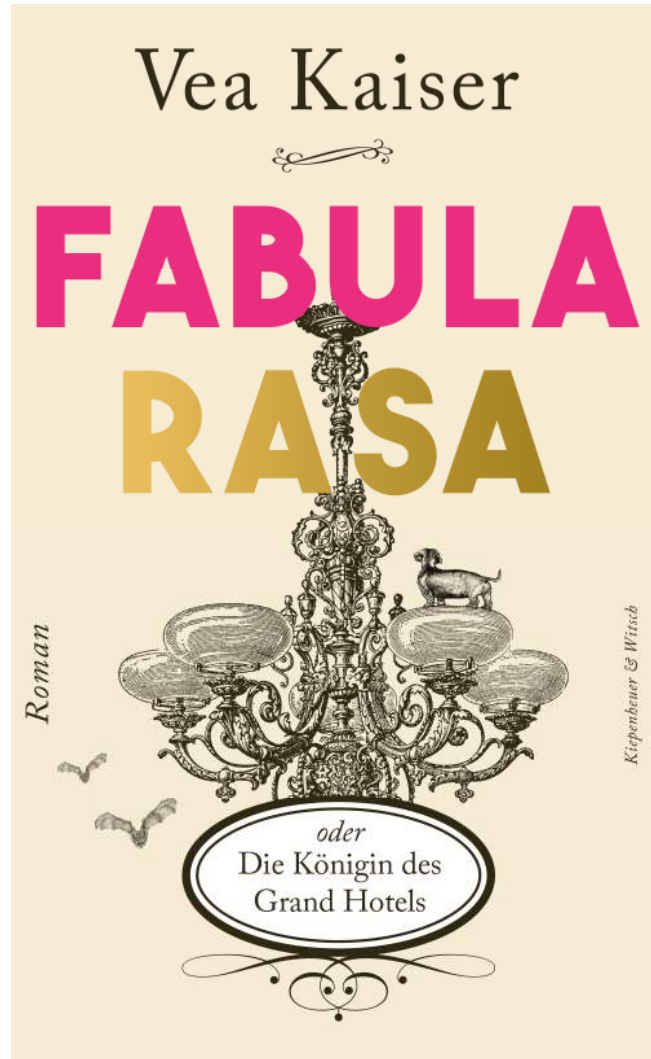


The Queen of the Grand Hotel

by Veia Kaiser

Sample translation by Eleanor Updegraff



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Prologue

The question I'm most often asked about my writing is: where do you get your ideas from? In the case of this novel, the answer is simple: one day, I opened a newspaper. There, in June 2019, I read about a hotel bookkeeper named Angelika Moser who had, over a period of many years, stolen €3.3 million from her employer, the Grand Hotel Frohner. When questioned in court about her motivation, she excused herself by saying she'd only wanted the best for her child. I couldn't help but feel a degree of understanding for this woman, being in the late stages of pregnancy with my own son. I felt his little feet kicking inside me, and I knew: I'd steal €33 million if he needed it. Who wouldn't? In the grip of the foolish, perhaps even ridiculous love one can only feel for one's own child, who among us is immune to folly?

In order to speak to Angelika Moser in person, I entered a prison for the first time in my life. I'd never known before that if you want to visit a prisoner, you become a prisoner yourself. You join the queue outside the prison in the morning, deposit all your belongings in a locker, have yourself frisked by the security guards, and then wait in a windowless corridor on benches that are bolted to the floor – left entirely at the mercy of your own thoughts. Nothing in the world could have prepared me for the shouts of joy uttered by little kids who, after they too had been searched by the security guards as though they were potential assassins, stormed

towards the play corner at the back of the waiting room. The tatty toys there were old familiars.

I waited almost four hours before I was called to take a seat in a room whose walls had been decorated with orange latex paint. I sat for another half an hour in a phone booth and felt myself become depressed. Already, the place had robbed me of any enjoyment of life. I remembered what I'd read on the website about the building's architecture: its aspect was supposed to be 'fearsome while also aloof', to strike fear into the hearts of those 'who, through their misdeeds, have made themselves unworthy of human society'.

The charismatic, quick-witted, bright-eyed woman who took the seat on the other side of the milky safety glass was, to my surprise, in much better spirits. She sat across from me with a straight back and no hint of a slouch in her shoulders. I felt instantly ashamed of my sagging posture and pulled myself upright, upon which she grinned as though to say: I saw that. She picked up the yellow handset and leaned on her left forearm, long fingers fanned out in front of her.

'You don't look like a person who's being eaten up by guilt at having stolen more than three million euros,' I said.

Her hand skimmed the air, as though she wanted to wipe away what I'd just said.

'Do you know the one thing I was always able to rely on in life? That sleep was always going to let me down.' She laughed then raised her shapely eyebrows, which were far more carefully plucked than my own. *'The bedding is scratchy and my bunkmate talks for twenty hours a day, but ever since I came here, I've been falling*

asleep the minute I touch that rubber mattress, and then that's me until the wake-up call.' She looked at a point somewhere over my shoulder and added: 'It's as though everything that once made me me has been erased: my mother's dead, my son's gone, I'll never set foot in the Grand Hotel Frohner ever again. And I sleep brilliantly.'

I didn't have to ask her to keep talking. The words just bubbled out of her. Perhaps after all the articles in the tabloids she wanted to tell her own story at last. Or maybe she'd simply caught up on enough sleep to be able to put together the puzzle pieces of her life.

She talked, I listened, and back at home I wrote it all up. I visited her eleven times in prison, and I met other people who played a significant role in events; their stories have been changed in places to fit with the narrative rules of a novel. The pandemic interrupted my work on this book, which means that many years have passed between real-life events and its publication. But I still remember vividly the question with which Angelika Moser began her story:

'Do you know what an air-slap is?'

— Crete, August 2024

Act I

In Which the Heroine Goes on a Quest for Love and Good Fortune, Topped with a Sprinkling of Adventure

It is an odd thing about the visitors in a big hotel. Not one as he goes through the revolving door is the same as when he came in.

