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–Carrie O'Grady on *The Element of Water, The Guardian*

EARTHLY CREATURES

Stevie Davies

HONNO MODERN FICTION

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To Julie Bertagna and Frances Hill,
dear friends, peerless writers

I desire a violent, domineering, fearless and ferocious upcoming generation … able to bear pain … show no signs of weakness or tenderness. The free and magnificent predator must once again glint from their eyes.[1]

Adolf Hitler to Hermann Rauschning, 1934

Long nights now. Short days …
– Burn the houses down, my brothers! …
Every village – is now a fire!
Everything flames. Locked in their burning
Cowsheds, how the cows are bellowing -
– Ah, poor creatures …[2]

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Prussian Nights,* 1947

Off with your steel helmets! Throw your rifles away!
Enough of this murderous enmity!

Do you love a woman? So do I.
And have you a mother? A mother bore me.
What about your child? I too love children.
And the houses reek of cursing, praying, weeping…

You were brave men. Now throw away national pride.
The green sea is rising. Just take my hand.[3]

Gerrit Engelke, 'To the Soldiers of the Great War', 1916–18

PRELUDE
East Prussia, 1944

Wild geese are rushing through the night,
With shrill cry northwards faring.
Danger awaits! Take care your flight!
The world is full of murder.[4]

Walter Flex, 1916

Storks, in their thousands, prepared to abdicate their high thrones. They peered down from chimney stacks and churches. Raising their heads, the creatures clattered their bills, spread huge wings, rose and soared in circles above the villages of East Prussia.

It was time, it was high time: the birds must abandon Europe without delay. So immemorial wisdom dictated, but with fresh urgency, for the storks could see from their vantage point what the human herd below avoided: Russia surging across the map from east to west. Southwards the flocks prepared to migrate, over the shrinking German Empire, across Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, cruising above the Bosporus to ride the thermals over Egypt, and follow the Nile down to the safety of breeding grounds in Africa.

Everywhere Magdalena Arber wandered, that halcyon summer and early autumn, she came across folk staring upwards, ruminating. You could hear what they did not say: *Will you ever return home, beloved creatures? Shall we?* In that peaceful season, the lush pastures of East Prussia had never seemed as fruitful. The villagers continued to eat their fill, while Europe famished. Wading through waves of green, Magdalena felt faint earth tremors: the reverberation of a

distant earthquake. On the main arteries, a westward trickle of refugees became a denser flow.

Now along the river valleys trekked strange cattle, driven east to west, breeds no one had seen before. In their thousands the animals gathered on the plains. On no account go near them, Magdalena was warned: these beasts are not a herd, you see, they're unrelated to one another. They've reverted and are wild animals now: they'll take you for an enemy. The cattle stampeded through the land, trod down fences, broke into gardens and stripped bushes and trees.

Uneasy news travelled by word of mouth, east to west. Border towns – Memel, Tilsit, Schirwindt – had been burned and bombed to ash. The rumble of distant artillery troubled your dreams; the eastern horizon glowed blood-red. The Russian front was coming, Stalin was coming! Terrified villagers abandoned their homes to join the flood of migrants…

…only to return and take up where they had left off.

For a deep, somnolent quiet had resumed. False alarm! Everyone exhaled. Our armies must have driven back the Slavs. The Russians are subhuman, everyone agreed, they cannot win against our Aryan might and manhood and technical know-how.

The wild geese took to the air, for their westward migration.

A first thick frost rimed the pastures. No grass remained for the alien cattle to eat, and they starved. They stood still, their stomachs distended, and when the snow fell, so – with a final defeated bellowing – did they.

Magdalena knelt to the child who was not her child, dressing her warmly in double layers of woollens and coats. She packed a rucksack, wrapped the crossbar of her bike in padding, and said, calmly, 'Dearest love, we need to go. But don't worry, Magda will look after you.'

1
Lübeck – Spring 1941

> The Master of Mercy will protect him forever, from behind the hiding of his wings, and will tie his soul with the rope of life.[5]
>
> *The Jewish Prayer for the Dead*

The moment she unfolded the letter and saw the official stamp at the head of the sheet, Magdalena knew: this was it! The imperial eagle spread the black symmetry of its wings on its swastika perch.

