CHAPTER ONE

Flowers

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.
(Virginia Woolf)

Day One

April 7, 1924

Marie said she would buy some flowers, and the trams, the pigeons, and the motor cars all murmured “yes.” She was light upon her feet; quick, careful, lest she should brush against another. None, she thought; there would be none who would know her, though some had smiled. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to. She would buy the flowers on her way back, and as she walked her head was set low.

She paused to allow a file of children to pass in front of her. Nineteen in all. Two-by-two save one, who turned and looked. It was her hat. Johannes may have bought it in Russia. But she should quicken her step. She … never tired of walking, for all her delicacy. On she walked. On. I love walking in London, she thought.

* In this chapter, all italicised quotations come from Woolf (most from Mrs Dalloway, some from her diaries and letters).
Did Johannes ever come this way? On foot, to his office. He did not like the omnibus and, besides, walking was even more natural than talking, he would say, quoting their friend, the eminent Linguist, Mr. X, as he had been introduced the night they had first met.

The Linguist was an elegant man with a fine moustache, the points of which seemed to quiver as if receiving messages from the air. Some said his name was Ferdinand de Saussure, Professor Ferdinand de Saussure. He certainly spoke with authority; though was inclined, Johannes would say, to mistake language for Switzerland. “A panorama of the Alps,” the Linguist had said, “must be taken from just one point. The same is true of a language.” The Linguist’s great-grandfather, she had heard, was a mountaineer. Among the first to conquer Mont Blanc. But she must be getting on. Such traffic. Piccadilly. Such traffic.

“City of death.” Yes, that was it. That was what he had said about Mont Blanc. Shelley, not the Linguist. Shelley, the poet. Strange thing to say, or write, whatever the light. Though he was an unbeliever, Shelley that is, even among the mountains. Especially among the mountains, Johannes had said, pointing out that the unbelieving poet had signed the guest book at Chamonix as “Percy Bysshe Shelley, Atheist.” Ah, and here, right here was Somerset House. Over the Strand … the clouds were of mountainous white.

Perhaps, she thought, she should not read so much. After all, there were, these days, so many curious books and so many curious authors. Mrs. Woolf, for instance, or Mr. Eliot, Mr. Eliot-the-Clerk, as Johannes would say. Mr. Eliot, however, she rather liked, seeing that he had written about a woman called Marie. Moreover his Marie, Mr. Eliot’s, was also inclined to read through the night. And then there was Miss Emily Dickinson, the hermit of Amherst, they said. “Our lives are Swiss,” she had written, “So still — so cool.” Yes. “Till some odd afternoon, the Alps neglect their Curtains.” Yes. “And we look further on.”

Marie paused, a little faint, and glimpsed a poster in the window of a shop. “The British Empire Exhibition, Wembley Stadium.” Yes, many would come. Odd, though, that the poster
should portray London as a woman in bronze, naked and slim. Marie tugged at her coat. April was indeed a cruel month, just as Mr. Eliot had thought. And, now, a shower was upon them. Rain, rain all over London, she should not wonder, even at the Exhibition. *It is nature that is the ruin of Wembley,* she thought. The problem of the sky remains, she thought. *Is it, one wonders, part of the Exhibition?* Marie put up her umbrella. How mountainous those clouds.

Was Johannes out in the rain? Perhaps, but then he was used to weather of all kinds. He travelled so much. What with his languages. French, German, even Russian. The rubber-trade took him to so many places.

* Metropolitan Police
— January 7, 1927 —
Johannes Schad has paid periodical visits to the Continent on business and pleasure and intends doing so in the future.

She did not, herself, like to travel by train; it was not, she had heard, altogether safe. *Villains there must be ... battering the brains of a girl out in a train.* The continental trains were, though, very different. She had once said so to the Linguist. He, though, had simply muttered something about trains in general, about how no two trains, whatever we think, are identical. “We [invariably] assign [the same] identity to two [quite different] trains,” he had said. “For instance, ‘the 8.45 from Geneva to Paris.’ One [such train]… leaves twenty-four hours after the other, [and yet] we treat it as the ‘same’ train.”

