

READ IT FIRST



PÉTER NÁDAS
PARALLEL STORIES
A NOVEL

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VOLUME I

The Mute Realm

Patricide

In that memorable year when the famous Berlin wall came down, a corpse was discovered in the Tiergarten not far from the graying marble statue of Queen Louise. This happened a few days before Christmas.

The corpse was that of a well-groomed man of about fifty, and everything he wore or had on him appeared to be of better quality. At first glance a gentleman of some consequence, a banker or a senior manager. Snow was falling slowly, but it was not very cold, so the flakes melted on the paths of the park; only the blades of grass retained a white edge. The investigators did everything by the book and, because of the weather conditions, worked quickly. They closed off the area and proceeding clockwise in a narrowing spiral course searched it thoroughly so they could record and secure all existing clues. Behind an improvised screen of black plastic sheets, they carefully undressed the corpse but found no signs indicating suicide.

A young man who ran in the park every dawn had discovered the body. He was the only one the investigators could question. It had been completely dark when he set out, and he ran almost every day on the same path at the same time.

Had it not been so, had not everything been routine and habit, had not every stone and shadow been engraved in his mind's eye, he most probably would not have discovered the body. The light of distant streetlamps barely reached this far. The reason he noticed the body, lying on and half dangling off a bench, was, he explained excitedly to the policemen, because on the dark coat the snow had not melted at all. And as he was running at a steady pace, he related a bit too loudly, the whiteness flashed into his eyes from the side.

While he was talking, several men busied themselves inside the roped-off area. They were working, one might say, in ideal conditions; there was not a soul in the park besides them, no nosy curiosity seekers. Using a flashbulb, one of the men photographed something on the bare, wet ground that two forensic technicians had already labeled with a number.

As he began his story for the third time, the young man noticed nervously that every clue had been numbered and the sight made him very anxious. He felt as if he had been not the one who discovered the corpse or reported it but, rather, the culprit instantly confronted with physical evidence of his crime.

He was like a blade, though he could not tell of what, perhaps of a razor or an icy thought, but of that he said nothing.

In fact, his first thought was that he had murdered his own father. He could not understand why he had such a thought, why he would wish the death of this man, but of that too he said nothing to the police officers.

Hardly anything remained of which he could speak aloud.

But they paid little attention to him; both uniformed and plainclothesmen were going about their business, and from time to time they mumbled to one another phrases the young man could not understand.

They would not delay him further. Twice he had given them his personal data, they had registered his willingness to give evidence later in court, and still he could not leave.

Some of the policemen were being relieved by others around him.

When he runs, he repeated excitedly in his report, he does not look at anything or in any specific direction, and he does not think. From a psychological viewpoint, that is the essence of running at an even pace. But when twenty minutes later he again ran past the body on the bench, it occurred to him that the snow could remain intact like that only on a cooled-off corpse.

He had read something like that somewhere. And that's when he stopped to take a closer look.

In Berlin's Tiergarten, or game preserve, many things have happened already, or, more correctly, hardly anything can happen here that hasn't occurred before. The police officers listened to the report impassively. One of them simply moved on with his plastic bags to continue his work. In a little while, another one stopped to listen, and the rest of them promptly left him there alone. However, the young man could not calm down. He told his story to this new man as if every detail had another hundred details and every sentence needed a further explanation, as if with every explanation he were revealing earthshaking secrets while keeping silent about his own.

He was not cold, yet his whole body was shivering. The plainclothes officer offered him a blanket, go on, wrap it around yourself, but he rejected it with an irritated gesture, as if the condition of his body, an impending cold or the awkward and embarrassing shivering, did not interest him in the least. He probably had some kind of nervous fever, a phenomenon not unfamiliar to law-enforcement people. Neither could he be certain of the impression he was making. He felt he was not making a good one, which in turn compelled him to present everything in ever greater detail. This last policeman, however, regarded him with delight, with an enthusiasm bordering on love, as he observed the agitation in the young man's facial features, body, and individual limbs, and his ceaseless gesticulation, wondering whether to think of him as choleric or ascetic, as someone with above-average intelligence and sensitivity or simply as a city idiot interested only in himself.

As a person so starved for speech that he could not stop before tomorrow. As one to whom nothing ever happened but who now was becoming tangled in

a suddenly arrived great adventure; as one entrusted with nothing less than the secrets of the universe.

