

Paul West

By the Waters of
Wannsee

I

Fräulein Mistfinger attributes her eminence to secretarial flair. Young as she is, she is well-tried, if not the belle of the

shorthand ball, at least its queen apparent, in Wannsee, a lovely high-class spot to bathe and laze in if you happen not to be typing out reams of important party papers. Why, she dreams, they could have chosen any one of a thousand who take dictation (in one sense at least) combed from the other cities, girls with authentic party badges and understated ruffs to their blouses, each with an eye to promotion or, failing that, discreet intimacy with a certain boss, preferably one in uniform, and not the brown of *Gauleiters* but the severe, haughty black and white of the true hierarchy. She has made it at last and will never have to look back on it as a failure, not once she's taken down and typed out the proceedings, as she always calls them. She has just the right kind of fawning, obedient face, and, who knows, the right hint of black silk knickers to egg them on if only slid into view. Not exactly an arriviste, she's a climber, soon to gain rung blisters on her palms. She lives here, even out of season, en saison drying out her underwear on the fireguard just to cut down on the laundry bills. She loves this free-spirited area, always there for a summer romp, and delights in its mix of true party people cheek by jowl with plotters, liberals, even foreigners still not decamped after paying the normal fee. One day, she muses, they will clean them all out and the frolicking crowd on the lake will be homogeneous at last, each worthy of the

others' praise, even their pets and birds. Can there, she wonders, be Party seagulls?

Just come with your skills, she has been told. By all means flirt with the gentlemen, whose names you will know; you will have an enormous sense of promotion through ovation as you obey their slightest whim. All the other staff will be male, bonded to secrecy on pain of death, so the field will be open for your undisguised wiles, just so long as you do your job without too many questions. Above all, do not inquire too curiously into the technicalities of the procedures; just take it all down and type it up neatly for signature. With this honor may come an increase in pay, though of course it need not: an extra grass parakeet or a kitten may come of it, but your reward is more likely to be at the bank, so fret not, Fräulein Mistfinger: you are appreciated, which means your price has gone up. And do not blink resentfully at the rest of the staff, the males, all got up in stark white uniforms with party insignia; the conferees, as they will be known, asked for a feminine touch here and there, and this you will provide, silk stockings herewith, crepe de chine and calm black skirt enclosed to exact dimension. Be confident, dear Fräulein Mistfinger. Such an opportunity may never come your way again. These gentlemen, the conferees, have rather routine wives, so don't hesitate to provide them with a flash of wile or guile, the obsequious smirk that implies another surrender, often made, quite different from any made on paper. Neither slut nor *Hausfrau*, you will charm them to death even as they ponder overdue weighty matters having to do with the future of our regime. No need to serve cakes and tea, liqueurs and bons-bons; just get the proceedings word-perfect and dream of luxury trains to come, truck-loads of flowers, your photo always on the arm of some higher-up, adorning the shiniest sheets of our magazines. A real German princess, whom we have chosen for geography and looks, looks and geography, with forever in mind the unappeased look always on the face of the finest ladies as they review their fate, never quite rising to the top of the heap with the most eligible party official. This time, you will glean the benefits of an already earned distinction: the only Fräulein Mistfinger known to us in your league, dear party member. You will of course keep all to yourself, even if you overhear it while transcribing it, on pain of, well, the greasy board and the grinding, toppling heavy blade. We can be very unforgiving as well as generous.

Habituated to prose style, at any rate to that of certain master officials, she just knows the hand of Dr. Goebbels is behind it, unsigned of course,

but eloquently vivid, and she knows his ways with actresses. His prose has his limp, his purview always implies a threat along with flowers and silks. She has to be careful, rising from the sea of complaints like froth destined to become a meerschaum pipe, as the old story has it. Goebbels, yes, by no means the heaviest-handed of them (Bormann the worst), you just know it's come from the top, that you have been chosen by the cream of human milk.

She almost faints, all of a sudden recovering to rearrange the few books in her living room lest an intimate encounter expose her as, what, a Romantic, a plotter in some scheme she has no knowledge of, some clipping from a provincial daily. Well, just so long as her parents remain safe in Munich while she lives off the fat of the land, dining and wining, sunbathing and ski-ing, typing faultlessly, yearning in the long run (perhaps now) to move to an estate recently vacated by undesirables already on their ocean voyage to Madagascar, or was it that little island, Reunion, to the south? Oh to be a baronial mistress! These dreams, however, she keeps to herself, even worrying that, as soon as she no longer sleeps alone, she will blab something and end prostrate on the slicing board. Her terror is grand, her yearning almost royal. A virgin should know better, but she does not, already impatient for life as a willing adult, but afraid to squander her welcome with the wrong person, not sage enough, not even shrewd.

