokes and double-entendres in French that I understood, but were beyond Ferdinand's comprehension – and I was thankful for that, because I knew he would be shocked. Certainly, *I* was shocked. But I was also riveted. There was pungent sweat, bulging décolletés, and miles of crazy laughter.

I finished my drink, and then I finished Ferdinand's.

"Isn't it exciting?" I asked when there was a short break in the noise.

Before he could answer, a woman in a long red gown stepped onto stage and began to sing in a smoky voice. Behind her, a line of women in short pink and black ruffled dresses swayed from side to side.

The singer slowly stripped off her long, black gloves, peeling back the fabric an inch at a time. When her hands were bare, the band slowed its tempo. The gaslights went out one by one until there was a single smoky spotlight on the red dress, and a rumble of low laughter coming from the line of dancers.

To the single beat of a deep drum, the woman slid her bare knee and then her thigh out between a long slit in her gown. I felt a jolt through my whole body.

Ferdinand put a hand on my shoulder and I turned, my face flush.

"I'm sorry, Adele," he said in my ear. "This is beneath you."

I thought he was joking, and asked him to order me another glass of

claret. Then he stood abruptly, taking me by the elbow. I followed helplessly as he pushed his way between the narrow tables, pulling me along until we'd reached the doorway. A line of women in Egyptian costume was making its way onto stage when he gave the coat check girl our ticket, and wrapped me in my sable coat

"I wanted to stay!" I said when I could finally make myself heard out on the street. The red windmill was spinning against the starry sky, and wind from the river whipped around my ankles. Carriages were still arriving with gay Parisians in furs and top hats.

"It was scandalous," Ferdinand said. "I had no business taking you in there."

He set his jaw in a stubborn line. I could see he was angry, but I was angry too.

"We went in there together," I said, standing up to him in a way I'd never dared speak to my father or even to my brothers. "I'm not a little girl -- I can decide for myself what is proper."

Back at the hotel I went straight to my own bedchamber and shut the door between our rooms. I fumbled in the dark before I found the lamp and turned on the key switch. I hung up my own coat, and slipped off my shoes. I took down my hair and let it fall around my shoulders.

I could still hear the music in my head, and smell the sweet perfume and cigarette smoke on my clothes. I could I see the woman in the red dress showing

her bare leg to us, the slit in her dress going higher and higher.

It was late, but I wasn't ready to sleep.

I'd ordered a box of books delivered to the hotel, and they'd arrived that very afternoon. I ran my hand across the leather-bound volumes piled on a table near the window: Descartes, Schopenhauer and Wagner. Two novels by Jane Austen. A fat anatomy book from London.

I rang the bell for a chambermaid, and asked her to bring up some tobacco and cigarette papers

"Matches, also," I added at the last minute. "And coffee."

I'd watched Berta rolling her own cigarettes, and seen my brothers do it at home, as well. It was easy enough. And I was alone. I could do it. I needed no one's permission.

I heard Ferdinand making noises on the other side of the door, but I ignored him and soon enough he must have gone to sleep. I did not. I lined up the dark cigarette paper, laid out a line of fresh tobacco, and pressed it tightly into a long cylinder that I sealed by moistening the edges. I let it dry while I changed into one of my new white sleeping gowns. After midnight, coughing and dizzy, I smoked the first cigarette of my life. I drank coffee that burned a second night into my first one. And I read two books side by side: Austen's *Emma* on my left, and *Grey's Anatomy* on my right.

I read deep into the night as the heroine of Austen's tidy novel made one romantic mistake after another. When I wanted to think over a line, or had trouble puzzling out the English because I was tired, I paged through the brilliant

anatomy book. I studied veins and ligaments, the system of bones and joints, and the red organs beneath a white ribcage cut in half. I found a page with the four chambers of the heart laid bare, and felt my own blood moving from one chamber to the other, the thump of my heartbeat moving with the pace of a clock over the mantle. I felt how easily life could slip from my body, as quickly as the heart could stop beating.

The hotel went from peaceful to eerily quiet. The heat slunk from the room, and the coffee failed me. So did my anger. I became homesick for my brother, and for the simple years of my childhood. I didn't know what I was doing so far away from home, with a man I didn't love and didn't know if I could love. Karl had been right when he'd warned me about the box -- but he'd been wrong when he'd told me that beneath the skin everything had already begun to heal.

I wept quietly at first.

"You were wrong," I said aloud, as if Karl could hear me. "You were wrong, everything isn't healed beneath the skin."

I must have made more noise than I realized, because soon I heard Ferdinand's voice, insisting that I open the door.

"If you don't let me in, I'll ring for the bellman and they'll use a key to open the door from the hallway," he said. And so I let him in. I let him find me weeping.

"What is it?" He took me by the shoulders. "Why are you crying? Is it the cabaret? We can go back tomorrow if it means this much to you."

I couldn't make it out. I couldn't begin to explain how the woman singing

in the cabaret had made me long for something I didn't understand, or how it had been hard for me to breathe when he'd lain on top of me on our wedding night. I must have choked on my tears, because he gave me a drink of water and when I couldn't swallow it down he pressed my lips to the glass, and tipped it toward my throat. Naturally that only made me choke harder, and as I was still crying, I began to gasp for air.

In a panic, Ferdinand rang down to the front desk. Soon the hotel doctor swept into the room with his black bag and monocle glass, and gave me a bitter draught of laudanum to calm me.

"Drink it slowly," he said in French. He was a soft-spoken man, older than Ferdinand, and nothing in my behavior or appearance seemed to shock or upset him. "Take your time."

He took a seat beside the bed and inspected my books one by one. I felt the medicine course through me, soothing my nerves. Ferdinand faded to the doorway between our rooms, unsure of what to do.

"What are you reading here?" the doctor asked. "Schopenhauer is a madman, no one reads him unless they're fond of suffering."

Ferdinand's French was clumsy, but mine was fluid. I spoke quietly to the doctor about my brother's death, and about how I'd wanted to study at University. I told him I'd become frightened during the night that I was to live a life I didn't want.

"I want to read and study," I told him. "I want to be an intellectual. Why shouldn't I study just because I'm a woman?"

The doctor adjusted his monocle. He seemed to give my words careful consideration.

“You’re a young woman and you have needs of the body as well as the mind,” he said. He spoke as a father might, if I could have spoken that way to my father, and he had understood. “You must eat and sleep well, and take in the air. Go to our museums, and see our art. Walk the streets, and enjoy your days. You’re intelligent and you’re beautiful. Don’t rely on your face more than your mind, or on your mind more than your beauty. Your life will come to you. Don’t be in a hurry.”

But I was in a hurry. I was afraid if I didn’t learn everything, and quickly, somehow life itself would pass me by as it had passed by Karl.

“She’s spirited,” I heard the doctor tell Ferdinand as he was leaving. “Be careful with her. You wouldn’t want her to break on you.”

I thought perhaps the doctor’s German was lost in translation, or that I’d heard him wrong. I was going to ask him to explain, but the medicine pulled me into deep sleep. When I woke it was early afternoon, and Ferdinand was sitting in a chair by the window reading the business pages of *Le Figaro*.

“Let’s go see the museums,” he said. “If you’re up to it.”

The crying jag had frightened me. I dressed in my warmest clothes, and carried my cheerful white fox muff. I put on the hat that I knew made my eyes look more green than brown, and we set off.

By day, Ferdinand and I visited museums and braved the cold to stroll through

the Luxembourg Gardens and the Tuileries. We went down crooked cobblestone streets and ducked into bright little galleries where we saw canvases filled with colorful fruit and flowers tipped at dizzying angles, yellow skies and thick brush strokes of blue and red. The names Van Gogh, Degas, Monet and Cezanne were on every art dealer's lips, and Ferdinand liked their paintings.

"Beautiful and modern," he said. We were standing in front of a line of Monet's haystacks, each one fading into a changing sky of purple, yellow, pink and blue. "I'd like to see more of this in Vienna. You've convinced me that this is what our city needs."

I saw the gallery owner making his way toward us.

"The Impressionists aren't of the moment anymore, Ferry." I took his arm and led him to the door. "They're not pushing the edges of what art can be."

In the winding streets where the white peaks of the Sacré-Cœur rose above us like a goddess, galleries were exploding with paintings of naked pubescent girls cloaked in anxiety and mystery. Gauguin was showing a piece called *The Spirit of the Dead Keep Watch* in a small space on Rue Lafitte: the brown-skinned girl was staring out from the canvas, one eye blocked, the other shrouded in secrecy. Her naked bottom was round and firm, as ripe as a piece of fruit. Behind me was Paris and the smell of baking bread and fresh croissants, women in stylish hats and singers whose jokes made me blush. In front of me was power and fantasy pulling me in the way the sea tides will pull in anything that stands at the edges of the shore.

"Symbolism -- that's what's new," I told Ferdinand. "I've been reading

about it in a journal I bought yesterday on Saint-Honoré. The painters are trying to send us messages in symbols.”

“Messages about what?” Ferry asked.

He was genuinely trying to understand, and I was touched. I struggled to put into words what I barely understood, myself.

“About the meaning of life.” I spoke with more confidence than I felt.

“About everything that we can’t see and don’t know.”

