

Erase and Rewind

By

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We are always about to take off into a future
Unencumbered, as if we could leave ourselves behind,
But of course we never do.

Mark Strand, from *Dark Harbour*, IX

Note:

The opening paragraph of Part Two is a slightly adapted quotation from the opening paragraph of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, in the translation by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser.

Snapshots of Karl 1.

A photograph is a memory. A simple memory. A glossy memory. A false memory. A photograph always lies; I never looked like that in reality. I have a lot of memories I don't want, memories I wish I could throw out. Forget. But memories aren't like that, they linger, especially the bad ones, waiting to launch themselves into your mind at any opportunity, unbidden, scourging you with your humiliations and failures. That's the mind for you; always out to get you, teach you a lesson, show you who's boss.

But since I can't forget them I've decided to dig down for them, sift them, looking for gold. I want to remember everything, the good and the bad without distinction, and to pin them down, like exhibits in a museum of memories. Look at these photographs.

Here I am as a child, he looks so sweet, he smiles so nicely, his head on one side in an engagingly bashful gesture; but he isn't sweet, the next moment he will be having a tantrum, he will snarl and weep and screw up his face into a mask of fury and throw things; that's childhood for you.

Here he is, a young man, looking cocky, trying to be adult, sophisticated, affecting a world weary air, a knowing smile, when all the while everything is painfully new to him. He'll make stupid jokes and pick fights, and inside he won't know why he does any of those things and feels at home with no one; that's adolescence for you.

And here he is sitting in a prison cell. A surprise shot, this one, which isn't in many albums. Something from the secret album here. But this museum aims for completeness, it doesn't relegate anything to the basement store, so here he is looking bored and angry. Not looking world weary but feeling it already. And his eyes look dangerous now; they look out at you with an air of confrontation, they challenge, provoke and mock; that's growing up for you.

Here he is receiving an award; a literary award. He looks like someone has smartened him up for the occasion. He looks slightly bewildered, as if he doesn't

belong here, and he doesn't. But everybody standing around him looks immensely pleased with themselves, as if they had won the award. It is all very unexpected.

That's success for you.

And he is still a mystery; doesn't know why he does the things he does, after all these years. That's why he needs the museum of memories.

I really should get out of the habit of talking about myself in the third person. The psychologists would have a field day with that. But casting yourself in the third person is an occupational hazard for a writer. And that's how I think of myself now, as a writer. It's strange how things turn out. It's something that nobody would have expected, this transition from a career of crime to a literary life. I've changed from being one of the least civilized elements of society, who needs to be locked up to protect the rest of the citizens, to moving in the artificial and rarefied atmosphere of the literary salon.

I suppose I could lay the blame for my past on my childhood. Why not, everybody else does, and I must confess that in the dark nights and the bleak days I tell myself stories about my mother. I conjure her back from the past.

I have to invent her. I see her loitering on the street, among the rubble and the dead street lamps of post liberation Vienna, 1946. I see the American G.I.s, perhaps a little drunk, proceeding down the narrow street, the sound of their footsteps staggering from wall to wall. I hear my mother call to them, to entice them, attract them, to sell herself for sustenance. I see their faces, etched with the avarice of lust. They have fought and won; they deserve something; they want something soft and unwarlike to plunge into. So they buy her. They buy my mother before I was born. In the dark doorways and the dank hallways they suck and probe and they pay up and go. Or they hear the M.P.s' nightsticks approach and change their mind, run from the temptation and evade the retribution.

Vienna at night is full of these women; emerging from the shadows, cold and hungry. All the trade is on the streets; the shops are closed or ruined; the food is on the streets, the flesh is on the streets, the drugs, the alcohol, the identity papers; the trade is on the streets, among the rubble.

When she is not working she attends the places where it is possible to meet G.I.s. The trick is to snag a permanent lover, one who will care for you and not just button up and go. Perhaps one might offer you a chance of escape, back to the land of wealth and power. So she flirts; but much more subtly here. There is one who catches her eye. He looks promising, a shy, diffident type, uncertain of himself despite years of war. She starts to see him regularly, my father, my future father; he takes her out to dinner; he gets her into a dance. She is a good girl. He knows she is not one of those cheap women who sell their bodies on the streets; he knows she comes from a good family, fallen on hard times, because of the war, like everyone else.

He feels gallant in her company. She is educated and speaks English quite well, but with a delightful accent and amusing inaccuracies of diction and syntax. It makes him feel protective towards her and special, important, in her company. She is his Viennese damsel to his half-forgotten knight. He fears for her. It is such a dangerous city. He wants to protect her. He establishes her in an apartment block less ruined than others. He visits her bearing delicacies obtained from the officers' mess and the black marketeers. They toast one another and play house among the ruins. When they make love they do it in a way that is not just a transaction, an exchange of goods, but an exchange of selves. She is a good girl, he is not buying her, he is protecting her. She no longer has to haunt the shadows of the night-time streets.