In her untried fashion, she lights an American cigarette and trimly writes in shorthand: I am delighted, I alone am chosen, I have considered for months, I have come out on top of the heap, then tears the paper to shreds, types out word for word the same sentiments, then rends the typing paper, flushes both pieces away and at once with mechanical dread worries about the little catch-all grille within the sewer, husbanding flushables and gradually reassembling the jigsaw puzzle of all sedition. She has to be careful, keeping everything in her mind, and not even there—who knows what dreams will come, what zealous overhearers she will become entangled with? *Fräulein Mistfinger* would, for just a caramel moment, like to go back, but she has already come too far, has been coaxed and accoladed; why, the conferees will be here at the end of the week, by plane and train and car, *men alone*, almost in holiday mood by the shores of Wannsee, where the whole world comes to play. She will have to censor her thoughts, then dump them; in other words, think and dream in code, translating all she hears and wants into fairytale metaphor, from the Three Bears to Red Riding Hood, constru-

able but not definitively corrupt. She hopes. She shrinks from the behavior she has been committed to. She curls up on the bed in her underwear, swathed in new obligations, trying to envision Dr. Goebbels addressing her as she strokes his ruined leg. She has heard of *Wehrmacht* heroes, ordinary soldiers, not officers, who smooth out their wooden legs with knives and scissors, then finish with sandpaper so as not to offend in bed (postcursor, she thinks, to long toenails in the marriage bed). How coarse her untrained thoughts can be, how much like a released greyhound her imagination when coursing the Olympic track of her sudden rise in status. It would be easy now, she decides, to become a midstream hoverer, one who, having edged one foot fractionally forward, does not so much withdraw it as bring the other up to join it, thereafter maintaining the stance on a secure basis, but never going farther and persuading herself she hasn't made any substantial change, nothing that commits her anyway, not to too much. But she can't believe it, and she torments herself with what she is going to hear, overhear, resist, go along with, blab or suppress, even having to acquire new changes of vocabulary to deal with the changes in her hitherto sheltered life. So far forward, she whispers, yet so far behind: you cannot advance without overbalancing, nor can you go back without some mud from the new terrain sticking to the soles of your feet. When they at last come after you, never mind how cordial the overture, they will ask you to denounce yourself in your own shorthand.

So she contents herself as best she can with an image culled from a newspaper, of a bombed-out, well-born Roman woman unearthed in her lead casket in London: fourth century, reconstructed by British scientists. She would, she reads, have frequented the temples of Isis and Mithras, the Governor's palace and amphitheater, and been a Christian, dead in her middle twenties only, about 350 AD. It is a soothing, though fatal reverie, far enough away from Wannsee to be worth the magic carpet journey there. She would have been Spanish, she reads, in the reconstructed face a touch of innocent shock, as if death surprised her in the midst of health and adequate nourishment, the wife of some potentate military or administrative, felled by an infection. She has had no children, says her pelvis, so she certainly did not die in childbirth. With her in the leaden coffin within her stone sarcophagus, there must have been food and drink and cosmetics, together with bay leaves alongside her head, reposing on a few threads of some fabric, a pillow say, a cut above the juniper berries often found in Roman graves. Bay leaves really single her

out, as she wishes, as do shreds of silk and golden thread, Chinese in origin, found in the shallow layer of silt into which her funeral robes have long since rotted.

Fräulein Mistfinger finds this reclaimed image just far enough away, a match to her dreams of modern grandiosity through rescue by millionaire, party official, *Gauleiter*, some Nazi of ancient lineage wholly committed to the cause and therefore likely to endure. If she seems an arriviste, she is also a sly dreamer, one who never confides but casts on all who appear before her an eye not so much avaricious as well-versed for quality. The disparity between her dreams and the coarse gruffness of her intendeds does not occur to her; it is as if she has an inbuilt vulgarity-counter that dismisses what fails to fit. Her serene, civil or military life goes on, heedless of history, turbulence, the Führer's whims, the gathering potency of the so-called Allies. She lives on in aloof delicacy, one eye on the main chance, the other on the Roman lady she has named Augusta.

Trembling a little before her big chance envelops her, she tidies her drawers as if preparing for sudden flight to higher rank elsewhere. It will all be very sudden, she decides, as in old romantic novels. Their eyes will meet, they will "click," and that will be that. From then on she will be a groomed paragon, no longer practicing shorthand, but much gifted on the telephone, an inveterate folder and Muse of ribbons, of gratuitous greeting cards entrusted to erratic wartime mails.

Her mind's eye feeds her more than it should, saddling her with a fresh-complexioned, rather pointy Spanish face, huge brown eyes and dismayed mouth, as if death just had enough time to discomfit her at an early age, so guaranteeing grief among the well-to-do. She would like to be superior to this face, but for some reason she feels locked in to it, as if destiny, espousing her, has made her a compulsory martyr—if, that is, she wants this fate of a Nazi wife, sheep rather than lamb, although this has not yet become a category in the history of the Reich; events will soon demonstrate its power over the besotted and the true. She would like a change, of course; but more than this she would relish a metamorphosis unthinkable far away from the slight ballet of draping her newly rinsed underwear along an extensible bathroom string to dry. Above all, she thinks, she has the Roman gift for being led, for divining a man's direction toward Valhalla, and she had read enough in her superficial way to learn how reticent a forward girl can be. When the day arrives, as it surely will, it will amount to instant recognition: a green flash will

follow the sun's last tweak, and a new life will ensue. All she has to do now is be hospitable, ceremonious, cordial, and the world will be hers, never mind at whose hands.

