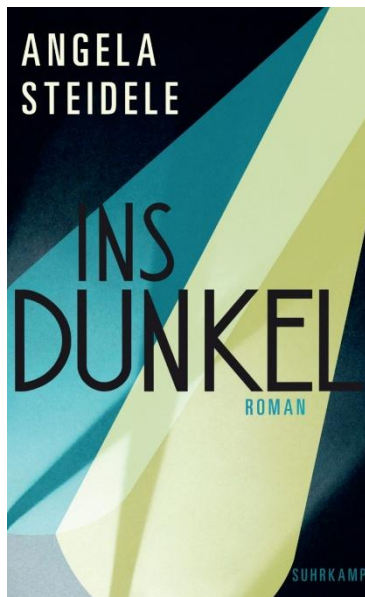




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Into the Dark

A Novel

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[Klosters, 1969]

We're sitting in the dark.

On the screen, we see a sparse, snowy forest. A gangling figure hastens across the picture, belt firmly tied, trousers in knee-high boots, a wide-brimmed hat pulled low. Effortlessly, the figure leaps over a bush, down into a ditch and back up again. As the hurried walker steps out of the forest onto a country road, a horse whinnies and an engine revs. A sleek white car is stuck in a snowdrift, its rear wheels spinning. A woman in a Tyrolean jacket, a headscarf knotted under her chin, is bracing herself against the car's trunk, to no avail. The figure from the forest dons a pair of sunglasses and walks up to her. Without a word, the two push the car – and it is soon back on solid ground. The woman with the headscarf wants to thank her rescuer, but the figure has already rushed onward. Along a half-frozen stream, the stranger passes the village sign for Klosters. Passing abandoned tennis courts, garages and a stable, we reach the modest Haus Fliana. Inside, the figure takes two

steps at once up the creaking wooden stairs. On the top floor, they ring the bell labelled 'Viertel' and let themselves in with their own key, not waiting.

'Salka?' the figure calls. 'I'm back.' A voice reminiscent of a warm cello.

'Greta?' A thin falsetto is audible from a slight distance. 'I'm in the sitting room.'

In the hallway, we see the figure from the side, chest rising and falling from the fast arrival. They remove their coat, then the hat, and lastly the sunglasses. We are slightly startled. Or astounded. Or both.

Greta shakes out her straight grey-blond hair, rubs her chilled hands and opens a door. We see a coffee table, a sofa, overloaded bookshelves, a dresser perhaps concealing a television set. The walls are crowded with framed black-and-white photos. Charlie Chaplin. Marlene Dietrich. Thomas Mann. Is that Bert Brecht? Almost all the photos feature a dedication. *For Salka devotedly* or *Unvergesslich, unvergessen*.

Sunk deep into an armchair sits an old lady, her white hair piled into a cloud. 'I was starting to worry.' She puts her book down on the armrest, pages splayed. 'Tea?' She pours, with some effort.

Greta ensconces herself on the sofa and wraps both hands around her cup. 'Cold out there.' She savours the aroma before she drinks. 'Ah, as good as ever.' She gives Salka a rakish smile. 'It would be even more warming with a dash of something stronger.'

'In the sideboard.' Salka gestures with her head. 'A gift from Orson. He came by again on New Year's Eve.'

Greta rises and opens the cabinet. Inside a mirrored compartment is a bottle of whisky. She studies the label. 'He still loves you.'

'He still wants to make a movie with me.'

‘Wasted on tea.’ Greta brings two glasses along with the bottle, pours and drops back onto the sofa. The two of them raise their glasses in silence. ‘Wonderful, this snow.’ Greta sips at her whisky.

‘A lot of skiers have arrived.’

‘Erika’s here too, by the way.’

‘Which Erika?’

‘Mann.’

Greta removes a slim case from the chest pocket of her wool blazer and inserts a cigarette between her lips. Her lighter refuses to spark, so she resorts to the candle in the tea warmer. Pensive, she watches the smoke curling away. ‘Ah, Erika Mann! Is she still as luminous – as she used to be?’

‘As witty and charming as ever. A little thin. But still athletically elegant.’ Salka uses a photo to mark her place in the book. We catch a brief glance: a portrait of a man with well-cut features and a dark shadow of stubble. ‘Isn’t she the same age as you? She didn’t come alone, by the way.’

‘Who’s she with?’

‘Another woman. I told her, Erika, about your former apartment here, though obviously I didn’t name you.’ Salka places her book over a worn patch on the armrest. ‘She asked me about a buen retiro.’

‘Buen retiro?’

‘She’s still living with her mother in Zürich, you know. And her brother Golo. Conservative type, historian or something. They’re having a lot of tzoers, to go by her hints.’