He encouraged me to go on – that is one of the things that I valued most about him right from the start. I told him our modern painters were looking beyond books and knowledge, and peering into the unknown corners of the heart and the mind

“And even beyond that,” I added. “Into the realm of spirits, death and desire.”

Ferdinand seemed satisfied with my answer, but I was not. I wanted to see it all for myself. I wanted to know and to understand, not to guess.

With a map in hand and the sun as a half-hearted compass to guide us, I went in search of my first painting by Edward Munch that same day. At the top of the funicular we turned away from the cemetery, going behind the church and round and round past dark little shops where women lounged in doorways and the air smelled of something sweet and thick. We stopped at a creperie and had a savory cheese crepe, followed by a sweet chocolate dessert. As I was wiping my mouth and preparing to begin searching again, I spied the place I’d been looking

for almost directly across the street.

The gallery was small and cramped, and there were two cats sunning themselves in the window. The proprietor was a tall, elegant man with a salt and pepper mustache. Immediately he recognized that we were Viennese, and spoke to us in German. He went on about Munch's popularity in Berlin, and how we would be bringing the modern right to Vienna if we brought his works home with us. I didn't hear much more of what he said. I was as horrified as I was captivated by the two pieces on the wall. One was an anxious mermaid pulling herself from the sea, and other was a naked girl sitting on a bed as if she were a butterfly pinned under glass.

"This symbolism seems dark." Ferdinand's voice was voice clear and sure.

He put a hand on my elbow, as if waiting for me to concur or object, but I was lost in the paintings: the mermaid caught between two worlds, and the naked girl staring out from the white sheets with her arms crossed between her legs as if she knew what was coming, and she was afraid.

"Certainly this is not what you mean we should be doing in Vienna?" Ferdinand asked.

"I think Klimt is already doing it," I finally said.

"Well then," Ferdinand said. Then he fell silent, too.

We spent a month in Paris. We did not return to the Moulin Rouge, and I did not pick up Schopenhauer again. By the time we returned home in February, I felt sufficiently prepared to join society as a woman of substance. I was

nineteen years old, and a show was about to open at the new Secession gallery. I was sure that Klimt and Berta Zuckermandl were exactly the people I wanted to know.

*“The white building on the Vienna River is finished. It stands directly over the Ottakring stream, where its foundations are eight meters deep and held in place with large concrete weights. Olbrich’s exhibition pavilion cost a mere 120,000 crowns because all the artists worked without payment. The dome is a bower crowned by a gigantic laurel tree painted in gold leaf, with 3000 leaves and 700 berries. It is an enchanting sight. Through the gaps in the dome branches one can see the sky above and the townscape below. Herman Bahr’s words round the exhibition hall run thus: ‘Let the artist show his world, the beauty that was born with him, that never was before and never will be again.’*

*A novelty is the interior walls, which can be shifted around at will. Even the great columns that separate the middle room from the back are removable. Thanks to this flexibility it will be possible for Klimt and the other artists to have a new ground plan each year over the next ten years. Even the lighting can be varied from overhead to side. Naturally, it will take time for public judgments to settle out feelings of confusion and perplexity, but as a whole the Secession gallery stands ready to host the young artist’s first international exhibition of new*

works.”

-- Ludwig Hevesi, *feuilletonist and art critic, Vienna 1900*

**Adele** 1900

After my bath, I settled on a sleeveless green and gold-trimmed cocktail dress for the opening. The evening was to be my debut as a married woman in Vienna, and I wanted to strike just the right balance: rarified, but also bright and modern.

I powdered myself carefully, surprised at how much effort it took to make my underarms smooth. My new dressing maid was even younger than I, and she was nervous, too. I tried not to rush or jangle at her as she slipped the dress over my head and lifted my hair so that nothing would catch in the necklace clasp.

The heavy gold choker by Koloman Moser was a wedding gift from Ferdinand, and I was glad for the chance to show it off.

“Radiant,” Ferry said when we met in the foyer. “Just beautiful.”

“Moser will be there tonight,” I said. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see I’m wearing his piece.”

“I meant you,” Ferdinand said. “You are beautiful.”

As we’d done that first day of our courtship, we took Ferdinand’s carriage across the Ring to the gleaming new Secession gallery. We were early, which I

preferred. There were two footmen at the doors, and Ferdinand and I climbed the red-carpeted steps slowly, passing beneath the motto above the doorway in gold letters that read, *To Every Age its Art; To Art its Freedom*.

The Zuckerkandls were waiting for us beside the reception table. Berta wore a loose turquoise dress and a colorful turban around her hair. I said I was certain no one would rival her daring costume, not even the Flöge sisters.

“And you look ravishing,” Berta said. “The dress is perfect on you.”

All the important artists would be there – Klimt, of course, and also Carl Moll, Josef Hoffman, Olbrich and maybe even the elusive Albin Lang. I was looking forward to meeting them, but I was also intimidated. I’d done my best to read up on the Secessionists, but while I knew the artists concerned themselves primarily with truth in art, I still wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

“Have a good time,” Berta said, as if she could read my mind. “Everyone will love you.”

Just then Koloman Moser hurried toward me and nearly bowed. I wanted to laugh, but it would have been unsuitable.

“Frau Bloch-Bauer, how happy it makes me to see you tonight,” he said. He was a handsome man, with a pencil thin mustache.

“I’m thrilled to be wearing your exquisite necklace,” I said. “It’s stunning craftsmanship, and so uniquely Viennese.”

It was an expected formality, but also the truth.

“Your beauty does it great justice,” he said.

Moser had also designed the stained glass window that dominated the gallery lobby. I asked him about the colors, and we enjoyed a lively conversation as the room filled. New people flooded in, and fashionable women were everywhere. I saw them turn to look at my dress, but it was Alma Schindler, holding forth about the libido and the death drive, who'd soon attracted a small circle around her.

"Eros and Thanatos," Alma said in a high, bright voice. "Dr. Freud understands what no one has dared to grasp before."

I leaned into Alma's circle, and looked at the faces of the women gathered around her. Some were shocked, some looked frightened or confused. One, a widow, was smiling slyly. Dr. Freud's new ideas about sex and desire had brought people to blows, and I was both stunned and amazed by Alma's brazenness. It was hard to believe that only a few years ago I had been forbidden to study Anatomy and now people – women! – were talking openly and in public about sensual appetite. Ferdinand's fuss at the Moulin Rouge seemed pedestrian in the face of it.

"Here you are." Ferdinand tapped my shoulder. He handed me a catalog of the show, and I missed whatever it was that Alma said next.

Berta appeared behind me, and threaded her arm through mine.

"Let's go in," she said. "You come with me."

I took a deep breath and stepped into Vienna's avant-garde in my sleeveless green dress, with my heart thrumming.

“There are two hundred pieces here,” Berta said, tugging me close. “Besides Klimt’s mural – that’s the centerpiece of the show, of course -- he has some wonderful landscapes. There are a few bold new pieces by the Belgians Symbolists, too.”

The Secessionists wanted the exhibition to be an experience that pleased as many senses and sensibilities as possible – a complete art work of art, music, color, sculpture and nature. A string quartet was playing Mozart in the center room, and the show had been divided into smaller exhibits areas that looked like intimate galleries or parlors. There was sleek, modern furniture designed by Josef Hoffman, and electric light fixtures hung over tables arranged with flowers and sculptures.

“I’d like a garden mural painted on my dining room walls,” I heard a woman with silver hair say. Her friend, who was staring at a pair of stiff white chairs, nodded. “And some of those Mackintosh chairs in the parlor, too. White is impractical, but it’s so exquisitely simple and pure.”

Beyond the small, stylized spaces there were four movable panels hung with larger, colorful pieces. Berta and I stopped in front of a dark, frightening painting of a bird-woman against a black sea background.

“Jan Toorop’s *Medusa*.” She tapped a pencil against a slip of paper where she was jotting some notes. “What do you think, Adele?”

I whispered that it seemed like two ideas mixed together into the grotesque. She liked that, and made a note.

“I prefer this one,” I said, looking at a larger piece that showed three brides preparing for a procession. The women’s faces were alternately European and Egyptian, regal and exotic.

“So do, I,” Berta agreed. “It’s like Vienna right now, poised between the old and the new.”

The seamstresses Emilie and Helene Flöge made a late entrance and caused a stir with dazzling new dresses that showed their ankles, and Berta and I found ourselves in front of Klimt’s landscapes. Right away I fell under their spell: with their blue water and crooked, lively rooftops I felt as if I’d stepped right into the countryside.

“And what’s behind there?” I pointed toward an enormous blue curtain that hung floor to ceiling. Two of the emperor’s soldiers were standing in front of it, on guard.

“The University mural,” Berta said. “Klimt will open the curtain around nine o’clock, just when everyone is dying of curiosity. He has a flair for theatrics,” she added with a smile. “But we can see it now, if you’d like.”

My friend slid a long brown ticket out of her purse and showed it to a guard. The press pass had the date – March 4, 1900 – stamped in large black print, and was signed by Gustav Klimt in a flourished hand.

The guard studied the pass, and gave us a nod.

“The mural is going to the Paris Exposition after this,” Berta said as we slipped through an opening in the curtain. The blue fabric covered my face, and for a moment I was lost in a sea of velvet.

