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Sweetlust

Translated by Jennifer Zoble

The Sorrows of Young Lotte

*O du, die du sie mir und meiner Liebe gebahrest,
Hältst du sie, Mutter, umarmt; dreymal gesegnet sey mir!
Dreymal gesegnet sey dein gleich empfindendes Herz mir,
Das der Tochter zuerst weibliche Zärtlichkeit gab!*
(Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, "Die künftige Geliebte")

June

The moment you set eyes on me is decisive for us both: I'm slicing black bread and sharing the pieces with my brothers and sisters. You conclude I'm a generous person. Big mistake. Everything my mother denied me, I'm inclined to take from others—but that's not apparent. I'm nicely dressed, ready to dance. I look lovely. You like my white dress adorned with red ribbons. You're not indifferent to my gloves with their tiny pearl clasps at the wrist. We simultaneously look up at the sky, knowing that inclement weather will spoil the party. I'm looking forward to the downpour. I've worn white because it looks best when drenched. You can't even fathom my wickedness. The bread I eat is always black.

We talk about literature. I falsely claim that my favorite authors are those who write realistically about my existence:

"My life isn't perfect," I say, "but for me, country life is a wellspring of happiness."

I lie to your face, but you're convinced that Beauty and Truth are one and the same, and I'm really stunning. I praise Klopstock. You concur. You look into my eyes, while thinking of my ass.

We debate nonsense. We haven't yet arrived at the ballroom, but we've been dancing a verbal minuet. We dance, but we don't touch. It's still too soon for that. When you finally manage to touch me, I'll make sure you regret it. I smile, but my good spirits say nothing about me.

While we dance a waltz, cruelty spins us in a circle. I feel the possessive grip of your hands. You're so excited you're not breathing. Your desire is like a plush skirt, bigger and heavier than it looks. And I, too

am heavy, but you're convinced you can carry me across the floor with ease. Clearly you don't know women.

We go for a walk afterwards. When we sit back down, you give me two oranges. You're preoccupied with these oranges—you don't want me to share them. For each segment I eat, I give one to the person beside me. What a sweet grimace you make! I thrust the knife straight into your heart and wait. I don't want to push it all the way in yet. You deserve to be tortured.

When, after the intermission, we dance again, I make sure to draw near to my old neighbor who adores Albert and takes every opportunity to mention him. I want you to hear his name: once, twice. It doesn't escape your attention. Right away you ask who he is. I time my answer; we part in a figure eight and the words remain at the tip of my tongue. I prolong your agony. I furrow my brow. I act like I don't want to hurt you.

"Albert is my fiancé," I say.

You trip over your own feet, confused. You dance terribly. Only the handle can be seen now at your chest.

I want you to at least get a sense of my rich inner life. When the storm finally starts and other guests come inside to escape the thunder, I propose a parlor game that will clearly reveal my character:

"Watch out!" I say. "I'll go around you in a circle, clockwise, and you'll count off, quickly. Whoever stutters or miscounts gets slapped."

I move fast, then faster, slapping my neighbors and acquaintances. I hit you twice as hard as anyone else. Your cheeks redden. I want to say, "Werther, what a fool you are!" because it's obvious you're enjoying it.

After the people disperse, I stand by the window. Outside the rain splashes. The wind gusts and makes my eyes tear. You think I'm crying from intense emotion. You bend over and kiss the hand that slapped you. You look into my eyes. You've understood nothing.

Ten days later, you call my mother's children mine. You say: Charlotte's children. You roll around on the floor with my brothers. You look like a pig. You are a pig. I race into the kitchen and stuff a piece of ham in my mouth. I imagine devouring your salted thigh.

July

Let us begin the month with your deepest fears: first, the possibility of losing me; and second, getting a job. You enjoy, as you've told me in confidence, planting spinach and other vegetables. You'd

rather be doing that. You refuse your mother's exhortations to take up a diplomatic post. Your only duty is to visit me all the time, sit with me for hours, and accompany me on nature walks. You advocate for a simple, provincial life. Wherever you go, you defend pastoral pleasure and innocence, but inside you're a ball of yarn that unwinds at the sight of the worst depravity and suffering. After all, you're an upstanding German citizen.