Trafalgar Square was stirring. People of all nations and none, she thought. She had not intended to come this way but paused to open her purse for a man without legs, his upturned cap beg-
ging on his behalf. He gazed for a moment. *Every man fell in love with her.* “The bride is beautiful,” as Johannes would say.

It is true that he would sometimes add “but, she is married to another man.” This, though, had been a jest of his. “The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man” were, he would explain, the famous words of a famous telegram. Coded words. The cable, he would say, had been wired from Palestine by two Jewish zealots hot-foot from the world’s first Zionist Congress, a gathering held, strange to say, in Basel. Yes, *his* Basel. The two zealots had, apparently, gone off in vainest search of Israel. Zion. The Promised Land. And they had found her indeed to be beautiful. But also to be another’s.

The man without the legs smiled. Then touched his cap and smiled again. She must help him. Find a baker’s. Ah, here. That smile, though. Yes that smile, it lifted her up and up when — oh! a pistol shot in the street outside!

“*Dear, those motorcars,*” said Miss Pym, going to the window to look, and coming back and smiling apologetically as if those motorcars, these tyres of motorcars, were all her fault.

No, thought Marie, it was *her* fault. She had grown comfortable from the tyres that rubber made, and, in fact, from all that rubber made. Yes, the disturbance in the street was her fault. But she could not stop. She must give the man the sandwich. She could not stop. She was expected at noon. By another man.

Marie’s shoes concerned her. The heels, though modest, were about to give way, and the points of her shoes were worn. Better not to look down; best look up, right up. And why not, seeing that *all down The Mall people were … looking up into the sky. See, an aeroplane!* There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! The Linguist, how he would have loved these letters. “*C was it? And an E? Then an L?*” There was, she saw, no “A” in the sky. Don’t tell the Linguist. He had loved the French lettersound *a*, handling it like the most fragile shell. “In its consistency,” he had once said, “it is something solid, but thin, that cracks easily if struck.”
The aeroplane above breathed several more letters into the sky. But it was not a day to stand and watch. Not like that day in Palmers Green. The dazzling day. 1912 it was, before they had moved in. “Honeymoon Land,” or so it was called. Newly-minted suburbia. Modern Houses for Modern Couples. This dazzling day, they said, was the day an airman, Italian, heading for Hendon, had found his engine faltering high over Honeymoon Land and, seeing Broomfield Park, had attempted to effect a landing. The aeroplane was, though, by now flying so low that its wings, they said, touched first one roof and then another before finally settling, with a murmur, upon the slates of 75 Derwent Road.

Mrs. Woolf, apparently, had said that in or about December, 1910, human character changed. In Palmers Green it had surely changed two years later, changed with an aeroplane upon a slated roof and a stranded aviator, a continental traveller emerging from a wounded butterfly. He had waved, they said, waved to the Honeymooners below, waved from his suburban Alp, waved as if he had something to communicate, just like, so like, the aeroplane even now assaulting the ears of all the people … in Pic-
cadilly. But what was it? What was it? What had he been trying to say? What word was it?

The traffic stammered an answer, and Marie strained to listen; but here, now, were boys in uniform, carrying guns ... and the wreath ... to the empty tomb. The Cenotaph, they are marching to the Cenotaph. Greek, it was, for empty tomb. Yes, but what might it mean to be the mother whose sons have been killed? What might it mean to be a wife?

Johannes, though, had not fought. He was thirty-four at the outbreak and, besides, he too was an Alien. He had still volunteered, saying he had languages and that he was ready to prosecute the War with words. To be an Interpreter. And he did get a letter, from the War Office. But he had merely been placed upon the Waiting List.

Her own tomb, as it were, was an empty tomb — having no dead sons to mourn, nor buried husband. Empty, perfectly empty, she thought. And, as the boys in uniform disappeared toward Whitehall, she remembered the annual silence. November silence. It had been strange to hear it at home, all that silence, on the wireless. Just Johannes and her. In the front parlour. Throughout the whole two minutes she had sat and covered her ears. Johannes had stood, his arms stiff at his side. It was, she had said, at the end, as if he were still awaiting The Call. From the War Office. He had asked her not to make light of the silence.