“Of course it is,” I said, my voice strangely muffled. “Everything exciting is in Paris.”

“That’s not true.” Berta put a warm hand on my bare arm, and spoke with a sense of urgency. “What the Secessionists are doing in Vienna is worlds ahead of anything that’s happening in Paris. You must know that from your own time there, and remember it. I can promise you that what’s happening here will shape the art world for a very long time.”

Berta didn’t promise things lightly, and I felt a shiver of nervous excitement as she guided me into the center hall. There were two others in front of the mural: I recognized the critic Karl Kraus and the writer Peter Altenberg, but they were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and barely seemed to notice us.

Klimt’s *Philosophy* was thick and dense – taller than four men, and as wide as three. Red and blue unearthly beings seemed to swim across the canvas, and there were dark lava swirls and twisted naked bodies clutching their heads or crouching in fear. It was overpowering and terrifying, and I had to stare at it for a long time before I saw a ghostly female face burning in the center of the canvas.

The woman was a shimmering sylph, looking coolly above the human suffering without giving it thought.

“But it’s ugly,” I heard Kraus murmur.

Altenberg said nothing. Berta shook her head and frowned.

There was more in the mural than I’d seen at first: a gaunt, naked man straining toward nothing with his arms above his head; a nude woman, bending

toward the outer edge of the frame where she could find no escape; bare, spackled space filled with a red and golden haze like the fires of hell or the expanses of heaven and the whole world a roiling, uncontained place of misery and mystery.

It made *Adam and Eve* seem like a child's primer.

"Well?" Berta asked at last. The others had left, and we were alone. "Do you think it's ugly?"

"It's terrible and magnificent," I breathed. "It's astonishing."

When I was young I'd searched the sky for God's face or closed my eyes and tried to pray him into my heart, but I'd always failed. When Karl got sick, God didn't answer my prayers – he'd let Karl die and I'd decided right then that if God existed he was a phantom in the sky looking past our suffering, never hearing our supplications. Since we didn't go to synagogue and we certainly didn't attend church, no one had contradicted my beliefs; no one had even asked.

Klimt had painted unblinking honesty in the face of human suffering. This was a truth I understood – and as I stared into his swirling eternity I saw the certainty of my life rise up to the glass ceiling, hover for a moment, and vanish. I felt the circle of time open into a possibility I had never dreamed of. In that moment, I saw exactly what Klimt meant by truth in art.

"It's everything I believe about God and suffering," I said.

"Is that a good thing, Frau Bloch-Bauer?" a man asked.

I turned to find Gustav Klimt standing right behind me.

“Herr Klimt,” I said. My heart filled my throat, and no words came out. We’d never met, and I was very pleased that he knew who I was.

“I think your work has made her speechless, Gustav,” Berta said, coming to my rescue.

“No.” I recovered myself, and cast about for phrases I’d read and heard. “It’s like music, but it’s also a meditation on...truth. Is that right?”

He smiled broadly, and I liked him right away. Quite a few men at the party, especially the painters, had a sickly look about them. Klimt was robust, with curly brown hair and wide shoulders. He was handsome, close to forty years old, with a trim beard that came to a point, like an elf. His fine three-piece suit was perfectly tailored, and his muscles were evident beneath the tweedy fabric. Although we’d not seen the sun in Vienna for most of February, his complexion was ruddy and healthy.

“I try not to make my work a meditation on anything,” he said. “I like to think about color and balance.”

He raised a hand and touched the gold necklace at my throat. I noticed bits of blue paint under his fingernails. Up close he smelled of the turquoise air in the countryside, blue water and snow, and the suggestion of animals waking from hibernation.

“I look for things that are in contradiction but are somehow in harmony,” he said. I could feel the heat from his fingers, and did not let my eyes leave his. “Like this gold on your shoulders, and the glow against your dark hair.”

Klimt's charisma was exceptional. I stammered out something about the woman's face, staring out from the bottom left corner of the mural.

"She looks wise and fierce, to me," I said.

"If you've read Wagner's essay on Beethoven, I'm sure you'll know who she is," Berta chimed in. She was a dear: she knew I'd read the essay, and thought about it deeply.

"I have," I said to Klimt. "I've just come from my honeymoon in Paris, where I did read Wagner's essay."

I cast about for something more to say. I wanted to sound clever.

"We saw art there, too," I added. "Some of the images here tonight have put me in mind of Munch, especially the mermaid."

"I haven't seen his mermaid, but I did see Munch's *Scream* in Berlin," Klimt said. "I think I know how that poor fellow feels."

He put his two thick hands alongside his mouth, and pulled his face into a comical scream.

I laughed out loud.

In Vienna we took our ideas and ourselves very seriously. Klimt was brilliant, but he was also devilish and debonair.

"Seriously," he said, while we were still laughing. "What did you think of Munch's mermaid?"

"It was disturbing," I admitted. The laughter had made me relax. I felt my tongue loosen. "It was provocative. It made me think. Like your painting does. Only your piece is far more...overwhelming."

"I hope the others will be as generous as you are," he said. He clapped his hands. "They'll be seeing it soon enough."

Someone popped a head through the blue curtain, and called for the painter. He excused himself, but turned back for an instant and smiled.

"I hope you'll visit my studio, Frau Bloch-Bauer," he said. "I'd very much like to see you there."

I was flushed from head to toe, and very glad I wasn't wearing a long-sleeved dress.

"Well," I said to Berta, after he'd gone. "Is he always like that?"

"He does know how to coax a smile onto a pretty face," Berta said, with an expression I couldn't read.

"And what about his fiancé?" I asked.

Berta laughed. "Emilie Flöge? Dear, they're like brother and sister. I thought everyone knew that."

"I didn't," I said.

Berta explained that Emilie's sister had been married to Klimt's brother, and that when Ernst died, Klimt had become close to all of the Flöge women. He and Emilie weren't engaged, she said, but people seemed to think they were, and they'd never done anything to discourage the rumors.

I was trying to piece it all together when Berta put her arm through mine again, and pulled me close.

“The truth is that Emilie prefers the company of women in the bedroom,” she said. A strange expression came over her face. “Although of course that’s scandalous to say, and nothing more than gossip.”

“Of course.” I felt a jolt go through me, just as it had in Paris. Sexual transgressions and secrets seemed to be everywhere, and my friend’s face was very close, and very warm.

The next hour passed with wine, cigarettes, and hors d’oeuvres. Friends who’d been at our wedding in December wanted to talk about the ball season we’d missed, and to hear about our honeymoon in Paris.

“We saw everything,” I told Alma, whose voice rose crystal clear above all the others. I ticked off a list of artists we’d seen on our honeymoon. “And the Moulin Rouge – Ferry took me to see the dancers.”

Alma shook her hips and smiled knowingly.

“I’ve been there,” she said. “It was thrilling.”

No matter whom I was talking to, it seemed Klimt was always in my line of sight, and always surrounded by admirers. He grew more animated and enigmatic as the evening went on, as if he were flirting with men and women alike and holding the whole room enthralled. Once or twice I saw Emilie Flöge standing near him, but there was nothing that suggested anything intimate between them.

At nine o’clock Klimt called for everyone’s attention, and the new Minister of Culture made a few remarks to the crowd.

“Emperor Franz Josef is proud and pleased to support the efforts of true Austrian art such as we see in Gustav Klimt and the new Secessionist movement,” the official said.

Klimt shook the minister’s hand and thanked the crowd for coming. His voice was clear and strong. I thought he might make a few remarks, but he simply reached for the curtain, and drew it open himself.

“I give you *Philosophy*,” he said.

In the full gallery light, the mural was even more powerful than before. The figures were gaunt and tortured; the swirling atmosphere haunted. There was a hush in the room, and a few gasps. A cry rose from the professors who’d commissioned the mural for the university’s Great Hall.

“I don’t understand,” I heard one of the professors say. “Where is Aristotle? Where is the Greek temple?”

“Is it an allegory?” another man asked. “I thought it would be an allegory to wisdom.”

“Good god,” someone cried. The Minister of Culture backed away from the painting, but he did it slowly, inch by inch, moving in such tiny increments that the change in his position was inconspicuous.

“They expected a party scene,” Berta said in my ear. “The philosophers through the ages, eating grapes in a sunny Austrian garden. Now they’re disappointed.”

“It’s ugly,” I heard Kraus say again. A few men around him agreed, and loudly.

Emil Zuckerkandl, who was standing with the other academics, was one of the first to clap his hands together. Soon a few others began to applaud, too.

Someone shouted *bravo!* And the applause grew.

I looked at Ferdinand, and he at me.

“I think it’s brilliant,” I said.

“Well then, I’m sure it is redeeming,” my husband said. “Although I have to admit I don’t quite see what’s brilliant about it.”

The last thing I saw that evening was Klimt, taking a long drink of wine and gazing up at the sylph in the center of his painting. It was as if he wanted an answer from her, and knew there would be only silence.

I lived with Ferdinand on Schwindengasse in those early years of our marriage, in the very same apartments I’d visited with Mother during our courtship. Our home filled a good portion of a city block, with two parlors and a dining room suitable for grand parties, private rooms on the second floor and Ferdinand’s business offices on the third floor below the servants’ quarters. From my bedroom windows I could look across the Ringstrasse and see the lights from the emperor’s palace winking on at dusk. Sometimes I could hear the royal horses whinny as the guards made their rounds at first light.