He elicited pity and some worry. In the end he could talk only to this one police officer, but he completely enthralled him with his feverish words, his vehement but disciplined and therefore fractured gestures, and his mental makeup that defied classification.

After methodically scanning the various surfaces and points of the young man's body and attire, and because the observed exterior seemed so average that even its social situation would prove hard to determine, this detective asked the young man which university he was attending and what he was studying, slyly adding that he asked not officially but only as a private person. Theoretically he had no right to pose such a question, but he knew from experience that sometimes a few innocent words will stanch sickly and senseless gushing. The death of strangers can cause real hysteria even in the most endomorphic persons. At the same time he did not mean the question to be a formal one; he was interested to see how the young man might be steered by such an innocent query, how far he might be led from his self-admiration, or perhaps how he could be trapped; how tractable he was. Although he was one of those well-trained detectives who usually avoided being misled by an unexpectedly deep impression or a labyrinthine imagination, the plainclothesman could not resist the experiment, at least to the extent of asking the provocative question.

However, whether with this or some other approach, whether in the first hours of an investigation—in police parlance the “loop” questions, or “first foray”—or at its peak, when the results somehow hang together however precariously, it was impossible not to lose some equilibrium. Here and there, he set little traps. Because detectives like him consider their own ideas preferable to the general criminal procedures used by their less daring colleagues. They were more creative, though their methods were sometimes high-handed. In one professional idiom, they preferred heuristic means to syllogistic ones, and, being guided by the former, they sometimes violated the law.

Under the influence of the compassionless investigation, the young man interrupted his report to answer; he is studying philosophy and psychology, he replied, taken aback. And while he answered, he wondered what the police official was observing in him or what conclusions he had reached.

I should have thought, said the detective impassively.

What was he looking at on his neck, or what did he notice on his T-shirt, and now on his sweat suit.

All these thoughts stemmed the flood of words. As if realizing that nobody was interested in what he was reporting. Not only the others, but this detective too was considering the details on a different level, in another dimension. He was not busy with the reporter; he was not listening to the report.

For quite some time, he had gone running in tight pants, yellow or red, and the detective continued his investigation by looking at his thighs and loins.

Which was uncouth, and cut him to the quick, so that he caught himself and finally noticed the person standing before him in this bare park at dawn, snowflakes falling peacefully around them. He noticed the detective's lips, eyes, the exceptionally thick, highly arched eyebrows, and everything he had been seeing until now: the forehead, the insanely curly hair, the calm disposition. A man who looked at him penetratingly, almost woefully, as if he knew everything about him. As if to take account, individually, retroactively and in advance, of all his most hidden secrets and even to offer empathy. In fact, the amused detective was merely recalling what he had read in some silly magazine, sitting in the dentist's waiting room a few days earlier, namely that in Germany every year about seventeen thousand students enroll for studies in philosophy and twenty-two thousand in psychology. This would mean that during a whole generation more than a million people would be busy with the mechanics of the spirit and the soul, a big number indeed, though the number of people dealing in commerce, finance, and military matters is several times larger.

Sensing the detective's disesteem, his underestimation of scientific interest, the young man fell silent, though his wretched body kept shivering in his damp sweat suit.

With which he made himself vulnerable.

And in the sudden silence the policeman, who may have been about ten years older than the young man and had a law degree, quickly asked whether they might drive the young man home and added even more quickly that they'd be happy to do so. Seeing that the young man had refused the blanket, they would not like their only eyewitness to catch cold. He used the plural as a sort of shield; he was not alone in making the offer, it was the entire law-enforcement community. Yet it was he who gazed out so penetratingly at the young man from the shelter of that community. As if scanning areas considered suspicious from a criminal point of view. Or as if glancing out from the protection of his profession, taking a long hard look at this other specimen of the masses.

No wonder the young man refused the offer of a lift home.

Unnoticed, this man had done something to him, appraised him and categorized him, which meant there was no way of knowing what he might do next. He was looking at a clear forehead and curly dark hair that somehow held his gaze, and wide, full, soft lips. He must be on his guard. He declined the offer with a single gesture, in fact quite rudely, while thinking, I must get away from here, though with his voice he was able to control his mood.

He said that if they needed him again—of course not during the holidays but right afterward—he'd be glad to be at their disposal.