The Swiss Observer
— November 17, 1923 —
We Swiss are as deeply concerned in Armistice Day as any other nation.
(Editor)
The Swiss, Johannes had added, were always readied for war. He had then pointed to an old slip of paper he had drawn from inside his jacket. On it, he said, were lines once set down by the Linguist. Swiss, of course. See, said Johannes, war is even on his mind. “Victory all … along the line.” “Advancing with all … big guns.” Johannes ran his finger along the words. He then looked up. The War, he added, had reached the Alps. True, it was only the Dolomite Alps, but all the signs of the War (the bones, the wire, the shells, etc.) remained. Bloodless signs.

This perpendicular Flanders, vertical Somme, could still, apparently, be seen, seen in the snow. “Snow,” Johannes had remarked, “is itself an engine of war.” Yes, she had said. Yes, she knew, for she had read late at night of the retreat from Moscow. Poor Napoleon, she thought. Defeated by Russian snow. Repelled, by the cold. The snow.

Now, however, at last it was the Spring, and she must head for Regent Street, where the windows would surely be glorious. As she walked, she thought once more of the Alps, and the dead. Yes, there had been the young men, the soldiers, but there were also the others. The others who had died in the Alps. She had read of them in The Swiss Observer, a London weekly that Johannes used to take. The Organ of the Colony, he called it. Each and every week, it seemed, someone had fallen to their death whilst walking the Alps. Pleasure-seekers they were, such as Miss Lina Schwarz, a telephonist from Geneva who had ascended the Pointe Pelouse in Savoy when, suddenly seized with dizziness, she fell off. Apparently.

A man atop a passing omnibus nodded. But the bride, she thought, is married to another. She then paused to open her bag; an over-night bag, Johannes had called it. Yes, all she might need.

But why mourn just one victim of the Alps? In the Alps, she heard, you could not move for Calvaries. Over the years, so many had fallen and died that, at almost every turn, every climb, there was a cross, a Golgotha, yet another Saviour. It was absurd. *When a man … says he is Christ … you invoke proportion.*
Yes, the man on the omnibus might nod but people would continue to die falling. Such as, for example, that *Eton tutor, a nice young man* … [who] *now lies at the bottom of a crevasse in Switzerland* … *crushed beside his [fiancée] Mary* … *the two bodies for ever … frozen.* Both of them.

And what, she wondered, might it be like to fall with another? Miss Schwarz, the telephonist, had fallen, whirled, descended alone, but what would it be like to plummet hand-in-hand? And how would you be remembered, the two of you? Would it mean that not one cross but two might mark the place where you finally shatter? And, if the two of you were married, might a future passer-by interpret the crosses as witness to both a *Christ … and Christess?* Or even, dare she say it, a Mr. and Mrs. Christ? She liked the idea of married Saviours. A single cross had always puzzled her.

*A seedy-looking nondescript man* … *stood on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral …. Why not enter in? he thought, [and] … put this leather bag stuffed with pamphlets before … a cross, the symbol of something.*

Marie paused before St. James’s Church. Why not enter in? Yes, why not? Because its cross would be empty, and today, just today, she did not want reminding of the Resurrection. Poor Mary being told not to touch her risen Lord, not to hold on tight. No, she would not enter in. It is true that she was reborn, that she was washed in the Blood, and that she had *seen the light* … *years … ago,* but today she might see the dark.

Marie looked behind. Was he following her, the Linguist? He had followed her before, or somebody had. Somebody like him. But she would not quicken her step. *He started after her. … Was she, he wondered, … respectable? And was she? Was she respectable? There were, of course, all those nights spent apart. But then he … insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed* and, besides, Dr. Stopes, the famous Dr. Marie Stopes, had always advised that husband and wife should have separate bedrooms.

Her own bedroom, in the mornings, had the light. It would wake her early. Johannes’s bedroom, though not communicat-
ing, was just across the landing. The supreme mystery ... was simply this: here was one room; there another. No, not a mystery, Johannes would say, merely an arrangement, an arrangement of souls. And, “no soul,” said Dr. Stopes, “could grow ... without spells of solitude.” Marie missed him nevertheless. Her soul, she said, missed his. But, he said, she could always ring him. It was his joke. Honeymoon Land, Johannes would say, was possessed of an excellent telephone exchange.