‘I didn’t know you were still in touch.’ Greta reaches for the ashtray.

‘She wrote to me when she was editing her father’s letters. Wanted to know if I still had any, that’s how come. Turned up last year with her mother. Took the waters in Davos, but

they preferred to stay here, because of the Magic Mountain, you can imagine. She and her' – Salka casts around for the right word – 'acquaintance are staying at the Pardenn for now.'

'Hm.' Greta nods. Glancing at the windowsill, she spots semi-wilting Alpine violets. She gets up, plucks at the leaves and checks the earth. 'You've been watering them too much again. Talking's enough, every other day.' Beside the flowers, she notices – a clouded hand mirror?

Greta picks it up, twists the disc with elan and peers through a slit. 'A phenakistiscope! Where on earth did you get it?'

'Helene Weigel gave it to me, last year in Berlin. She invited me to the festival week. It would have been Brecht's seventieth.'

Greta returns to the sofa with the device and spins the wheel again. 'I was addicted to these moving pictures as a little boy.' She lowers the toy. 'You mean they let you in?'

'I could even live in East Berlin, if I wanted to.'

'Imprisoned behind the "antifascist protective rampart"?''

'If they'd let Dubček carry on, if the GDR had been allowed its own Prague Spring, I might almost have considered it. But now that the Russians have invaded Czechoslovakia?' Salka puts her cup down, clinking against the saucer.

'Did you hear about the student who set light to himself in the middle of Prague, two weeks ago?'

They exchange concerned nods. Then Greta tops up their whiskies and leans back again. 'So, Erika. How's her walking?'

'She can still make it to the car.'

Greta narrows her eyes in thought. 'And the other woman?'

'Younger, apparently. Shall we meet them this evening? At Grischuna's? I could book the round table.'

Greta purses her lips. 'Why not. And I'll pick up the bill, don't worry. For you and me, I mean.'

'My advance has all gone.'

'How's the book going?'

'It's really coming out now. In April. I've chosen the title *The Kindness of Strangers*.'

'*The Kindness of Strangers*?' Greta looks at Salka, perplexed. 'What strangers have ever been kind to you?'

'Oh, come on.'

'And who on earth is ever kind to strangers?'

Salka glances along the photos on the wall. 'After the war, the first one, I took the boys from Wychylówka to their father in Dresden so I could play Medea at the Hamburg Schauspielhaus. I soon ran out of provisions, and then food. We had to change trains four times, in Przemyśl, in Krakow, in Brünn and in Prague, and I needed new tickets every time, and since the inflation was travelling ahead of us, we ended up stranded in the middle of nowhere. One woman simply gave me money. And on the next train, a farmer's wife sliced big chunks off a loaf of bread for the hungry boys and spooned on so much raspberry jam that they looked like vampires in a feeding frenzy. That's the kindness of strangers, and I'll believe in it until my dying day. There's no need to worry, by the way. I haven't made any changes where you're concerned, it's all still the version you approved last time.'

Greta extinguished her cigarette. 'Hm. Erika. My God, that was so long ago.' She holds the phenakistiscope up to her eyes again and spins the disc. 'It was after the German premiere of *Gösta Berling*. I'd gone to Berlin specially, with Moje. The first time I ever went abroad. I was so excited. I was only' – Greta counts back – 'eighteen.'

[...]

[Silver Lake, 1931]

A car parks by a lake in the midst of pristine nature. Bessie lugs travel bags out of the trunk, to be stowed in a rowing boat by Mercedes and Greta. There are large baskets of provisions, loaves and leeks protruding from them, potatoes, carrots and apples. As they say goodbye, their gestures tell us they're agreeing to meet up again later.

Greta and Mercedes wave as the car climbs a steep road through conifer forest and disappears from view. The lake is surrounded by a circle of wooded slopes, an idyllic sight. Greta and Mercedes exchange winks: they're all alone here.

They board the boat from the jetty. Greta takes the oars, pushes off skilfully and soon picks up speed.

'Are you training for Oxford or for Cambridge?' we hear Mercedes' astounded question.

Greta rows across to a small island. At the jetty, she moors easily, leaps out, ties up the boat and accepts the bags and baskets Mercedes passes her. Together with the two of them, we walk along a mossy path and come across a simple cabin concealed by firs, consisting of a single room: a table with four chairs, an iron stove, a bed and an open fireplace. As Mercedes unpacks, Greta inspects the well outside the cabin and a privy at a slight distance. Behind a shed, she comes across a stack of wood. She finds a hatchet alongside it and starts trying out the chopping block. Rendering five logs into firewood soon warms her up. She takes off her summer sweater and drapes it over her shoulders, sleeves knotted over her chest. Is she really wearing nothing underneath?