This did not interest the detective at all, however, though he would have

preferred to hear the young man accept the lift. They had his personal data, along with the deposition, they had recorded his voice as well, but he had no documents to corroborate his identity. In the absence of direct suspicion, they could not even demand them.

Tomorrow he must travel home, the young man added in his confusion.

His ears registered the tiny noises made by his teeth as they knocked together with every word he uttered.

So you live in Berlin, the detective noted, but your home is elsewhere.

He did not understand how one's own body could abandon and humiliate one.

The detective may have understood something of this; he thanked the student for his comprehensive if circumspect help, and then they mutually nodded to each other.

Berlin is my temporary home, the student added, minding his teeth, as if to express his gratitude for so much understanding.

They seemed unable to part from each other.

My parents live in Pfeilen, that's where I was born. Well, a little ways from the town.

What is the name of the place, the policeman asked, and for a while they looked at each other suspiciously.

North of it, of Pfeilen, he said, pointing with his finger, Niederrhein.

Never heard of it, which of course is my fault.

We've had a farm there for a long time now, but my parents live in town. It's a very insignificant place, no reason you should know it.

The young man wanted to smile politely, but the smile turned into something closer to a snarl.

It was impossible to know whose hand was extended first. In any case, they shook hands; the handshake threw them both into embarrassed confusion.

The policeman, in the meantime, introduced himself: I'm Dr. Kienast, he said.

The doctoral title was what remained in the air between the two of them. In the contact of their bare hands, in the mutually felt humps and knobs there was something too physical. The doctoral degree had more to do with healing. As if making a promise to that effect. And mentioning it also had to do with the fact that he, the young man, does exist, after all, in the boundless mass of humans of which they are both insignificant parts. But at this degree of personal closeness, the young man froze up completely and did not reciprocate the bashfully hesitant, promising introduction.

And then, convinced that without further ado he could continue his interrupted run, the young man started off. If the other man really wanted to know anything, let him look up the personal data in the notes just taken by his uni-formed colleague.

In the end, nothing happened.

After a few steps, he had to realize that again he had failed to gauge the situation and his abilities correctly; again he had presumed more of himself than he could deliver. Because something fatal had happened, something that would be very difficult to put behind him. If indeed he could get away with it at all.

With his stupid loquaciousness he had given himself away; why did he have to blurt out where he was going to, why did he go on and on with his explanations. He slowed down and then, changing pace, applied more force to getting away; but his thighs trembled and his knees shook, his breath could not find its proper rhythm, and most of all he felt in his back the challenging gaze of that damned cop.

Indeed, the policeman's eyes followed the young man for a long time, and then he instructed his technicians to record the footsteps left behind. In the muscles of his palm, he felt the imprint of the other man's grip; the other hand's heat clung to his skin and worked its way into the fibers of his muscles, which was more than pleasant, though the evaluation of the contact belonged strictly to the investigation. Kienast, who had written his doctoral thesis on evidentiary processes in the magical, mythic, and rational periods of history, was considered a great fantasm among his colleagues, who followed scientific rationales and adhered to strict professional regulations. They would have scorned him for his method were it not for his all-encompassing attention span and thorough practical knowledge.

Slowly it was growing lighter, though falling snowflakes were still visible in the beams of distant streetlights. As if in the young man's grip he had felt both a terrific strength and an insane trembling that the hand's owner could not reconcile. He had to think that the young man might be a drug addict, his periodically recurring need accounting for why his facial features were so nervously, prematurely old and used up.

He could still see the thin figure in the snowfall among the trees.

Hopeless, he said to himself, though he couldn't have said to whom or what he was referring.

As if his fate had been to have this hopelessness added to another hopeless case. For this he could thank the coincidence that he had not been relieved on his shift. And as if the approaching Christmas holiday served only as a means to deepen the complications. Yet in fact, in this new case, Kienast needed only to deal with two primitive matters: to determine the unknown person's identity, and to exclude the possibility that the death was a suicide. He could see that the case would be simple, yet that he wouldn't be able to solve it to his own satisfaction. This boy would somehow mess him up. His other hopeless case was more exciting; he had been at it for more than two months—a patricide in which the wife took the blame for the child who had been regularly having intercourse with the father.

After his night shifts, Kienast often felt dejection followed by a justified anxiety. His natural laziness sought this sort of excuse or explanation. He was like a large canine that loves softness, warmth, and comfort.