The call had come, she was under orders from the National Socialist Labour Service, flying the nest to make her contribution for Germany. Miss Magdalena Dorothea Arber was summoned to perform her war service as a village schoolteacher in East Prussia.

At last! Goodbye to lovely old Lübeck; release from the cosy cage of childhood and her family's dangerous equivocations. Nineteen years old and called to perform the kind of duty she valued most – brain work, rather than digging up spuds on a farm or assembling parts in a factory. Forming minds; taking culture to stinted children in the great fertile plains of the east. Bookish, greedy for knowledge, a lover of languages, Magda had yearned to study at university but the doors were closed to women. Never mind: this was a good second best.

And ... amazingly ... in East Prussia!

That unseen and poetic land had called to her forever: her dead mother's birthplace had been Königsberg. Magdalena knew East Prussia through the history books and a few photos in the family album. Primeval forests stocked with wild creatures: she was mad

about animals, there'd be elk and bison, bears and foxes, wolves and beaver, chamois and lynx and deer and boar and storks! There'd be vast wheatfields undulating as far as the eye could see and ancient forests. East Prussia was on an edge, a frontier. It was *over there!* A far country that was also, reassuringly, German to the core. To the east lay Asia, the Slavic races. Lithuania, Ukraine, Latvia, Russia. Imagine!

Magdalena could take her young pupils to view the Teutonic Knights' castles and fortresses from the thirteenth century. They'd be the children of farmers and hunters, horse breeders, foresters and fishermen. Her pupils could teach her about their myths and customs, mysterious and ancient. She could take them to the white sands of the Baltic Sea shore with its trove of amber. Lagoons, rivers, lakes. They'd be *her* children, Magdalena loved them already!

Yes, and Dorothea her mother, somehow an abiding presence in that unknown land, seemed to be calling.

Magdalena went haring round the house to share the news, only to find preoccupied murmuring coming from the kitchen. She paused at the ajar door to listen.

Dad was telling Auntie Ebba about his last conversation with … whom? The blackout was down and they were seated by candlelight at the rough old beechwood table. The halo of light cast by the candle picked out the table's whorls that remembered the original tree and its wounds; the stipple of pretend runes she and her cousin Clem had dug into the wood ('It wasn't me, honestly, Uncle Max – it was her!'; 'No it wasn't, Dad, it was him!')

Dad was speaking, Ebba listening. Through the gap, Magdalena could not see her aunt's face, only the fingertips of one hand tracing irregularities in the wood, round and round.

'…said he should have gone to Turkey with Erich in '37 while he had the chance. Erich begged him … he pleaded with him…'

'Erich?'

'Auerbach.'

Magdalena heard the tears in Ebba's voice. 'Oh yes, of course. How did Hans-Martin … how did he seem?'

'Calm, wry – matter-of-fact. Relieved almost at taking his life in his own hands. Thwarting *them*. You know how he is. Master of irony to the bitter end. Jested that he'd missed the boat when it came to Turkey. *And now they want to put me on the train!*'

Hans-Martin? Oh no, it was Dr Süsskind Dad was talking about. Dear Dr Süsskind who had been in their lives forever, scholarly, kind, austere. He couldn't help being a Jew and anyway he was exceptional. He'd been protected up till now by friends high in the Party. A complicated qualm overcame Magdalena. What train did they want to put Dr Süsskind on? But Magdalena knew. Of course she did. And instantly denied it to herself. No, that can't be right. International Jewry is one thing and must, she understood, be curbed. But not culled. Dr Süsskind is a good Jew. And anyway he's old. How could he labour in a work camp? Must be a terrible mistake.

A good Jew? A good *person*. Other people shocked Magdalena often, but not as grossly as she shocked herself.

'Shouldn't we go in and ... be with him, Max?' asked Ebba.

'He said no. Categorically. For our own sakes. They must come and find the body themselves when he doesn't show up at the station. Doesn't want us involved in any way. He asked me to take his books and manuscripts, Ebba, and preserve them if I possibly can, without danger to myself. And this ... and these...'

Magdalena heard a soft jingling as Dad began to turn out his jacket pockets onto the table. Watches, a string of his dead wife's pearls, rings, fountain pens, cigarette case came into sparkling view in the candle glow.

