

DUMONT

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KAISERSTRASSE

A Novel, 315 pp.

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Kaiserstrasse

Excerpt: pages 13-31

They called him “Little Böwe” even though he was 6 foot 1. A certain kind of look from men made him feel insecure, as did a certain smile from women. He had dropped out of high school four months before graduation with an excellent report card, even though, sitting at the back of the classroom, he had usually considered it beneath him to raise the hand cupping his face whenever he knew the answer to something. One March morning while classes were still in session, he went to the principal’s office and picked up his report card. That was three years ago. Through the classroom doors he could hear the voices of the teachers as he ran down the stairs two steps at a time, the familiar smell of old apples and cleaning agents in his nose, a smell he had known for nine years, as familiar to him as the nails that still substituted for coat hooks in the crumbling plaster of the corridor walls. He calculated his grade average as “A.” He even got an “A+” in gym and drawing. At the bottom of the report card the principal had written: Böwe is intelligent, extraordinarily athletic, loyal, enthusiastic, but fidgety.

Why have you decided to leave just now? Is soccer the only thing on your mind?
Böwe shook his head.

You’re a good soccer player, Böwe. Will you try to make it as a first-rank player? It would suit you, Böwe. Soccer is something you have to have inside you. Lots of guts, lots of feeling, lots of passion. Look at Helmut Rahn and Fritz Walter! Wouldn’t you like to play like them? But with a diploma to boot?

Böwe shook his head.

Well then, what other reasons do you have?

Böwe looked out the window. His class was playing soccer down on the red sand of the athletic field. He watched Shorsh Szymanski run, a bandage on his knee, but there was probably nothing more than a perfectly sound knee under the bandage. Szymanski pushed and shoved, spat, kept on pushing and shoving, but the gym teacher, who also taught French, didn’t blow his whistle, just let it dangle over his stomach. Same as last week. Last week Böwe had still been running on that field; even though he had a cold he was in position, ready to play, his eyes peeled for an opportunity. Szymanski had been pushing and shoving with the regularity of a cuckoo clock. Then a beautiful long pass to Böwe, Böwe shoots, the ball is punched clear and rolls back toward him. He and two opposing players, one of them Szymanski, pounce on the ball. Böwe takes the ball as it comes, not directly with his toe, nor fully with his instep, driving it as hard as possible with his extended leg into the left corner of the goal, while jabbing Szymanski in the stomach with his right elbow. The whistle blows, the gym teacher refuses to allow the goal, points at Szymanski who is lying on the ground, acting as if he were about to have a baby.

Just because I tugged at his shirt, sir? Böwe asks calmly. Sir, you're screwing us. The gym teacher says, Böwe, you have nothing to say around here. When you're poor and on a tuition scholarship you have no say here, none at all, Böwe. Understand? Böwe raises his hand to hit the man, but at that instant he pictures his mother in her blue nylon smock standing at the factory assembly line where she works smoothing the edges of plastic baby bassinets. He stops his hand in mid-air, switches the gesture, and puts it up to shade his eyes instead, pretending that it was merely the sun that was bothering him. He clamps his lips shut and turns on his heel. Hey chief, the team's goalie calls after him, hey chief, what's the matter?

Böwe got dressed and went home. Then, in the grocery store at the front of the house, with the same hand that was going to hit the teacher, he wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education and typed it up using two fingers and making no mistakes. Early that evening in the apartment they had rented behind the store he showed it to his mother. She cried and then signed it.

Böwe, I asked you for your reason, the principal had said.

Issues of the heart, Böwe said, his facial expression the same as the one he would have twenty years later whenever he fudged the truth.

Is it a girl? the principal had asked.

Yes, a girl. Any personal secret was all right with him as an excuse. There are moments when you learn things that it might take another person years to learn.

Then let me give you a bit of advice, the principal had said. Hang your pants up only where you'd also like to hang your hat.

Böwe became a washing machine salesman.