It took a long time to identify the corpse, especially since no one came looking for it, not even after the holidays.

Before it was put on ice, it went through only the first, most necessary coroner's examination. The forensic technicians searched through the corpse's belongings. They found nothing on the body or in the clothing to indicate violence. Most likely a heart attack had finished him off on that park bench.

Kienast noted, however, that no article of the corpse's clothes had labels. In cases where personal identification is difficult, these labels can be very helpful. One should look for them almost automatically. Overcoats and jackets are to be turned inside out; the labels are there, sewn into the lining. In shirts and sweaters, they are on the collars, in pants on the inside of the belt band. In socks and underwear they may be embroidered or woven; in cheaper merchandise they are printed in bright colors. Often these labels are of more use than the so-called *bertillonage*, those eleven items of physical measurement and characteristics that must be recorded to make a positive identification but that are useless for anything else and find themselves at the bottom of desk drawers or in unused databases. This dead man did not wear cheap clothing. Dr. Kienast, examining the third or fourth item, with gloved hands lifted them carefully out of their marked plastic bags. When he found no trace of any labels, in his surprise he hissed involuntarily.

He was alone in the large room; his lonely hissing echoed within the empty tiled walls.

Well, all right, it's possible that a person finds these labels offensively colorful, or they irritate the skin, or one simply does not feel like being labeled and one removes them. It's also acceptable to get rid of them on one's shirt and pullover because, let's say, they irritate one's neck; but why in hell would anyone peel them off the inside of the pants' waistband, where they can't be seen or felt. A mania; but what could be the sense or significance of such a mania. As if he were angry at the living person whose corpse was lying before him.

What maniac would get rid of every possible mark on his clothing that might be used for identification. Other people do not even notice labels, or they like them because they are proud of the brands they wear. His mind automatically supplied the answer: persecution mania, compulsive self-concealment, justified or unjustified anxiety, a desire to leave no traces behind. He gazed at the corpse, he gazed at its belongings.

At the shockingly small underpants, made of translucent, shiny, almost glittering material, where he found a large stain of sperm. Whatever else, he had been a man who liked the color blue; everything he wore was blue—light blue or dark blue.

A man who only in the blue of his shirt allowed some white stripes.
There was too much blue here, much too much.
Must have been a boring man.

He must have been a man who used this boring stylishness as a disguise but in fact was some kind of compulsive or a maniac. That's characteristic of a fastidious man: while his passions rage within him, he maintains his self-respecting exterior; must have been an unbearable person. He found no labels on the diaphanous dark blue woolen socks either. The label had been cut off at the seam of the glittering silvery blue underpants, but a tiny sliver of it, frayed by frequent laundering, remained. The underpants: an exceptional piece. Hardcore fetishistic gentlemen wear such items. He glanced at the corpse and then with his naked eye measured the place of the substantial sperm stain on the unusual underpants. The result of prolonged erection, prolonged seepage or a minor emission. There will be something to look for on the pants too. He could almost see the sharp leather-cutting scissors with which the small label had been removed with a single snip.

This man must have behaved most mysteriously and was probably prepared for the end at any hour.

On his thin bony wrist, there was no visible sign to indicate he wore a watch; neither did he wear a ring. Still, the detective thought he'd been married. If unmarried, he would have been more daring in his passion and probably would have worn not this sort of brief but rather a jock strap of red or white satin under his conservatively tailored clothes. In his soft, black wallet they found a surprisingly large amount of money but no trace of personal identification. This also showed he was after quickly purchasable intercourse and that he managed to get it cheaper than expected. Finally, his black-laced low quarter shoes were items that revealed something if not of their owner then of themselves: Italian shoes of a most reliable brand. Such sturdy Italian shoes one can purchase only in London. And there was something else Dr. Kienast did not know what to do with: the bare body's pungent smell. It was not an unpleasant odor, in fact rather pleasant. Something like an enticing female fragrance that somewhere, not so long ago, the detective had encountered close up or even enjoyed.

Or he had been exposed to a waft of it and found it not repellent.

Perhaps it reminded him of another fragrance, and that is why he thought it was familiar though he could not recall the original. He thought it must be a feminine fragrance because he found it sweeter and somewhat heavier than the deodorants, colognes, or aftershaves used by men, and it emanated not only from the corpse's clothes and other belongings but also from his body.

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