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Invitation to the Daredevils

(Extract)

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For my part, I was often alone with the books. You couldn't tell by looking at me.

I got up in the mornings and made coffee, I stood in front of the books, I looked at them, I drank my coffee and went away.

Later I came back again.

I didn't know anything about the books. They had always been there in the flat above the police station. I didn't know who had brought them there, I didn't know who they belonged to now or who they were to belong to later.

I read the textbooks and the non-fiction. Treatises on mining science, books about shipping, the second volume of *Introduction to History* from the bourgeois revolutions to the present day, an introduction to astronomy, *The Oceans of the World*, two volumes about the birds of Europe and *Alaska - Mexico (9148 Miles from Anchorage to Oaxaca)*. *The Living Desert*, Winston Churchill, *The Plant*, volumes 1 and 2, *The Beauty of America*, *Inseln im Atlantik*. *Angers sous l'occupation*. *Alpine Flight, with 191 aerial photographs and a colour plate after a painting by F. Hass*. *Wonders of the World*, volumes 1, 5, 6 and 7.

I read at the kitchen table. While Fritzi roamed the territory I read. An agreement we had never made. Sometimes I looked up from the kitchen table and she was walking slowly past outside at that moment, cross-country. Even though she walked slowly she once went all the way to St. Beinsen. I took my bearings from the pit frames, she said on her return.

I piled the books on the kitchen table. I carried out research. At some point I discovered tiny flowers I knew from *The Plant*, volume 2 in one of the 191 aerial photos that Walter Mittelholzer had shot in 1928. The sixth volume of *Wonders of the World* explained to me how aeroplanes are built and function. *The Living Desert* was incredible, and Walter Mittelholzer flew over Mount Kilimanjaro on 8 January 1930. In volume 5 of *Wonders of the World* a chapter about mining by Hanns Günther, who also wrote the *Aeroplane Book for Boys*. In which: *The pit frames tower above the shafts which lead vertically down into the earth.*

I held onto everything worth remembering, giving reports every evening. Fritzi listened and added whatever else had to be said. For instance, I said: Joseph Conrad on the North Sea pilot: *He mistrusted my youth, my common-sense, and my seamanship*, and then Fritzi said she had roamed through dingy weather, had reached a peak in the land and felt no astonishment.

We knew little. I didn't know why I read the books. Fritzi didn't know what had to be said. At the beginning of summer we simply imagined what it would be like in winter: we'd get lost in the hills due to heavy snowfall!

The case of this land was unusual, our situation was unprecedented; I couldn't find it in any of the books. At least I could pencil a cross in the atlas above the coal plane, read off the time zone we were in. I noted down the longitude and latitude.

Our birthdays too, Fritzi Ramona Stein 17 April, Margarete C. Stein 25 September, Heribert Stein 4 July, Rosa Stein 5 January.

I noted down the names of songs in the form of a list.

*The Fire Came Up to My Knee*

*To The East*

*Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*

*Return To Burn*

We knew little. They were conspiratorial evenings; we ate hard-boiled eggs and leeks. Preserved tomatoes, turnips and celeriac. We peeled potatoes. There was uproar in the kitchen.

Writing entailed considerable difficulties; I made countless attempts. I wrote:

Fritzi Ramona Stein and I, we are them, the youth of the town, the only daughters of a police commander and a renegade woman, unknown to us for the most part. Our inheritance is an abandoned territory.

Great devastation prevails here, which we do not know how to deal with.

We have always been its children. It is our youth.

We must have come too late.

Though they tell us nothing was better in the old days, and though the police commander and his officers know nothing but patrolling, half-hearted citing of paragraphs and chronological obedience, though our mother has long since set out on her own, we would have been pleased to have some hints handed down, an instruction

manual for actions regarding the future, a handbook for work, the revolutions and the sea. *Lift your skinny fists like antennas to heaven*, it might have said.

Yet any link between the ancestors, possible past events and us, the present youth, has been successfully prevented. Everything has been handed down only in part. Possibly the police commander also administers history in his fervour or it lies fallow in his hands; that's my suspicion. Reports from the past are stored in filing cabinets and card files at the police station. As statistics, as a logical conclusion, as incontrovertible evidence.