The day after he quit school, Böwe went for an interview with Fritz and Franz Locke about a job as apprentice in Locke's Washing Machine and Metalworking Factory. He soon learned the rules a washing machine salesman needed to know to get a foot in the door:

1. Selling is a personal relationship between two people.
2. You get further in life if you have a sense of humor.
3. What you pretend to give away will turn into profit.
4. The wishes of the customers always have priority: It is more important to gain their good will than to close a deal.
5. There may be reasons for failure, but no excuses.
6. Customers must get rid of their No's before they can say Yes. Therefore: Start off by asking all the questions to which they will answer 'No' so that they can get rid of their No's; then ask 'Why,' the most effective little word in concluding a sale.
7. He who decides quickly can give orders. He who hesitates must do what he's told.
8. The sale begins when the buyer says, 'No.'

Böwe tagged along with an older salesman under whose tutelage he rapidly learned to become a sort of secret seducer whenever he stood outside someone's front door. At just the right moment in his sales pitch he learned to ask: Are you married? Do you have children? Are you from Baden? Ah yes, there's a bit of a southern accent in the way you speak. By that time he was usually already sitting at some lonely woman's kitchen table, drinking a glass of water or a cup of coffee, praising her stale cookies even as he is pushing the package aside to make room for his brochures. He quickly learned

that selling was a relationship between two people, one of whom, the seller, has to have ideas that the other, the buyer, believes are his own.

It was a sunny, clear October day, the sky swept clean, as it might look above some northern sea. Böwe had never been near the sea.

Böwe, my boy, Franz Locke called from his desk, Young Böwe, I have an assignment I can entrust only to you. You're my man. Böwe smiled and looked again at the framed motto hanging behind the boss's desk:

"In achieving prosperity it is important to act ethically."

Wasn't there a comma missing somewhere?

Fritz and Franz Locke were twins, both pretty short. The only way they would have been allowed to go to war was with one carrying the other piggyback. But after the last war, they'd shown them all. Each brother now drove a large Mercedes because their factory also supplied parts to Mercedes-Benz. Fritz drove a white one, Franz a smoke-blue one, and in both the leather upholstery was gray. Franz, the less trusting of the two, was in charge of sales and Böwe's boss. Fritz who was responsible for purchasing was more relaxed and had the prettier wife. Altogether there were five washing machine factories in the city, but only one high school. It was two years ago that Böwe had chosen to work for the smallest but most exclusive of these factories. A year after that Adolf Hitler had been officially declared dead. In September of this year Böwe voted for Adenauer – because Adenauer had managed to get the last German prisoners-of-war held in Russia released. After that many people had voted for him. Böwe's bosses did too.

Böwe, my boy, I have a special assignment for you, Franz Locke said. Let me just say: Corelli & Co. We must take advantage of their bankruptcy. And you will do that for us.

Franz Locke looked at him, one eye expressing tenderness, the other anger. The legs of his desk ended in four lions' paws digging their wooden claws into the carpet. Under the desk his feet were placed close together, two tiny feet in shiny black shoes. This is what Böwe saw when his boss dropped his pencil and Böwe bent to pick it up, crawling around on the floor longer than necessary. Leo Böwe, twenty-two, apprentice salesman, athletic but underweight, would have preferred to stay under his boss's desk forever. That's how it had always been with him – too fearful before taking on a new task, too fearless once it was underway.

The conversation lasted more than an hour, and throughout Böwe didn't once cross his legs. When the questions got too complicated for him he thought of the African mask hanging on the bamboo wall at home and took cover behind its face.

