

Actually
It Was All Over

In the morning, in September, in the morning, when I used to walk to the station, across the square with the taxis wet from the dew in their first sleep, as the thin fog drew across the green surfaces and around the shrubbery and Orpheus — who had become old — in wide, baggy trousers sidled up again to occupy his spot at the comfort station, to read inscriptions, to add his piece, hopeless, as the boy on his way to school came from the street car, every morning, mobile and tense, but already with a boozier's face and eyes, the small wrinkle at the root of the nose, cheerful and right above the forehead the tuft of hair, wet and turned up like a water elf's coronet, then I used always to stand in front of the station door, turn round once more, in order to look across the square as far as

the point where the asphalt street started its incline towards the vault of the bridge and the cupola church behind it, before I pushed against the swinging door leaf with my foot and rushed up to the counter.

I no longer see that any more. I've moved away, to another part of town. No longer the basement pubs either, in the side streets off the station, one after the other, seven or eight, teamsters' cellars for morning coffee, for cumin or gin, two short ones first and then the three doubles.

None of that any longer. Because I've begun another life, in a profession that doesn't permit that, that commits me to tailored suits, to morning oats, to tea, cigars and a bottle of red wine in the evening. That's how people talk, but it's really true. And it surely wouldn't be true at all if I said I long to return to that time with the station, the fog and the taxis, the boy and the third pub, where the bartender was called Erich and where they took me for a trick shooter.

That was Otto Klemmer, building plumber, 10 Bridge Street. Do you know my dog? A polar bear, I can tell you. And then the dog came in and it was an old Pomeranian, coming apart at the seams with the years and sent out to look for its master and to bring him home. So this fellow had seen

me in Copenhagen, in Wilhelmshaven and somewhere else.

And you're not in the biz anymore? But if you build up a number again — you can count on me, I'll come, bottom man in the human pillar act or something.

And the barkeep had thought I must work for a newspaper.

And then Helene had popped up there, one evening, with long hair, in pants and two boys in her train, art students, and had made friends with the barkeep's tomcat and had drunk a lot of schnapps and had talked, in nothing but half-sentences, and the boys had listened and counted up their money in the toilet to see how far it would still go, and they had kept on coming, the three. And when Erich had wound up the musical clock on the stove and everyone became quiet and leaned on the table, at that point we'd smile at each other, touched, sort of moved by the schnapps, and like in school behind the teacher's back.

And then sometimes we switched over to another pub, a whole bunch of people, and the two boys always with us. And Helene had sung in an extremely shabby voice, and not even screwed up her mouth when we laughed.

And now I have no idea when all that stopped. It was simply over. First the sculp-

tors, who had patched up an historic building somewhere thereabouts stayed away. Then Otto Klemmer didn't come anymore. The barkeep had to go into hospital. His nephew, a butcher, carried on the pub and did better than Erich, that is, sales rose, and actually it was all over.

Helene — yeah, I once heard she's still supposed to be making the haunts, only with other boys, now with three. I don't want to see all that again. Just perhaps the square in front of the station. And now it occurs to me that there was always a dog there, pretty big and black, I'd forgotten all about that, and every morning when I came by he acted as if he wanted to start barking, sort of a short, hoarse little start in that direction, but then he'd just look at me gravely and viciously, and I'd grab him by the snout while going by, and he'd wag his tail a bit, two or three times.

The bartender is said to have died. Helene — I really don't know anything about her. And should I still want to inquire, it would be too late.