



**Christoph Nußbaumer**

**The Unexpected**

**Novel**

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

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*Nothing stays for us.*  
Blaise Pascal

*Not even Earth itself can remember fine sand and clay spilling into a primordial ocean and settling there aeons ago. The immense temperatures and the colossal pressures in the depth of the abyss transformed the mixture into gneiss, which was eventually, after several millions of years, squeezed out in the form of a massif. Following various processes of elevation and erosion, the massif was pushed upwards one last time 65 million years ago. The mountain's rough relief was born. With perseverance wind and weather formed it into a perfect mountain range. And where there were small cracks in the Earth's crust, water carved gorges into the massif. These were inaccessible to humans for a long time and thus a jungled mixed alpine forest full of deadwood grew. Many myths and legends originated there. The rough climate let relicts of the ice age to survive in the higher regions, even though the last ice age had ended 11,000 years before.*

*In that area, halfway between Munich and Prague, at the edge of the world, lies the village of Eisenstein. There, at the foot of the Großer Arber, the winds come mainly from the west, but it is the bone-chilling »Bohemian wind«, which often blows into the valley from the northeast, that determines the weather. The wind makes the grass stems herbaceous to the point of translucence and the winter here lasts for as long as it takes to carry a child to full term. The village owes its name to the iron that was mined here in the Middle Ages. But more so than the*

*metal, glass manufacture and forestry informed the events that took place along the Bavarian-Bohemian border.*

*At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were floodplains, wet meadows and patches of moss scattered over a large area as well as ample forests and pastures. At the beginning of spring, great numbers of beeches shone reddish-brown through the dark of the spruce and fir forests. The croplands were not particularly fertile. Filling the pastures and fields and picking up every stone and every expelled grain brought the hope that this year would be better than all the others before.*

*The majority of people pledged their strength, their sweat and their blood to a few feudal lords who were equally feared and revered. To tame the suffering, people believed in the Almighty Father and his aides. Still, from time to time, the people of this region were beset by nagging doubts about whether they were even permitted to live. The return to the womb was a particularly deeply buried desire in these parts. An existential insecurity about whether something as wretched as they should even be allowed to exist was gnawing away at everyone. No one knew why this had to be so. But outwardly they all flaunted their vigour, maybe they were proud of their strength that allowed them to pull up trees. Maybe that's why they had such a difficult time loving. Everyone knew that every rivulet joins the Danube. Sun and wind, the cold and the rain, all come from the hands of God. It is only bright where the light goes, and the passage of time resembles a three-four time waltz.*

# **Book I (1899 – 1900)**

## 1 A Volatile Reality

Maria looked up and squinted into the darkness. There was an acrid smell in the air. She hadn't left the village yet, she wasn't safe yet. She drew her hood lower over her face, now she understood that she was a refugee moving between a not-anymore and a not-yet. The moon shone clear and bright, the stars gleamed above the valley basin. All of a sudden, the angry chime of a bell came crashing down onto the roofs and into the alleyways. She hadn't expected the alarm so soon. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead. She continued to walk and only increased her speed at the fifth chime. Now the bells in the ridge turrets of the surrounding farmhouses also sounded their alarm. A few guard dogs began to bark and soon after that wakeup calls, cries of alarm and curses could be heard from the houses and swelled into a chaotic background noise. The atmosphere resembled what Maria thought the Last Judgement would look like, just before hosts of angels riding on their fiery horses would invade the village and announce the End of Days with trombones and trumpets. But now it was her who would be judged, she was the persecuted one. Whether Christ or Satan, both would make short shrift of her, as would the villagers. If they catch you, you'll die a miserable death in jail. The thought had just begun to spread in her when a dog jumped out from the bushes a few metres in front of her and started bellowing at her. Its ears were pulled back, slobber dripped from its mouth. Someone must have released it. But when she looked more closely, she recognised the animal and the animal recognised her. Thank God, it was Nero. She walked towards Gassenhuber's dog carefully, whispered his name tenderly a few times, then she pinched a chunk off her provisions for the journey – a piece of bread that she was carrying in a hessian sack along with a bottle of water – and threw it down before its feet. The emaciated animal swallowed it with one bite. »And now get lost. Run to your master, be a good boy and bite him to death.« Nero wagged his tail and disappeared into the bushes.