My rooms were my own and my bed was grand, piled with pillows in all shades of blue and white arranged so that I could lie back and look up at the sky. The green velvet chaise from my childhood bedroom was in front of a cupola window. I watched the sunset from my bed on spring evenings, and on nights

when I couldn't sleep I lay there rolling cigarettes and smoking until the sun came up.

The morning after the Secessionist party I woke easily, reached a toe out from under the blankets and pushed aside the curtains. The sky was swirling yellow-gray velvet, the same dappled infinity that Klimt had painted in his mural.

I was shrugging into my robe, deciding what to wear and whether or not I should send a calling card to make an appointment with Klimt, when Ferdinand knocked and came into my room. He was dressed in a brown jacket and tweed vest, and was carrying a pile of newspapers. I could tell by the way he held the newsheets against his chest that something bothered him.

"They've written another editorial about Sarajevo," he said. "They're advocating for suffrage throughout the empire."

"It's too early in the morning to worry about Bosnian radicals," I said. I took the newsheets from him, and found Karl Kraus's culture journal.

"Here," I said. "Kraus has reviewed the Secessionist's show in *Die Fackel*."

I scanned the page quickly, running a finger under the lines about Klimt

"It's an attack -- he says Klimt has no understanding of philosophy." I read the rest aloud -- *In his ignorance, the painter has offended the intellectual and aesthetic principles of his sponsors at the University, and invited a new darkness to descend upon the Secessionist movement.*

"He didn't understand the painting or anything about it." I was surprised that my voice was shaking. "We need this kind of art, Ferry -- we need a way of

thinking about the things that we're afraid of or don't understand."

The emperor had supported the Secessionists, and Ferdinand supported the emperor.

"What kinds of things?" he asked.

"Sorrow," I said, thinking over the painting, and what I'd felt last night.

"Death. Pain. A world without God that's still wise and beautiful."

He shook his head. He didn't believe in God, but he believed in the emperor and the order of our city and of our lives.

"I'm not sure this is a good thing for you to be worrying about," Ferdinand said. "Remember what happened in Paris."

"This isn't like that." I was prone to heady pronouncements, and I summoned one then. "This is the future of Vienna. And if we're going to live in a world without God, Ferry, we need this kind of art more than ever."

"I'm not sure I agree," he said again, but he did not insist on anything further.

After breakfast Ferry went up to his offices, and I told the maid that I would be out until after lunch. I bundled into my ermine cloak, kidskin gloves and warm boots, and set out on the Ring. The sun had broken through the clouds, and the city looked bright even though the trees were bare. The Triton and Naiads Fountain in front of the Museum of Art History was dancing, and even the pigeons were clean and white. I took the path through the Volksgartens, past the cafe where I knew Berta and some of the others would be meeting at eleven. I knew they'd be

talking about Kraus's review, but I didn't stop.

Klimt's studio was far from the First District, in a neighborhood where workmen lived with their families. As I got closer, the sidewalks narrowed and there were fewer carriages on the road. I passed *hausfrauen* and laborers in burlap coveralls, schoolchildren in gardens catching snowflakes on their tongues, and men shoveling coal from rumbling delivery carts.

A low, white fence surrounded Klimt's studio yard on Josefsträdterstrasse. The gate was open, and I entered without shutting it. There was a brown flower garden that had not been turned or weeded, and a wreath of holly shrubs against the fat, yellow house.

To have created such a work of art, I thought Klimt might be something of mad man. I wanted to see him alone in his studio; to see what was behind the face he presented to the world.

Behind the hedges I saw a wide window, and I stepped off the path to peer inside.. Through the glass I saw a pretty young woman, about my age, sitting on a high chair. Klimt was standing in front of her, his long robe dragging on the floor, his eyes rapt on her face.

Without thinking, I hid behind a shrub.

Standing perfectly still, I watched Klimt's mouth move. His voice carried through the cracks around the edges of the silvered glass. The words were muffled and yet they seemed perfectly clear. I pressed further back into the shrubbery, and ducked my head. In my green cape I was camouflaged by a tangle of ivy and branches.

“Take off your dress,” Klimt said.

A look crossed the woman’s face – some expression I hadn’t yet learned to read – and she crisscrossed her arms and drew the long fabric of her clean blue dress up over her head in a single motion.

Her brilliant red hair cascaded across full breasts, and her heart-shaped face tipped toward the painter. She looked eager. She wasn’t wearing a corset, so there were no tight strings to loosen and no buttons to unhook. Her shoulders were pale and freckled, the folds of her belly soft and loose.

My whalebone corset had never felt so terrible against my waist as it did at that moment.

“Your garters and your stockings, too,” Klimt said, followed by something I couldn’t make out.

It was cold outside, but I flushed as I watched her fingers roll the fabric from her thighs. The soft flesh spring to life, pink and ready. I’d never undressed fully in front of anyone, not even my husband.

“It’s freezing,” the woman moaned, but she didn’t look cold. She wrapped a bright shawl around her shoulders and licked her lips. I could see the imprint of the brass snaps still on her skin; I could feel my own garters pinching the inside of my thighs. What had been invisible and imperceptible before that moment now seemed impossible to ignore – the heat between my legs, cool morning air reaching up through my own thick stockings and bloomers, the feel of garden ivy brushing against my shins.

“That’s beautiful, the scarf is...” Klimt’s voice trailed out of range as he

reached for his sketchpad. “Now lay down, Mimi. Lie down and spread your legs.”

She did it: she lay down and opened her thighs. I saw the bold streak of red hair and the dark hollow of her opening, and I went breathless as Klimt’s pencil flew across the page.

“That’s right,” he said softly. I had to strain to make out his words. “Now touch yourself.”

A shock rocked through me: I felt as if I were back in Paris, alone on stage with the woman in the red dress. When my schoolmates had whispered about lust and desire I’d listened with a detached coolness, never understanding what it was that excited them so. I’d studied my anatomy book with barely a thought about sexuality, and nothing in my time with Ferdinand had made me dizzy or breathless. But as the woman brought her fingers to her mouth and then back between her legs, my hips began to move. Heat spread from my thighs to my navel, making me lightheaded. Klimt’s pencil flew across the page and the woman’s fingers moved slowly, then more quickly, between her legs.

I nearly pressed my nose to the glass as he drew furiously, pulling the sketches from the pad and dropping them to the floor one by one -- snatches of thighs and hipbones falling at his feet. At last he spoke in a low growl.

“Come here.”

“The boy will be awake soon,” Mimi murmured— it seemed I could hear the tiniest whisper of her breath, the call of a winter bird in the distance, the soft drop of snowflakes that had begun to land on the bushes around me and the sigh of

Klimt's exhale as if in my own ear.

"We have plenty of time," he said. She moved toward him as a fish through water – writhing her body as if swimming in a river, and in a fluid motion climbed up his torso, hiked up his robes and wrapped her legs around his waist.

He grabbed her bottom and they closed their eyes. I stood as I was, watching his buttocks tighten and hips thrust as he growled her name and pressed her against the wall.

It was too late to turn away. I watched until Mimi threw back her head and moaned sharply and then the two fell apart as quickly as they'd come together. I backed away – the spell broken – terrified that her eyes, flashing toward the window, had seen me with my mouth open, panting.

***Adele*** 1900

I turned from Klimt's window and hurried back out through the open gate.

I didn't want to go home, but I knew I couldn't stand there.

Time had to pass. My blood had to cool.

I walked furiously through unfamiliar streets, past men digging in a ditch, and a stockyard full of sheep. The houses thinned. A few brick homes with thatched roofs lined the road, and then gave way to open fields. I walked beside them without seeing anything. More than an hour passed – I heard the church

bells chime twelve – before my body finally settled and I went back to the studio on Josefsträdterstrasse, back through the white gate.

There was no knocker on the door. I crushed my velvet knuckles against the painted wood, and rapped as loudly as I dared.

“Go away,” Klimt called. “I’m working.”

I kept knocking until he pulled open the door. What possessed me, I have no idea. Maybe it was desire. Maybe I wanted to feel the heat inside that room.

Klimt was wearing his strange brown robe. I saw none of the softness I’d seen in his face earlier, nor any of the amusement that I’d seen in his eyes the night before. I wished, then, that I’d gone straight home. But it was too late. He was close enough to touch. I couldn’t go back.

“I’ve come,” I said in a rush. “You asked me to come to your studio.”

“Yes.” He softened when he recognized me. Behind him, cats mewled and padded over sketches that had been carelessly dropped on the floor. I saw no sign of the redhead.

“I read Kraus’s review,” I said.

“Kraus is an ignorant mule,” he replied.

He looked tired -- not at all like the man I’d watched through the window, or the man I’d met last night.

“I wish you’d sent a card ahead, Frau Bloch-Bauer,” he said gently. “Or made an appointment.”

“But I’m here now,” I said, more boldly than I felt. “And it’s cold outside.”

Slowly, he opened the door and invited me in.

A cat mewed at my leg. I looked down, and found I was staring right at a pair of splayed legs, sketched with a hand between them at the crotch. I smelled the sex in the air and dared to glance through a doorway at the back of the studio.