Now, more than ever (which is not much), she feels obliged to take stock of her being, not so much to review what's missing as to piece together, if possible, the pieces that lure her into dreaming of what they might become. Not quite satisfied with what she has, and does, she entertains with forward-looking regard what, for instance, might yet become of an abandoned, almost levitating clarinet, heard she cannot remember when, but its sound was eerie, terminal, or, visually speaking, something noticed, then considered again: the cloven hoof of an amaryl-lis just before it burst into bloom. Split if not cloven. Her sense of incompleteness in these matters haunts her gently; had she been someone else, the sound or sight might have delivered itself up in full glory. She tries to content herself with a prophetic modicum, wondering hard about the next step, sometimes even drawn into eyeing the tango, once the violent cavort of love-lorn gauchos from another country, substituting a male duo for something else, and she gets her own point. Her life so far has been like theirs, a *pis aller* as the French say, while waiting/hoping for something better. Sometimes she even thinks of herself as gaucha, her version of gaucho, which also tells her she must to others seem gauche as well. Not for her, not quite, the arrant display of bravado in the presence of severe loneliness, but its prelude, whether, as now, at the hands of the Heydrichs and the Eichmanns, or in some other way.

Not an assiduous reader, though she has had the time for it without "making it," she remembers little tags culled from books of such things, sometimes the *sero te amavi* of Saint Augustine, addressed to God, saying *I love you too late*, or *late* at least, which she doesn't fully orchestrate to match her own life; she propels it forward, incongruously predicting her own lateness, though she is a monster of punctuality on the job. She feels denied, thwarted, given over to secretarial service without much prospect of anything but congestive heart disease or cancer not before time but soon enough.

Different now, she notes that you can never measure a live snake (another tag), but there come drifting into mind curios from some Party exhibit: moneylenders executed in Meissen porcelain and "hanging Jew" watchfobs, wondering if stuff such as this belongs in her arsenal of the future, like shafts of corrupted sunlight from a putrid sky. Thank goodness she is not in Austria, where in the old days you could be arrested for

wearing the swastika, or, if you were in trade, you had to painstakingly remove swastikas from imported model aircraft kits. In the olden days, she thinks, when I didn't matter. Safer territory by far is the exquisite letterhead she has hoarded against a rainy century, its margins so feathery and snowlike, a bit crinkly to the touch. She writes on it only to report to her parents its very quality: no news of anything else, until now, when she deserts the soft, mesmeric hue of the bond and (as she jokes to herself) intimates the *Bund* with a hint of what her promotion-to-be shall be. It is as if all the snow that gathered in the paper's margins has come to roost in the middle of the sheets, offering her a clear arena in which to ply her hidden gifts. Her tendency now, she muses, is to overrate herself and go too far. She tears up the sheet with its unfinished sentiments and flushes once again, lamenting the waste of one white drift while applauding the arrival of yet another, all on top of one another within the strict confines of the pretty box and ready to serve.

Soon, she hopes, the paper's hue will change to one of blue steel, annotating her progress, her presence among men of heft and rank, to whom she remains delicate but of a special metallurgical radiance they have never seen before, not even at the most elegant of Party *soirées*, even with bombs coming down (incongruously) among the leaflets (get them one way or the other). What an extraordinary world I live in, she concludes, *inching*, as the British say, from one life to another. We Germans do not inch or we would have a word for it, whereas the British, who bombard us, do things, you'd have thought, with finicky precision, ultra-cautious in all. Unaccustomed to exotic thoughts, she feels the need to sit.

It is a rickety chair, held together not by nails but by wooden pins, mark of the scrupulous craftsperson no doubt, not even glued, held together by astute judgment and exact measure, the right angle of taper in the golf tee that fills the hole (and sometimes, when two of them meet, thin end to fat and vice versa, godly mutual fit). Here she sits, urging her body this way or that, always toward some calculated future, knowing from her mother's knee that in order to live forward you need not remember anything or the enterprise will founder and you will be a nobody. The chair does not creak, not in a major way, until she has left it and half-bounded across the room, reluctant to be caught rising from it. And then it creaks, retaining the memory of her, rendering a last salute while retaining in the midst of a thousand minutely registered settlements the slack way her body uses it, sits and slumps, eases itself forward or

backward, waiting to be born. The loud brass of a German band may stir her from it, all oompah-oompah as trombones and huge euphoniums get to work on some innocent theme in the street below, and all she can think, being a secretary, is that trombones is what Spanish speakers call big paperclips. She is nothing if not lingual.

Of late, her shoes and feet have begun to occupy her more than usual. The shoes are new, a treat in wartime and buyable only with some flashing of her Party badge. They would fit if only they had been correctly made and not by some displaced person or Slavic slave. Because her feet are wide, she has to wear a shoe that is too long, and so has to endure a constant disparity between breadth and length, never arriving at the right combination. So she tries pads that fit inside the heel, preventing slob, but these prove uncomfortable, so she tears them out, leaving adhesive on the insides of the heels. How to neutralize this bothers her a while, even as she sits in her creaky chair, until she realizes that, because her heels have calluses, she can file them and so create a fine dust that lets her heels slide about again. Rather proud to have solved this anatomical contretemps, she abandons her chair and switches on the radio, thus producing the brass band that was waiting for her all the time. Now, more or less, she can walk, and in her ribald way thanks the divinity that she has no problem with her thighs which she has no idea how to file, although she has heard dim rumors about bewhiskered veterans wearing away a woman's inner thighs with trenches barb. All this, she considers, is to come, now she has broken free of the old barriers like those on ocean liners, keeping steerage away from first, and cabin class in limbo.