Attempts at a chronicle. It was supposed to help us in this mess. I wrote:

Try to be obedient! That is, to subordinate the events obediently to what is generally acknowledged as history. That is, to subordinate the events obediently to a chronology, even though the chronology is tantamount to a brazen simplification, plus a relativisation and a basic renunciation of contradiction, of the formation of non-family gangs and alliances. Of the direct appearance of the possibility in space.

Typed later:

*On the standpoint of modern man on his past,*  
on the significance of the old markings in the territory,  
pit frames,                      shaft entrances,                      railway tracks,

piles of rubble. On the significance of the newer and newest markings: clefts in the ground, paths to nowhere, subsidence of the earth's surface.

*The territory gives birth only to fear and horror! It gobbles up hares, mice and ferrets in one bite!*

In the end I simply tried to explain myself.

This is the story of a town in the process of disappearing. After nothing else but a fire broke out decades ago and continues to burn in the tunnels underground.

It shall further tell of the few houses now remaining in the deserted land, of their inhabitants, male and female.

The description of the life of the Stein sisters. Where and in what form they come into this world, what they see, learn, experience and endure in it.

The youth read books and look for a river. The youth think of meeting at the river in the future. They cannot recall the time before the fire, but they try nonetheless. Journeys are undertaken. A horse joins them.

There is nothing mysterious about the entire story, although it may cause confusion in places, unsettling those easily scared, as life often does. Unfortunately, this cannot be prevented.

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It was early evening. Two police officers were leaning against the outside wall downstairs, talking quietly. I spent a long time watching them.

That evening was the first time I had read about the river.

*My friends in Missouri advised me to bring tools to build canoes and go down this river to the Pacific.*

The river extended visibly before me. Its name was Buenaventura. It flowed calmly and wide, yet not without its perils. At times it seemed too rough to me; barely sprung from the eastern flank of the mountains, it crossed southern heat, subtropical regions, Florida.

I was alone. Fritz was out roaming. Our father H. Stein sat downstairs in the police station. I had not yet told Fritz about the river. I ate a piece of bread, then sat back down at the table.

Two padres and an old cartographer had discovered the river on their 1776 expedition. It was on an early autumn day, and the cartographer most likely walked slightly bent, his stomach aching. The three of them held a show of hands to agree on a name. The cartographer hastily jotted down the river and its location in his notes and then they continued on their way.

With the reports in the books I had found a map dating from the year 1823, on which a river with the name Buenaventura flowed into a lake. In widely spaced inked letters to the left were the words

*UNEXPLORED TERRITORY.*

The officers were still there when I looked out of the window. I couldn't see them, the darkness had grown too great, but I heard their voices.

*The western boundaries of this lake are unknown.*

I adjusted the fall of light from the desk lamp. On further expeditions years later, they had charted the unexplored territory. They had missed the river, then failed to find it any more, and then in turn looked too far to the south. They suspected it further eastwards, they believed it to be in the north, they doubted it existed, *buena ventura*.

In 1844 J. C. Le-Mont definitively proved the river did not exist. His geographical surveying expedition had failed to find it either. When he made his report to the country's president, the latter called him *young* and spoke of the *impulsive behaviour of young men*.

Fritzi came into the kitchen late in the evening. She hung her anorak over the back of my chair. And still the torrent flowed wide before my eyes. I said only this: According to my own calculations, the river Buenaventura still flowed straight through this territory 240 years ago.

Fritzi nodded: Then we must look for it.

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That evening:

I climbed on my motorbike and rode through the town. With me rode a great unrest. The town was dark, a light still burning on Elisabeth Korn's first floor, but that too was soon out of view. I left the town behind me. *I sought the Buenaventura long and restlessly on my journey southwards.* Unexpectedly, the motorbike leapt once over a swell, then everything was as it had been.

\*

Fritzi sat down mutely with me at the kitchen table; her alarm clock had been ringing for several hours. Her hair stood on end in all directions.