She decided to avoid the road and flee through Gassenhuber's orchard so that she wouldn't risk being recognised by the villagers, who were coming out of their houses like startled ants now. Getting into the fenced-off piece of land was no problem, she could see exactly where she had to step on the fitted leaf décor between the climbing trellis. She crept across the extensive property. Lights were on in the house, she saw the silhouette of Gassenhuber's wife scurrying past the window. In America, I'll have a nice house too. Because things are different in Chicago. My industriousness is going to pay off there.

Ever since she had learned about the existence of America, she had started to imagine more life, more than she could probably ever live. She ripped a premature apple from a tree, bit into it and spat the sour mass in the direction of Gassenhuber's house.

As she reached the other end of the garden, the night turned black all of a sudden. A cloud bank obscured the moon. Maria felt her way along the wrought-iron fence and that's when Gassenhuber's dog started a new salvo and a woman's voice ordered him to search the garden. »There's someone there, get him, Nero!« She wouldn't be able to get rid of the guard dog this time. She quickly climbed the fence. One foot was already on the last crossbar when the German shepherd mix came running. She managed to pull up her second leg just in time so that the agitated animal jumped up on the fence and its teeth snapped at nothing but air. The fright made her lose her balance, she slipped off and fell down the other side of the fence line, directly onto the edge of the hard stone base. A sharp pain went through her from her right shin upwards, her back hurt and her head ached. She quickly got up. The mutt barked like a berserk and clawed at the iron vehemently. She reached for her hessian sack and noticed that the bottle had broken. She had the presence of mind to take out the bread, which was now damp and sticky, and tore off a sizeable chunk. She kneaded it into a clump and hid a few small, sharp pieces of glass in it. In her mad rush, she cut both her hands, then she threw the piece of bloody bread down in front of the dog. »Eat, for God's sake, and shut up.« It seemed as though this was what Nero had been waiting for, he lunged for the food and fell quiet.

Without looking back, she ran up the rocky hill. The steeper it got, the louder she panted. Powered by adrenaline and fear she ran into a small birch forest where it was so dark she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She felt her way through this quasi-Egyptian darkness and found herself in a sea of blackberry bushes. Prickles got caught in her skirt and tore it up more and more with every step. Turning back was not an option, she had already come too far. She tripped over the vines a few times, they wriggled in between her feet, some even into her face and scratched it. Picking herself up took a lot of energy every time and there was no end of the ordeal in sight. Only now did she notice how exhausted she was. Cold sweat appeared on her forehead. Every breath hurt, every step caused her excruciating pain. She had to throw up, tried to keep her clothes and her sack clean of the vomit but failed. She no longer knew exactly where she was. Her original plan included a different escape route, now she had lost her bearings. Tears ran down her face, she cried soundlessly like an animal. She wanted to be an emigrant but had become a runaway. Why had she been so intent on settling her score with Hufnagel? Maybe the priest had been right when he said that only suffering and endurance would lead to God's path. Maria slumped to the ground with exhaustion. She lay on her back,

thirsty and sodden, her despair made way for fatigue. The clamour from the village was now only an indistinct murmur that was moving farther and farther away from her. Her eyes fell shut. A few startled hares rustled in the undergrowth. An eagle owl circled above the forest. And a person of twenty-one years lay lifelessly on the ground.

## 2 A Life in Eisenstein

The mail train whooshed past, the wilted grass on the graveyard bowed in farewell. A few pigeons were circling above the roof of the train station. Then the airflow hit Maria and blew a few strands of hair into her face. Her gaze followed the train, which departed Eisenstein westwards. Just then she had received another letter from her cousin in America. He had been over there for more than a year now. »Through Erwin and his wife I got a registered address. And, imagine that, there is even a Waldler neighbourhood in Chicago. And you can ride on horseback through the entire prairie ...« Those last words were hard to say out loud, she hadn't expected it to make her so emotional. And still, her decision was final, in the spring she was going to follow, but that would also mean that she would no longer be able to visit her father's grave. She wept freely, there was no one here to make her feel embarrassed.