You stubbornly lie to yourself about the lust you feel in my presence. You deceive yourself into believing you love me more profoundly than those women who were good for some passing fun in the provinces. But we both know what you're thinking about when you hold heads of cabbage in your hands. You praise my musical and literary tastes, but you try drawing me naked when you go home. Our discussions of Lessing are superfluous. A drawing of my silhouette is enough.

At night you kiss the notes I send you. Your servant told me as much. You don't know that I stick them under my naked butt while I play the piano. You think that the courier folded them, but no—they crumpled under my weight. You long to be every chair I sit on, but you can't admit it. You are, after all, a delicate specimen. You express yourself in the vocative like a poet.

When Albert finally returns from his trip at the end of July, your impotence has reached its peak. As soon as we're left alone, you praise him: Oh, how sensitive Albert is, ah, how much he loves me, wow, how intelligent and dignified! Everything you want to say about yourself, you project onto him. When you see him, you instantly become hysterical, laughing loudly and cracking jokes. You're a sick man. You think I'll take care of you until you get better, but women aren't cold compresses, we're icy whirlwinds that ignite fevers. It's not in my interest for you to recover, ever. There's only one outcome: death.

August

You want to be a member of my family, but you don't know my relatives at all. You don't know my father and his feigned kindness. You didn't know my mother, who was a bottomless well for other people's suffering and discomfort. You've imposed yourself on us; you want to be father to my brothers and sisters. You want them to be our children, for us to raise them together. These are not my wants. I don't want to play house. That's not the minuet I like. When I can't catch my breath in the circle of my family, it's never due to joyful spinning.

While we're picking pears together in the garden, my thoughts turn to your conversation with Albert, which he recounted to me later. You took down his pistol from the wall and wanted to shoot yourself in the head. He argued that suicide was stupid. You passionately defended your position that

there's a limit to how much sorrow a man can endure. You told him that love was also a sickness, one that it was alright to die from. You said:

“It’s alright to give up.” Even though, truth be told, you wouldn’t give up even in death.

I regret, of course, that Albert's pistol wasn't loaded. Only gunpowder would blast those stupid prejudices from your head.

P.S.

At the end of the month we celebrate your birthday. Albert buys you a book you want. Before he sends it, I sneak into the package the red ribbon I was wearing the night we met. You’re already standing on the edge of the abyss. You just need a gentle push.

September

I can talk about my mother only at nighttime because the memory of her is an evil that can’t bear even the slightest trace of light. She bore so many children, and gave so little love to the world! She manipulated all of us. Albert knows this well. He’s never judged my hatred. Motherhood is holy to you, however, and whenever I mention my mother, you think I’m speaking of her with admiration. You love your mother. You ignore her, but you love her. I imagine the tenderness with which she raised her favorite. I could never take her place, nurturing your weakness like it’s the greatest gift to humanity. You’re not suited for life. You’re constantly daydreaming. You draw me naked, you long for Albert to die. You convince yourself I care. I don’t want to free you from your delusion; you deserve unrequited love. You deserve a mother like mine.

On her deathbed Mama asked me to be a servile wife to my own father! To be a mother to my own brothers! Sometimes, when I pass by her bedroom, I go in and spit on her bed. You remind me of her. Behind your sensitivity lurks a devious mind. Albert is a saint compared to you. His roughness stays in the bedroom where I can easily bear it.

At the beginning of the month we stand beneath a chestnut tree, moonlight illuminating the path that you walk with me by day. I babble on about some foolishness. I’m upset. You grasp at every word I utter about death:

“We will meet again,” you say, certain I want to hear it.

While he accompanies me home, Albert and I discuss how much I despise you. Later he slips through the open window into my room. He chokes me to help me relax.

October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May, June

Is a woman even alive if there's no man nearby lamenting his pain in her presence? Of course, but who cares? You flee to go work for a nobleman. Albert and I get married. One of the wedding guests says:

“What a shame that Walter isn't here.”

People have forgotten your name. They've buried you alive.

July

We didn't get to throw a handful of dirt on you; you've already come back from the dead. You've returned with your tail between your legs. You notice how Albert clasps me around the waist. You're consumed with jealousy. I was right: you're an evil man.