The two of us watched in silence what they called the sky here, and what had once been the land beneath it and now merely extended. At some distance, three pit frames stood unmoving in the landscape. The steel cables still ran taut over the cable sheaves into the ground. Railway tracks sunk deep into the earth led away from the shafts. The pit frames were the only reference points the land offered. (And the hills? And the houses and the roads?) Only the northern coalfield itself remembered: the men descending the cables to the depths that inscribed their own periods on the land.

The rims of my fingernails were black with coal dust.  
Even if the territory in question were to be abandoned in the end, I  
would take it away with me.

Fritzi spoke cautiously about the untenable landscape:  
For a long time, she said, I have been trying to comprehend the  
landscape here. She said, I look at the pit frames rising to the  
sky, and I look at the railway lines running deeper and deeper into  
the ground because they're sinking and sinking, I look at the sky,  
because the sky might be symptomatic too, the sky is part of this  
landscape too. I count, she said, I count the colours; my vocabulary  
is exhausted already after brown, olive and black, and when I think  
about it those are all the colours there are here. I look at the few  
houses standing in the landscape, at random distances from one  
another. Stubborn and alone, they keep the names of their streets  
upright and have lost all context. Former terraced houses stand in  
the broads of endless streets, kept from collapsing by high piles of  
bricks on either side.  
She said, the land is lying on its back, it's not working any more.

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In the subsequent nights I dreamed of the Mekong. The Mekong  
got wider and wider as time passed by. In its middle rocked a  
small transport ship, its freight two cages of hens. At the rudder sat  
a woman in a hat. Once darkness had broken, when the heat grew  
even clearer, I heard people's voices calling to one another, from

one bank to the other until deep in the night.

Morning came, and I wrote on a sheet of paper: In search of a river.

O buena ventura!

The procedure: extensive research in the territory and in the books on the territory's past and present. Interrogation of those present. Possibly archaeological excavations.

Then I stayed in bed and thought of the animals in the Mekong Delta. Little apes hugged tightly to the tree trunks, the fish were on their trail, a giant catfish swam just below the surface, and a snow crane flew past.

\*

At last I found a few useful pieces of information on the shelves, wedged between the books. A few photographs: 4 December 1908. 150 people homeless following a fire. Standing under a bare tree, in front of it two horses. In the background swathes of smoke and as if snow were lying on the ground: piles of rubble and ash. Fire laid by the mining company, to gain access to the coal seam directly beneath? Letters, notes: 12 May 1902: strike. 3 October 1902: 122 striking miners force strike-breakers in a railway carriage emblazoned *L. A. Rilken Mining Company* to turn back.

A photograph shows the L. A. Rilken mine in the year 1880 in its entirety. Photographer: G. Schwarzer, Wildenstadt.

Once dug-out territory in the year 1963. Mammoth Coal Company. Tiny digging machines in the foreground.

Erik Danz, aged eleven, sitting on the huge fan over the ventilation shaft, 1959. Son of the local brass band's first trumpeter, Karl Danz.

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*The Grand Erg Occidental in Africa, the Grand Erg Oriental, the great Erg of Bilma, Igidi Erg, Rebiana Erg, the deserts Erg Shesh, Fesan, the deserts Gapawa, Hamada du Draa, Hamada el-Hamra, Kalahari, made the branches of the old boxwood droop low to the ground, the great deserts of Kamaturi made my boat rot at its lowest point, I was thirsty at the sight of them, the animals had already perished, towards the end seeking liquid even in their own stomachs. The great deserts of Karakum, Kysylkumm, Lakamari, Makteir, Masagyr, the deserts Moritabi, Mujunkum, Trarza cleared their path, leaving a number of traces on the Alps towards the end, Uaran.*

\*

The book *On Avoiding or Removing Individual Sections of Existing Constructions* by Hirsch and Elm had been published in Turin in 1951. It was in the first-aid kit in the car, hidden. Hirsch and Elm wore hats on the book cover, two young Canadians shipped over to Italy at the age of 24 and 27. They allegedly studied Statics and Dynamics at Turin University, according to the jacket copy, and later built the great arched bridge at Hölltobel, several steel-framework railway bridges in Canada, and in particular, according to the jacket copy, the Rose Blixt Overpass, the New Turnpike Bridge, also in Europe the Hotzentötz Bridge, the Weberschlucht Bridge, an arched bridge made of fieldstones, at an unnamed location (Italy?): Ponte sul fiume Bonaventura, according to the jacket copy.