Mercedes calls her, a question in her voice. She's using a box camera to photograph the lake and the cabin. When she spots Greta, the star adopts a pose, one foot on the block, axe in

hand, one arm raised like a muscleman showing off his biceps. She beams proudly at the camera.

Click!

For a second photo, Greta drops the sweater. Sadly, we see only Mercedes pressing the shutter button, gasping for breath.

‘And now we need baptising,’ Greta calls, running to the bank and slipping out of her white shorts, though our view is blurred by the distance. She jackknifes into the water and front-crawls far out into the lake. After a while, she turns around to Mercedes and waves. Mercedes follows her, slightly reluctant again, and removes her own clothes on the jetty. She climbs slowly down a metal ladder. We can tell by her hesitation how cold it is.

She pushes off bravely, swimming with her head high out of the water. Greta crawls over to her.

‘And you’re training for a cross-channel swim as well, are you?’ Mercedes teases.

Greta circles her, chuckling. ‘You’re doing very well in this ice-cold water, for a Spaniard – bravo!’

‘Is there anything you can’t do?’ Mercedes asks, gasping a little.

‘Speak good English,’ is Greta’s answer. ‘But you can teach me that now.’ She splashes water in Mercedes’ face, who responds in kind. We hear sharp cries and laughter. After a while, they return shivering to dry land. What we want to see is always hidden by an inopportune tree or a rock.

Inside, Greta lights a fire. Sitting in front of it, she rubs herself dry. Mercedes looks far better wet and tousled than in her brilliantined neatness. She combs Greta’s unlayered chin-length hair straight back.

Greta laughs. ‘Are you making me into your mirror image?’

Mercedes moves away a little and inspects her. 'For the final scene as Mata Hari. When you have to go to your execution. Paired with my black cape with the high collar. You'll look ravishing.'

'I can suggest it to Adrian, who knows. It would be a relief after everything he's forcing me to wear before that. A Javan dance costume made up entirely of holes and cut-outs, plus a multi-storey temple of a headdress.' Greta describes it with generous gestures. 'Glittering stockings made of metal rings, with a top spun from gold thread. It's actually a suit of armour – but cut lower in the back than your sister would ever have dared. It's all so overdone – it's terrible!'

Mercedes thinks a little. 'Make it so overdone it's good. Camp, you know?'

'You mean like a female impersonator?'

'Exactly. Act like you're a man playing a woman.'

Greta's eyes widen. A memory flits across her face. And the possibilities dance a tango. 'Ramon Novarro is as pretty as a girl, almost – and very, very gay.'

'He got the male lead, then?' Mercedes is thrilled to hear it. 'That means you'll knock Mrs Dietrich out for good. She'll never get back on her feet.'

'Poor Marlene.' Greta watches the kettle she's put over the fire.

'Poor Marlene?' Mercedes asks, amazed.

'Sternberg's divorce scandal is seriously endangering her career. They said on the radio, his wife is suing Marlene for 100,000 dollars in damages for slander. Apparently, Marlene told a newspaper Mrs Sternberg wasn't fulfilling her marital duties ... And the wife wants 500 000 dollars from Marlene for stealing her husband. And then Marlene came back without her own husband, just her daughter. People here don't believe she's really married. I couldn't stand all that gossip.'

Mercedes stares at Greta, incredulous. 'Don't you read the glossies? Mr Dietrich is paying his wife and daughter a visit as we speak.'

'Er – no. But his name's Mr Sieber. Rudi.'

'There's no escaping the photos of the happy Dietrich family right now, they're everywhere.'

'Is Tamara with them?'

'Who?'

'Rudi's mistress.'

'Well, she's not in the photos. Anyway, it seems to be doing the trick. They say Paramount settled out of court with Mrs Sternberg.' Mercedes hesitates. 'Why do you know all this – do you know her personally? I thought you two had never –'

'Marlene may be a loving mother, but I'm a proud father.'

Mercedes laughs, bewildered.

'I have a son in Sweden.' Greta savours Mercedes' speechless consternation before going on. 'My friend Mimi has had a baby. I can't wait to see her, I'm already stockpiling gifts. Perhaps you can show me the best kind of rope for throwing a lasso?'

Mercedes listens to Greta with increasing horror. 'So when are you leaving?' she asks, brave and distressed all at once.

'Three more films, *Mata Hari*, *Grand Hotel* and *As You Desire Me*, and then my contract is up and I'm going home.'

'Can I come with you?'