It would be a big challenge for him, an adventure, his boss said, and a delicate affair. Böwe would shortly be going to Frankfurt every Thursday for the Locke firm. His brother Fritz and he had hired the salesmen of their competitor Corelli & Co. to represent them in the Rhine-Main area, and every Friday in an office rented especially for that purpose Böwe was supposed to pay these men the considerable commission of 25 percent on every finalized sales contract. Böwe was to travel to Frankfurt by train, carrying a great deal of cash, remain until Saturday, staying in the Hotel am Berg, and then either he, Franz, or his brother Fritz would pick him up by car. And Böwe needn't worry about the large amount of cash he was carrying, for surely he must still have a money belt from the days when he went on excursions with his Boy Scout troop.

The office, by the way, is near Kaiserstrasse, in case that means anything to you.

It meant nothing to Böwe, but he nodded, still pretending that he was behind the African mask. He began to daydream. He had been married for more than a year, but had never been to Frankfurt.

It was midday. Böwe was ambling along the green linoleum-floored corridor that connected the offices. At the end of the corridor there was a window through which one could see the truck parking lot, beyond that the factory gate, then the street, and on the other side of the street a brick-red railroad viaduct that stood out against the blue sky, so blue you could really call it heaven on a day like today. Böwe briefly leaned his forehead against the windowpane. From here it looked warm out there. Indian summer.

He walked down the stairs to the exit of the office section of the building, and on the ground floor he passed the door to the machine shop. Through the door came the sounds of metal being stamped out of metal at regular intervals, to be turned eventually into washing machines. It hurt the ears, like a scream. He walked to the gate and was going to yell, "Enjoy your lunch" and "I'll be back soon," to the gatekeeper. But the gatekeeper's chair was empty. The radio was playing last year's hit, "*Kriminal Tango*." Hazy Osterwald was singing. Böwe smiled and kept going. He had a nice face, sharp-cut features, and broad shoulders that remained steady as he walked out to the truck parking lot, into the October sunshine which no longer shed any warmth.

He didn't even own a suitcase that he could take to Frankfurt.

* * *

You screamed in your dream last night, Liz said. She was still in her nightgown, saying good-bye to him at the front door.

What had he been dreaming about? He looked at the pink nylon gown, and at that instant his dream slipped away on the slinky material. It was cold in the hallway. He kissed her nose, picked up his brand-new little pepper-and-salt suitcase and took the streetcar to the office. At noon he ate cabbage with sausage out of his portable lunch bucket, then he worked until early afternoon. At about two o'clock he picked up 20,000 marks from Franz Locke's office, and while Locke watched he shoved the bills hastily into his money belt, took his little suitcase, and left. The route to the train station followed the railroad tracks at the edge of town. The sun stood pretty low in the west and blinded him. But Frankfurt was to the south. "Down there" in Frankfurt, Liz called it. She had been anxious ever since she found out about his special assignment, as if Frankfurt lay in the direction of Hell. Böwe, too, expected that Frankfurt "down there" would be the darkest South.

He took a second-class seat on the local train to Wuppertal. He had bought the ticket at the station from a guy he couldn't stand, even as a child. He wore the same sweater summer and winter and would drink his coffee from an unwashed cup that was as dirty as a toilet bowl even as he served the next customer at the ticket window. What sort of guy was this? You knew him for such a long time and yet never really knew him at all. In town they said that after work he wrote poetry about the idea that heaven had been abolished long ago. He was probably a communist because he never wore white shirts, not even on Sunday.

In Wuppertal-Elberfeld Böwe transferred to the express train to Cologne, and from Cologne he took the express to Frankfurt. The men sitting in the express were

different from those on the local trains. Men with slender briefcases, narrow ties, shiny suits, and ears that stuck out like bats' ears. Böwe's face was oval and still undecided, not yet set. Behind his eyes the first signs of melancholy were waiting to become full-blown melancholy. But when he looked out of the train window what was outside became connected with what was inside him. He was happy riding on that fast train rolling through small towns without stopping. Had he really screamed in his dream during the night?