— Vicki Baum, *Grand Hotel* —

Pomp, Stench and Circumstance

Angelika had finally done it: she was outside. Ingi stumbled across the threshold behind her. A gust of ice-cold winter air hit them full in their flushed faces.

‘Nothing like a good air-slap!’ shrieked Ingi, all keyed up. Long nights tended to put her in a frame of mind to torch some neighbourhood or other, while Angelika was minded more to bring delicate peace negotiations to a positive conclusion. They couldn’t have managed to rule a country together, but for being best friends in Vienna in the late 1980s, this was sufficient.

‘Come on, home time,’ said Angelika. The cuboid street clock on the southern corner of Neuer Markt was showing four o’clock. If they got a shift on, Angelika could have a shower and sleep for three hours before she had to go to work. Ingi linked arms with her.

‘Yeah, but sausage stand first.’

‘Are you nuts? I need to sleep.’

Ingi grumbled as Angelika pulled her along, the way she knew she ought to have done much earlier on: *Just this song! One more for the road! Oooh, look – Branntweiner’s is open.* No one else was still out and about. Angelika concentrated on the pavement – she was wearing her new boots – but there weren’t even any dog turds lying around, although they were usually omnipresent in the First District with its population of posh old ladies and their handbag pooches.

‘Could have spared ourselves that tonight, couldn’t we,’ muttered Angelika, annoyed with herself. There’d been nothing going on at U4. Not so long ago, their favourite club had been closed on Saturdays because the crowds had got too big. Young people had commissioned their grannies to light candles in church that the bouncers might let them in. Tonight: nothing but bad music and a couple of passed-out drunks. After that, Ingi had dragged Angelika to a house party in some flatshare on Schwedenplatz, but by the time they arrived their hosts had already been doing the washing-up. And so, yet again, they’d ended up at Branntweiner’s, a dive somewhere behind the Imperial Crypt where you could only stomach the acidic white wine they poured from two-litre bottles if you chased it with plum schnapps.

‘Every experience broadens your horizons,’ murmured Ingi, who was pissed as a newt and squealed happily when they rounded a corner: ‘Look, *Debreziner!*’

It was rush hour at the sausage stand behind the opera house. The last Thursday before Lent: Opera Ball night. Dolled-up women in black coats and furs were sweeping the pavement with the hems of their evening gowns. They doused their lavish up-dos with the scent of oozing cheese-laced sausages, while the gentlemen filled their bemedalled chests with fizzy beer poured straight from the can. Angelika used to watch the Opera Ball on TV with her mother, Erna, and their neighbours in the social housing complex. She’d be given a finger of sparkling wine in her

cocoa mug and allowed to stay up while the grown-ups bitched about high society.

‘Behold the stuffed shirts in all their glory,’ sniped Ingi, but all the same she pulled Angelika into the queue outside the window. The crème de la crème of Vienna’s glitterati were biting greedily into their sausage-stand snacks as though they’d never eaten anything as delicious in their lives. Little Angelika had dreamed of being one of the debutantes who opened the Opera Ball. But grown-up Angelika kept this quiet from her friend Ingi, who was wolfing down her spicy *Debreziner* sausages along with jalapeños and a tinny. ‘Eat the rich,’ mumbled Ingi with her mouth full, and: ‘Absolute chumps – so embarrassing.’ Angelika thought the people standing around looked infectiously happy as they savoured the city’s most down-to-earth snack while wearing the year’s most elaborate get-up. And wasn’t that life in its purest form? When you did whatever you wanted, no matter how it might look? Wasn’t it more embarrassing to think yourself a cut above because they knew you by name in the city’s grimmest dive-bar, which couldn’t have been cleaned for a good two years? Ingi, by now, had finished her food and was flagging down a taxi.

‘You’ve been bugging me all night about having to work today, so hop to it!’ Ingi flung herself into the back seat. ‘And anyway, I’m paying.’

But, of course, she couldn’t find even a single groschen in her pockets when the taxi turned into Talgasse and pulled up in front of Number 8. While Angelika grumpily scraped enough

coins together, Ingi threw up noisily in the footwell. Both sausage and jalapeño were still recognisable as such.

‘That’s gonna cost you,’ said the cabbie, unmoved.

Angelika kept a thousand-schilling note at home for emergencies, which the cabbie then had to go and break somewhere. By the time Angelika had received what little change she was owed, and Ingi had thrown up what little remained in her stomach and was lying, cleaned up, on Angelika’s sofa, it was getting light. Angelika wanted to have a shower, but she was so exhausted she had to sit on the bed for a moment. It never used to bother her, going to work on no sleep. But as her partner for this chapter of life, Berti, never tired of mentioning: thirty wasn’t far off. Angelika shuddered. She’d been at primary school still the summer Ms Master of Arts Totznig had moved in on Stairwell 4 of Veza Canetti Court, the social housing complex where Angelika had grown up. The neighbours had watched her labour alone until two o’clock in the afternoon, when sympathy had finally outweighed schadenfreude in their Viennese hearts of gold. ‘Fat lot of good all that studying is when you’re an old maid with no one to help you lug your books about,’ said Angelika’s mother, Erna Moser, who was the housing-complex caretaker, before – as an exception – lending a hand for free. Ms MA Totznig later became Angelika’s after-school French tutor. At the point at which she’d moved in, she’d been thirty-two.

And then Angelika woke up. The sun was blazing brightly through the curtains. The radio alarm clock beside her bed showed 8:40.

‘Bollocks!’ yelled Angelika. She’d fallen asleep in the clothes she’d gone out in the night before – that never happened to her, not even when she came home completely rat-arsed with a one-night stand in tow. Make-up off, clothes off, shower, anti-wrinkle cream and a hundred strokes with the hairbrush – a certain degree of order had to be maintained, otherwise life went off the rails. Angelika drenched herself in deodorant and perfume while she rang for a cab. Ingi didn’t even stir a toe.

‘Thanks for nothing!’ Angelika yelled at her before dashing out of the door.