Mimi was still there, but she was dressed. She had a child on her lap, and she was breastfeeding him. The juxtaposition of mother and lover inhabiting a single body within the space of an hour was stunning to me.

“That’s my model, Mimi,” Klimt said, with barely a hint of intimacy in his voice. “She’ll be leaving soon.”

I tried not to stare as Mimi gently separated the child’s mouth from her nipple. She began pulling her hair into a scarf and bundling the boy into a coat and hat. When she stopped to let Klimt give the child a pat on his head, I saw that her hands were rough, like a washerwoman’s. But her skin was glowing, and her little boy had big, winsome brown eyes.

“Send for me when you need me,” she said.

The boy raised his arms to Klimt.

“Hug Pa-pa,” he squealed.

*Papa?*

Klimt put his arms around the boy, and nuzzled his pale neck with a tiny growl. The boy giggled. Then the two were gone.

In the quiet atelier, the memory of Klimt’s bare bottom tied my tongue. I felt none of my heady giddiness as I twisted a cigarette into the holder and fumbled for my lighter.

“I didn’t mean to scare away your model,” I said at last. I decided to say nothing about the child. “I came because your painting says everything that I feel inside.”

Klimt had a changeling’s face, and I saw it then for the first time. He was an urchin one moment, a seductive lover the next. On that morning he looked decidedly untamed, as if the man wrapped in the tweed suit had broken out of his clothes and was free to run wild.

“Go on, please,” he said. “You sound much more intelligent than Kraus.”

“The whirl of terror and longing,” I said, hesitating. Sex and fear seemed closely linked to me that day, as they’d never been before. “The loss of control – all the things I’ve read about in my philosophy books.”

“I’m not a scholar,” he said. “I’m sorry if I gave you that idea last night.” He found a piece of graphite and searched until he found the knife to sharpen it. “I make art, that’s what I do.”

“It’s all there,” I insisted. “I’ve been thinking about the face at the bottom of the mural. She’s Wagner’s *Wissen*, isn’t she? She’s Wisdom, but she stands outside the whirl of our emotions – she’s there, but she’s so small you can almost miss her.”

“I’m a simple man,” he said, almost wearily. “I work every day, from morning to night. I have no time to talk about philosophy when I should be working.”

He was tired, there was no doubt about that. I felt foolish for even thinking he’d want to see me on that day, after such an eventful night.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was impulsive. I can go, if you like.”

He kept talking, as if he hadn’t heard me.

“I spend every day in my studio.” He gestured as if to say *look around, don’t you see my work is everything?* “The University professors are already threatening to withhold payment for the mural. If they don’t like *Philosophy*, I can only imagine what they’re going to say about *Medicine* and *Jurisprudence*, which I’ve barely begun. So you see, I don’t have time sit and read - I don’t even have time to worry. All I can do is paint.”

When he finished his short monologue, I smiled. I don’t know why, I can only think that it was a flattering to hear him say so much, as if he were confiding in me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to smile, I know you’re a serious man.”

I hadn’t seen Munch’s *Scream*, but I’d seen a postcard of it in Paris. I was tempted to put my two hands flat against my face, and open my mouth in a howl – just to see Klimt laugh again. But I didn’t.

His pencil was sharpened, and he reached for a sheath of paper.

“And you’re a very serious young woman.”

There again, I saw the changeling. I wondered if I, too, seemed different than I’d been the night before. I certainly felt different. I’d seen things in the past sixteen hours that I’d never even imagined.

“Yes, I do take myself seriously,” I said. “Maybe too seriously.”

“How does a serious young women like you spend her time?”

His pencil was whispering across the paper. I wanted to keep his eyes on

me.

“I read – I read all the time,” I said. “I go to the opera, to the theater, to museums, to Berta Zuckerkandl’s salons. I attend lectures, too.”

“What kind of lectures?”

Neither of us stood still; we were moving in concentric circles then, getting closer to one another and then moving apart.

“I love British and French literature -- I especially adore Jane Austen.”

I thought of Emma, Austen’s heroine, who made all kinds of mistakes when she involved herself in romantic affairs where she didn’t belong. I mentioned Dickens’ *David Copperfield*.

“He’s the hero of his own life,” I said. “That’s an idea I like very much.”

His gaze was like a draught -- exotic and intoxicating – and I’m embarrassed to remember how little it took to keep me talking. I smoked one cigarette after another as he dropped his sketches onto the floor and table, and caught glimpses of my hair, my mouth and my arms in motion as he worked.

By the time he put down his pencil, almost two hours had passed. He sorted through the sketches quickly, and thrust one toward me.

“This is how I’ll paint you,” he said.

I was shocked to see myself naked from the waist up, my face a blur but my breasts exactly as they were in my own mirror.

“Nude?” I cried. “I haven’t asked you to paint me at all – and especially not nude.”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?”

The time I'd spent in his studio had passed almost without passing at all – it was as if we'd stepped together into the endless circle of time, into some other timeless place.

“No,” I stammered. “I'm here because I read Kraus's review, and I want to answer it.” I took a breath. “I'm thinking I might write a rebuttal and try to place it in the *Neue Freie Presse*.”

There, I'd spit out the words. They didn't sound so crazy after all. I knew enough about philosophy and anatomy, which was also important to the painting. I wanted to be like Berta; now, perhaps, I could begin.

“There's no solution in words,” Klimt said slowly, shaking his head. “The only answer is in art.”

I tried not to feel discouraged or dismissed. I looked around his studio. There were women everywhere, in every state of dress and undress. Some were drawn hastily on paper, others were painted carefully on canvas. Turned away from the window was an almost-finished portrait of regal Rose von Rosthorn. Her body was sheathed in a glittering black gown, the jewels at her neck still wet with white paint glistening as a snowflake on a leaf.

“Others will write in my defense,” he said. “Your friend Berta, for one. I still have a few friends at the University who will speak up for me and for my work. I've already heard this morning that a scholar wants to present a public response to the critics who are calling the mural ugly.”

“I see,” I said. “Please understand, I want to support you however I can.”

He gazed at me with what seemed to be electric attention, and in that

moment I became something like spirit and gold. I felt completely and absolutely lifted out of the world in which we stood.

“You’re a woman of substantive style, and more influence than you may know. You will come into your own very soon, I think. That can help me, Frau Bloch-Bauer. Your friendship can help me.”

“Then we will be friends,” I said, the words catching in my throat.

“And I’ll make a painting for you.”

What did he see in me that I didn’t see in myself?

“I’m not a *femme fatale*,” I said. “If I’m going to pose for you it will be for something new,” I searched for a word. “Something powerful.”

“Something powerful,” Klimt nodded. He scratched at his pointy beard and drew a few more lines on another sheet of paper: a rough shield, a knife, a breastplate. “A heroine. Like Judith,” he said.

“A Jewess?” It was one of the only times I used the word to describe myself. I’d endured the jest of girls who thought they were better than me because they were Catholic and I was not. I felt that same teary desire for denial as I’d felt then. “Why a Jewess?”

“Judith is a heroine.” He stood straighter, and used his whole body to create a victorious pose. “And a seductress. She goes where she’s not invited, and stirs passion in powerful men.”

I’d seen Hebbel’s play about Judith and Holofernes at the Burgtheater. I’d seen the actress taking off her layered scarves as she seduced the enemy general in his tent. Like everyone in the audience, I’d known the story of Judith

slaying the general, and been prepared for his decapitation -- and still it had shocked me, the way sex and death met on the stage.

“My husband will never pay to have me painted as a bare-breasted Jewess, even if she is a heroine.”

I remembered Alma, and the way she'd looked when she was talking about Dr. Freud

“It won't be a commission.” Klimt took the sketch from me. His hand brushed mine, and I felt a spark. I hoped I didn't gasp aloud, but I could not be sure. “The painting will be ours, it will belong to me,” he said. “Your husband will have nothing to do with it.”

For a rare moment I was speechless. I was also thrilled.

“And you'll be a heroine,” he repeated. “Bold and beautiful.”

So there it was. I was a heroine. I was bold and beautiful. I was a Jewess, and Klimt would paint me that way.

“Come back to me when you're ready to begin,” Klimt said.

I wanted him to touch my neck again, right above the collarbone, where he'd touched me the night before. But he didn't. He picked up his sketchpad, and disappeared. It was as if he'd already dismissed me, and I was gone.

It didn't matter, though. I had not felt so perfectly alive and fully visible since Karl had taken my hand and traced it over his anatomy drawings many years before.

I had a secret, and it burned through me all afternoon. Like Judith preparing for

Holofernes, I was aware of my face, my hair, the way my body moved through the streets and how I looked in the mirror. I thought I certainly must look different, but no one seemed to notice.

I dined with Ferdinand, Gustav, Thedy and my parents at the Hotel Metropole that night. The evening was pleasantly predictable – the dining room was filled with flowers, my mother ordered her favorite cold vichyssoise soup for a first course, and we enjoyed an hour of conversational French over dessert.

Almost everyone we knew spoke French, and read Voltaire in the original, and my mother liked to practice with us as often as she could. Even Ferdinand did his best to keep up, mentioning Klimt's mural in passing, and the editorial about Sarajevo, which clearly troubled him.

"We all support the emperor," my father said, pacifying Ferdinand as he often did. "The Bosnians and Serbs are nothing to worry about."