She is ever ready, though, for the *Joyous Frolics* of Paul Chabas, a reproduction of which adorns her bedroom wall, the fond little circlet of girl swimmers appearing to swim right into her bed chamber, propelled forward by an omnipresence of water, neutrally advanced, so to speak, as if they know who at the other end of this motion is there to receive them, they too aspirants to the charmed circle that will receive Heydrich and company in the *Grossen Wannsee*. If Wannsee is water, these are the swimmers, Fräulein Mistfinger included: scantily clad in shallow water—a monument, if you like, to bad taste, or at least to the second-rate, except that, to Fräulein Mistfinger, this painting, however feebly reproduced, is her badge of good intention, the image of her own forwardness, indeed, a bunch of highly secretarial young women coming in for prey. Could they actually be swimming backward? Retreating? No, they have coming-forward, or forward, faces, whereas the painting might be

subtler if it confronted the viewer only with an assortment of pink bottoms mooning away beneath hair floating outward like that in primitive times when the children had it to hold on to. The impersonality of that, wafted toward whoever is looking at mesmerically overflowing water that might have spilled from a bath, would improve the art. She cares not, having spent hours viewing M. Chabas, whose handling of liquid evokes what happens when two microscope slides meet and mate, creating a flat sluice.

II

Obliged to be present in good time, but persuaded to wait in a small room crammed with empty ashtrays and unused desk blotters, she hears cars arrive and faint commotion begin, gleaning even through the closed door (and a couple of peeps) the buzz of protocol, the big waft of male aroma, from pomade and solidified brilliantine to tobacco smoke and early morning flatulence, and the exaggerated bravado of those high enough to be summoned yet not high enough to have developed a free way with rivals. This is the world of men, she tells herself, and their tribal blurts. Her role is to appear at the last moment, to be hastily introduced so they can get to business on time, which means, she concludes, no time allowed for courteous presentations. She will be seated and that will be that, unless she makes her own pauses and deflects attention to her, as is her right as a woman. Heydrich will arrive last with his usual bustle and impatient bray, a man who has almost no time for anything, who has subordinated all to some as yet undivulged purpose. As the prelude advances toward his appointed time, she inhales its gathering fug, certain it echoes another fug from somewhere else, less tobacco-y, less male, less an offshoot of the barber's parlor. She hears the grind of tires, the suck and slam of doors announcing the arrival of Heydrich, in whose honor this conference is held, and she holds her breath to catch the bustle of the man arriving, a different aftershave, a more vigorous step, a different shout in the peremptory manner. But nothing; he must be in a withdrawn mood today, a man with so much on his mind that his mind has buckled. Since the yellow pad she holds has a few thumb marks from being held so hard, she tears off the front page and starts again, not so much nervous as eager. They may be going to talk, but she has to write, of schedules, quantities, SS men assigned, timetables, round-ups and selections, exemptions and exceptions. "You will be writing mainly

numbers,” she has been told. “Get it all correct and you will be Heydrich’s heroine.”

His bow is minimal, hurried, but he gives her the once-over, allowing himself even as he busies someone with his overcoat the kind of bemused approval he prefers, aiming into the middle distance a private bouquet to himself announcing that he might, he just might. Nose too big, she decides, eyes of the unshubbable intellectual, manner nervously imperious, clearly a man of infinite memory and mechanical bravura. She is glad to sit down, for a brief truant moment a young Roman matron who has swum toward them through a brimming pool, and who therefore need not be diffident about anything. Now she is one of them, shunted to the side, which also this morning happens to be the center of attention. The *gnädige Fraus* are over, the *schnell, schnell*s begin, and everyone begins to mutter at once, over which morning chorus the impatient, exasperated voice of Heydrich, the censor of Prague, rises, a tempest of jangling wires. They all cease, and the numbers begin, recited without more ado as if a grocery order long-postponed must occupy the field. She is so amazed by the banality of it that she fails to write it down. They forgive her, she gets it right, they go on, and the dialogue starts, mainly functionaries from little-known areas who have a grievance, or some crass tale of disobedience to spell out. He is not interested, but he lets them blunder about, guffawing and doing the seated equivalent of an obsequious flounce. All these men are jockeying for some position, some reward, looking for more duty, and boastful as apple-cheeked schoolboys. They want to impress him and to make him wonder how, stuck out there in pointless Prague, he can have lived his life without them, stuck over there in Lithuania and Latvia. They are coming home to roost, their nails newly trimmed, their whiskers shaved against the grain for that early morning gleam. She wonders about the obviousness of men whose main duty so far has been to bundle others into rail cars bearing a designation for so many humans, not that many more animals. She soon identifies the limp-mannered, junior-seeming Eichmann, who keeps volunteering and seems, to them at least, a dab hand with numbers. It is all beneath her pencil and above her mind: boys’ play, a puzzle of conformity and greed, a trip to new medal ribbons and congested-sounding titles, far far from what matters in this world.