The traffic on Mariahilfer Straße was awful. Stewing in the back seat of the taxi, Angelika swore to herself she’d extract the entire cost of the previous night from Ingi, down to the very last groschen – and that included this taxi ride. Ingi had grown up two floors above Angelika in Veza Canetti Court, until Ingi’s mother had married her boss, a notary, and they’d moved to a detached house in the leafy suburb of Strebersdorf. When two lives begin the same but go in contrary directions, friendship isn’t a given but a decision. Angelika had internalised this – Angelika who had never had a father and only knew pocket money as something in Ingi’s stories. She herself had stayed behind at Veza Canetti Court and had had to pay her mother for bed and board from the time she got her very first holiday job until she moved out. Ingi had spent the last ten years studying philosophy, German philology and Viennese nightlife, as the notary was more generously disposed towards her than most fathers were towards their own biological children. Angelika was a bookkeeper, but she didn’t

earn enough to heat the whole of her draughty little flat in winter. It was hard to reproach Ingi for constantly talking Angelika into going on nights out with her: the prerequisite for successful seduction, after all, was someone who wanted to be seduced.

‘Right you are, then,’ said the cabbie, and to her horror Angelika realised that he was stopping in front of the main entrance on the so-called Johann Strauss Ring section of the boulevard that wrapped around Vienna’s city centre, and not at the back of the hotel, where an unprepossessing wooden door led to the staff changing room in the basement. Josef the porter was already opening the door to the taxi.

‘A very warm welcome to the Grand Hotel Frohner!’ He rattled off the ingrained sentence before surreptitiously whispering, ‘Miss Angelika from Admin?’

‘I’m running late,’ said Angelika as she paid the taxi driver and got out. It was three minutes past nine. Employees were only allowed to use the staff door if they were dressed in their civvies, but to circumnavigate the Grand Hotel, a stone behemoth that towered across an entire block, would have taken too long.

‘Is everything all right?’ asked Josef.

‘It’s all absolutely fine,’ said Angelika, pulling back her shoulders, sucking in her stomach and marching towards the revolving door that transported her from the noise of the Johann Strauss Ring into another world. Inside, her sleep-deprived eyes smarted from the glare of the forty-candle Lobmeyr chandelier, which shone like a radiant heart at the centre of the lobby. It was the sleep-befuddled morning after a ball: a fashionable couple

opening their suitcases, an expensively dressed woman waiting at the empty concierge desk. The marble tiles were freshly polished and gleaming; the air smelled of the beeswax that was used to treat the enormous reception desk once a month. The emerald rugs and curtains, upholstered armchairs and staff uniforms were all absolutely flawless: not a speck of dust anywhere, though emerald was a most unforgiving colour. Everything was shining, resplendent, impressive – and Angelika suddenly thought she could smell Ingi's vomit on herself. She was emitting fumes of alcohol and cold smoke; the hairspray had made a bird's nest out of her perm; remnants of yesterday's make-up were caked on to her face.

Angelika might have grown up the fatherless daughter of a caretaker – they had only ever just managed to make ends meet – but her mother had taught her from a very young age that there was one thing no one could ever take away from you: pride. If you didn't feel it yourself, there was a magic trick, and that trick was: posture. Shoulder blades down, chin up, hair out of your face – Angelika strode through the lobby, shoes squeaking on the tiled floor. All around were beautiful people. Rich people. Powerful people. All the dazzling splendour of a time-honoured establishment in which princesses and presidents, film stars and opera divas, CEOs and cult heroes had slept, loved, laughed, eaten, drunk. And that smell! At her interview eight months ago, she'd been so nervous chiefly because the Grand Hotel had smelled so remarkably good: of sweetly fresh, slightly powdery cleanliness. Angelika could smell her own sweat; ethanol oozed from her

pores. So as not to meet anyone's gaze, she fixed her eyes on the huge aquarium which functioned as a room divider between the lobby and the bar area. The guppies were swimming cheerfully around their seaweed and pirate ship. Any time one of them started to float belly-up towards the surface, members of staff would rush in to remove it. The guppy breeder stopped by regularly with a plastic bag full of fresh fish, so that no guest would ever notice that even inside the Grand Hotel Frohner, the world was in a constant state of flux. No, here the world was on pause, here was the dominion of comfort, glamour and chic. Here everything was better, purer, perfect. This was what Director Julius Frohner III had said to Angelika at her interview: the guests at the Grand Hotel Frohner weren't looking to encounter reality, but to have a break from the very same. The secret to any big hotel was that behind the scenes were hundreds of cogs interlocking seamlessly, entirely unseen by any of the guests, who felt only welcomed and able to give in to the illusion of perfection. And so, in order to play her part, like an assiduously swimming guppy, Angelika swapped her pullover for an emerald-green hotel blazer in the changing room and arrived breathless, riddled with nausea and headache, but a forgivable seven minutes late to her meeting.

‘A very good morning to you all!’ she greeted her colleagues from the administration department, as though everything was, indeed, absolutely fine.

The Weight of the World

It was a tough day. Pain throbbed at Angelika's temples, her eyeballs stung, and the slice of creamy Esterházy torte which her colleague Elvira Angermayer devoured in the coffee kitchen turned her stomach.

'Good grief – did you sleep in a schnapps-filled ashtray?' Hilde Brunner had whispered, sitting next to Angelika during their meeting in the head of department's office. Angelika would have liked to have answered that she, Hilde Brunner, who often didn't shower for days on end because her four children were causing such bedlam at home, wasn't exactly entitled to make olfactory demands of others, but her own sour breath made her keep her mouth shut. In Room V2 of the administration department, Angelika worked alongside four other women who worshipped the Holy Trinity of Viennese vices: *Saint Sloppiness, grant me the patience not to overwork myself. Oh Divine Disorderliness, allow me to float with nonchalance above the rest of the world, unworthy as it is of any true-born Viennese. Sacred Slapdashian, help me to be indifferent to everything.* They were kind, funny and addicted to gossip, and when you worked with them you had to worry about a number of things, but never that they'd overwork themselves. Angelika's mother had drummed it into her: if she did her work quickly and thoroughly, no one could think themselves better than her, no one could say anything against her. And despite the fact that there was definite room for improvement in her resistance to nights out, Angelika was quicker

and more thorough than her colleagues in the office. The problem was: in the three-quarters of a year she'd been working at the Frohner, no one had noticed this yet. What the others saw was that she'd made out with Khaled from Room Service. That she'd spent a night with Schorschi from the doughnut manufactory. That she had a penchant for miniskirts. That she made a little less effort with herself when she'd spent the previous night at U4 or Blue Box or, like yesterday, had ended up at Branntweiner's. Then, the length of Angelika's skirts would be up for discussion in Café Korner, the corner cafe two streets further down, and Angelika wanted to be the kind of woman who couldn't care less about such things, but no matter how hard she tried, she did care.