In Cologne, Böwe took a seat in the dining car with his new suitcase, intending to stay there until the train got to Frankfurt. He stroked the purple-and-dark-gray striped velvet of the seat with both hands. Hardly any of the white tablecloth-covered tables were occupied. At the most distant table sat a much older man, wearing suspenders and smoking a cigar. Böwe studied the menu carefully. Broiler breast with rice, lentil soup with or without hot dogs, a cheese or cold-cut platter with cucumbers. He ordered the cheese platter and some wine.

Good evening, the woman said. It was still light outside.
She had boarded the train in Koblenz.

He had already spotted her on the platform. She had a face that could have fit in his hand and which might have been older than his own, or maybe not. It was very pale, but different from the paleness of Liz's face. At that moment Leo Böwe wished for something and immediately forgot what it was.

Good evening.

She sat down at his table after having softly asked whether he too was a non-smoker. She was wearing a fluffy black sweater and pushed the sleeves up to her elbows, exposing very white arms. Only then did she take off her gloves. She was wearing an ivory necklace that fit snugly around her neck. She brushed back her hair, it was blond with a note of ash. His sister-in-law was also blond, but egg-yolk blond. She sold shoes and was pretty dumb. Any woman traveling alone like this one was sure to be an intelligent woman.

I'd like to have a glass of wine, Mediterranean wine, the woman said to the waiter.

When Böwe looked out the window he saw the Rhine glittering alongside the tracks. Late fall. There were few people to be seen among the houses to the right. They walked bent over because of the wind. The woman tossed back her hair again, and only now did he see that she was wearing earrings, orange-red like the directional signals on a car when you make a turn. She put a brown camera bag on the white tablecloth and ordered Ovaltine.

With wine? Böwe asked.

I drink delicious Ovaltine, she said, to make me fit and happy...

...and with a mind that's bright and keen, said Böwe completing the advertising slogan. He hastily wiped the sheepish smile off his face with one hand and, realizing he needed a shave, continued rubbing his face in embarrassment. A last ray of sunlight fell on the two wineglasses and the wedding ring on Böwe's finger.

Tomorrow would be All Saints' Day.

Leo Böwe was born at midnight on May 10, 1935, four months and two days after Elvis Presley and two years after the book burning. He didn't read much. But one book

had become his bible. Actually the only reason he had taken the book off the bookstore shelf had been its title: *The Secret Seducers*. As soon as he opened it he realized it had nothing to do with sex. He had intended to put it back, but since he had already started to read he continued reading as he walked to the cash register. In the weeks that followed he learned a lot from that book. Evenings, while Liz listened to the radio, Böwe sat next to her on the couch, his knees drawn up, his nose as pointy as the beak of a curious bird, and learned why women prefer to buy items in red packages, why men smoke cigarettes, why a woman only rarely buys a dress that suits her taste, why men's clothing is becoming more feminine and why distrust of banks is on the rise, why a person votes for one party rather than another, and why people have recently begun to brush their teeth before breakfast.

Sometimes he would read aloud to Liz. She would yawn. Her boredom made her boring to him. But then the two rows of small, pretty white teeth she revealed when she yawned, like secret pearls, quickly made up for it.

How far are you going? the woman with the small face asked.

To Frankfurt.

On business?

Yes.

What kind of work do you do?

What kind of work do I do, Böwe repeated and took a deep breath, I travel a lot, at least for the time being.

I do too, said the woman sitting across from him, and she looked out of the window.

Böwe had never been to Paris or London or America. He hadn't been any place where they spoke a different language, except for Holland. There he had been able to understand the people quite well; their language was much like Plattdeutsch back home. Liz had walked through the monastery gardens near the harbor in white, excessively high-heeled sandals and later, on the beach at Sheveningen, in nylon stockings, carrying her shoes under her arm like a pocketbook. Böwe, in spite of the heat, hadn't even taken off his shoes or suit jacket. He had been looking anywhere but at Liz so as not to have to get into an argument with her. Yes, after two days his Liz had gotten homesick while he had been seized by wanderlust. What it came down to was that Liz saw the world in a different way than he did. She didn't even take a good look at a place once she was there. For the first time he realized that each of them led a very limited life, so limited in fact that there was little room in it for another person. Two pigeons had been coupling on the beach promenade, and both he and Liz had averted their eyes.