'Oh, bless him. Such a tender spirit. Hide them. Where have you put the books?'

'It's all right. Don't worry. Well hidden. With the others. He says he's glad Deborah isn't here to suffer this, it's easier this way.'

'Shall we ... do you mind if I...pray for him, Max?'

Pause. Magdalena could imagine the expression on her atheist father's face. And the love.

'All right. You say whatever prayer seems…'

Ebba's hand reached across Magdalena's line of vision, to take her brother's hand.

Ebba prayed.

'God, full of mercy, who dwells in the heights, provide a sure rest upon the wings of the Divine Presence, within the range of the holy, pure and glorious, whose shining resembles the sky's, to the soul of Hans-Martin Süsskind. The Master of Mercy will protect him forever, from behind the hiding of his wings, and will tie his soul with the rope of life.'

There was silence.

This was the Hebrew prayer for the dead, Ebba said. A rough translation. As a pious young Christian woman, she had learned the language to help with her Bible studies.

Magdalena listened while her father, voice breaking, said that Hans-Martin had tried to comfort him for his coming loss, saying, *Do not torment yourself, my friend. This is my escape. You are innocent of all this.* But Dad had replied, *Not one German is innocent. Not one of us.* To which his friend had responded, *Ah, but, my dear Max, I am a German too.*

Magdalena made to creep away, hugging to her chest the summons to war service and her own contradictions. Two kinds of crippling shame struggled within her. For much of her life she'd veered wildly between the National Socialist ideals – honour, submission, loyalty to Leader and Fatherland – and her home world, divided as it was between her father's old-fashioned humanism and her aunt's unflinching Protestant faith.

Her shoe squeaked as she turned, and they registered her presence.

'Is that you, Magda?'

Magdalena advanced into the candlelight, apologising for the interruption and … oh, but … seeing the tears on her father's face … maybe this wasn't the time. The motion of the door caused air to rush in and out of the kitchen, twisting the candle flame. Light faltered on the faces of her father and aunt.

'What is it, Magda? Has something happened?'

'I have my marching orders, that's all. I'm being sent as a teacher to East Prussia.'

*

Magdalena wasn't at home when they came for Dr Süsskind.

Returning from having her documents stamped, she glanced up at their neighbour's lovely house, attached to her home and identical with it. She'd always felt as if the red-brick houses with their crow-stepped Gothic façades and rust-pink roofs held their arms around one another all along the row. They stood together in the terrace, all for one, one for all. In the sunlight, the red brick glowed. But Dr Süsskind's ruined front door, off its hinges, left a darkly gaping mouth into a cavernous interior.

The Gestapo had come too late, Ebba told her. The Veronal had done its job; their friend had slept the sleep of the just. Thank God. For God, full of love, would never condemn suicide in such a case, whatever anyone told you to the contrary. She gave her niece one of her penetrating looks.

'Oh no,' Magda hastened to say. 'I would never condemn ... there are times ... and circumstances...'

Ebba had been kneading the dough when the men came. She'd heard the pounding on Hans-Martin's door as they broke it down; the bellowing when they discovered that their prey had flown, and they tossed out the corpse onto the pavement. After looting the home, they'd dumped Hans-Martin's remains on the lorry with other human trash.

But our dear friend had seen and heard none of this barbarism, Ebba said quietly; our friend was safe, bless his heart.

Magdalena did not know what to say. Swallowing the qualm, she turned away, to go and sort her clothes: decide what to take with her on her adventure; darn or turn any garment that looked shabby.

A memory popped into her mind of a birthday, her fourth or

fifth perhaps. Dr Süsskind had appeared at the door, pulling along a toy tortoise on a string. *His name is Ferdinando, Magdalena my dear, and he has told me he would like to come and live with you.*

Anyway, she thought, never mind that. A dress but which one? As she only had two halfway decent ones, it wouldn't be much of a problem.