Once, as if to prove his point, he had added that people were talking behind the bedroom walls. Yes, she had said, people did talk. She had read in the Recorder that, in Palmers Green, “girls who went into service discussed their mistress's failings with freedom.”

Marie suspected that Nelly spoke freely; and, more than once, had aired her suspicion. “Breathes there a woman with tongue so tied she never discusses the servant problem?” the Recorder had asked. No, she had murmured; her tongue was never so tied, least not her French tongue. If she and Johannes ever wished to keep words to themselves, to puzzle Nelly, they would simply talk in French.

She thought again of the Linguist. “Suppose,” he once had said, “suppose someone pronounces the French word nu.” Suppose indeed. And suppose, she thought, just suppose you were overheard by a girl who understood French, who knew that nu meant “naked,” and who might also see someone naked, and with another? What then?

But just a word, just a word overheard, even such a word, what could that betray? What could that prove? Besides, she thought, what could spoken words ever prove? They come, they go. As the Linguist had once whispered, “It would be impossible to photograph the utterance of a word.”

On and on she went ... up Regent Street, now thinking of all the teeth in Paris, and all the x-rays she had taken. The surgery had been so busy. And how much she had seen in the wide-open mouths, the lips gaping wide.

The other day she had read, in the Recorder, “Do you examine your children's teeth?” No. No, she did not. Besides, her
qualifications were not recognised here. Not in England. So, no, she examined nobody’s teeth, and did not desire to do so. What could be seen within the wide-open mouth was, at times, quite unbearable. *Pneumonia in [the] throat, for instance, the germs [forever] copulating.

She walked on, as another shower whipped her cheek. And, through the rain, she saw a woman who wore a mackintosh, a green mackintosh. It was Miss Kilman standing still in the street for a moment to mutter, “It is the flesh.” Marie nodded her assent. *This Christian … woman* was right, so very right. But not the green mackintosh, in that respect Miss Kilman erred. She, Marie, was also a Christian, married to Christ; but the bride was still to be beautiful, and so should never wear such a mackintosh. Miss Kilman, she had heard, was even given to standing … upon the landing in her mackintosh. A large dark motorcar crept by, its new tyres piano-black.

*Yes, Miss Kilman stood on the landing,* and yes she, Marie, had also lingered, some nights, upon the landing. At Johannes’s door. And there, right there, *she would think what in the world she could do to give him pleasure (short always of the one thing).* Some nights she would even go into his room, and *he could see her with tears running down her cheeks going to her writing-table and dashing off that one line.* Strange, how it often ended that way. Sometimes she would write that same one line again and again.

In the morning, she would wonder at her writing. Page after page, and always *that one line.* The night of truth, she used to say. The Linguist, however, had always said of writing, “We must be aware of its defects.” The Linguist had not liked writing, not liked to set things down. He had, in fact, never written her; instead, he would whisper. Through the traffic. Writing, he believed, was a wretched poison, and was now even infecting speech, pronunciation. “In Paris,” he had sighed, “in Paris one already hears *sept femmes* with the ‘t’ pronounced.”

But, why *sept femmes?* she had asked. Why not *sept hommes?* Or *sept rues?* Why seven women? Were there only women in Paris? The Linguist had said nothing, and she had apologised.
She had been speaking like one of Mrs. Pankhurst’s women. Such women were legion in Palmers Green. Some had even set fire to the letterbox at the corner of Fearnley Road. Its gaping mouth had smoked like a gun, and when the box was opened the Royal Mail was nothing but ash. It had been a kind of treason. England had trembled.

And on she walked. Dear England, she thought. Her father, he was English, but her mother was French, and she herself, Marie, had chosen France for her passport. A blow had been struck; a window broken; a brick dislodged. She had betrayed the Kingdom, connived against this isle of men, this dear, dear land. She had chosen to be not English. To be not English even among the dead.

As she walked, Marie thought how long she had continued her betrayal, it becoming a secret treason, a secret un-weaving, a nightly work of nothing and tears, a nightly not-thinking of England. And it almost made her smile at the policeman who, just now, had arrested the traffic.