Angelika did her best to get through that Friday by drinking lots of coffee and compiling statistics. There was a new menu in the Danube Wave restaurant, and the bookkeeperly detective work of calculating its profitability kept her awake until the pendulum clock on the north wall of the office chimed eleven thirty. The clock was half a century older than the already 115-year-old Grand Hotel Frohner. In summer it went slow and in winter too fast.

Angelika's manager, Klaus Schnattl, opened the door to his office, and extracted himself noisily from his work blazer like an overripe mandarin from its peel.

'Mahlzeit, ladies – enjoy your lunch!'

Angelika looked at her wristwatch. It was actually only twenty past eleven, but the alpha had summoned the herd to the feeding trough. Anyone who got in the way would be trampled.

Angelika's colleagues, who let loose a loud chorus of '*Mahlzeit!*' and busied themselves getting ready to leave, were entirely capable of taking a good twenty minutes to reach the staff canteen. They stretched their limbs, suit seams creaking, nylon stockings straining. Then, in slow motion, the four of them tidied their desks while discussing their plans for the weekend. The forecast was for rain.

'Well, if it brightens up, me and Horsti are going to walk to a *heuriger*,' said Monika Novotny. 'Walk' in itself was a big word for Mr and Mrs Novotny, never mind walking to one of the wine taverns dotting the hills around Vienna; Horsti, who had been head chauffeur at the Grand Hotel until he'd taken early retirement, drove his Monika to the staff door every morning and picked her up in the evening, each time parking on the pavement to minimise her journey on foot.

'I'm doing nothing, for a change,' said Elvira Angermayer, and Angelika bit back the question: *For a change?*

Gerda Lausecek said nothing, because what she was going to do was an open secret: she'd wait around for a visit from her married lover, who worked for the Federal Monuments Office, and then get blind drunk when he went back to his family.

Of course, Angelika could have objected to the fact that her colleagues were already embarking on the weekend via their lunchbreak – the working day always ended earlier on a Friday – but that would merely have led to four bottoms, made voluptuous by the Frohner's award-winning fine dining, plumping heavily back on to their chairs, only for the first rumble of a stomach to

raise a lament in four-part harmony on the theme of dizziness caused by low blood sugar. Angelika had by this time accepted that for some people 'working together' meant covering each other's backs when the hotel director, Julius Frohner III, had one of his fits of choleric rage because something or other hadn't been dealt with. And, in any case, she wasn't on top form herself.

'Not coming for lunch, Angelika?' asked Monika Novotny.

'Kind, but I'm not hungry yet,' she lied. Her body longed for energy; if sleep wasn't possible, then at least some carbohydrates. But she was afraid she might be sick. And then there would just be a fresh round of rumours about whom she'd allowed to knock her up.

'There's fried plaice today!' Klaus Schnattl addressed his lunch-table quadriga, who left the room philosophising about how breaded fried fish was so much more succulent than the plain pan-fried version there'd been last Friday.

'If we don't see each other again, have a lovely weekend!' called Angelika, as though there was even a whiff of doubt about it.

Angelika drank another cup of coffee. As penance for the previous night, she would now undertake all the work her colleagues had left unfinished. Her heart was racing from the caffeine and alcohol breakdown, but the deeper she dived into the columns and tables of figures, the better she felt. Angelika loved her night-time escapades, but she needed the order of the daytime so as not to be overwhelmed by ghosts and spiralling thoughts on the nights that remained escapade-less. Every invoice she handed

in for payment signified something dealt with. Every filed payslip had made a difference to someone's life. A clean set of books meant one more day of victory over chaos.

The filing cabinets lined the windowless back wall of the administration department. Therein were labelled storage compartments, leather-bound portfolios and folders by the metre, waiting like livestock to be fed and then, stuffed full, transported to the basement archives where they'd spend ten years maturing, before the lorry belonging to the waste disposal company reversed into the courtyard and collected the decommissioned documents. Whenever Angelika felt melancholic, she went to one of the neatly ordered cabinets, opened it, breathed in the scent of eau-de-l'Ordre – and everything was all right once more.

Angelika stamped, calculated, dealt with things, then leaned back in her chair, rubbed her eyes, closed them briefly – and jumped when she opened them again: the pendulum clock suddenly showed half past five. Unless it was broken, Angelika had just spent three hours sleeping at her desk. She leaped up in panic: what if someone had seen her? Like a castle ghost, Julius Frohner III was everywhere and nowhere at all times. He moved silently, unless he'd discovered an error, and then he bellowed like Old Nick. Angelika smoothed down her blouse and calmed herself: she'd be out of a job already if the director had caught her sleeping at her desk. All the same, her concentration was shot, so she decided to call it a day. She made a final inspection round of the department, turning off lamps and collecting half-empty bottles of mineral water. The director could fly into a rage if he caught an

employee opening a new bottle of water before the previous one had been finished. In this matter, Angelika did understand him: nothing in this world came for free.

By the time Angelika finally shut the polished wooden door with its engraved bronze plaque – ADMINISTRATION – behind her, it was a little before six. With a stack of unpaid invoices that she wanted to hand in to Frau Packlhuber, secretary to Director Julius Frohner III, for authorisation, she descended the emerald-carpeted stairs of the operations wing. Here, at the back of the Grand Hotel, the administrative offices shared space with the storerooms, laundry, patisserie and kitchen. There were no rococo chairs standing around in the corners here, no large-format oil paintings on the walls; instead, they were decorated with the ‘Nudies’ – nude paintings which had been acquired in the roaring twenties but were apparently no longer suitable for public display: the bodies were contorted, the faces twisted, the colours monotone. Lots of the staff begged for ‘that trash’ to be put away in the attic. Angelika liked them. They dared to be exactly as they were. Who was beautiful naked, anyway?