Also, books and paper. A parcel of textbooks had arrived, handsome-looking volumes, quite new off the press. She was saving this trove for the long journey east. But how on earth to transport the whole lot? Oh, it was all right, she'd be taking the bike, with its panniers and basket. One day Magda would write her own books – children's stories first perhaps, based on her work at Alt Schönbek – animal fables, modernisations of Aesop – and perhaps illustrate them herself. It was her life's ambition. Why not? Oh, and she would definitely take the blue silk blouse for best. And as well as skirts, trousers for walking and riding. Would she be able to ride one of the famous East Prussian Trakehner horses? And which shoes? Not that there was much choice. She'd never been interested in clothes but obviously you didn't want to affront anyone's eyes.

Halfway up the stairs, Magda seemed to register a dizzying silence from next door. It stopped her in her tracks. Dr Süsskind was gone. Really gone. He would never come back. He did not exist.

Retracing her steps, she went back into the kitchen and said, 'Auntie, I'm so sorry.'

*

Preparations were soon in full spate. Magdalena would be taking the bike on the train, she told her family. And that was that.

The dear old bike! It even had a name: the Auroch. A lumbering, heavy and unpredictable beast, antediluvian. The handlebars reminded Magda of the curved horns of the extinct species of cow that once terrorised the primeval forests of Europe and which

science was trying to breed back into existence. She might even see one of the new aurochs in East Prussia! Nobody else had such a bike or ever would have.

'Oh no, Magda, you don't want to be encumbered with that hulking great thing,' Dad objected.

She put her foot down: 'The Auroch is coming with me! For it is axiomatic,' Magda informed her father and Auntie Ebba, '*axiomatic,* that the Auroch and Magda Arber cannot be parted!'

Father ridiculed the nineteen-year-old's self-consciously educated diction, picked up of course from himself, and her arrogant tone, picked up from her role as standard-bearer in the Band of German Maidens: '*Axiomatic!* Don't be ridiculous, Magdalena!'

Yes, but the girl would do it anyway, ridiculous or not, as Ebba knew. Magda read the expression on her aunt's face: it said, *I'd give up if I were you, Max dear, save your breath, she's going to do what she's determined to do. In any case she'll be safer over there. No air raids, remember. Plenty of food and plenty of churches.*

Dad's haunted face replied, *She's so young, Ebba. The Auroch! Axiomatic! I ask you! Thinks she knows it all. She knows nothing. She's all over the place. And her bike is just a heap of junk.*

Ultimately Max, surrendering, limped out and pumped the Auroch's tyres. He oiled the chain; tightened everything he could see that might benefit from tightening. He wheeled the uncouth machine round the garden and out of the gate. Magda and Ebba, observing from a window, winced as they saw him mount, push off and wobble along the road. His right leg, broken in the camp, had not been properly set at the time and, over the years, the damage had been compounded by arthritis. Magda was relieved to see her father dismount, for surely that must be it: the Auroch would be passed as adequate.

But no.

Dad was testing the tyres again, between thumb and finger, shaking his head. His sister and daughter could see him scratching his head, wondering if he'd maybe tightened some of the parts too

much; he accordingly loosened, just a touch, what he judged he had over-tightened. Magda reckoned that the machine was now more or less as it had been before Dad began to tamper with it.

The Auroch was a homemade contraption, a mongrel. Clem, oily handed, had patched it together from parts salvaged from ex-Army bicycles. Men's bikes, of course – but Magda was athletic for a girl, Clem had observed, and could cope with that. The thing was a clanking, grotesque horror, his uncle had objected, the moment he clapped eyes on the finished article. And the handlebars appeared to be upside-down! It had no *unity,* he'd told his nephew. A reliable machine couldn't be assembled willy-nilly from bits of rubbish! Whatever was Clem thinking of?

Clem had grinned and winked, and said, rather patronisingly, for at sixteen and three-quarters he had also caught the tone, *Don't you worry, Uncle Max, I wouldn't have offered it to Magda if it wasn't strong as a horse, she'll be fine, you'll see, she's no weakling.* He'd patted his uncle on the shoulder, causing him to flinch, humiliated, and complain about Clem's bad grammar.

Coming indoors, Max now announced that he'd done his best with the thing but frankly it could not be called a bicycle. It was a hotchpotch. A mismatch. A contradiction in terms.

But Magdalena adored her machine, she'd mastered it from the off, and mastered her father too, and he knew when he was beaten.