I pored over the maps of Italy I found in the flat for a River Bonaventura. Then perhaps, or so I thought, it might all have been a misunderstanding, instead of in Italy, J. C. Le-Mont might have entered the name of the river on the wrong map.

*Ponte sul fiume Bonaventura.*

When I asked H. Stein about Hirsch and Elm that day, he confiscated the book with a police-approved arm lock and threw it on a glimmering pile of plywood behind the police station.

Fritzi shrugged her shoulders. Elvis Hirsch?

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There was no other option but to begin the search over and over again. Our animal bodies paced restlessly to and fro between the various rooms of the flat.

*My chronometer and barometer were now at constant risk. The stumble of a mule might destroy everything.*

Fritzi disappeared in the bathtub, I stood at the kitchen window, seeing: Henrik, Dünckel and Schroeder on the car park, smoking cigarillos. Heller vacuumed the dirt out of his car. I sat down in the dark corner. Even here in the desert, I heard the faint rush of the river. It had to pass nearby, at some point between St. Beinsen and Wärgl, Hasseldorf, Ansburg and the demarcation line. Some rivers disappear and only appear again at a different point, entering an underground karst country and winding caves through a ponor. Then they flow into the Chinese Sea. They flow in a south-westerly direction, past a campsite. They re-emerge just past the airport.

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*On 11 May many years ago, 7000 male and female workers at the Good Courage Mine at Wildenstadt entered a strike. In addition, 10,000 downed tools in Belkenburg and 4000 in Usten. There followed strikes in Hasseldorf, St. Beinsen and Oberfeldstadt, workers striked in all parts of the coalfield.*

*Votes were held in the shafts on further actions to be taken. 91 delegations, elected by over 20,000 miners and employees, set out to announce their demands in the capital city.*

\*

Fritzi found a horse in Usten. It must have strayed onto the hill through the bushes; she took it by the halter, which was brittle and almost colourless, and led it away from Usten and down from the hill to the crossroads, where a sheet of paper fluttered on the traffic light and scared the horse.

I pointed the name Bataille out to her; she said it was a name most likely suitable for this last horse in the deserts of Africa. I thought of the stumbling mule.

Perhaps all I had to do was write long enough about the horse's hair, and then everything important would have been said.

No, no! cried Fritzi.

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I was in Usten, I also entered Hasseldorf, I visited Belkenburg, viewed Hinterzell, St. Beinsen, Wildenstadt, I walked through Unterdorf, rode once around Wärgl. I saw the edges of the woods, I heard a bird's call, from far away the humming of the transformer station in Wärgl, I thought of the Mekong, of the Nile, the Amazon, the Yangtze, the Po and the Mississippi. I searched for the Buenaventura.

Above my head flew an albatross, yet it did not land.

I walked all the roads in the south and followed the paths to the north, I roamed to the east and of course to the west. Fritzi too had walked these streets, she had rode out ahead of me on the horse Bataille, she had run after me, had crossed my path at regular intervals. We met by chance on the edges of the woods, in the deepest hollows of the valley, at small standing waters, ponds, puddles and pools, we met below the pit frames and at the great mine ventilator, we made appointments on the savannah-yellow field, for we were in search of the river.

And the light rose and fell, and the days passed with quiet footfalls, once it was summer, then came the autumn, and soon it would be winter.

Fritzi was walking outside with the horse on a loose rope. A horse has an unerring instinct for water, she had said, its nostrils tremble and it raises its head in excitement towards the horizon.

Where the albatross flew.

\*

There came to us 41 editions of the newspaper for miners by the name of *A Woodpecker Flew over the Shaft*. The poet Peter Wassermann had sent them to us, although we were absolutely unacquainted: To the sons and daughters in the territory, grandsons and granddaughters, he had addressed the box of newspapers.