How little the policeman knew. How little he could have guessed. For instance, that she was a friend of the eminent Linguist. Or that he, the Linguist, had a wife who was also called Marie. How little, too, could the policeman have guessed that within but half an hour she, Marie, Johannes’s Marie, as it were, would undress. Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe. Her finest underclothes would be laid on a chair, her body cast in Russian perfume, and she would be alone in a room with a man who was not her husband.

Marie quickened her step, crossed Oxford Street … and turned down one of the little streets … Now, and now, the great moment was approaching. Yes, here was Queen Anne Street, and here was number 20. She stood before the door and rang. An ambulance passed by. The door was soon opened by a girl who led her along a corridor and into a faded room. A waiting room. She declined the invitation to remove her coat and stared at a door that led to another room. She made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting her chastity … Now the door opened, and … for a single second she could not remember what he was called.
The man in the doorway was known to both her and Johannes; known, though not well. He smiled. All would be fine, he said. They would not be alone; there would be a witness. It was the only way and would be for the best. He then withdrew.

There were, she now noticed, two others in the waiting room. A man and a woman. They looked up as if she were a guest and this their drawing room. The man stood up and introduced himself as Hugh Whitbread, the woman beside him being Mrs. Whitbread. *They had just come up, he said, to see doctors. Other people came to see pictures, go to the opera …; the[y] … came “to see doctors.”* Marie nodded, sat down, and drew from her bag a book. Mr. Whitbread coughed, desiring to speak. *His wife,* he explained, *had some internal ailment.* How openly the stranger spoke. Johannes never spoke of ailments, or complaints, but then *Dr. Holmes [had] said there was nothing the matter with him.*

*

**The High Court of Justice**

I do order that Inspectors be appointed to examine the parts and organs of generation of Johannes Schad to report whether he is capable of performing the act of generation; and also to examine the parts and organs of generation of Marie Schad and to report whether she is, or is not, a Virgin, and hath or hath not any impediment on her part to prevent the consummation of Marriage.

(W. Inderwick, Registrar)

*

Something had changed. It was the Whitbreads. They had gone. And in their place stood an older woman, a nurse, a kind of angel, grey. Would Mrs. Schad care to follow her? The seraph was beckoning her back toward the hall and, once there, led her to a staircase. *Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower,*
she went upstairs. At the third turn or break in the staircase, Marie stopped. It was a little larger than the landing at home. She looked out. Our lives, she thought, are Swiss. At last, she could see forever. And flinched.

But what could he see? Johannes. He had always said that from Basel one could see Israel. Or, so said the Zionists. Milk and honey, etc. From Basel, he would say, the Promised Land could at least be seen, if not entered. Like Paradise, she thought. The nurse coughed. Marie had heard much about Paradise, but knew it was not for all. Dr. Stopes had written about a newly married couple who thought they were “entering Paradise” but were, apparently, mistaken.

A horn sounded in the street, and Marie followed the nurse up another flight of stairs, then through an open door. She paused once more. Here, at last, she would be seen. Dr. Stevens looked up from his desk, rose to his feet, and moved toward a basin of water. He washed his hands in silence. The nurse motioned Marie toward a curtain. Women ... at midday ... must disrobe. The policeman would once again stop the traffic, and she would now undress. The bride, she thought, is beautiful. The Linguist had smiled when first she had said this, as if he too were about to talk of beauty. But no. “To speak of a linguistic law,” he had remarked, “is like trying to lay hands on a ghost.” The doctor washed his hands a second time. She closed her eyes. Tight.
Fig. 4. Report of Gynaecological Examination, April 7, 1924.
The National Archives.
After it all, and once outside, Marie stood in the doorway. She closed her eyes again. Tight shut again. And here she might have stayed. In very great pain. But, there were still the flowers to buy, and so she began to walk. Very slowly.

She must buy the flowers, she thought, as two men passed by. “I have come over,” said one, “to see lawyers about the divorce.” She knew there was a flower-stall nearby; she had passed it on her way. Ah, there it was, vivid with every possible colour. Red? Yes. And she would have them wrapped. Thank you. Behind her, two smart women waited, one laughing and the other talking of “men … who sent their wives to Court.”