After half an hour, Heydrich allows his gaze to settle on her full length, from ruff to heels, conceding, allowing as—what *is* that pawnbroking look? It says he just might and he dispenses to her a secret, barely visible

smile of complicity: now she knows that he knows all about her from wide feet to callused heels and can take it in his stride. Prague meets Wannsee over the equations and formulas that manhandle the intricate details of so many other lives. Something slight begins to go on between them, a scintilla of a glimmer's overture? No, a code unspoken, but blinked or eloquent in an arched brow, a little finger let dangle over a closed inkwell. She can feel it beginning, in her bones, but she knows it will not happen at table, not among the uniformed hoi polloi, but "off," as stage managers say, when he is standing up and the problem of the day has been fixed to his satisfaction and he can, however briefly, relax like a human being. He has that pending look, with some kind of proposal in reserve, and it slowly swells during the bureaucratic palaver as the room warms up.

Then he seems to have gained his way, certainly with Eichmann, a commanding figure for one so negligible in physique.

"Do you know Prague?" She was still wondering about Eichmann, but this is the golem unbending, almost debonair.

She says no, but she has heard it is romantic.

"We are thinning it out," he answers. "Some of us. It will be better."

"I wouldn't doubt it," she says, wondering if he will be able to sustain this conversation for longer than a few moments.

"How do you like Wannsee?"

"I know it too well. My friend Gerstenmaier praises it to the skies, but then he's a sailor." A taut silence.

"And you?" She is being deferentially inquisitive.

"Ah," he laughs, "we're thinning that out too. There is almost nowhere that we are not thinning out. Such is German zeal." His face is a crag against disappointment, and she asks herself what on earth happened to him once upon a time.

"You should come to Prague," he is saying. "We need good help."

She flirts. "You never know. Could I be spared?"

"Say the word," he tells her, "and a Junkers 52 is yours. We will citify you in no time, Berliner or not."

"I imagine you would, sir."

Back he moves, to business, having clinched things. Has he really, she wonders. Have I been that easy, that eager?

"After such a high point as this," she daringly says to his back, all-hearing as it turns out.

Without moving he answers her in an underwater tone: “But *this* every day, *gnädige Frau*, the high politics! We are really going to stir things up, aren’t we?” Several cronies agree with him, puffing their assent past him to her. She finds herself in a claque intended for colonels, maybe even higher, and wonders how it would be to become increasingly familiar with men who need nothing any more, but need to have that needlessness witnessed. It cannot be easy, she decides. One day she would become another of those not needed to witness, and then, at best, restoration to Wannsee, at worst the huge mahogany door that clicks open under the hand of the headsman within, telling her it’s time to go, *gnädige Frau*, just you come through the door and we’ll do the rest, hoisting you up as if you were flying, Gert at one end of you, I at the other, guaranteeing you a quick exit. She shudders. Worse things have no doubt happened, but this will be enough. Does she really want to mingle with such men, as distinct from taking their shorthand? Surely, this kind of meeting is exceptional and the kind she’d have in Prague would be less heinous. Deep water, she murmurs. Watch out, Mistfinger, you’re named for a French town.

Not a man much given to musing, Heydrich is wondering which of these bureaucratic buffoons told him that, in the last war, the crosshairs of certain rifles were made from the steely webs of trapdoor spiders. Ridiculous, he thinks; they take me for a military fool, and he has juicier fish to fry, a cocksman ever since the naval career from which he was cashiered. Correctly siting his lips the requisite centimeter from Fräulein Mistfinger’s upraised hand, his deference to the customary European curtsy, he has noticed in her face something tantalizing: a Carpathian flatness, he calls it, beneath the eyes especially, denoting the lack of ebullience he prizes, something more than obedient even if not at first visible. She washes her hair, he tells himself, and she feels young again. One of those, not exactly in the first flush, yet not quite peeling. It was the same flatness he noticed in the features of Frau Canaris in the old days, when he and the costive little admiral played at being friends, and Heydrich and Frau Erika played the violin together while Wilhelm donned his white chef’s hat and prepared the meal in the kitchen. Even if those were not exactly the good old days, they had an abundant conviviality that seemed to have no end: nothing gruesome anyway, but a mellow drift into yearned-for retirement. Obviously, no one was going to look askance when he imported another secretary from Berlin; why, he could get away with it if he imported a troupe of loin-rich dancing girls from Fiji, if he

wanted to. No, it was entirely up to him, whether his manners were curt, abrasive, riotous, sleek or those of a peasant.