August

I write a few letters to my relatives. I want to escape. Albert says it's not a bad idea, but my father, my brothers, they look at me dejectedly. They howl like village dogs tethered to a tree. Who would slice their bread if I left? Whose hand would they eat from if not mine?

You come by constantly. Albert laughs. Your intrusiveness flatters him. Sometimes your tears are a salve for the bruises Albert leaves on my body, especially the thighs you furtively touched. For every one of your inappropriate touches and glances Albert later punishes me. I've come close to thanking you openly. Your desire has strengthened our marriage.

September

Let's finally get to the glorification of those people you refer to in conversation as “the raw and uneducated class.” You praise the peasants by insulting them. You say you're a worse person than they are because you're “educated,” but if you think about it—were not the peasants and the Philistines educated by the same mother who always says yes to her sons, while repeating no to her daughters?

You applaud the servant who tried to rape his mistress because to you such an outburst of passion is healthy and genuine, while scruples are a sign of bourgeois affliction. But then with unconcealed contempt you tell Albert the peasant women are too promiscuous. You celebrate me, the educated and happy, and spit on them, the uneducated and happy. And why for the love of God don't you say openly that you want to rape me, but your reading of Klopstock holds you back? I don't think it's right to blame one's

own impulses on poets, however pathetic they are. There's nothing romantic about ignorance and rural coarseness. I've told you this countless times. But I can't dissuade you. You ardently defend your position that education has made us rigid, that it prevents us from reacting in the ways we really want. Albert and I read between the lines: you are ready for a cruelty from which no woman could ever recover.

When Albert controls my breathing, he observes the color of my face. He follows my inhalations and exhalations. You would stare into my eyes, watching yourself in them. You would strangle me, just so you could have me forever. It's all the same to you whether I'm alive or dead. The question of life for you is a trifle that preoccupies only good-natured and dull-witted provincials. You are above mere survival. Death is more precious to the Philistine. Especially the death of a woman. You think you're so refined, but the cabbage doesn't lie. The head of cabbage is the same whether it's picked by the rough, cracked hands of the peasant or the well-groomed hands of the salon philosopher. I am that cabbage. I feed all of you, but only Albert cares about my appetites.

You intercept my message to Albert (I wrote that I could hardly wait for him to come home). You muse aloud that I wrote it to you. Usually I have no trouble hiding my feelings, but this time my face betrays my disgust. You clearly see how much your comment has annoyed me. I hate when I briefly lose control, when I can't master my emotions. Especially in the presence of vile men who pretend they're in my power. Right away I go to write Albert that I can't endure another minute in your company and he suggests I go to him by coach. It takes me two days to recover my peace of mind. While I'm away from home, I realize I need to do something. I can't stand you anymore. I'll just wait for you to attack me, so that Albert challenges you to a duel. If you can't pull the trigger yourself, the gunpowder should be given to someone else to finish the job. To provoke you even further, I buy a canary and feed it bread in front of you. I give it crumbs from my mouth. My message is clear. You turn your head. You know, deep down, that I'd even give an animal what I'd never give you: crumbs of tenderness, the tiniest kindness.

Your nerves are fraying. You're full of rage. They cut down two trees, walnut trees you loved. You attacked the priest's wife for this. You wanted to choke her. You scream about it in front of me, in front of Albert, even in front of my father. Everyone here knows that neither the priest nor his wife should venture out. Although both trees stood on their property, you say MY WALNUT TREES. I'm no longer a head of cabbage. I've become a felled tree.

October

You admire authority figures, princes, literary giants, and Albert. I don't know how Albert ended up in this group given that he has no interest in being a father figure; he doesn't want complicated relationships with children.

November

While we're celebrating Albert's birthday, I notice you're drinking a lot. You're disappearing into your glass. You've kept your mouth shut, but your eyes are giving you away. You look at Albert as if your pupils are a pair of daggers. You brush up against my dress more often; you let your hands roam freely. I'm not sure how much of it is conscious, and how much driven by wine.

I enjoy drinking too, but not in front of you. My tongue would surely untie. That was how I confessed to Albert years ago that I wanted him, and explained, in detail, what I expected of him. I was young when we met, but I already knew what I wanted. Wine doesn't have the same effect on you. Even if you drank the entire cask, you wouldn't confess what you're after. Albert knows. That's why we're here: happy in your misery.