The graveyard was quite run-down. The hedges opposite the entrance were overgrown, the simple brick work was crumbling, forced open by plants. Some of the biers had fallen over or had been kicked and then fallen over. After the last migrant workers had left, there was no one to maintain the graveyard. The locals had detested the workers, they called the hired men *baraber*, good-for-nothings, half derisively, half fearfully. And since the magistrate had not permitted the migrant workers to be buried in the official graveyard, a second one was created. A makeshift solution next to the railway line that everyone just called the »Italian graveyard«.

Maria placed a red carnation on the gravesite, then she said the Lord's Prayer. She made an effort to pronounce every word deliberately. After that, she stayed for a little while longer and tried to memorise everything in minute detail; the bier on which her father's corpse had once been lain, the embellishments and notches, the pediment as a finish above the painted cross, the inscription beneath that: What you are / I was once / And what I am / you will be. Below that a friend had carved: Same reward / for the same work / everywhere on Earth. Another had engraved something in English at the bottom of the bier: Driving the Last Spike, In Memoriam Willi Raffeiner. She had stood here countless times before and had conversations

with her dead father. She kissed the cracked wood, then she left through the squeaky wooden gate and went home.

The advances often weren't enough to cover the wages, estimates were calculated wrong or organised strikes got the building contractors in dire straits. All the labourers, recruited from various regions, worked like donkeys. Their life was backbreaking, they carved the tunnels into the mountain equipped only with shovels, pickaxes and wheelbarrows all too often. With their broad-brimmed hats, which served as a protection against the rain or the sun depending on the weather, the railway workers were easily recognisable even from afar. They exuded an aura of lawlessness and brought a pioneering flair of the Wild West to the forest. Taverns, skittle alleys and gambling dens popped up everywhere in the vicinity of the major construction sites. Sutlers offered their services but it wasn't just the migrant workers who enjoyed their company, some of the villagers also squandered a lot of money between the women's legs and at the bars of the taverns. When a brewer once announced that the price for a mug would be raised from twenty-eight to thirty-two pennies, there were riots and walkouts. All of this happened to the chagrin of the local clergy, who held the migrant workers alone responsible for the moral decline. Every Sunday they railed from their pulpits against the »drunkards« and »whoremongers«, all of whom were going to find themselves in hell after their demise.

Even after the workers were long gone, having created the connection to the world that many had longed for, people kept talking about them disparagingly, the loudest voices came from those who had made the biggest profits off them.

Every now and again, there were accidents on the construction sites, like on the day a dynamite explosion blew up three people. One of them was Maria's father Willi. Six years earlier, he had left Carinthia for Eisenstein, where he found work as a tunneller. A man with a genial disposition and a zest for life, but also a man who got worked up easily if he suspected an injustice. Diplomacy was not his thing. Willi was a very good singer, in another life he could probably have been a tenor opera singer, but in his time, he was very popular as a cheerful entertainer in the taverns. Maria's mother Emma was tending bar at Asenbauer's, one of the three local inns. She was young and curious. And she was the daughter of Asenbauer, the innkeeper. They got together quickly, very much to the displeasure of her family. But their love was stronger, and Emma married Willi anyway. They had two children. In retrospect it was a time full of deprivation but not a bad time, because they had a future in their sight and that future was called Carinthia. As soon as the works were done, their plan was to go there. Willi wanted to fulfil his dream of owning a stud farm, he was thinking of establishing an agricultural

co-operative. Emma would have supported him as much as she could. He had consistently put money aside, there was no shortage of optimism. Three months before the railway line was finished, Willi was killed.

Maria had inherited his dark eyes, they were surrounded by delicate, girly features. She had thick, straight dark blonde hair that cascaded down either side of her face. Usually, a smile played around her mouth, but especially today, she seemed to be looking forward to something.