Really? The woman moved her hands encouragingly across the white tablecloth past her wineglass in his direction. You travel too, that's a scream.

She had said 'that's a scream,' and the expression didn't suit her at all. It suited only cheap people.

What do you do?

His lips began to stretch oddly sideways into a vague smile. I'm a writer, he heard himself say, but he spoke so slowly that he could have stopped in mid-sentence. It wasn't a lie, he would later console himself. It was an invention, and inventing wasn't lying. After that he looked intently out the window, afraid she would now ask for his

name, and he wouldn't be able to think of any writers besides Goethe, Edzard Schaper, or Heinrich Böll.

Writer, the woman said as slowly as he had smiled. A writer? Aren't you too young for that?

The point is, he said and stopped short. He thought of his favorite book, *The Secret Seducers*. What one needs to capture the subconscious, he said, is first of all know-how, not necessarily experience.

Know-how? So you speak English? the woman said. Böwe blushed and realized he was nodding.

Have you ever been to England?

He nodded.

That's a scream; so have I, the woman said.

Again that silly expression.

When were you there, if I may ask, he said quickly before she could go on with her questions.

I was three years old when my parents took me to England.

Böwe stared at her hair, and the word he'd been searching for suddenly occurred to him. Baltic blonde, he thought, she's a Baltic blonde, and now that the word Baltic had come to him, he believed that he knew what she meant about going to England.

Then we're about the same age? he said, flustered, and so as not to have to say anything about the thing with England. For an instant he thought he saw an expression of dismay in her face. Up to that point they had gotten along because they knew nothing about each other. Now that had changed.

Yes, she said, we are. And otherwise?

It took a while before they were able to look at each other again and go on with their conversation. From where he sat in the dining car, the sky seemed heavy with snow. He smelled her perfume and, with that scent in his nose, as long as he didn't look at her he thought she resembled someone he knew. In spite of that there was something strange about her.

As the first houses of Frankfurt came into view, their feet touched under the table. He jerked his back first as though they had kissed by mistake and asked what her name was. By then she had already grabbed her camera and clicked the shutter right in his face.

What's your name? he asked again.

And what's yours?

Leo.

Leo Tolstoy? She laughed; he didn't.

And, may I?

What?

Mail you the photo?

Where to?

To your home maybe?

Böwe blushed again as he said no.

She got up, put on her coat, and walked to the door even though the train had not yet entered the station. She stood in the drafty area between the cars, still in view but already far away. The distance between them indicated that something was wrong. Big-city women. He glanced at the empty seat across from him. The space where she had been was still there, without her. The tablecloth seemed less bright.

* * *

Now it was three weeks later and Böwe had gotten used to Frankfurt. He walked through the train station, a ribbed undershirt over his money belt. A nylon shirt on top of the undershirt, a tie on top of the nylon shirt. A dark-blue tie that he only wore on Sundays tied in a Windsor knot. And, fitting tautly over all these thin layers, his suit. The suit was new and the smell of synthetic fibers drifted up to Böwe's nose with every move he made. The soles of his shoes, though, were real leather. His egg-yolk blond sister-in-law worked in a shoe store and that meant: wholesale prices. So he didn't have to face the world wearing crepe soles – rubber erasers, as he always called them. The world? Oh, man! Böwe walked briskly through the main exit of the Frankfurt train station and over to Kaiserstrasse. Kaiserstrasse ran at a right angle away from the station. Where he came from there was a Kaiserstrasse too, but that one ran parallel to the tracks of the small-town station. Parallels, Böwe had learned in math class, were two straight lines that touched only in infinity.