The paper of the oldest copies was discoloured; they were almost 100 years old, others younger than our father, from the period shortly before the fire. Someone had made notes on some of the pages in pencil and underlined certain sentences, most likely Peter Wassermann:

*Presumed river*

he had written at one point in the margins. Another time underlined *Rosa Luxemburg* and a few sentences of Friedrich Engels. In edition number 53 he had underlines the word *tomorrow* a total of eleven times on all pages. On the title page of number 70 he had drawn a ballpoint moustache on all 17 miners in a particular photograph.

On one occasion he wrote several lines about a woodpecker next to the title.

*When the woodpecker  
flies by in the evening,  
we shall gather in the morrow.*

Fritzi gazed thoughtfully over the rim of a water jug. We shall gather in the morrow, she said slowly, shall we gather in the morrow with the horse Bataille, a miner's hammer and a pick in remembrance?

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Dear Mr Peter Wassermann, wrote Fritzi, sitting in front of the water jug in the kitchen. We, the daughters in the territory, received your parcel. Your parcel, Mr Wassermann -

I left the kitchen and pulled on a hat in the hall. I could already hear the horse's hooves outside.

Perhaps, I thought, all I had to do was write long enough about the horse's hair, and then everything important would have been said.

No, no! cried Fritzi and said: Of course we talk of this white horse's hair. And we talk of the little pebbles on the way from here to Hasseldorf. We talk of the time just before the night

and the nightly times, of the changing of the light as a day goes by, of the signs of autumn. We talk of the notes we find in our pockets in the evening and the old paths in the territory.

Yes! We talk of the old paths, the last bushes on their edges. Of the little birch tree with its round leaves down on the edge of town behind the swimming pool. Of the fine veins of the round leaves of the little birch tree. Of the houses and the mines.

But it's not enough. Margarete! It's not enough, do you hear me! We have to think of the white horse's hair in the future as well. We have to talk of the time just after waking up, of the changing of the light for the better as a day goes by, of the signs of the next day that will be the way we want it. Of a flamingo and a sparrow and a snow crane circling above the territory. Of the feet of the albatross and of Hemingway's daughters. Of circles of friends. Of books that end with fishermen getting up and ships casting anchor. Of the performing bear catapulting himself through the top of the circus tent from a trampoline. Of the wild cat secretly building a nest in the bushes. We have to meet in the warmest room of the house! We have to maintain correctly that this state is not the last. We must not believe that things are incontrovertible! We must talk now as well of the unknown paths in the territory, and of the old familiar paths now forgotten. Above all we must talk of the river, the River Buenaventura, until we find it. That

day will come!

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On the banks of the Buenaventura, we shall make plans for the time after the long winter. Plans to provide relief for a) our miserable existence and b) this miserable stretch of territory.

We shall plan a conference that shall escalate into a great celebration. We shall undertake a trip on the Buenaventura in a wooden rowing boat, which shall take us all the way to China. We shall proclaim the land anew. We shall ride in circles on Bataille and then suddenly veer off and disappear. We shall perform Bruckner's *Sickness of Youth* in numerous languages, but we shall not put on costumes. We shall invite countless guests, among them many mining scientists, lady archaeologists, a unit of firemen, lady and gentleman representatives of the arts, the miners of all continents, a typographer, a number of young daredevils.

A hotel awaits you, we shall write in the official invitation, accommodation will be provided.

We shall type letter after letter – the great celebration! Of the renewed discovery of the River Buenaventura! – and insert each one into an envelope.

To the Academy of Mining Sciences  
To a band from London that we heard on the radio  
To the aforementioned typographer  
To Mrs Erika Gerste and Messers Hirsch and Elm  
To a geography student from Berlin and Freudenberg  
To a surveyor from the former GDR  
To the firemen of New York  
To a number of hobos from Idaho, Kansas and Montana  
To Norma Jackson, lady archaeologist  
To the lady photographer and war reporter who studied in  
Frankfurt am Main  
To the poets Wassermann, Leu and Becker  
To the lady chroniclers of the northern lands of Africa  
To the first deputy mayor of Reykjavik  
To the youth of Athens

This extract quotes freely from: John Bidwell, Joseph Conrad, W. H. Emory, John Charles Frémont, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Hanns Günther, Deryl B. Johnson and Peter Wassermann.