He was Heydrich, which is not far from what Fräulein Mistfinger is thinking, not that she happens to be a climber of any distinction, but this will be her one climb, into which, should she wish, she will pour all her energy and drive just, well, to be among the initially selected from the forecourt of erotomania: *Heydrich's fallen for a simple typist*, girl from Wannsee. Whores his way through every conference and takes the refuse home to savor. Don't you know, he has a mental trick most generals might envy, amalgamating all that his life lacks and then shoving his life into the mass, like a fuse into explosive. This is to say, he rams his all into what he has not, setting the world ablaze. In some this might be called commonsense ambition, but in him it's fireworks and munitions, making the rump of the world obey his unappeased lusts. Can't you see this in that lean wooden bobbin of a face, that introvert's inward peer, the eyes so weak they seem to have left their energy back in the knees, the solidly brilliantined uncurly hairdo, a parody of Isherwood's? His lips beg for lipstick, his ear for the further hand of the waxworker. He is the idol as ogre, the debonair deathshad.

She spends much of the morning in a dutiful trance, at first impressed by the huge bridgework over the gate at 56-58 Grossen Wannsee, address of the Reich Main Security Office, then by the stodgy, heavy cars that disgorge men in multiple armbands, others in thick sub fusc, all of them yawning and farting, puffing cigars and barking with laughter. "No blabbermouths here," she hears on top of some crack about ghettos bursting at the seams. There is an oaf from Riga, she registers that much, with a badly behaved dog called Hasso. Other names register more faintly, from Bouhler and Leibbrandt to Luther and Meyer, all of them growling and spitting. Eich is dapper, suaver, more to her taste, she thinks. Are they, any of them, she wonders, aware of her blue suit, her indecisive gestures, her face that trembles between smile and smirk? She has never dreamed there was any such thing as an SS Honorary Tuxedo, but someone is wearing its stark white, with gold buttons, black trimmings, an entire alphabet of medal ribbons, a dagger encrusted with brilliants, and a silk black tie knotted tiny. Could this be Gestapo chief Müller?

They get on with work while the dog romps outside. She becomes aware of numbers, cities, times of departure and arrival, these the real phenomena she swiftly translates into ciphers. There is incredulous talk about corpses frozen to their seats, hilarity as a telephonist enters and

inquires about Top-Rank Brass, gasps of unsimulated astonishment as someone boasts about a Jewfree Latvia and Lithuania. Now the dog outside is puking. *Asphyxiation*, someone drawls, adding “it is dishonorable not to carry out what the future of our people demands.” *Just so long as you leave a few over for manicure training*, someone else roars, and they all guffaw. Deftly she gets most of it down, amazed at the transition from fact and rumor to abstract notes on paper, as if none of what they were planning existed. The stage directions, as some director might put it, occupy her more than the meaning of the hour. “Shall we move down, then?” No one budges because Heydrich does not give the signal. The Riga oaf seems asleep, heedless of his dog. “Virtue,” she hears, parrying it, intercepting it, then “hot and cold,” attributed to Himmler, then “don’t deport the armament workers at all costs.” Now she hears the word bacillus almost in the same breath as the blond beast’s first come-on: “Come work with me.” She demurs with a bashful pout and works extra hard on her shorthand. Now they flirt a little over numbers she must write down. “Banter,” he says, “it’s all banter. No luxury attached to it.” He sips his cognac, wafts its bouquet toward her, proffering, enticing. “You’re pleasing to the eye.” Help herself she cannot, every inch a Roman. Those stone lions outside once belonged to another owner, now dispossessed, but what can she do about that?

The noise of the small informal buffet confuses her even more. An historic day. And we were here. Who is that civilian in hard tweed? Two hundred hostages per soldier. Don’t rejoice yet, Heydrich says, you still have a lot of work to do. Holland is not worth mentioning. Belgium has been taken care of. Luxemburg not worth mentioning. Greece. Can be done. Estonia. Already reported. Who is Cozzi the high Italian officer in Riga? I am still thinking, Herr Berger. Sneezes. Swigging sounds. Who concocted this party? Why, the Brown House. What’s that, she wonders, but recoils from someone deep in his cups who declares, “A vagina defiled by Jewish sperm will always be a cesspool. And no German broom can keep it clean.” Assent from everyone. She’s horrified. Consider the matter closed, a high, linnets’ voice says. Eich blurting “I can’t get Riga. Those assholes are asleep.” Heydrich is smoking (“special occasions,” he says glancingly). Now Müller is blasting into the phone: “Office of *Reichsführer* Himmler here!”

Eichmann, Müller and Heydrich are sitting around the fireplace in riotous good humor, singing and toasting. Now they climb onto chairs and toast again, thence to the table, traipsing around and around almost

as if dancing a Ring of Roses. It is as if they have relieved themselves of some appalling burden, fulfilled a promise long shirked. Fräulein Mistfinger knows that something dreadful has been deposited on and in her hands, ready to be cyclostyled to all ministries and SS headquarters.

How on earth, her brain says later, could she associate with such duffers, such thugs? Yet it is as if she has not been to the black mass she witnessed, couched as it might have been in roundabout vague terms; was it not civil ceremony, a glimpse of chivalry gone rancid but chivalry nonetheless, the knights with their vizors down. To be sure, she was flattered by Heydrich's attentions, but, she reasons, a compliment from him under any circumstances must be like a spritz of bird-lime from an overflying mob of geese. She shudders with a tremor of delicious survivorship, having had the flame singe her box of delicious peppermints. The bright part is that, having been exposed, sanctified, she now has enough standing to go on to something else, not with Heydrich of course, but in some remote hinterland of his domain, buried once more but in an elaborate winding cloth. I have been tampered with, she whispers, but I've survived. I have come through with colors flying, just like a Roman matron flowing clear and three-dimensional through the liquid barrier. I had to do it only once, thank God, and now I'm free to move on. I have been noticed.