She strolled up the hill where she passed Gassenhuber's estate. The guard dog acted like a maniac, snarling, the chain was stretched as far as it would go so that he almost choked off his own barking. A black monster, streaked with some grey, his back taller and his chest smaller than that of a purebred German shepherd. Maria stopped and looked at him. »What a stupid dog you are,« she said, indulgently, took a piece of dry bread from her skirt pocket and sucked on briefly before she threw it down in front of him. The dog needed no second invitation and quickly wolfed down the small meal.

His actual provider was Johann Gassenhuber, owner of a large farm. Together with the glass manufacturer Siegmund Hufnagel, for whom Maria worked as a maid and before that she had worked at his factory, they were among the grandees of Eisenstein that also included the customs director, the district's physician, the senior forestry official, the railway administrator and a few glass furnace builders. All of them men who smoked and drank a lot and had a lot of opinions. They controlled the work, no one could get around them.

»Oi! You can't give him anything. I've told you before!«

Maria couldn't locate the voice immediately but then she noticed Gassenhuber at the rear barn door. He scrutinised her with a dismissive look, his right foot up against the door. »Or do you have so much that you have to give it away?«

»No, it's not that, I ...«

»A dog bloated with food is a lazy dog. I have no use for that.« He took a few steps towards her, dragging his left leg behind slightly. »The Bible says that the meek shall inherit the earth. What do you think about that?«

»It's possible.«

»I think it's a misprint. Otherwise, it would have happened ages ago.«

»Maybe it'll happen yet.«

»But that would be a big mistake. Because, if no one lays down the law, there's chaos and some obscure common folk get out of control ... I think God feels the same.« For a short moment, his laughter revealed two lines of crooked teeth, but his expression darkened immediately afterwards. »Now get lost, if I catch you again, I'll let Nero off the chain.«



Maria looked at the dog one more time, he had lain down by now and was licking his coat dolefully, then she walked away.

The little house on the north-facing slope stood a little lopsided, its withered front leaning towards the path. There were a few worm-eaten pieces of furniture in the sitting room, apart from that it was equipped with a tiled stove, firewood and a vanity unit. Parts of the walls and the ceiling were blackened from smoke. In the back, a flight of stairs led to the sleeping quarters in the garret which were separated by thin wooden walls. Also in the back, but on the other side, a door led directly into the stable where they kept a goat and a few chickens. Since her father's death, it was only the three of them living here.

Their elbows resting on the table, Franz and Maria sat and looked out the window at the mountains shrouded in their own shadows. A pot of soup was simmering on the stove top. Somewhere outside they could hear a cab but a moment later it started to rain, and the sound of the vehicle was drowned out by the steady drum of the raindrops. Changes in the weather were not uncommon and they often happened from one moment to the next. Popping thunderbolts, cracking trees, falling branches. Sometimes the sky spat hailstones at the heads of the people living in the Bavarian forest with the force of pellets. And moments later, everything was quiet again and the moon was big and beautiful.

Maria got up and walked across the trodden-in mud floor to the tiled stove atop which sat a tin pot. »I don't want to leave.« Franz's voice was croaky, as it happens sometimes to sixteen-year-old lads. Maria stirred the bread soup. »She should really hurry up and get here, otherwise she'll be sogging wet.«

»I was talking to you.« Maria turned around briefly. »I heard you.« Then she turned her back to him again. There were four tins, three earthenware containers and a hand-made wooden container for flour on the shelf in front of her. She seasoned the soup with a pinch of salt. Franz's nostrils flared. »If you go somewhere you don't belong, you'll fail.«

»But if you're somewhere that isn't good for you then you have to leave,« Maria retorted dryly.

»Going to America is stupid!«

»You're crazy. Do you want to be an errand boy for the rest of your life?!«

»We have all we need.«

»Take a look at yourself!« His shirt was tatty, his trousers had been mended a few times, his boots had holes. »And now go outside and get some chives.«

Franz was just about to object when the door opened and Emma entered. She greeted them curtly, then she took out two cans from her bag and put them on the table.

»I almost got caught.«

»By the weather or the guards?« Maria flashed her eyes at her mother. The rain outside was pouring now. Emma took a seat. »The tins are legitimate. They were given to us as a gift, for the end of the month.«

»Maria wants to go to America.«

»What else is new?«

»She wants us to come too.«

»To follow,« Maria specified, »I want you to follow me. No one finds happiness here.«

»Giving up employment at the factory, I'm not that stupid.« Emma tapped her forehead.