Marie, though, would not be sent. She would go of her own volition. And she would take flowers. “Are flowers,” she asked, “allowed in Court?”
Fig. 5. Court Minutes of Schad v Schad, née Wheeler.
The National Archives.
Day Two

November 25, 1924

Marie had brought some flowers with her and held them tight. Her coat matched the dark of the vast, stone-built, entrance hall. She did not particularly like the echoes or footfalls. Nor the whispers. Another cathedral, she thought, and sat down. The bench was cold.

Beside her was a tall, angular woman. “It is to be an annulment,” whispered the woman. She paused, then began again: “Dr. Stopes herself has had an annulment.” Marie lay the flowers at her feet. “It happens, you know,” whispered the woman. “Dr. Stopes has written, I believe, about a nullity case that took place after twenty years of supposed marriage.”

Marie did not care for the word “supposed.” It was true that she and Johannes had rarely made a show of their affection; true they had not always spoken over dinner, unless Johannes had invited guests. But a couple need not make an exhibition of love; need not speak, nor even touch. Two can, sometimes, simply lie together, hearing the same sounds, feeling the same air press upon their limbs. And two can, surely, sleep apart. As Dr. Stopes herself recommended. *A little independence there must be between people living together.*

Yes, she thought, yes, a little independence; *a room of one’s own,* a bedroom of one’s own and, above all, a bed in which one could inhale fresh, un-breathed air. She sighed but would not cry. Not now. Not here. Her shoes, she thought, were worse than ever. She then looked up. Across the hall stood Johannes wearing the same black suit he had worn in that wondrous summer of theirs, in Paris, on the very day they had stood side-by-side, before God and Man. A miracle it had been. Then.

A clear, light voice was now heard above the whispers, and echoes of whispers. It was his name and hers. His first, that of the Petitioner. Then hers, that of the Respondent. Should they enter together? No, they should not. She would enter alone. But first, and with the flowers. Violet.
The Courtroom was dark and, once within, the Usher, a pale man, showed her to a seat. The judge, it would be Sir Thomas Horridge, should soon appear. Marie caught Johannes’s eye. He looked down. The business of copulation was filth to him before the end. But this may not be the end. The world might turn. Sir Thomas could surely see to that. He was a Knight. And here he came. She straightened her hat. Had the Usher noticed her hat? Or, was it that she had taken off her wedding ring?

“Marriage,” began Sir Thomas, “is founded on words of Divine authority.” To dissolve a marriage would, then, be to dissolve God. She looked around. Perhaps, after all, there is no God?

Sir Thomas now called upon the evidence of Dr. Stevens, to be read by Johannes’s barrister, a thin man. The first testimony concerned herself, but she would not lower her eyes. The thin man’s voice rose and fell; at times loud, at others quiet. Some words she heard, some she did not. “Very great pain,” she heard. “Not since November 1904,” she heard. “Both being known to me,” she heard. Was it not strange, she thought, to be seen by one to whom they were already known?

“Not since November 1904”—she heard the words again. “Not since November 1904.” She closed her eyes tight shut. Paris, Johannes, and their courtship froze beneath her eyelids. Bloodless. No trace of blood, none at all. She had known what this could mean, but it could not have been the case. And she had bled no more, thereafter. No more the Curse.

She wished to say something, but the thin man had begun to read again, informing the Court that the Petitioner had successfully demonstrated himself capable of the act of generation. But how, was not said; or under what conditions, or before whom.

She must now speak, address the Court, the Crown as it were, and risk contempt. The assembled would doubtless turnabout, and all behold the bride, the still un-ravished bride. And, though she might suffer a rush of November blood, she would speak. She rose to her feet, still holding her flowers, and lifted her head. But Sir Thomas had gone, and the courtroom was already beginning, in silence, to empty. She looked across at Johannes,
who mouthed, she thought, “I am sorry.” His lips brushed the air. *He has left me; I am alone for ever.*

She had been, apparently, nobody’s wife; there had been, apparently, no marriage to cancel. And she wondered by what English magic the Court had erased something which had never existed in the first place. Nothing. It was just as Mr. Eliot had written. Nothing again.