This is all very well, a luscious pipedream of an Alice who has not fallen down the well, but she has not reckoned with the loutish bravado blatantly on show in that smoky Wannsee chamber, where the sadistic sport of bluff commanders took on an aspect of wedding confectionery while Heydrich tapped his pointer at a series of charts (numbers and phases mainly). She looks the other way. They look away from her and then look back: she is the only woman in the room and, although similar in function to the SS waiters in their short white bolero jackets trimmed with gold and lightning flashes, more connected through her flying pencil with the sordid gravamen of the talk. They just float in and out with trays and napkins while she gets it down for later typing: the final solution, innocuous as the terminus of a chemistry experiment (pale dugong graphite the color, say) or the long-awaited result of some vexed excursion in the calculus, worked out in detail with curses and sweats rather than cheated into being out of the answers in the back of the text.

III

All that happens now remains in her sobered mind, except that its culmination comes from the real world. She knows she has not gone along with him, has not gone to Prague, to his office or his villa, has not embarked on the Junkers 52 with her major but minor suitcase and her minor handbag, seasickness pills in her flank pocket just in case. Of course not. But what is she doing, then, idly scooping gossip and postures from a glossy German magazine as she cuddles in her fur in a seat that once may have contained the Führer himself? Because she has not gone along, metaphorically or in actual fact, she feels free to flirt with a scenario, making all the needed family and postal arrangements, bread and milk, newspapers and garbage collection, then awaiting the car that picks her up and with swastika flag stiff in the wind takes her to Tempelhof for the flight. Heels click, hands snap, someone escorts her to whoever escorts her next. A blanket, a pillow. Exactly how long? A hundred years. Oh, that is too soon, she wants the voyage out to last the rest of her life and well beyond, just in case; if she has to choose between dynamite and talcum powder, she will choose the latter, ever stalling and temporizing, lest she become fatally roped in, reeled in, one of the party in every sense, forced to see the true drift of the dictation she took in Wannsee last January, 1942. No air pocket disturbs her. The landscape below her, smeared with snow, detains her not in the least, as insignificant as the dope-sprayed fake foliage in some lucky child's elementary train set complete with trees, hedges, bridges, tunnels, crossings and tiny farms. On grind the three engines tacked on to the corrugated body of the plane; she is one of only five passengers, none of whom in the least heed the others lest—well, who knows? They are determined to be aloof lest whisperings follow them to Prague. Fräulein Mistfinger floats onward to a destiny in which the imagined has greater force than the real. She feels rendered up to Satan, but helpless in his deep-sea grip.

Is this the old problem of her life? Need she think only of her life as it is and then of her life as it is not? There is A and there is B. She has only to allow B into A in some symbolic, vestigial form, and she will begin to grow, to be twice the woman she is. I will only go so far, she tells herself, into nothing disgraceful, daintily floating on the fringes of what men love to do: no more than that. I will be charming on the outskirts.

Where she ends up, though, after taxi rides and a bumpy airplane flight through what she learns not to call air pockets but nuns' farts, she

at last arrives somewhere, uncertain if she still has cluttered about her hotwater bottles, nosegays, smelling salts, eau de Cologne douches, astringent soothers of the eyes, cotton for her ears, even a drink to keep her from aerial diarrhea, and a seasickness pill. Where is she? On a hotel corner, next to some placard about the fat ration being raised for workers, luxury hotels for the working classes, and abolition of the blackmarket.

“Wait for him here,” they tell her before thundering away, the pseudo-taxi and the motor-cycle escort. No one waits with her, it is supposed to be private as he advances upon her from his country villa en route to Hradschin Castle. She cannot believe it. Can this be Prague? It looks just like Germany. Shakily she stacks her baggage on the sooty sidewalk, the flimsiest (purse, three douches in oilskin, and her passport and travel orders) on top. She has to be ready to move at a moment’s notice, they have told her. Heydrich does not like to be kept waiting, the star in his own movie, the director, whose very geniality to Czechs has prompted this morning’s event as far away as London and Scotland. No one heeds Fräulein Mistfinger, though she looks semi-glamorous in furs, not exactly Venus but her Berlin cousin. It is May 27. Has it really taken this long for Heydrich to get his act together, soft-soaping the Czechs until they almost fawn on him, certainly providing him with an amenable country to try a little dalliance in? Can this be true, she wonders. Surely there have been other reasons. When was Wannsee? That encounter might have been yesterday, she remembers it so vividly. It is morning. Where have you been all night, she asks herself. *Who* have you been? With whom? What’s happened to your old spark? Have you been buried in something? A book, a bed, a coffin? If so, where and what? Did you fly, or were you *thought* here? In fact, two scruffy-looking workers apart, the corner is deserted, though a couple of similar types appear to be awaiting a bus. She recites the details of her briefing again and again, vaguely disbelieving anything so preposterous yet so precise; but she knows military men and their obsessive calculations. This morning she is cold and fidgety. Why she thinks, I don’t even know the language. I may never get out of here if anything goes amiss.