»There are much bigger factories in America, the people there are doing so much better.«

The small cannery where Emma worked had only been built a couple of years ago. They mainly processed raspberries and blueberries. A man whom everyone just called »the machinist« was responsible for sealing the tins, seven women were tasked with sorting and cleaning the fruit and putting them in the tins. Emma was lucky enough to be one of them. As an outsider, she had stopped believing that she would find stable employment but »the machinist,« who also oversaw the hiring, felt sorry for her and the children, who, in his eyes, were not to blame. The workers were also assigned to pick the berries as needed. They would crouch low on the ground all day and set themselves to the onerous task without complaint. The sun burnt their heads and their sweat attracted insects that bit their skin. The women saw nothing but the ground and green bushes in those thirteen, fourteen hours, from six in the morning to nightfall. When their throats became parched from the dust, the smell of the earth became unbearable. They constantly wanted to spit but their mouths were too dry. Chatting was unthinkable, they couldn't afford to waste their energy on words and so they filled their baskets in silence and thought of nothing. At the end of the day the women's hands were stained either black or red and at night, when their bones protested, they moaned quietly but they were so tired that they fell into a short, comatose sleep despite the pain.

The three of them ate their soup in silence. »You have work, mother, and so do I and Franz, but we're still poor. We're just the servants, nothing else. That must make you think.« Drawn-out thunder rattled the sky. The storm had moved over the mountains completely by now. »Stop complaining, others have less. We are doing fine.« Emma patted Franz's head. She

had always tried to protect her children from the hostility of the villagers as best she could. The two of them knew that. That's why they didn't tell her about quite a lot of it.

When Emma's husband had come home with the idea of joining the workers' movement, she hadn't stopped him even though she had a bad feeling about it. She intuitively mistrusted the saviours Willi got so excited about. Everyone, she thought, wants to get something out of everything. Unselfishness only exists in Sunday sermons. In that regard, she was entirely the inn keeper's daughter, she knew the state of affairs from hands-on experience. Someone always paid the bill in the end. Some people would want to make a profit in socialism, even though they said that no one was supposed to make money out of it.

One spring evening, the children were already in bed, there had been a rattle at the door. Emma had opened it, Willi, for whom she had already been waiting, was standing in front of her, next to him a man, half supported by Willi. He looked like a monstrosity he was so savagely beaten. His entire left side was injured, his overalls ripped, dirt and blood had combined and formed a black crust. The smell had been appalling. The man was grunting and groaning with pain. »Get the iodine!« Willi had instructed her as he put Alois onto the sofa, which they still had back then. »There's no medical care in his barracks. And the doctor won't come till tomorrow.« They had washed him and given him clean clothes and after that Emma had tended to the wounds, dabbed at them with iodine, and Willi had given him warm beer, then schnaps, so that he would be able to sleep at least a little. Alois was a tracklayer from the Upper Palatinate, a new worker on the site. As it turned out, he couldn't read. That's why he had ignored the warning sign and walked into the explosion zone of the tunnellers. »How many other poor sods are there, walking around not being able to read and write ...« Emma had told Willi to be quiet or he would wake the children. Sometimes her husband could be quick-tempered, not angry but vehement, and the arsenic he was slipped by a Styrian groom from time to time and that he had had in him then had only agitated him more. In small doses it gave you strength, Earth's gravity was alleviated a little and it made you feel liberated. »But I won't be quiet now,« he had started to rant, »I am angry. There are still so few people who can read and do math. And then people are surprised when something like this happens. But the people upstairs don't really want us to learn. And I can tell you for why, because stupid people are easier to rule, they are good to boss around with the pandy of fear!« Emma hadn't been listening properly, so she was flabbergasted when he had suddenly got up and stomped up the stairs. A short while later he had returned with five-year-old Maria on his arm. He had carried her to the sofa and woken her up. The girl had looked around drowsily, then she saw Alois, got a fright and started to cry. »Don't be scared, he won't harm you. Look at him closely,« Willi had

whispered in her ear, »that man got very hurt. And that only happened because he didn't learn to read. When you start school, promise me that you'll be a good student.« If Emma hadn't told her this story years later, Maria wouldn't know anything about it. She also couldn't remember saying yes before going back to sleep. Then he had carried her back to her bed.