I tell you that you should stop drinking so much, but not out of concern. The things you do, other men did before you. The same looks, the same touches. The same breath and the same lies they called Truth. I am, unfortunately, well acquainted with this "love." You don't know the difference between tenderness and violence. The wine's not to blame, but rather mothers, who together with poets bear some responsibility. After the other guests disperse, you stay seated at the table with me and Albert. You talk about poets. You don't mention your mother.

"When I read poets of yore and recognize in them my own heart, how torturous it is! I never knew that people before us were so miserable, that they suffered as much as we do."

You don't slur your words. You sound sober.

"Everyone suffers, Werther," says Albert. "You're not the only one."

"But you suffer less than others. You have Lotte."

"She's not a talisman," he says, his voice clipped.

"You should carry her in your heart," you say. "Like I do. Then she will be."

Albert laughs. He's not angry. He points to his head and says:

"I carry her here."

"Me too!" you say.

You smack your forehead loudly. I'm sick of your conversation. When I go to leave the table, you begin to vomit. Finally I get a closer look at what's inside you. It's revolting.

In the days that follow you show more openly how much you want me. You're no longer suppressing it. You stare at me, quoting significant verses. You make a point of coming by when Albert's not home. I sit at the piano, playing and singing to exhaustion, just to avoid talking to you. Here and there you cry out loud; you're done holding back. Your feelings are plain to see. If only you'd keep on about your vegetable garden, you wouldn't feel the need to cry so much!

December

My musicality goes far beyond the minuet, the waltz, or any other virtuosic piano piece. The sound I enjoy most is the slap of an open palm on a naked ass. The same sound I made with my hand when I slapped you at last year's dance. I'm sure you haven't forgotten it. I'm thinking about repeating those slaps. Albert tells me you encountered Henrik on a walk. You recognized him instantly. You sympathize with him; you think he went insane because of me.

"Lotte's eyes drove him crazy," you say.

"You're talking nonsense," Albert replies. "She has nothing to do with him."

My father employed Henrik as a clerk when Mama was still alive. It wasn't long before he wrote his first love letter to me. The paper always displayed the traces of his tears. Clerks are odd creatures. They're not writers, but they, too lack imagination. I was sick of his pathetic sentences and red-faced looks full of longing.

Once, when my father wasn't home, I went looking for my mother to complain about my brothers banging on my piano. The door to her room was ajar and I saw—though it was the last thing I wanted to see—Henrik the clerk lying on top of her. My mother was stretched out on her stomach and didn't notice me. They were both panting loudly. At first I heard only the piano, the strains of children's songs being pounded out on the keys. I was distraught. Mama was getting louder and louder, but I couldn't hear her voice, just the sound of her buttocks, which could never be inscribed in sheet music.

Henrik continued to court me after that. While I'd play piano, he'd sit nearby. He came over every day for lunch. He touched me under the table.

"He's very industrious," said my father.

My mother agreed.

"Tireless," she said.

Henrik was totally domesticated in no time. The affection he and my mother exchanged in bed nearly began to show openly, in front of her numerous children, even in front of her husband. It was completely repulsive, the way he addressed me in my mother's presence. Maybe he wanted to make her jealous? I begged my father to let me visit my cousins, and he gladly consented to it. Nothing escaped my father. He knew everything. He saw everything. When I returned from my trip, he brusquely reported that Henrik was not well and had needed to leave his post. He'd fired him.

"After you left," my father said, "the young man went completely crazy."

His words spread throughout the neighborhood. Everyone began to look at me reproachfully.

"My son was sound and healthy before he went to work for you," repeated his mother. "Charlotte drove him to the madhouse."

When you came upon him, his mother was there too. What exactly did she say? That he was an exemplary, even-tempered son, who out of nowhere, had grown melancholy, come down with a fever, and ended up in an asylum? You seized on her words because you think I'm mortal danger. Peasant women are a venereal disease. I'm a disease of the soul.

TO THE READER, FROM ALBERT

Charlotte doesn't want to hear Werther's name anymore and she asked me to take her place in relating to you what happened. She told me: "Albert, you're a lawyer and you don't know how to write, but it's better if you smother the reader than if I do."