He waited for the No. 17 streetcar that went to the Hotel am Berg. All the others came but not the No. 17, and Böwe decided to walk to his office instead, along Kaiserstrasse to Zeil. From there it was just a little way to the hotel.

Beside him men jumped noiselessly off the streetcars the way they do in big cities, in passing handing the newspaper vendors in the traffic islands their precounted change, tucking the *Rundschau*, *Neue Presse*, or *Allgemeine* under their arms, and sometimes taking a few steps to catch up with a woman who had gone ahead carrying her net shopping bag and wearing sheer stockings, so sheer they made her legs look bare.

Somewhere nearby perhaps a Baltic blonde was just now sitting down on a hotel bed to take off *her* stockings. To do so she would lie down on her back, raise her legs up in the air and stay that way a while, exhausted after the train ride.

It was already dark. The arching lampposts on Kaiserstrasse were ornamented art deco style, but none of them worked any more. They stood out black against the dark gray sky. Böwe's little suitcase wasn't heavy. He walked past a bombed-out apartment house, not really a house, just a skeleton. On the remnants of the walls of the next house the advertisements of enterprising businesses were calling attention to themselves. He passed a series of more recently built but already dilapidated pavilions, and a beer hall that offered hot meals from eight o'clock in the morning till midnight.

An artist had cast colored metal figures against a windowless wall, elongated and line-slender, a pile of chopsticks that made Böwe think of the wall mosaic at the Catholic school back home that Liz and he passed every Sunday on their way to the cemetery. In the mosaic a circle of faceless children were dancing around an equally faceless man who held up a ruler in his hand. What were Liz and he doing at the cemetery every Sunday? For Böwe the mosaic had come to epitomize his Sunday afternoons, pale and empty and always a little rainy. On Sundays Böwe bore a hollow space of anxiety within himself. Liz, of course, hadn't understood when he told her about it. He wouldn't ever want to arouse this anxiety in her. Never.

Böwe walked quickly up the Kaiserstrasse. Suddenly a stranger was walking close beside him, but that didn't make Böwe walk any faster. He only took bigger strides. Do you need a typewriter?

A what? Böwe did not stop. A very young woman walked hurriedly past them wearing a little cap on the back of her head. It must have been fastened with quite a few hairpins.

An Olivetti, the stranger said. Right now I can sell you one at a good price. You're of course familiar with the Olivetti, the new model?

Now Böwe did stop. He stared at the stranger. The man took his hands out of his coat pockets. Böwe's boss had hands like that. Pudgy, small, pale, almost silvery hands with which one picked out cakes or petted hamsters. But the stranger's shadow, that shadow on the pavement, hadn't he seen it once before? In the movies maybe?

Böwe shook his head. The stranger's shoulders drooped with disappointment but in a friendly way.

And how about Nitribitt, the stranger said. His tone of voice was matter-of-fact and thoughtful.

No, Böwe said, I don't want to buy a Nitribitt either, and anyway I never heard of that brand.

At that moment there was the smell of car exhaust. The stranger had lit a cigarette that smelled of carnations. Good God. Really, there were so many things he didn't know yet, Böwe thought. He passed his hand over his shirt, felt the money belt, and would gladly have had a beer right then and there. It was suddenly very cold, colder than October or November, and the cold didn't come from around here. It was a cold from "out there." The stranger reached over and grabbed his sleeve.

Nitribitt, he repeated.

Nitribitt, Böwe said. Is that one... is that one new too?

Not new, the stranger said, but dead.

It was October 31, 1957, shortly after seven. It was Böwe's fourth weekend in Frankfurt on special assignment.

Well then, have a nice evening, he said abruptly because he was not interested in the death of a typewriter.

Well then, the man said, too bad, and he stood there another minute nodding sorrowfully, but his eyes remained expressionless, like black buttons that no longer saw Böwe.

Böwe crossed to the other side of the street and didn't really know why. The sidewalk looked deserted as if it were already many hours later and deep night. A cold wind was blowing.