'You? To Sweden? Even the High Sierras are too cold for you.'

Mercedes grips Greta by the arms. 'I want to be with you always. Won't you move in with me? Or we'll rent a house under my name only, and no one will know where you live, not even the studio, like here.' Mercedes loosens her hands and strokes Greta's shoulders.

‘Just like you’ve always dreamed of. No fans startling you in the garden, no one throwing themselves in front of your car for an autograph. I’ll protect you from all evil.’

Greta hesitates. ‘Let’s just enjoy what we’ve got here for now.’ With that roguish smile, she adds: ‘We won’t marry until we have to. Shall I make you a baby?’

She folds the blanket over them both and leans over Mercedes, who falls back, pulling Greta down with her by the neck. She caresses Greta’s cheek, runs a finger along her eyebrows, outlines her lips. ‘Are your eyelashes really real?’

‘See for yourself.’

Tenderly, Mercedes encloses Greta’s lashes between her lips and tugs a little.

‘My unusually tolerant mother passed them down to me. She always says: “When you have long lashes, you don’t have to see everything.”’ Eye to eye with Mercedes, Greta’s hand searches for something; we can guess what. Mercedes emits a low sigh. Then Greta’s face floats above us. We could kiss her if we wanted.

She comes slowly closer until we fade to black.

[1932]

If only we’d stayed in the dark.

Now, though, we see the young Greta Garbo in a long shot, her face half-concealed by a hat with a wide brim, as she hurries along a platform to a train through a flurry of camera flashes, photographers awaiting her. A reporter is lying in wait in her sleeping compartment; he must have hidden there. The conductor – the only Black man among dozens of white faces – asks her to step into the next compartment, but the passengers there have barely noticed who’s seeking shelter before they start assailing Greta for autographs. She takes flight again.

In the meantime, the porters can hardly load her many suitcases, so many photographers are swarming around them.

As the train – *The Chief* – chugs across the prairie, we see superimposed newspapers coming off the printers: *Greta Garbo leaves Hollywood – for good?* is the headline on one title page, or *Die Garbo: Wiedersehen in Deutschland?* and *Greta kommer hemma!* Newspapers in Arabic, Indian, Chinese characters appear to share similar headlines.

In a large city on a great lake, could be Chicago, Greta leaves the train on the outskirts with only a small case. A waiting car takes her to an average Joe hotel, while a double with her hat pulled down low disembarks at Grand Central Station and checks into the luxurious Stevens. Yet Greta is soon staring a photographer in the face, peering through her window from the fire escape. She makes a panicked escape into the corridor. A maid smuggles her through the kitchen to a back door, but reporters have tracked her down even as she's on the way to the next port of call.

Similar incidents on the next train, and Greta doesn't dare leave her compartment. The New York skyline appears. Greta runs the gauntlet through the narrow streets of Manhattan. At the port, a huge crowd is waiting by the transatlantic steamship *Gripsholm*. Six rugged men in lounge suits and hats take Greta into their midst and manoeuvre her up the gangway onto the ship, where the captain welcomes her with flowers. As she locks the cabin door behind her, she collapses to the floor, her face buried in her hands.

'Wer wird denn weinen, wenn man auseinandergeht,' we hear Marlene's voice, but Greta doesn't. She's looking out of her cabin's porthole, wrapped in a man's bathrobe now, gazing at the open sea.

'Wo an der nächsten Ecke schon 'ne andre steht.'

Greta reading in her cabin, sleeping, dreaming and having her meals served there.

‘Why weep at parting, why cry, when there’s another round the corner? Why say
goodbye tear in eye, when secretly you scorn her?’

We do hear someone crying, sobbing in fact, but it’s not Greta. As the *Gripsholm* docks
at Göteborg, another enormous crowd is waiting. Greta swallows, but she seems less tense
than in the USA. A young man and a young woman board the ship in a flurry of camera
flashes. He bears a strong resemblance to Greta, tall, blond, even features. ‘Sven!’ she
exclaims, and embraces him. He lifts her off her feet, she drums her fists against his
shoulders. He can only be her brother. At last, she peels herself away from him and turns to
the woman. ‘Mimi,’ we read her lips. Tears prick her eyes. They have a long swaying hug as
Sven gives instructions to the porters. Then Greta removes a rope from her bag, her
expression conspiratorial, and looks for something small around Mimi’s legs, but Mimi shakes
her head with a laugh and seems to promise something for later. Next, she and Sven lock
arms with Greta and disembark along the gangway, visibly cheerful.

‘Falling in love again, never wanted to,’ Marlene sings, ‘what am I to do, I can’t help it.’

But who on earth is sobbing?