*

Magdalena stood in the hall. Her father was seated at his study desk, just visible between the open door and the jamb.

She'd always known not to interrupt him in the study. Not to clatter downstairs singing at the top of her voice. Not to chase the kittens along the hallway. The scholar of the Enlightenment needed, not mere quietness but unqualified silence. Magda would take off her shoes and skate along the hall in her socks, before bursting out into the pandemonium of daylight to join her friends. Then beetle

off down to the beach at Travemünde, to swim half the day and nestle the other half in a beach-basket in a pile of giggling pals. Through early childhood, her parents had always trusted her. Now her father scarcely trusted the motherless Magdalena out of his sight. And she was nineteen, for heaven's sake!

The air in Max's study was dense with smoke and dusky with the brown leather-covered books that rose up every wall to the ceiling. Antiquarian books in French, Italian, English, Latin and Greek, some made from the skin of dead lambs. The study smelled of a rich composite: vellum, nicotine, antiquity. And an occasional tang of brandy. Her father was the author of half a shelf of these books. But although he still researched and wrote, the great book on Voltaire begun ten years ago had stalled when, after his incarceration, Max Arber had ceased to be publishable. There could be no market for books on eighteenth-century France. And besides who would publish Francophile Max Arber, even if he could pretend to make his ideas tally with National Socialist thought? Germany's armies had rolled into louche, effeminate Paris last summer – strolled in, rather. The French army had just laid down arms and run away. Pitiful. In any case, there was no market for books on any subject by authors who'd once stained their copybooks. Relegated to a menial job at the Institute after his protest and his stay in the re-education camp at Dachau, Max Arber had forfeited worth and dignity – in his own eyes too.

And frankly you are lucky to be employed at all, Dr Arber. Even as a porter.

Magdalena feared for him – and she also feared him. The new world belonged to the young. Anachronisms like her dad endangered themselves and their families.

Nicotined fingers reached for another cigarette in the lamplight.

Max lit up. Sat back, coughed, took a deep drag, blew a smoke ring. Magdalena watched it tremble up through the air, passing beyond the bubble of lamplight. Opening a drawer, he rummaged around, taking out what looked like, but surely couldn't be, a

toothpaste packet. He seemed to be studying it. Was he worried about his teeth again? His teeth were awful.

Few nights now remained to Magdalena at her childhood home. Tomorrow she must do the rounds of neighbours and friends, bidding farewell – the friends of her childhood, whom she'd known forever, a Band of German Maidens sisterhood really, and all scattering at more or less the same moment. Most had been conscripted as mere farm labourers.

Magdalena made friends easily. She had a sense of community, helping others, putting her shoulder to the wheel. Seeing new things and people, enlarging her acquaintance, and putting into action her National Socialist commitment to aiding the community. Now there'd be a chance to escape feeling undermined by her family's contempt for the Leader. In East Prussia the ground would not be constantly shifting under Magda's feet. She only dreaded going east for Dad's sake. She wouldn't be able to keep an eye on his vagaries. Sloppy about the blackout when Ebba was out, he'd been taken to task by the block warden. He neglected to perform the *Heil* salute; smiled wryly when he should be straight-faced; made no effort to appease Mrs Koch the notorious informer with the simpering smile; tuned in to the BBC, a criminal offence.

Good God, Magdalena had been tempted to denounce him herself when her adolescent passion for the Leader first set in!

No, no, Dad would be all right, Magda reassured herself, he'd have to be. Her own life was just beginning. To be let loose! To realise oneself! To do something for her Fatherland in its time of crisis, using her training to maximum effect! This posting was Magdalena Arber's destiny and she embraced it.

Tried to embrace it. A door in her mind kept blowing open, however hard she tried to lock and bolt it. Beyond the door, something obscene was at large.

She turned her mind away.

By the front porch stood Magdalena's rucksack and the case Dad had locked, strapped and labelled. Typically, he'd got everything

ready way in advance of departure. Magda's summer jackets hung on the peg. Ebba had brushed them and strengthened the buttons. Magda would have to wear most of her clothes on the train to avoid carrying too much luggage – and it was warm. The Auroch's panniers were already crammed full.