Frau Packlhuber’s office was also the anteroom of the director’s quarters. Aside from Angelika, she was the only administrative employee who could still be found at her desk outside regular working hours, albeit for a different reason. Angelika loved her free time. It was just that she couldn’t bear to begin the weekend knowing that she’d left important work unfinished. She wasn’t good at sleeping, and the thinking about loose ends often led to her wondering at four o’clock in the

morning whether she shouldn't just pop into the hotel quickly. Frau Packlhuber, on the other hand, went home when the director went home. Because Julius Frohner III haunted the halls at all times of day and night, there were rumours that the Frohners didn't actually have a home. The director's daughter had married in Zurich; the director's son had lived abroad ever since boarding school; the director's wife, Elfriede Frohner, was a regular guest at various Alpine health resorts on account of her frail constitution. The exception was Easter, and six weeks in the summer, when the Frohners acted the inseparable family in their country villa on the shores of Lake Traun. Then, Julius Frohner III only haunted the Grand Hotel from Tuesday to Thursday.

Angelika knocked three times on Frau Packlhuber's door; if it wasn't locked, one was permitted to enter. But the typewriter on the filigree Biedermeier desk was resting under its protective cover. There was no sign of a teacup, which, in light of Frau Packlhuber's addiction to heavily sugared rosehip tea, did seem rather suspicious. Angelika wondered whether a miracle had occurred and the director had clocked off before she had.

Angelika chucked the wodge of papers on to the desk, where it landed with a slap, like the strap of a swimsuit snapping against wet skin. But something else stirred in the background: a muffled noise, as though someone was screaming into a cushion. The badly soundproofed walls betrayed the fact that the Grand Hotel Frohner hadn't been intended as a hotel when its foundations were dug. It had been opened as such on the last Thursday before Lent in the year 1873, with a glorious ball that had

later – on account of the sheer number of visitors – been moved to the opera house and thenceforth known as the Opera Ball. It had been built, however, in the mid-nineteenth century as a city palace for a duke. But his wife had seen the ghost of her dead mother-in-law in the hallways, and after a few unhappy years the duke had sold up to Julius Frohner I, who had transformed the building into today's Grand Hotel just in time for the World's Fair of 1873.

On the floor below were the back offices of the reception; the floor above was composed of storerooms. Angelika suspected that the noise had come from there. Probably Peter the sous chef and Sonja the receptionist were enjoying another high point in their love-hate relationship and fucking on the pallets of toilet paper. Angelika grinned, until she made out a word:

'HERE!'

'Hello?' Angelika pressed her ear to the inlaid cherry-wood door.

'HERE!'

The noise was indisputably coming from Frohner's office.

Frau Packlhuber was the only person who was allowed to enter without a summons, but it seemed that someone was in need of help – perhaps one of the maintenance men had hurt himself – so Angelika went in. Director Frohner's office was deserted. The desk lamp was on, and a trench coat, hat and the director's umbrella were hanging on the coat stand. No one else in Vienna possessed such enormous umbrellas, under which it was possible to shelter a small family from the rain. Angelika ventured

one door further, into the meeting room: a parlour with ceiling frescoes and an oval table, in the centre of which a glass bowl of fruit was besieged by a cloud of little flies.

‘HERE!’

Anyone who, like Angelika, had grown up in a badly soundproofed social housing block built in the interwar period, living door to door with a large number of people, was used to not listening as a matter of principle. Her mother preached that whatever went on behind the neighbours’ doors was none of anyone else’s business.

Staff were strictly prohibited from entering the far room in the director’s office suite, the so-called study. In Café Korner, it was rumoured that Julius Frohner III kept the Amber Room back there. But now it was undeniable: someone in the study was calling for help. Angelika recalled how she and her mother had once witnessed an unkempt, corpulent woman having a seizure in front of the oil shelf in a Konsum supermarket. She’d collapsed to the floor and, in an attempt to keep herself upright, had pulled several bottles of sunflower oil down with her. She’d convulsed, foamed at the mouth, lost control of her sphincter. ‘On we go now, chop-chop,’ Erna Moser had said, but Angelika had run to the woman’s side, knelt down in the soup of oil and bodily fluids, and forced her hairband into her mouth. She’d stayed with the woman until the ambulance arrived. Erna Moser had gone home and only let Angelika back in once she’d stripped off every last item of clothing on the doormat. ‘You think I want that stupid old cow’s piss all over my flat?’

Remembering her aspiration not to be like her mother, Angelika opened the door. Director Frohner's myth-shrouded study was nothing but another wood-panelled office. A smaller desk, a dark bookcase, the same emerald-green flock wallpaper as in the rest of the hotel, illuminated by dim wall sconces. The only difference from the boss's public office was an uncomfortable-looking black Chesterfield suite, along with shards of glass on the floor and a pungent stench of alcohol in the air. It appeared that a globe had toppled from a round, four-legged stand of delicate-looking ironwork, thereby carrying out an assault on the director, who lay wounded beneath. He was, nonetheless, well enough to snarl at Angelika:

'Why in the name of God did that take so long?'

'Oh Jesus, sir! Just you wait a minute – I'll get help!'

'No, you will not be doing that!' he cried. 'Undo those brass catches on the globe and take the bottles out. It isn't exactly easy to move when you're weighed down by a collection of scotch.'

Angelika was totally baffled, but she didn't dare remonstrate. Very carefully, she opened the globe, which was actually a drinks cabinet, and took out the bottles one by one until she was able to heave it back on to its stand. Director Frohner remained prone.

'Give me a hand, then,' he grouched. Angelika would have liked to reply in the same curmudgeonly tone, but he was, after all, the director, and so she merely pulled him up into his leather chair. The entire right-hand side of his face was grazed, from the hairline to his bull-terrier jowls. The blood had dyed his walrus

moustache red and sullied his shirt. His trousers were ripped, and there were shards sticking out from a long cut running across his thigh.