Together with a handful of like-minded workers, Willi had wanted to establish better working conditions, fairer wages and adequate safety measures. It was probably this that sealed his fate. They never got to the bottom of the exact circumstances of the explosion. There was no external investigation, no trial, no compensation. His allies assumed that it was a targeted act. There was much that suggested this, but no one could prove it and no one brought charges. Since then, Emma had hated the workers' movement. In her eyes, it incited people, but if worst came to worst it didn't give a damn about the bereaved. Yet Emma didn't know that Bismarck's »Anti-Socialist Laws« were one of the main causes of why the case had fizzled out. Many organisations of the workers' movement were illegalised or dissolved outright, those who were unwilling to knuckle under were prosecuted and so Willi's friends feared that they would go to jail if they drew attention to themselves by demanding an investigation into the accident. Instead, they scattered to the four winds to find new construction sites. And only the abandoned, grief-stricken widow and her children remained.

Even without their father's political commitment, the children of a *baraber* would have been subjected to a lot of harassment. Especially at the hands of those men who had had their eye on Emma before. They got back at her and his spawn for the rejection, she was even outcast from her family. Her father had intended her for Johann Gassenhuber, the son of the wealthy farmer, but he was an oaf, Emma thought, and besides that she loved her Willi. It was that simple. Today, she thought about this differently. At least sometimes.

Emma had no professional training and where could she have gone, penniless and with a child on each hand? So, she had stayed in Eisenstein. Before she had started at the cannery, she even had to beg at times.

But despite the humiliations she did not become bitter. She had hardly ever hit her children, even though Maria had often infuriated her with her endless questions. Emma's temper was geared to give the love that had willed the two of them to exist. In that she differed from the other mothers in the village who, admonished by their husbands, mainly saw their children as an investment for the future. They were raised to work and obey and the feeling of owing their parents was drilled into them from birth. Emma's love, on the other hand, was unconditional.

Once, however, she had lost her calm and slapped her daughter in the face, after which the child had run away and stayed hidden for the rest of the day and the entire night. At first Maria had roamed through the forest and got to the Small Arber Lake, where she was planning on drowning herself. But somehow, she couldn't succeed. She had kept pulling her head from the water and gasping for air. Then she had run to the parish house to confess her suicide attempts to the priest. The house had been unlocked, so she had snuck in and peered into every room. Eventually, she had heard murmurs coming from a chamber upstairs. Through a gap she had seen the priest standing next to the bed in the darkened room. He was holding a crucifix in his hand and was saying prayers in a singsong voice. A woman was lying on the mattress, her arms and legs held down by two men. She was whimpering, her body had kept tensing and convulsing as though she was suffering from seizures. All of a sudden, she had let out a shriek. Maria hadn't understood what was happening, she got scared and ran away. She had climbed up a rickety ladder into the attic of one of the outbuildings. That's where she had found a book box covered in dust behind a worm-eaten rocking chair. Maria had rummaged through the box and leafed through the books. One of them aroused her interest with its foreign-sounding name and so she began to read a volume of Voltaire's writings. To recover from her fright, she immersed herself more and more in the book. She read until it got dark, then she shut the book and closed her eyes while some of the sentences were still on her mind. She hadn't understood most of them, but the words had sounded mysterious and some of them made her think. »It is not more surprising to be born twice than once« was one of them. Others made sense to her straight away: »All mortals are equal; it is not their birth, but virtue itself that makes the difference.« In the coming years she would learn repeatedly that this phrase was dangerous, and therefore, she would conclude, it was right. But from that time both sentences accompanied the twelve-year-old until her death. She thought of one or the other in various situations in life. Where the first sentence represented the wondrous things in life, the second helped her rebel against oppression. Very early the next morning, she had sneaked downstairs. No one had discovered her. At home, she was embraced by her mother, who didn't ask any questions.

[...]