Dad's face was gaunt; he looked ten years older than his actual fifty-two. He dragged his leg and she was sure he suffered pain there, despite his denial. He mumbled and muttered to himself in the street, which for every reason he shouldn't do. His friendship with Dr Süsskind had been dangerous but now Dr Süsskind was gone. Years back, Dad had parted company with the dad who used to jounce her on his knee, dance her round the kitchen, read aloud to Mum and herself, performing all the voices – excelling as a wildly warbling Brunhild, a martial Siegfried and an army of Nibelungen dwarves. His audience would roll around laughing till it hurt, and beg him, *Don't! don't!*

And then suddenly he didn't.

All this was like a film Magdalena had once seen, rather than a memory of her own. She knew Dad had once been larger than life, daringly original, a distinguished teacher and scholar. Upright, witty and authoritative. She knew that as a Social Democrat he'd taken political risks, spoken out according to his conscience, or the ethic of his old-fashioned scholarship, for they seemed to her to add up to much the same thing. Ancient Rome and Romance languages and Voltaire: the day-before-yesterday's idealisms. However, all that had been before.

Before Mum's death.

Before his bereaved sister and nephew moved in with them.

Before the camp, Auntie Ebba had said, without elaborating, her face tautening into *that* expression.

What happened exactly at Dachau, apart from the broken leg? No one would say. The shame, presumably. Hobbling ignominiously home, with a soiled name. Shame could kill you. And Dad had obviously done himself some kind of injury there. If you

asked for further explanation, Ebba would shake her head, purse her lips, flap her hand and turn away. Widowed brother and sister, having lost half their worlds, had joined forces in one household. It made sense for all four of them.

Magdalena lingered at the study door, in a niche of time, capturing her father in the sepia perspective between door and frame, loving him, fearful for his safety.

She tapped on the door and stepped through.

'I'll leave it behind, Dad, if it's really going to trouble you.'

He swivelled, looked at her over his specs. 'Leave what behind?'

'The Auroch.'

He hesitated.

'Just say, Dad. If it bothers you very much.'

Turfing Goethe and Schiller off the chair, at which they mewed crossly, she sat down. The desk was littered with papers and files and Dad's typewriter, a handsome Torpedo model bought when the household was flush with money. Dad's English fountain pen, the pride of his writing life, lay on top of the blotting paper. He'd brought it home from Oxford on his last visit, years before the war. Magdalena picked up the pen and weighed it in her hand. He was still holding the toothpaste box.

He looked into her eyes. His face said, *Magda, you are my one ewe lamb. I cannot lose you.*

And it was precisely for that reason that her father now capitulated to her wishes: she saw that clearly. The floor of his certainty yielded, its walls sagged inwards. Her heart twisted. To have been loved like this, child and woman, was a rare gift. He had spread himself across the loss of a mother, keeping that loss drowned in the vast reaches of the unsaid.

And for months in the wake of Dorothea's death, the articulate and voluble girl had been struck literally speechless. She'd lost her voice. Dad had spoken for her, giving her his full attention.

Nowadays, in Dad's mind, there was reason for anxiety whichever side of a choice one opted for. Wherever he looked lay minefields of

equivocation. Magda understood that Max Arber's generation of scholars, steeped in antiquity, could fail to grasp the obvious. They over-thought the least thing, making what should be automatic a source of conflict. How, for instance, could it hurt him so much to raise his hand in the customary salute? Just do it! The salute, Magda thought, is an everyday courtesy that binds you all together in one body. It says: *We are one great German family, we speak a common language under our Leader, we are rooted in a common territory, we share a common destiny.* What shocked Max and Ebba appeared to Magdalena and Clem – oh dear – what other word could you use? – *axiomatic.*

'No, my love,' Dad said decisively. 'I won't ask you to leave your bicycle behind. You may need it. And say you … I don't know … needed to get away from someone or something … and I'd persuaded you to leave your bike behind … how could I ever forgive myself?'

In the yellow lamplight, she caught sight of the text on the toothpaste box: *Doramad Radioactive Tooth Cream*, promising to shine your teeth blindingly white.

It seemed all of a sudden as if their roles had reversed and the daughter must take responsibility for her father, his broken heart, his broken will.