‘Sir, you’re bleeding!’

‘Gosh, am I?’ he barked.

Angelika was about to enumerate his injuries – but then she realised he’d meant it sarcastically.

‘I don’t want to overstep, sir, but I spent every summer when I was a kid at a Friends of Nature camp, and I learned a lot about first aid there. Those cuts need cleaning.’

Frohner appraised his wounds.

‘There’s a first-aid kit in Frau Packlhuber’s office.’

Angelika looked at him blankly.

‘If you’d be so kind as to fetch it, madam.’

‘You need to go to hospital – or at the very least a doctor.’

Director Frohner sighed, drew out a handkerchief and began dabbing at himself.

‘Young lady, you’re a perfectly intelligent person, are you not. What would the guests think if the director went limping around the place like some dishevelled tramp? What would the staff think?’

The director was a man of censure. But Angelika realised that he had, in fact, just praised her. Shrugging, she went to fetch the white metal box that was affixed to the wall in Frau Packlhuber’s office. Regrettably, it contained everything she needed: tweezers, disinfectant, compression dressings.

‘Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to take off your trousers.’

He sighed.

‘A doctor would be bound by patient confidentiality.’

‘And you think it would really stay a secret from the nosy parkers round here? They’d all start sniffing about straight away, and soon enough word would have it I host orgies in my rooms! You can’t even trip over in peace here without someone noticing.’

In a large hotel, attentiveness was part of the business model. The Frohner’s staff distinguished themselves by never missing a thing; they noticed and fulfilled their guests’ every unspoken wish. Angelika knew what the director meant: it was unpleasant to have everyone badmouthing you. He unbuckled his belt. Angelika had just enough courage to ask:

‘Shall we have a drink?’

Julius Frohner III did his best to hide how much pain it caused him to peel off his trousers. ‘Help yourself. I don’t drink.’

‘There’s only basic painkillers in the box.’

‘I can take quite a lot.’

Angelika fished an undamaged glass and a bottle of scotch out of the puddle of shards on the floor. The director took a seat on the leather sofa and pressed his knees together. Here was something she’d never wished to know: he wore tight-fitting white fine-ribbed briefs, from which protruded muscular legs – castle ghosts could easily manage 15,000 steps a day, minimum. A few lone grey hairs sprouted from his thighs; his lower legs were smooth, epilated by decades of chafing suit trousers.

‘Sir, it would be easiest if you lay down.’

She was surprised when he complied without objection. Angelika angled the desk lamp towards them, disinfected the wound and used the tweezers to prise the shards from the director's thigh-meat. The Packlhuber first-aid kit was even equipped with a magnifying glass.

'I'm the third generation to run this building as the Grand Hotel,' said the director. Angelika tried to concentrate. 'Do you know what the former Royal Hotel, Merler & Sperb the chocolate manufacturer, the Zur Witwe Fink restaurant and the Notmann clothes-iron factory all have in common?'

Angelika tried to keep a steady hand.

'They were all model Viennese businesses. And all of them met exactly the same fate. Founded by a visionary patriarch. Built up by his hard-working sons to become one of the city's leading lights in business. Then driven into ruin by the third generation.'

Angelika cleaned the cuts. Frohner ground his teeth.

'All right?' she asked.

'It has to be, no matter how heavy the weight on one's shoulders.'

'Wouldn't you like just a little swig – for the pain?'

'Alcohol impairs one's judgement. I've never touched a drop in my life.'

'As you wish,' said Angelika, leaning back and taking a large gulp of scotch. Frohner watched as she applied the dressing. Then he limped over to the wall and turned a crank, upon which the bookcase swung open to reveal a walk-in wardrobe as big as the boxroom Angelika had grown up in.

‘No need to sit there with your eyes out on stalks. Our clientele doesn’t want to spend the night in a hotel whose director goes around the place with flecks of mustard on his lapels. Let yourself go and you’ll run the whole hotel into the ground. Damn it, half seven!’ he exclaimed, before adding: ‘It’s Friday. Why are you still here?’

‘The turnover figures for the Danube Wave restaurant, sir.’ She hummed and hawed, hoping that the smell of scotch sufficiently covered the fumes she herself was emitting. ‘I thought the new menu might not be making a profit. Turns out it is losing us money.’

Angelika hastily took another sip of scotch to steel herself against the bollocking that was sure to come for her having undertaken such a bit of number-crunching without being asked.

Director Frohner grunted.

‘I like it when my staff think for themselves,’ he said, suddenly good-tempered. ‘Packhuber lost a filling at lunch today. She was groaning so loudly while drinking her tea that I couldn’t concentrate, so I sent her to the dentist. She’s a good person really, but that addiction to rosehip tea with four sugars per cup does make her a bit suspect,’ he said, and then the unbelievable happened: the director chuckled. He unscrewed the cap on a shiny black shellac fountain pen, signed a cheque and then blotted the ink.

‘For your discretion. And now you’ll excuse me; it was the Opera Ball last night and, in my position, one does have to put on

one's hated dancing shoes once a year, at least. I'm doubly damaged today.'

Angelika, for her part, could have danced for joy: that was half a month's wages right there. Frohner fixed his gaze on her scotch glass, so she set it down and thanked him politely, hoping her paroxysms of joy wouldn't make her appear drunk. In the doorway, though, she stopped.

'Sir, why do you have a collection of scotch when you don't drink?' she asked.

'Young lady, I assume you know better than I do how much of our profit is down to the sale of alcohol?'

Angelika did some rough calculations: two bars, a world-famous wine cellar, two restaurants, room service, a cafe and the minibars – the gross domestic product of a small developing country was drunk away in the Grand Hotel Frohner every month.

'And what is one supposed to do, as the director of such an establishment, when joining a group who are drinking? Prominent figures in business, politics, culture – all of them hanging off one another with sour breath and their clothes all rumpled, but already running up a tab that will pay the wages of two chambermaids? It would be a snub, if you refused to drink with them on the grounds of your own abstinence. No, if I have to be in on a toast, I always order expensive scotch. Drunk people never notice if you're drinking along with them or just pretending. Word got around that I'm a scotch connoisseur, so bottles arrive pretty regularly. At least my little mishap has created some space

in there. Next year I'll be turning sixty, so I'm anticipating a larger number of bottles than usual.'