"On the contrary," Ferdinand said. "They'll take every inch of power that they can."

"Thedy, did you enjoy the symphony last night?" Mother asked, changing the conversation from politics to music.

No one asked how I'd spent my day, and I mentioned nothing of my visit to Klimt's studio.

Alone in my room at the end of the night, I blew out the candles and slipped between my sheets without bothering with a nightgown. I pulled up the blankets and imagined I was Judith, parting the tent flaps to find Holofernes beside a fire in fur boots and a long robe.

I was a seductress, Klimt was Holofernes, and in my fantasy I dropped my scarves one by one until I was wearing only a thin white toga, I was opening his hungry lips and plying him with wine and sweets. My head filled with Klimt's lithe redhead and his fingers weaving through her long hair, her hands between her legs, the look of bold pleasure in her face as she stroked herself.

Sex with Ferdinand was uneventful, but I had another picture of desire as I slipped my hand between my legs and imagined being taken by the redhead and the painter at once, their limbs swimming through mine, their skin hot against me. I'd heard of such a thing happening to other women, this feeling of excitement at the moment of surrender, but I'd never felt anything like it with Ferdinand -- never this surge, never this rocking, never this power as if I was climbing a mountain and ringing a bell, ringing and ringing as I rocked and shook with a crown of pleasure.

## VOICES FROM THE MARGINS IN WOMEN'S HISTORICAL FICTION

From Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne to Lily King's Nell Stone

If you read or write smart historical fiction about women who overcome obstacles and defy the odds, there's a good chance that someone, somewhere, has sneered at your taste. Millions of readers around the world have devoured Paula's McClain's *The Paris Wife* and *Circling the Sun*, Christina Baker Kline's *Orphan Train*, and Lily King's *Euphoria*. Yet the literary world is full of reviewers and critics who dismiss women's historical novels as a lesser form of the craft; genre work to be sidelined between historical romance and trite thrillers, hardly worth the twenty-five bucks.

Historical women's fiction been called *counterfeit history*, *allegorical romance*, *fictionalized memoir*, and *fictional autobiography*. In her 2015 *New York Times Sunday Book Review* of *Circling the Sun*, Alexandra Fuller called McClain's novel a rehashed "bodice ripper." Indeed, critics have been casting aspersions on these heroines and their creators since Nathaniel Hawthorne gave us America's very first historical female protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter*.

But these are important stories based on the lives of real women who struggled to define themselves in a time and place when women were not free to decide the course of their own lives or their own fates. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne is the original single mother who refuses to apologize for her passion or her daughter. McClain's Beryl Markham is a pioneering aviator out of Colonial

Africa. King's Nell Stone is a singular maverick anthropologist who is also a victim of spousal abuse. Baker Kline's Vivian Daly survives abandonment, abuse, rape and shame before she is reunited with the daughter she gave away at birth.

Like Adele Bloch-Bauer, the heroine of my novel upcoming novel, these are women whose gender nearly stood in the way of their personhood. Their stories show us how to survive and thrive in a world still unfriendly to young women who dare to be wild, passionate, recalcitrant or, heaven forbid, unfeminine.

The books are heroines' journeys, and the protagonists' struggles are intricately bound in the role of maternity denied, disrupted or destroyed. Defy cultural norms and expectations, these novels warn, and mother and child will pay the price by being outcast, separated, or killed. This seems a worthy warning for every generation of young women to consider, and to challenge.

"I want someone to write this. I want the defense [of historical fiction] to be out there," Lily King told me recently "For every Margaret Mead who actually got her voice heard and somehow managed to work within the system, and have influence and have power, there are probably hundreds of Nells who were suppressed or put down in one way or another for centuries."

Indeed, when Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, he was well aware of the Puritan's history of punishing women for evidence of passion. His great-great grandfather was a judge in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692; he'd likely read the public accounts of Puritan women branded with an A on their clothing, or on their foreheads, for acts of infidelity. Set in 1650 Salem, his novel features

beautiful young Hester Prynne, the unrepentant adulteress, condemned to wear a scarlet A on her bodice.

*The Scarlet Letter* was an immediate hit when it was published, selling out 5,000 copies in ten days. Just as immediately, Prynne and her creator came under attack. Religious and public leaders decried Prynne's lustful transgressions and Hawthorne's apparent empathy for her deeds. Literary criticism was also immediate. Edgar Allen Poe had already accused Hawthorne of creating flat and moralistic characters, and of reaching back to the "medieval era instead of pushing literature forward into the future." Henry James saw Hester as merely "an accessory figure" to Arthur Dimmesdale, the fallen minister with whom our heroine has secretly borne a child.

But like our own favorite historical heroines today, Hester Prynne isn't a mere allegorical invention for her creator. She is a statement against the injustices that confined women to narrow rules of morality and behavior. To read her story is to be offered a glimpse and a warning about the punishing role gender and desire have played in American history.

"I am interested in the way this genre of historical fiction invites you into a history lesson that is intimate – it's intimate, it illuminates a bit of history but with a context," Paula McClain said when I reached her by phone. She was in New York City for a private book club event. "I really want to be riding on someone's shoulder and in someone's skull because that's the only way we get to the universal and that time period and what the lessons are – they're global simultaneously."

To be sure, writing fiction about historical women does not guarantee a feminist approach to a character or a story, any more than the fact of being female requires a woman to behave in ways traditionally defined as feminine. A feminist heroine is a protagonist whose life, goals and circumstances are characterized by a personal commitment to the struggle against sexism and strict gender codes. An historical novel is a work of fictional realism set in a time period at least fifty years in the past – presumably before the author’s and a majority of her reader’s lifetimes. Creating a strong and compelling fictional protagonist based on the life of a real woman is a deeply creative and challenging endeavor, as King and McClain readily attest.

History, news accounts, letters and personal diaries are often available for consumption and study. Facts and historical analysis abound, outcomes are inevitable and pre-determined, and the public persona of the woman in question is often well formed. And yet, this does not mean that the arc of the novel is tidy or clearly laid out, any more than it means that the authors rely on a recounting of fact to create a compelling heroine. Rather, King and McClain both emphasize the importance of creating their characters from the inside, out – just as every great fiction writer approaches the craft.

“The business of a novel is to fill in the dots, to fill it all in. It’s not what happened, it’s what happens in the deepest recesses of the human heart and soul is where we are, as historical novelists, invited to interface with the facts,” McClain said.

McClain used Beryl Markham's memoir, *West with the Night*, as an invitation to enter into a conversation with the real-life Markham, and to reveal the personal and emotional price Markham paid for her independence and heroic achievements.

"Absolutely, I think what I'm doing is feminist," McClain added. "Especially with Beryl I did see right away the privilege of being able to introduce her to a whole generation of women who don't know her, who don't know her significance historically but also don't know what a badass she was."

As an aviator and a horse trainer, Markham's trappings, instruments, quest and surroundings are traditionally male, but her emotional life is decidedly female. In the prologue, Markham tells us, "I have a chart that traces my route across the Atlantic, Abingdon to New York, every inch of icy water I'll pass over, but not the emptiness involved, or the loneliness, or the fear. Those things are as real as anything else, though, and I'll have to fly through them. Straight through the sickening dips and air pockets, because you can't chart a course around anything you're afraid of. You can't run from any part of yourself, and it's better that you can't."

For this contemporary woman, those words are relevant and inspiring. They are nothing to be sneered at.

Like McClain's Markham, Lily King's idea for *Euphoria* – and her inspiration for her heroine Nell Stone -- was sparked by a passionate episode in anthropologist Margaret Mead's life. McClain's novel follows Beryl Markham's life closely, while

King quickly departs from the facts to make Nell Stone her own woman with her own unique desires: to be loved but not owned; to discover a way of living that is not bound by male or female gender roles.

Nell Stone wants to be a mother; she also wants to live beyond traditional female expectations. Since childhood she's longed for adventure, nurtured a vivid imagination, and believed in the power of her own intellect. She feels very strongly that a man's possession of a woman – or a person's possession of something holy and ephemeral – goes against what is best in people.

“The biggest theme is possession and Nell's struggle against possession, which feels to her often to be a male imposition,” King told me. “She has felt very much possessed by Fen in a way she never wanted to be and she's very aware of how the West is colonizing the places that she wants to study. She's aware of missionaries coming in, a lot of Western/male power structures --- so I feel that's something that she's trying to figure out – how to articulate and how to resist, and part of what she's doing there is trying to figure out how to live in a world where that [possession/patriarchy] doesn't have to be the overarching power structure.”

Stone never realizes her desire to become a mother. As with Markham and Prynne, her motherhood is scarred and interrupted. Against the male-dominated world (in the form of her violent husband) Nell Stone – brave adventurer, brilliant anthropologist, and kind maternal figure – stands in defiance, and pays the ultimate price. Refusing to allow her husband's theft of a tribal totem, Stone is sacrificed to the sea and becomes, at the end of *Euphoria*, a shred of a dress behind a museum glass, where she remains unknown and

untouchable.

Yet Stone is undeniably a feminist whose story stands between the outcast Prynne and the conquering Markham – one who dies for what she believes and who pays the ultimate price for her rebellion against Western society, the patriarchy and its twin offspring, possession and greed.