'If it's going to add to your anxiety, Dad,' Magdalena said sympathetically. 'I'll gladly leave it. Just say the word. I don't want to be worrying about you worrying about me, we don't need that, do we?'

'But *will* you be careful, love?'

'You know I will. And East Prussia is a very safe place after all – perhaps the safest place in Germany. Nobody is bombing it. Besides, I don't have a choice, do I? I've been ordered to go and go I must.'

Her father straightened up in his chair, his dignity ruffled. 'For instance, Magda, you will be on your own and there are always sharks around.'

'Sharks?'

'Men may … had you thought of this? – take advantage of you.

You're inclined to be headstrong, to put it mildly – you know that – yes, you *are*, don't shake your head. Fundamentally you have a good heart and conscience. But you're painfully naïve, like so many in your generation. Young men – soldiers, for instance – will take you up and use you and drop you like a rag, if you're not careful. Do you know how to fend them off?'

'Of course I do!' She squirmed.

'Well then, what would you do, if a man came up to you ... like this...?'

He sprang from his chair. Grasped her shoulders. Towered over her. Magdalena pulled back, laughed with shock and not because it was funny, it was not funny, the look in his eyes, the panic rising.

'Stop it, Dad. What are you *doing*?'

Releasing her, he took a step back. 'You see. You have no idea. None. If this happens to you, ever – listen now, Magda – this is what you do. You don't freeze. You knee the swine in the groin. You know what the groin is, don't you?'

'*Pardon*? Yes, of course I know what a ... groin ... is!' It was a word you absolutely did not want to hear from your father.

'I'm serious, Magda, I've never been more serious in my life. You knee him hard in the balls. Like this.'

Together they rehearsed the kneeing in the balls.

'Hard, that's it – then you run. You bellow at the top of your voice and you take off and you run like hell. If he catches you, you ram your fingers in his eyes. Or better still a key. Like this.'

Preposterously it came over Magdalena, the memory of *The Nibelungenlied* and Dad playing all the parts while his audience died laughing. How King Gunther tumbled Brunhild's shift as he claimed his marital rights, and how Brunhild bound him hand and foot with her belt, carried him to a nail and hung him on the wall, leaving him there to squirm and moan all night while she snuggled down for a nice cosy sleep.

But what her father was counselling, she knew was not a joke. Magda's sexual knowledge was not exactly limited: it was non-existent.

The thing with Peter Schneider had been limited to hand-holding and chaste goodbye kisses. Pecks, really. Peter was in Poland now. And besides on the whole she preferred the company of girls.

'I will remember, I promise,' she assured him seriously, quietly, to soothe him. 'Thank you, Dad. I will be careful. I won't put myself in dangerous situations.'

'For my sake.'

Magdalena took both his hands in hers. 'For your sake. And for Mother's. And Auntie Ebba's. And Clem's. And mine – yes, I know, especially for mine. And don't forget, I'll have the Auroch for a fast getaway.'

'Well, that's true.' He grinned with one half of his mouth.

'You do have to start believing in me though, Dad.'

'Well, I do, of course. I know you'll be happy and do good work in Alt Schönbek. I shall be proud – and Ebba too, here she is. I was just saying, you'll be proud of our Magda too, won't you, when she's a teacher like her beloved Miss Heller?'

'It goes without saying. She is our shining girl.'

Ebba had brought coffee. She set down the tray on the desk: it was the last of the real coffee, saved for a special treat. 'And she'll be fine, you'll see,' she assured her brother. 'What's this doing here?' – picking up the toothpaste box from where it had dropped.

'Oh, I bought that years ago. It was a bit of a novelty then.'

At the pharmacy, Max hadn't noticed the swastika decoration at both ends, which nowadays of course was commonplace – on cakes, on shoe polish, on tins of paraffin. He'd kept the box, he said, as a trinket of the times, a piece of memorabilia for when all this – he didn't say what – was well and truly *over*.

'So are we to understand,' asked Ebba, bridling because there was no excuse for waste in this day and age, when there was so little in the shops, 'that you have kept a tube of perfectly good toothpaste stowed away in your desk drawer for years, Max? Will it even be usable now?'

'No, dear. I just kept the box. A *memento mori*, if you like. Patriotic toothpaste. Radioactive. Very healthy.'