“But what,” she said, aloud, quietly tearing at the silence, “what of the statement? Dr. Stevens’s statement, it contains errors, the finest of errors.” Her solicitor was already leaving. “Dr. Stevens,” she continued, “meant to say ‘menstruated,’ but what the typist had set down is ‘menstrated.’ The ‘u’ is not there.” She waved a carbon copy of the statement. “Look. There is no letter ‘u.’ The assertion that she ‘had not menstrated since November 1904’ was, surely, inadmissible, illegitimate, a kind of bastard?”

Her solicitor had now gone. Marie would, though, continue to speak. “His name,” she said, “the doctor’s name, it’s also wrong. It says ‘Thomas C. Stevens’ but it should say ‘Thomas G. Stevens.’ ‘G’ for George. Where there is a ‘C’ there should be a ‘G.’ Look. Look.” Again she waved the statement.

Silence. There was silence. She looked around the Court. Only the Usher had remained. But he at least had listened; she felt sure he had listened.

And now, yes now, the Usher spoke. He wished to remind her of what the eminent Linguist had always said. Ah, the Usher too seemed to know him. The Linguist, he continued, had always said that words would change, and letters disappear. For example, the word “menstruated” might lose the letter “u,” said the Usher, but such is merely the forgetfulness of language.

“Consider,” he added, “the German word, *Bethaus,* meaning ‘temple.’”

She looked puzzled.

“Recall,” continued the Usher, “how the word had once been spelt Betahus.”

Marie sat down, and the Usher concluded. “According to the Linguist, the change was but ‘the result of an accident … the fall of the “a” in *Bethaus.*’”
No, she said. The Linguist had, for once, been mistaken; had been wrong to talk of the fall of the “a.” No, the “a” had not fallen but merely moved, migrated. Whilst once the “a” came before the letter “h” (Betahus), now it came after the letter “h” (Bethaus). The “a” had passed through the “h” as if it were scarcely there. As the Linguist might surely have guessed, for he had also once said that the “aspirate ‘h’ … is an orthographic ghost.” The “a,” therefore, was not fallen, was not gone. No, it was simply elsewhere, in another room, as it were.

The Usher was perturbed; the woman, she was right. The Linguist had erred. Within the word Betahus there was no crevasse, no place to fall. It was as if the Linguist had somehow been thinking of an accident somewhere in the Alps. The Usher, deeply troubled, sat down; the woman would now develop her case.

“If,” she said, “the letter ‘a’ had not disappeared, then perhaps she too, Marie Schad, would not simply disappear?” The Usher said nothing. “Instead, might I yet pass,” she continued, “like the ‘a,’ through some door, some wall, and there, like a nun who has left the world, find asylum?”

She had risen to her feet but was possessed by a terrible dizziness. The Usher offered her his arm and inquired if she would like him to telephone for a cab. Yes, she said; to Victoria, for she would go South that night, toward Paris. And there she would meet the Linguist, who would arrive on the 8:45 from Geneva.

But did she not know, inquired the Usher, his face torn in two, did she not know that the Linguist was dead? That he had died in 1913? She did not move, her face as still as a doll.

Yes, she said. Yes, she had known, had always known. But the Linguist, she said, when last they met, had whispered, “Let us begin with death.” Begin, she echoed, begin — not end.

There was, once more, the dizziness. The Usher again offered his arm and inquired if she were well enough to travel alone. He paused, then spoke again. Could he not (here he hesitated) — could he not accompany her? To the station.

Marie, for a moment, said nothing. Such kindness; she had never encountered such kindness. No, she said, gently. The man
had not quite understood, had not quite understood this leaving like a nun, this leaving the world, this beginning with death. *This killing oneself.* She would, though, give to the man her flowers.

He thanked her.

Outside, the cries of the street welcomed Marie. *This killing oneself,* she thought, *does one set about it with a table knife?* She walked on. Or, she wondered, could one simply walk in front of a motor car? *In the midst of traffic there was the habitation of God.* And this killing oneself, she thought, should one set about it today, or next week? Or, exactly a year and a day after one’s undressing, one’s disrobing?


— April 8, 1925 —

London … is shot with the accident I saw this morning … a woman crying “Oh oh oh,” faintly, pinned against the railings with a motorcar on top of her.

(Woolf)
Some diabolical official is playing about with our letters.
— Franz Kafka (1883–1924)