“She is absolutely on the cutting edge of feminist thought at that time,” said King. “Occasionally people will ask me – she’s such a powerful woman, why did you kill her off? There’s a real sense that a feminist hero cannot die – that is so absurd. I think she has a small victory, but she has to pay a terrible price for that victory.”

Happily, King’s novel did not suffer the pejorative attacks that befall so much of woman-centric historical fiction today. While King is nothing but grateful for the positive reception of her first foray into historical fiction, she is also profoundly aware of the dichotomy between the reception of historical fiction written by women, and that written by men.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately,” King says. “Historical fiction is maligned when it’s written by women, but not so much when it’s written by a man. Why is that?”

Why, indeed?

Creating a strong female heroine from history began with Hester Prynne, but exploded in the late 1990s when Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* launched the book club craze still growing today. These blockbuster novels also launched a smart contemporary genre the

publishing industry began to call Women's Historical Fiction. A melding of two genres familiar to booksellers, the label turned pejorative even as new authors became deeply invested in rescuing women from the margins of history.

“Even I'm guilty of denigrating it and not taking it seriously,” McClain told me. “I think each book has to justify itself and its own presence and right to be there.”

The fictional women that Hawthorne, McClain and King created meet in the liminal, fertile borderland between imagination and reality. They challenge norms. They suffer and triumph. Prynne carries her mark with such patience and dignity that she raises a fearless daughter and returns home at the end of her story to give comfort and hope to other women who share the burden of their sex. Markham defies both Colonialism and cultural expectations to soar (literally) beyond forces that would hold her back from joy and self-discovery. Stone goes halfway around the world in search of a society that allows men and women to live beyond the confines of Western tradition, only to pay with her life for daring to protect what is sacred to others. All three heroines struggle to define themselves maternally, to varying degrees of success and failure: Prynne is jailed and outcast because of her child, but she protects Pearl above all else; Markham's child is taken from her by his father's family; Stone's child is beaten out of her.

In her death, Nell Stone is equal to any one of the characters – men, all – whom Hemingway said could be killed but not defeated. Markham is as brave or braver than any of Jonathan Franzen's women – including those Lyz Lenz in

*Salon* called, “beautiful and invisible, even to themselves,” and who often flee (via absence, silence or neglect) the responsibilities of family and home.

When we create heroines who defy gender norms and challenge the limitations imposed by society, we conjure the lives of women whose journeys toward selfhood, home and motherhood have timeless lessons rooted in truth and justice. We give voice to women of the past, and to the female experience that is otherwise lost to history. The days of Hester Prynne’s public shaming should be long gone, and her literary descendants embraced for the personal faces they put on otherwise abstract or quaint notions about the past. Women’s historical fiction brings to light the lives of inspiring women, and brings us together to read and share their triumphs.

## I AM HESTER PRYNNE

Concord, 1853

Twilight falls and fireflies take to the air above the Concord River as Nathaniel Hawthorne slips into the yard behind his clapboard house to build a bonfire. He's nearly fifty but he's robust in leather boots and a black cotton coat, silent as a secret as he moves along the familiar narrow path.

Across the river he can hear the slip of oars on the water. His friends Waldo and Lydian have gone north to the Berkshire woods with their daughters and son-in-law. His friend Henry Thoreau is sleeping at home tonight at the edge of the pencil factory. And in the gabled peach house across the road, the Alcotts are calling goodnight to one another, their voices floating to him through the trees.

"Louisa, remember the candles."

"Papa, please draw us cold water in the morning."

Nathaniel flicks a matchstick on the strike and for an instant his face is illuminated in the yellow light. Then leaves snap and flare, sparks fly in startled zigs and zags, and new flames flutter at his feet.

When the bonfire is knee high, he goes inside the quiet house to kiss his wife goodnight.

Sophia is in bed with a damp cloth across her eyes. She can smell the fire and ash in the air. It is very hot in the bedroom, and the window is wide open to the river and sky.

“We’ll keep only what we can trust for the ages,” he tells her.

Behind her closed eyelids Sophia sees a red-hot iron, a scarlet letter, scarred pale skin. She sees words burning. She sees names in flames. She tries to tell him this but her mind is yellowed with laudanum and mercury, her brain bright with a migraine, and she is silent.

In the morning they are London bound. She comforts herself with that.

Outside, darkness takes the daylight like a lover and Nathaniel rolls three heavy bushels toward the fire. The first is full of letters. The second is piled with old manuscript pages. The third is filled with Sophie’s journals and correspondence. His wife has argued against him, and lost.

He feeds the first bushel to the fire and watches the flames flicker and rise. They bathe him in heat and something like shame but not shame; like pride, but not pride. Others have praised his narratives gifts, but he know what to keep secret and what to reveal, and that his powers lie therein.

He feeds the second basket to the flames and imagines lanterns illuminating twisted canals that furrow deep beneath his skin. He sees widows and orphans who mark their nights with poisonous houseplants and veiled horrors. He wishes he would think in other metaphors – swimming, perhaps sailing or boating. Yes, boating. Yes, the slip of the canoe he and his brothers

built at the beginning of their journey at the outset of their lives. That is better than thinking of secrets, because secrets are the stuff of his life and he does not want to think of his life burning.

He adds the third bushel to the fire and flames leap overhead, casting his shadow across the woodrush behind him. Into this inferno he throws Margaret's letters at last. Snatches of her phrases fly into the flames and turn to heat. He sees each black letter, every blue word, all the long questions quenched by time and fire and its unremorseful passage.

Rome burned and Nero played the fiddle. Why does he think of this now? He wishes he would not think of any of it.

Fire dances with the darkness. His great grandfather would have believed the man who stood in shadows and fed the dancing flames was a warlock, or even Satan himself. This is the corridor of memory along which he is always getting lost. Tonight he will not go there. Tonight he will climb out of his mind and into his body.

He walks down to the riverfront and looks back at the windows of his dark house. Is that Sophia, his Dove, standing by the curtain in her white dressing gown? Is that a person most dear to him, or is it perhaps an apparition in the smoke, a ghost of all the lost words that rise now, from the fire?

It is no matter for one man to answer.

The river water is cool and smells of toads. Nathaniel pulls off his shoes and socks and slips the suspenders off his shoulders. His feet are white in the moonlight. Soon he is down to his breeches. Then he is naked. He hears all of

Concord in the river tonight. How has he not noticed the baptisms of joy at each dock that dots the waterfront? Now he hears the shrieks of laughter and the low hum of quieter words spoken two-by-two, hushed secrets told and beneath that, nearly imperceptible, the telltale hearts with stories of their own.

In the summer night, the river is an intimate place.

## **One**

The London evening in Thomas Carlyle's parlor was a terrible bore until Margaret spied the tall, elegant gentleman surrounded by a group of simpering women in too-tight corsets and hair curls.

She ignored the women and walked right up to the man dressed all in black.

"I know who you are," Margaret said. She was wearing a plum colored silk dress and a fragrant pink Japonica in her hair. Her skin was fresh and she smiled broadly because she knew her fine white teeth lit up her small face.

"I am Joseph," the man said, presenting himself with a slight bow that spoke of gentle breeding and good manners. For an instant, his perfect English took her aback. Then she spotted the tricolor pin on his lapel.

"And I am Margaret Fuller," she said. "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance at last."

His delight was immediate, and the other women fell away, leaving Margaret to ask Giuseppe Mazzini all that she wanted to know about his exile, his fight for an independent Italy, and the price King Ferdinand of Barbour had put upon his head for treason.

“You’ll never know a people more exuberant, more hopeful, more full of life than the Italians,” he told her.

His eyes were shining. Even the memory of young Nathaniel Hawthorne, sleek and strong as an elk, was banished by Mazzini’s dark good looks.

“When you’re in Italy, I’m certain you’ll see the injustice that befalls my countrymen,” he said. “ And you’ll know why I would give my life to see them united under one republican flag.”

By the soft lamplight in the Carlyles’ parlor, Margaret looked young and almost beautiful. The hunch in her shoulders was smoothed and lifted, the squint of her eyes relaxed and softened. She forgot herself and accepted a glass of dark Italian wine from the Carlyle’s second butler.

“Since I first read Virgil, I’ve felt myself on a journey toward Rome,” she said. “I want to know the Italian people more than I’ve ever wished to know anything or anyone.”

She seized his hand, and for a moment wondered if this man, finally, was the one who would end her search.

“You will know Rome,” Mazzini predicted, bringing her hand to his lips. “And Rome will love you.”

Eight months later, on April 4, 1847, Margaret's silver coach trundled from Naples toward Rome along the Via Appia Antica, an ancient crumbling road most inhospitable to coach travelers. Margaret was thirty-seven years old, hot in her long blue dress, and very thirsty. She also urgently needed to use the toilet.

"Ecco Roma," the driver called, and Margaret threw open the coach window to stick her blond head into the dusty wind. Her sharp gaze swept the horizon where newly excavated temples dotted the landscape, and great pines stood like naked-limbed women arching toward the road. Grand pink and gray villas set upon rolling green hills gave way to a flat landscape dotted with ancient ruins and mounded graves.

Shielding her eyes against the red dust, Margaret imagined old wagons straining with grain and livestock headed for market two thousand years ago. She pictured dark-haired gladiators in warrior's leathers walking with their chests proud and high. She imagined handsome men -- burly men who wouldn't shy away from her; soldiers and warriors who would treasure her.