When I first met Lotte, I knew right away that she was a genius. She was only sixteen years old, but she already knew far more than I did. When she would speak fervently of Lessing, for example, her eyebrows would go up and down. She was both dramatic and composed and I fell in love with her at once. I didn't hide it from her; we'd known one another barely a month when I admitted that I loved her and thought of her more often than my own mother, and I thought of my mother quite often. My inappropriate joke pleased her, because her mother was an awful woman. We became best friends. Whenever I'd travel for work, I'd write her long letters and send books she'd requested. Lotte would read the books and then we'd engage in an epistolary debate about them, or about the latest gossip. We didn't always agree. For example, I loved Klopstock, but she found him repugnant. She always interpreted popular works through the lens of local political conditions. Poetry was never for her just a text to sigh over. I wish I could explain to you in her words the problem she had with poets, but that's not possible. It's hard to find better words than hers. She was precise in her language and in her desires.

She asked me to marry her first, while we were hunting wild mushrooms in the forest. I accepted immediately. Then she said that once we'd gathered enough thick and juicy mushrooms, I should take some to her father and ask him to compensate me with his thick and juicy daughter. I froze. Her father didn't have much of a sense of humor, but Lotte said everything would be fine: he knew, she said, that she would still look after the children. She was right. Her father accepted, but asked us to postpone the wedding because Lotte was "too young" for marriage. She was 20 years old. Anyway, not to bore you with the details, but the thing with Werther was getting worse and worse. Lotte said she somehow needed to fix it. It was bothering her too much. I agreed that Werther had become intrusive, but I didn't offer to talk to him. I knew Lotte would find her own solution. She didn't need to say: "Albert, let me deal with this on my own." I told her not to procrastinate too much because Werther was getting ever more brazen.

I was sometimes jealous of the way Werther would say "we" when speaking about Charlotte and himself. For instance, he bragged about mushroom-hunting "again" with Lotte: "We have to go pick mushrooms again," is how he said it. When I complained about his behavior, Lotte told me not to be jealous because she planned to gather a special kind of mushroom for him. I told her she mustn't poison him, and she replied: "Maybe I'll have to." Anyway, in the meantime a peasant whom Werther would meet now and then at the tavern killed the servant of a widow he was in love with and had previously tried to rape. Werther rushed to help him, identifying with his violence. He begged the manager to set the killer free. "He did it in a fit of passion!" shouted Werther. The man had been in love with the widow for years. He'd killed her servant out of jealousy. "You must take pity on him!" Lotte was visibly unnerved when I recounted the story to her. "He didn't kill the widow," I said, "just her servant," but Charlotte said it didn't matter. He'd killed a person. He'd given Werther an idea.

I knew that Lotte was right because at one point, Werther took up his friend's defense in the plural: "We men are passionate creatures!" I trembled at his words. I didn't recognize myself in them. When she was upset, Charlotte would go into the kitchen, prepare a heap of food, and eat until she calmed down. Her mother had often berated her for this. Her father had rebuked her too, but it didn't bother me. I wasn't going to tell her how to feel. I'd sit in silence at the table and eat with her. And this time I did the same. She told me between mouthfuls that if she didn't kill Werther, he would kill me. I replied that I knew this because he defended the killer with such passion that I occasionally felt sorry for him. Lotte said I should under no circumstances pity him. She chewed slowly. She said: "If only he'd shoot at my father like Henrik did!" Lotte condemned all brutes, not just Werther. She'd once written in a letter that she lived in an environment that valued inconspicuous female rudeness and conspicuous male violence. Men fired pistols.

Women sneaked poisonous mushrooms. Lotte didn't want to accept such an assignment. She understood both motherhood and gunpowder. Her life, she wrote me, did not begin and end with hoeing vegetables and birthing children. In any case, Lotte wandered off somewhere in her thoughts while we were eating. I asked her what she was going to do. She stared at a piece of ham. I jokingly asked if she planned to kill and eat Werther. Lotte made a disgusted grunt and pushed away the meat. She got up from her chair and left.