She calms herself only when the green open Mercedes appears in the distance and slows. Deliverance is at hand, but she still cannot believe she was flown here and dumped at the request of a senior Lothario. Now she sees one of the two men in sight raise a Sten gun and spray the car, With no result: the gun has jammed. He recocks it. Nothing. His opposite number lobs a grenade toward where the car has almost stopped, the

driver angrily pumping the brakes, Heydrich screaming "Step on it, man." The grenade goes off, devastating the back of the Mercedes into which she was graciously going to step, spewing springs and fabric into the air even as the Acting Protector of Moravia and Bohemia leaps out of the car, revolver in hand, shooting at anything and everything as he might have in a Czech western. One man pedals away on a bicycle retrieved from some bushes while the other, at first frozen by his jammed Sten, comes back to life and scoots off. Nobody has attended to the appalled, shriveling woman in furs whose idyllic reunion this is not. Now the male lead, who had seemed intact, drops his gun, collapses, peppered with steel fragments in the ribs and stomach. Off they take him to a neighboring hospital, where he refuses treatment by any but a German doctor, though some cooperative Czechs try to aid him. Fräulein Mistfinger, invisible to the actors in this unlikely scene, remains at the spot, ungreeted, unwanted, uncollected, uninjured, knowing the dream will end and she will wake with a book beside her, tangled in her sleep, Heydrich snoring. But which dream is it? Is this the Berlin dream or the Prague one? Is there a bed at that street corner? Did the assassins enter their bedroom? Is this the gloomy, echoing Hradshin Castle he had spoken of? Or is it a hospital? She is suffering from gross dream, unable to find her way out, not even into the next-door dream, in all of which Heydrich, alive and shooting, survives, only to go down with grenade splinters in the membrane between rib and lung, as well as in the spleen. He is not doing so well after all, mustering enough hatred to whisper to the oddly named Syrup, a deputy, to beware of Himmler, whom he blames for this, not the least part of his thinking on his rendez-vous, if any, with Fräulein Mistfinger, whose Czech *Liebestod* has gone up in smoke.

Obviously, this is a flash forward stripped from its just place in history. She never went, but in her mind she did and suffered the consequences, being shipped back home to join Kurt Gerstein of the Technical Disinfection Service of the Waffen SS, together with a professor of hygiene named Pfannenstiel. She ended up typing scripts for the SS: "Women and young girls are to have their hair cut off to make something special for the U-boat crews in all their hardships." She was punishing herself of course, in imagination, for even dreaming of Heydrich. Himmler had already looked on Heydrich's death mask with what Schellenberg called a "nod of buddha-like approval," while his tiny glazed eyes behind the pince-nez "suddenly lit up with a sparkle stolen from the basilisk." Murder and terror followed. The village of Lidice was erased. On the day Heydrich died,

152 Jews were executed in Berlin alone, and three thousand others were shipped off to Poland. Fräulein Mistfinger knew that enough, in its little way, had happened to her to last her for life. The ogre had tempted her to go completely outside herself, but only to catastrophe. No one punished her. She only imagined her transfer to Hygiene. She typed on. Some gross animal had sidled up to her, rubbed her with its rough pelt, and asked her in, like the amalgamated future of the rest of her life rolled up into a ball and dismissed, but with it, of course, the only way out she would ever have other than as a dutiful ant criss-crossing an acre of burned toast.

Of all the horrendous images that afflicted her in later years, as she settled back again into mellow stenography, never aiming too high, the one that lingered and bored a hole into her brain was that of young Ata Moravec, tortured in the cellars of the Peček Palace, then plied with alcohol to ready him for being confronted with his mother's head floating in a fish tank. Could that be the regime she had fancied joining? Somehow the head in the fish tank outdid in grossness the severed heads of Gabèik and Kubiš, eventually presented to their families. It was Gabèik whose sten-gun had jammed at the assassination site. It was Kubiš whose bomb had killed Heydrich. What was this head-severing fetish? She preferred to think of Heydrich lying in state at the Hradèany castle under an SS flag and pine branches intended to conjure up the Nordic past. When the coffin left Hradèany for Berlin, Frau Lina Heydrich had escaped, an orthodox Nazi wife. Fräulein Mistfinger had escaped just such a fate, and she dealt with her near-miss by thinking of how, during the last stages of a cold, she was able to suck from the recesses of her soft palate a small leathery tongue-like thing that had lain there for weeks, obtruding and infecting, prelude perhaps to diphtheria, no more than a flap, but enough to choke her or to produce, whenever she tried to speak, the authentic sounds of quinsy: strangulation from within.

A conference on **Paul West's** work will be held at the University of Tours, France, in 2003. West's forthcoming books are *Oxford Days*, a memoir, and *Cheops: A Cupboard for the Sun*, a novel about ancient Egypt. His long novel, *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests* has just been republished in a new paperback from Voyant.