Even there, even then, New England's most famous spinster was looking for the great Roman of her imagination and youth. She was looking for the ideal man she had sought and failed to find in America because the best of them -- Waldo, Nathaniel, Sam and James -- had each declared her brilliant, talented, and destined for something greater than domesticity and marriage. Each man had told her she was extraordinary and then married another woman. A lesser woman, who was satisfied with domestic servitude.

Margaret was a journalist and teacher -- author of a celebrated feminist tome, first editor of the *The Dial*, first female New York City news reporter, and now the very first international correspondent for Horace Greeley's New-York *Tribune*. Her reporting had brought readers inside the terrible Sing-Sing prison for woman, shown the heartbreak of a pauper's hospital on Blackwell Island, and revealed the filth and destitution in Liverpool's factory workers.

"Reform," she'd written -- and demanded -- of others.

"A woman can be anything she wants to be," she'd said in public meetings. But in private she'd wept with frustration and despair.

"It is an evil lot to have a man's ambition and a woman's heart," she wrote in her journal. "With the intellect I always have and always shall overcome. But the life -- oh the life! Will the life ever be sweet?"

Only Guiseppi Mazzini, leader of the young Italian revolutionaries, shone brightly for Margaret as she headed for Rome -- which is why, hidden in her bodice close to her heart, she was carrying a letter from him that put her life in peril.

"Bring your head in, Margaret, I fear for you," a soft voice called from inside the coach. This was Rebecca Spring, pale Quaker philanthropist who had made Margaret's first trip to Europe possible. Rebecca, her husband Marcus and their twelve-year-old son, Eddie, had been Fuller's travel companions through England, Scotland, France and Naples for the past eight months. Truth-be-told, Margaret was a little bit sick of them. She was tired of tutoring Eddie, of

entertaining Rebecca's fears, and of the modest Puritan decorum that Marcus expected of her.

With her head in the air, facing into the wind, is exactly how she wanted to be. Ahead lay Rome -- her bread and wine and daily aspiration during the long, lonely childhood she'd spent bent over her Latin and Greek books at home in Massachusetts. Now, the true metropolis beckoned.

"We don't have much time," she said, falling back into the coach beside Rebecca. "Giuseppe asked me to deliver the letter before the fifth of April."

As her party reached the south gates of the city, two soldiers from the Pope's army rode out on horseback and demanded to search the carriage. The soldiers wore modern rifles and bayonets strapped across their shoulders, and white uniforms blazed with red and gold.

"Out," they said, a single syllable instruction that Margaret inferred from their gestures.

The coachman halted the horses, surrendered the reins without a word, and stepped down from his seat. Marcus blanched, Rebecca fanned her face, and Eddie slipped a moist hand into Margaret's. The sealed envelope in her bodice seemed to burn against her breast.

"We're American," she said when she saw that Marcus would do nothing to avert the search. "We've come from Naples, and we have an apartment waiting in the city."

She spoke a formal Latin, not the Italian of the people. A soldier with a handlebar mustache spit in the dirt and shouted a long sentence that she couldn't understand, and Margaret realized that she had made a grave error. The soldiers' faces were harsh, almost stupid – and they were Giuseppe Mazzini's enemies.

Just as she felt she might lose her composure, Rebecca looped an arm through hers and leaned close.

“Here is what I can teach you, Margaret,” her friend said. “Soften yourself, and the men will look right past you.”

Margaret was clever enough to abide quickly. Against her very nature she swooned as she stepped down from the carriage. She fanned her face, fluttered her eyes as if she might be close to fainting, and conjured the Latin word for latrine. It was familiar enough for the coachman to understand and instruct the guards to show her a proper place for privacy.

She hesitated, but necessity was stronger than caution and she followed a soldier around a low brick wall, where she took her relief under a privet hedge.

The search went quickly after that, and the party was hardly detained a quarter-hour before they entered Rome at dusk. Cutting along the road that runs where the old aqueduct once stood, the cobblestones spooled beneath the carriage until at last they passed the piazza at the foot of the Medici gardens beneath the Palace of Neptune Fountain. She saw marble naiads and nymphs dancing in under the moonlight, naked and free; Neptune, sprites and goddesses of the sea, and a trident with three spears pointing toward Orion in the northern

sky. She thought she would never become used to the nudity, the freedom of spirit, the naked flesh that even in white marble and carved granite seemed to breathe and bend in the soft Italian air.

It was nearly dark when they arrived at their rooms on Via del Corso, and Margaret was stupefied by fatigue. Marcus twisted a bell knob that rang up to the landlady's door, and soon they were led through a small interior courtyard, up an open staircase and into a very satisfying apartment where the ceilings were high and the wooden floors polished. Margaret went directly to her bedroom at the front of the building, where she found two tall windows open to the street. The walls were papered yellow, the narrow bed was covered with a blue coverlet that smelled of lavender, and on the dark walnut washstand a white pitcher sat beside a bowl of water in which floated a still-fresh branch of pink oleander.

She stood behind the blue curtains and looked out upon Rome. In the street below her room, Italians in fashionable evening clothes were just coming home from dinner or calling to one another and laughing in small groups. Their voices were happy and charged with excitement, and she was eager to know them....but in the morning, after she'd slept and rested.

She pulled the wooden shutters closed, turned the latch, and the world outside disappeared to a faint muffle. Margaret took off her brown shoes with a sigh, and was about to step out of her dress when there was knock at her door.

“Are you decent?” Rebecca asked. When Margaret answered in the affirmative, she pushed upon the door just far enough to hand over two envelopes. “One from America, one from London,” Rebecca said.

Only after Margaret had opened her small brown trunk, shaken out her white sleeping gown and cap, and washed in the fragrant water, did she break the seal on the first letter. It was from the poet Adam M, whom she had met in London along with Guiseppe Mazzini. His letter was gay and fat with gossip from London and Paris, full of the comings and goings of the royalty with whom Margaret had recently become acquainted.

*As for your friend the Princess Visconti, she is hoping for a reprieve from the emperor that might allow her to return to Rome, Adam M wrote. Until then she is taking residence at Lake Como where she will spend the summer months. You must visit if you can -- there is no place in the world as sweet to escape the fever season.*

*For now, Dear One, delight in the great city where everything is beautiful. Seek the society of Italians, conversation with Italians, art and music with the Romans. Enjoy what surrounds you! Breathe life through all your pores and learn to appreciate yourself as a beauty. After admiring the women of Rome, say to yourself ‘As for me, why I am beautiful, too!’*

Margaret held the pages to her nose and inhaled, but there was none of Adam’s musk scent on the page, no trace of his skin in the ink. By then her eyes were nearly closing, but she’d saved the most troubling for last, and knew she wouldn’t sleep until she’d read Nathaniel’s letter from Salem.

*If you are reading this you have arrived safely in Rome, she read in his precise, familiar hand. How proud I am to think of you with the artists and intellectuals you describe in your dispatches. I regret that I cannot tell if you are well in your private life, as I have had no further letter from you since Paris. I hope that you will find what you seek abroad, but also beg that you recall the freedom that can still be found here at home.*

*I think often of our time at Brook Farm, and especially since you have gone across the ocean have thought that I might write some fiction of those days – the snowfall when we arrived, how you waited upstairs in The Hive, out of sight. No one need to know what transpired, as it would all be closely guarded and made new, only I would like to have it from your pen that what is done and over has been put into its proper place in the past and that neither you nor I harbor ill of one another. It was consecrated in its time, and I hope that whatever else there has been, we have a shared connection that none may tear down or cast asunder. I wish you only the best of what you seek, my friend. Please write to me and let me know what is in your mind and in your heart.*

*Yours, NH*

Margaret folded the letter back into the envelope and imagined her friend sitting at his desk and rising again, pacing as she knew he did, chewing on the nib of his quill and worrying over his job at the Custom House, his collection of stories that had sold so poorly, and where he would find the time to write.

To write – this was the most important thing to him. She knew this the way she knew the swirl of hair beneath the top button on his shirt, and how he fueled his days with tea and hard biscuits. Their intimacy had been forged in that desire, their secret alliance brokered at Brook Farm over their conflicting need for connection and private creativity.

“You may never have to sacrifice one for another,” she’d told him then. “But I am certain that I will have to choose.”

She’d been right, of course. She had her career and her freedom but little to soothe her sense of untethered wandering, while Nathaniel Hawthorne had words, wife and hearth all his own.

Brook Farm had been a difficult time, as full of passion as of reproach, but it was seven years in the past, which is where she wanted it to stay. She wished her friend wouldn’t write of it to her, nor ask her to recall it, nor write about it any way at all. She resolved to tell him that, but not soon.

Best to wait, she decided as she extinguished the lamplight, and pulled the coverlet over her head. There was so much to discover and write about Rome – the whole city was ahead of her, the whole greatest city of her dreams. It was nearly ten o’clock as she faded off to sleep, oblivious to the music, merriment and whispered talk of revolution that ran like a current up and down Via del Corso while Orion watched over the city, his hunting spear drawn as he chased the seven Pleiades to edge of the sea where they fell, like wishes, into the water and over the edge of the world.

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