When Lotte returned home that night, she was covered in blood. I helped her remove her clothes, then warmed some water to bathe her. I dried her hair, and threw her dirty clothes in the fire. Knowing that she'd been preparing something, I'd sent all the servants into the city a couple hours earlier with a long list of tasks that would keep them there at least two days. There was no one in the kitchen. Still, I didn't ask her what she'd done. I just hugged her and told her everything would be alright. Of course it would, Lotte said. She shivered and I helped her get dressed. She had no trouble falling asleep. I went out to groom my horse and wash the traces of blood from his back and neck. Just before dawn I found Lotte at her writing desk. She pushed a letter into my hand and said she'd explained everything in detail. I nodded. When she left the room, I sat in her spot next to the fireplace and began to read. Outside a heavy snow was falling. I wondered whether she'd left any tracks.

Dear Albert,

I didn't tell you this sooner in order to avoid upsetting you, but a few days ago, while I was sitting at the piano, Werther pounced on me after crying over some stupid song. I pushed him off and barely managed to escape to the next room. I locked the door, which he was bearing down on. Werther repeated that he loved me, and that he wouldn't leave until he could see me and hear my voice.

"You want to rape me!"

He insisted this wasn't true.

"I just want to see you. Talk to me!"

I wiped away his kisses with my hand. I felt nauseous, and vomited on the parquet floor.

"Alright," I said after catching my breath. I can't see you now because I'm overcome with passion. Albert would catch us in an embrace."

"Tell me, my love, tell me when can we meet? When I can kiss you again?"

"Soon," I said. "Don't come over here anymore, lest Albert suspect something. I'll have one of my servants bring you a note and we can meet in the forest."

"O, my love," moaned Werther, "I am your only servant!"

Another wave of nausea stopped me from speaking further. Thankfully, a servant came into the room and I heard the lout leave in a hurry.

“You can come out,” said a woman’s voice. “He’s gone.”

She cleaned the floor and I was sure she knew what had happened. All the women in the village were familiar with Werther and his high-minded city impulses. We didn’t utter a word; we understood each other in silence.

Then the murder happened. I needed to urgently reconceive my plan. After you and I had lunch in the kitchen I went to write Werther a message:

“Dearest, I know you’re sad for your friend. Let my gentle kisses soothe your endless suffering tonight, and calm your trembling heart!”

Werther replied immediately:

“My beloved, my one and only, the sorrow of my heart, come comfort me! Your servant needs you and kisses you endlessly!”

Never, since we’d first met, had I extended the slightest tenderness to him, but all the same he clung to my promise as if I’d been passionately loving him my whole life. I grabbed a weapon, but not the one from the wall, rather the pistol you’d hidden in the book on the Code of Hammurabi. First I went for a walk to clear my head. My plan was simple: I needed to knock out Werther with a small dose of poison and discharge the pistol into his empty head. I was nervous. Much time had passed since my mother’s death, but the memory of her was still alive. And Werther’s face would persecute me just as hers did. I nearly lost my courage when I ran into Henrik’s mother. I wanted to bypass her, but she gripped my hand and insulted me. Fortunately, her son was nowhere in sight. It was cold; she’d surely put him in a warm bed and left him to his beautiful dreams. Her slander returned me to the time when, instead of Werther, her son had tormented me. I tore my hand away from her and fled.

“Witch!” she shouted after me.

You know how much I hate that word. I hate it with a passion equal to Werther’s hatred of women.

When I returned home, I didn’t let you know, but rather went directly to the horse and made off for Werther’s place. He was waiting for me in a bathrobe. In his hand was the red ribbon I’d gifted him for his birthday. He wrapped it around his finger.

“That ribbon belonged to my late mother,” I said.

He didn’t hear me. The smile never left his face. He was so self-confident it made me sick, but I needed to be patient.

“Have you any wine?” I asked.

“Of course,” said Werther.

He brought two glasses. I noticed one of them was chipped. I poured the poison into that one while his back was turned.

“Where has your servant gone?” I asked.

The house was quiet.

“He’s around here somewhere,” he lied.

I considered how months of Werther’s greedy hands and sweet talk had prepared me for this moment. I knew that if I changed my mind, he would never give up.

“How will Albert react when he finds out about us?”

He didn’t expect an answer. He was talking to himself. In fact, he was talking to you. I was sure he wanted you to watch us.