'Well, that's good to know. You won't be getting any scotch from me, then,' said Angelika, upon which the director's expression immediately darkened again.

'You are not to repeat that to anyone!' he barked.

'Jesus, it was only a joke,' said Angelika, and she set about leaving the room as fast as she possibly could.

Once More unto the Dark

That morning, Angelika would have given anything to have stayed in bed, but as she stepped on to the street after showering in the staff changing room, she didn't feel at all like going home. Perhaps desk naps were particularly invigorating, but perhaps the treasure in cheque form had also had an enlivening effect. Angelika was in such high spirits that she even gave Khaled a smacker as he was getting ready for the late shift.

'I thought you had a boyfriend?' he asked, bewildered.

'I will again tomorrow. Today, I want to party!' answered Angelika, and she bounded down the street to Café Korner as though electrified. She was too late: only the after-work alkies from maintenance and service were still there, as well as Hugo, the bar pianist who was on his fifth wife.

‘Well, if it isn’t the tidiest arse in the whole Frohner,’ he crooned at Angelika, and she wondered whether getting married could be a kind of hobby. She fed the jukebox a couple of times and accepted a few red-wine spritzers, before Hugo’s saggy balls started swinging dangerously close to her across the bar stool. Angelika knew she ought to go home: she’d barely slept and hadn’t eaten all day, plus there was the fact that Berti would be waiting for her in the flat. He’d announced his intention to stop by after he’d fixed a collapsed wardrobe rail for his mother. It was only a short ride on the number 9 tram from her house to Angelika’s. Berti would certainly stay until Sunday, so she wouldn’t have chance to go out again all weekend. Berti was revising for his final pharmacy exam at the moment, and the high point of the excitement would be sex in the missionary position, during which Berti left his socks on because he found her duvet too short and her flat too poorly heated. Berti was sweet. He listened to the radio while he was revising and recorded all the songs she liked on to cassette tapes, but Berti never wanted to dance, was tired by ten o’clock, and never drank more than a small measure of beer – and even that was only for the electrolytes. Angelika checked her watch; she wouldn’t make it home before ten o’clock anyway, now, and by that time Berti would already be asleep. It would be unkind to wake him again so soon after he’d gone to bed; better to leave him and come home in the middle of the night when he’d be in a phase of deep sleep, Angelika thought, and she went, before heading out, to the ladies’ to backcomb her hair and redo her make-up.

There wasn't much going on at U4 that night, either, although a band was playing. Ingi, who was throwing shapes on the rather sparsely occupied dance floor, wasn't hard to spot.

'You're here!' Ingi clung to Angelika. 'Wanna do a line?'

Angelika declined. There was always the possibility of undercover cops at U4, and Angelika's spirits were already high enough, despite the general vibe being somewhat depressed and the band very strange. Also, it stank, as though there was a compost heap mouldering away backstage. But good mood was also a matter of posture.

The band that was playing tonight was the latest new line-up put together by a certain Freddy, who had been frequenting U4 longer and more often than Angelika and Ingi, and accordingly was deemed 'the last Mohican of the New Wave'. In the early eighties, Freddy had generated quite a buzz with his band Gaxi Royal, though it hadn't been enough for a record deal. It seemed, though, he hadn't given up quite yet, and so he formed a new band every couple of months, none of which ever got much beyond two performances.

A discordant jumble of instruments sounded from the stage. Angelika had experienced a number of things at U4. Musicians who urinated on volunteers' chests. Hawaii-themed parties in the middle of winter, with paddling pools on stage. Or, as one conservative local politician claimed, U4 was corrupting the youth – upon which the club had had its licence revoked, with no idea that this would be the starting pistol for the craziest live concerts of all, the kind that really did corrupt the youth while

above the dance floor a sign proclaimed: PLEASE DON'T DANCE WHILE LISTENING TO MUSIC.

This particular band, Angelika thought, seemed to be trying too hard to live up to those times. The musicians threw sackfuls of leaves and old funeral wreaths into the audience. Angelika and Ingi caught one of the wreaths, wriggled inside and used it as a hula-hoop. *Our dear comrade Horst, in eternal remembrance – the Austrian Comradeship Association*, read the ribbon. The band jumped around on stage like a troop of monkeys gone wild. Not even the keyboard player or drummer seemed to consider it helpful to sit down; the former switched to playing the keyboard with his feet, while the latter started using bottles as drumsticks. It sounded gruesome, it smelled like a peat factory, but it was a spectacle, and, as though to protest the fact that the eighties were drawing to a close, the few party animals who were there would rot away together on the dance floor. Some of them held lighters in the air. The bar girls filled buckets with water. Angelika decided she didn't care if the place was about to go up in flames; she wanted to dance, and so she danced. Then the drummer leaped on to the guitar, which the guitarist had just set aside so he could tip a pint of beer down his gullet. The guitarist lashed out, smashing his glass on the drummer's skull, whereupon the latter crashed to the ground and had to be taken away in an ambulance. Thus did the concert come to an end. A DJ took over. Angelika and Ingi looked for a seat in the clubroom.

'Bollocks,' murmured Ingi. Angelika put her aching feet up, and Ingi mused on where there might be a better party, until

someone leaped over the back of the sofa and squeezed themselves roughly in between the two friends. Ingi went to give the intruder a slap, but her aim was off and she smacked Angelika's ear with such force that she spent the next thirty seconds feeling as though she were on a swaying ship.

'What the hell is wrong with you?' Angelika yelled at Ingi.

'Fuck off, you filthy pig!' Ingi yelled at the guy.

'Apologies, ladies, but I've come to the realisation that I love you,' the guy said to Angelika. When she was able to see straight again, she identified him as Freddy. Ingi was pulling at his jacket.

'You little shit, you hurt my friend!'

'That was you!' Angelika said to Ingi.