I slowly took the ribbon from Werther’s hand and tied it around the wine glass.

“Imagine this glass is me.”

I offered it to him. I expected him to empty it, but Werther was a scoundrel like me. He hesitated.

“Let the first sip be yours, and then I’ll drink from the place touched by your lips.”

I had no choice, so I drank a little wine. I handed the glass back to him.

“And now you!” I said.

My tone was sharp and I quickly corrected:

“Dearest Werther, my love, take the wine as you will take me.”

I spoke such drivel, the German poets would’ve envied me.

“There’s time,” said Werther.

I won’t lie, I was scared. I expected him to attack me at any minute, but he seemed not to be in a hurry.

“Do you remember the day we met?”

“Of course I remember!” I said. “I’ll never forget. We spoke at length about literature.”

“Yes,” said Werther. “You praised Klopstock enthusiastically.”

“Well he’s marvelous!” I said.

“Interesting. Your father told me recently that you don’t like him, indeed, he said you despise him.”

He sounded cold and suspicious.

“My father doesn’t know me at all.”

I blinked a few times, very seductively, but it was as if Werther was looking right through me.

“I spoke with Henrik too. He’s crazy, but very smart.”

“Ah, poor, sweet Henrik! Life has been so unfair to him.”

“Life, or you?”

The poison was beginning to take effect.

“Can I sit down? The mention of him always saddens me.”

“Go ahead,” said Werther.

“I wouldn’t say he went crazy because of me. He loved older women.”

“Your mother?” he asked.

“I didn’t know you’d become so close with my father,” I said.

“I can drink a lot. Your father, not so much.”

I wanted to change the subject.

“My mother was a wonderful person. Everyone loved her.”

“Your father said you resemble her.”

“If only!” I lied. “She was a true beauty.”

Werther removed his robe and stood before me. He was completely naked.

“If she wasn’t shy, then I guess you aren’t either,” he said.

“My mother was very pious and wouldn’t have tolerated male nudity,” I lied.

I laughed, though I wanted to cry.

“My beautiful Lotte,” said Werther, taking my face in his hand.

He dropped his hand to my neck, moving lower and lower. I grew frightened that he’d see the scars. The bruises on my shoulders were quite visible, but fortunately, he stopped at my décolletage.

Werther was, like Henrik, the most ordinary boor.

“More wine?” he asked.

“You know I never drink,” I said.

“You drink, just not in front of me.”

“What exactly did my father tell you?”

“He admitted he doesn’t like Albert.”

“That I know,” I said.

“I don’t like him either.”

The quiet was becoming unbearable. I went to get up, but Werther held me down roughly in the armchair.

“Stay seated,” he said.

He removed the ribbon from the glass and tied it around my neck. I felt for my pistol. Before I could take it out and blow away his genitals, which were hanging right in front of my nose, Werther sank into the armchair across from mine and finally brought the chipped glass of wine to his lips. He gulped it down.

“Do you love Albert?” he asked.

There was no reason to lie anymore.

“More than anything.”

He gazed into the distance. The wine was slowly putting him to sleep.

“While I was at my diplomatic post, I found your double and did everything with her that I wanted to do with you, but it didn’t help.”

“Is that why you returned, to finish the job?”

Werther didn’t answer. His head slumped on the back of the chair. I tried calling him loudly:

“Werther! Werther!”

He didn’t respond. I shook him. It was over. I dressed him slowly in his favorite clothes. I forged his handwriting and wrote Werther’s farewell letter to myself. When I pressed the pistol against his temple, he opened his eyes for a moment. There wasn’t a shred of horror on his face. Midnight struck and I fired. I didn’t wait to see if he was dead. If he didn’t die right away, I reckoned he’d surely be gone by morning. I planted the pistol in his right hand. I hurried out into the air, mounted the horse, and took off. The crime had been prevented. You already know the condition I was in when I came home. When the messenger comes today to inform us of his death, I plan to faint. I’ve firmly decided. I didn’t cry enough when my mother died. That was a mistake. For Werther I will sob twice as hard, thrice. Life hangs by a thread, people will say, and you know all too well how quickly gossip travels. Everyone will think that I truly died with him.