'No, Angie dear, he ducked.'

Freddy pulled out a hundred-schilling note and handed it to Ingi.

'Get us all a drink, would you? You can choose whatever you like.' Ingi glared at him hatefully, but then she inspected the watermark and left.

'She'll go off and buy weed and never come back,' Angelika said, rubbing her ear.

'I'm done here anyway. Shall we go to yours?' He put one arm round her shoulders and stroked her thigh.

'Are you mad?' Angelika said, pushing him away.

'Come on, love, I saw the way you were dancing for me,' he said, then leaned forward and stuck his tongue in her smarting ear – an unusually long and wet tongue, like a water snake or a

tadpole's tail. Ingi would probably have ripped out a clump of his hair if he'd tried such a move on her. Angelika herself usually spurned unwanted advances politely, but saliva in her ear was going too far. Why did men think women existed only for them? Why did the director think it was OK to have her patch him up while he sat there in his underpants? Why did drunk, half-bald and four-times-divorced Hugo think he stood a chance with her? Why did Berti assume she wanted to have him in her flat all weekend when all he was going to do was stare at his pharmacy textbooks? And why did this idiot, who'd desecrated a cemetery for his onstage performance, think she'd been dancing for him?

'You're a filthy pig,' she told him, and hastened back to the dance floor. Her feet hurt; she was tired; she wanted to go to bed. But as long as that fiend thought she'd spent even a second dancing for him, it wasn't enough. With an iron will, she danced till the lights went on. Then Angelika saw what she'd already sensed the entire time: Freddy, sitting off to one side, legs spread wide, a moronic grin on his face, staring at her intensely so that she felt completely naked despite being fully clothed. She located Ingi, who was in the midst of a discussion about the merits of late-night *Debreziner* versus cheese-filled sausages, and started to drag her away. Freddy planted himself in their path.

'In a couple of hours you'll realise: we belong together,' he said. Only when Ingi threatened to shove her beer bottle into his rectum did he withdraw with his hands above his head. Up on the street, they were greeted by a fierce air-slap: the fresh morning air smacked them in the face, and Angelika immediately felt two-

tenths of a per cent less drunk. Pink streaks hung in the sky. Angelika looked at the brightness enveloping the smutty late-nineteenth-century buildings along the banks of the river Wien. The morning traffic had already started, the first Saturday shoppers on their way into town.

‘Can I go beddy-byes on your couch again?’ asked Ingi.

‘Berti’s there and he’ll be pissed off I’m only just coming home. Sorry, Ingi love, but I’m afraid you’re going to have to go home to Strebersdorf.’

‘I don’t have to do anything.’

She gave Angelika a kiss on the cheek and turned on her heel. A couple of worse-for-wear carousers who didn’t want to go home yet sat around on empty drinks crates not far from the entrance to the club. Behind her, Angelika heard Ingi asking this motley crew, ‘Right then, my pretties, who wants to have sex?’

Angelika found out who definitely didn’t want to have sex when she got home: Berti. He was showered, dressed and waiting for the mocha pot to start spitting on the larger of the gas rings.

‘Hi, Berti bear,’ said Angelika, as sweetly as exhaustion would allow. Berti didn’t turn around, so she hugged him from behind. He muttered a tart ‘Hello’, but in spite of her caresses made no move to turn towards her. Angelika reached round and turned off the hob. Did that Freddy really think she was so easy to get? She deserved better. ‘Berti, you smell so good.’

‘I’m going home to revise. I just wanted a quick cup of coffee because I’m so tired from worrying about you not coming home,’ he said, emotionlessly. Angelika knew she was now

supposed to utter copious apologies and murmur something romantic, but she was too tired to be the good girlfriend he deserved.

‘It’s faster if you put it on the small burner,’ she mumbled, then went to take off her make-up with almond oil and warm water. In bed, the cotton pillowcase she’d washed two days ago embraced the back of her head as though it had been waiting longingly for her. Lying down, her feet hurt even more. Her tights were soaked with blood where she’d developed a blister around midnight. Her back hurt; her head was spinning. She wouldn’t be able to sleep with Berti bustling around outside like that. Finally, he poked his head round the end of the bookcase. ‘Was there something else you wanted to say to me?’

There was a coffee stain on his shirt. If she pointed it out, he’d rub salt into it, rinse it, take the hairdryer to it. Angelika’s head hurt; she wouldn’t be able to stand the noise of the hairdryer.

‘Let me know when you’ve stopped sulking.’ Angelika pulled the duvet over her head.

Berti sighed sadly.

‘I’ve accepted that even at the age of nearly thirty, you still want to go bounding around at discos like an eighteen-year-old. But Sunday’s the anniversary of my dad’s death. And the fact that you couldn’t care less about it doesn’t exactly make you a nice person.’

Angelika waited for the door to slam, but Berti shut it carefully behind him. Angelika couldn’t sleep. How could she have forgotten that? You don’t forget that kind of thing when you like

someone. And she did like Berti: Berti made sure she had enough food in the fridge, Berti listened whenever she needed to vent about how she didn't get enough recognition at work. Berti was good to her, and the way he could get her to come without her having to lend a helping hand was something he'd learn soon enough.

Angelika's studio flat was marginally bigger than a shoebox: the entrance hall, which led off the arcade in the building's back courtyard, was equipped with a kitchenette and a shower and acted as a vanguard to the living-slash-bedroom, whose casement windows also looked out on to the wooden access gallery. Outside, the neighbours were standing by the door to the shared toilet, discussing an armed raid on the tobacconist's. Angelika was too tired to get out of bed. Her blood alcohol level was sinking; she felt sick; she wanted a glass of water, but the tap was so horribly far away. Angelika tossed and turned and felt guilty: why couldn't she manage to be decent to a man who was unfailingly wonderful in his treatment of her? Everyone at work thought she was a good-time girl. Her manager, Klaus Schnattl, spent his mornings dusting his yucca plant, but all the same he was head of the department while she was given the trainee-level work that the others were too good for. She couldn't manage to show them what she was made of. She couldn't even manage to sleep. She only managed one thought: now what?

[END OF SAMPLE]