As a result of this fortunate meeting all is well, for a time. But army life is always uncertain and he is unexpectedly posted to Germany. They barely have time

to say goodbye. He leaves her with some money, she knows it will not last. He says he will send more, but he does not say how it will be possible to do that. After he has been gone for two weeks her period fails to arrive. I have arrived instead. What timing! Too late or too early, depending on how you look at it. She never hears from him again. In this way she ends up back on the street; enticing other G.I.s into the shadows for their enjoyment.

It is all just a brief interlude in his army memories by now. Just one of those crazy things he did after the war, when everyone acted mad. He sometimes thinks about it, but not often. It leaves him wondering, discontented, he doesn't like to think about it. He has a life to lead and the less time wondering about what might have been the better.

She has her little boy in a charitable medical facility set up by the victorious nations. All attempts to rid her body of the little soul had failed, most of them had been half-hearted anyway, replete with the knowledge of failure. When she reached a certain condition; when her belly was a ripe round protruberance and her skin as taut as a drum she could use it to charge more for her services; so, for a while, the little soul was an asset, a partner in her work. But now, squealing beside her on the little bed the little soul's utility declined considerably.

As soon as he split her thighs with his sharp voiced greeting to the world life got more difficult. She could see the partnership would need dissolving. He would just get in the way now. If she wasn't careful he would drag them both down

Did you like that? Did you like that little vignette? Touching isn't it. Do you think it's true? Don't look at me, I only wrote it. How should I know, I wasn't even born when most of those things took place.

Chapter Two

I'm all right.

They put me in prison for life. Life. One word. Four letters. So short for such a long time. Can you imagine what prison does to someone like me? I doubt if you can. I'm a free spirit. I need to wander at will, I can't be tied down, I must have freedom. In prison you're no longer alive. You look like you're alive, but inside you're dead. You lead a half life. When I was sentenced to life in prison I thought I would die; I thought I wouldn't be able to face it. But I managed. I never gave up hope; even though I was half dead and the half that was still alive was tormented by the need to be free, I never gave up hope.

When I was in prison I said to myself, What can you do with a life that's locked up? And the answer I came up with was, You do the things that a life of freedom leaves you no time to do. In the world an amazing amount of time is spent keeping a roof over your head, putting food on the table, travelling from A to B, all those things you take for granted you have to do. You don't have to worry about any of those things in prison. It's all taken care of. So I used my time to educate myself. I caught up on all the education I'd missed as a kid. I took correspondence courses. I looked things up. I read voraciously. I learnt what the word 'voracious' meant, and a lot more besides.

I read book after book, it got addictive. And one day I said to myself, I can see how it's done. I could see the trick of the thing. When I read a book of poems or a novel I took note of how they did it; how they strung the words into a beautiful necklace of meaning. I thought I could do that. I could arrange the words the way they did, so I tried it out. I thought I would write about all the little steps, all the little decisions and hesitations that had led me to this point. I didn't have to imagine a plot, I was the plot.

I knew there was nowhere I could go. No way out. The only thing to do was to escape into my mind. It was the only freedom that was available to me. So that was what I did. I escaped into my dreams. I created worlds to inhabit that were far

from the reality of prison existence. To sit in my cell and write provided a means of escape. The walls would dissolve, the noises subside as I dug deeper and deeper into the imaginative world at my disposal. A world where the warders could not follow; where my fellow prisoners, with their blind, blunted lives, could not follow. A world where only I was free and all the characters had to obey me. A world totally opposite to the reality of my life. Infinitely preferable, infinitely free, as free as my imagination could make it.

That was how it started and, in time, I got good at it. So good that they could not ignore what I was doing. The world I created for my own escape began to capture others. When a writer in residence came to the prison and read my work he was very impressed. He showed the work to his publisher. The publisher liked it. They published it. They publicized it. The fact that the author of the work was a convicted murderer gave extra impetus to the publicity drive. It sold. It was read. Critics liked it. It was stacked in large piles in bookshop windows. Not that I could visit these bookshops, but that was what I was told. Then they started coming to the prison, they wanted to interview me and photograph me for their magazines. They wanted to know what I thought about things, so I told them. After a while they began to ask themselves, 'Why are we keeping this man in prison? What's wrong with us? Why do we keep such talent locked up?'

When I was in prison the first things I wrote were poems. I looked into my heart and described the despair I found there. I looked into my past and described the anger I found there. It required no elaborate apparatus of plot or characterisation, just a stark confrontation with self. But soon I found poetry, on its own, a depressingly confined form. So I ventured into the wide open spaces of the novel. I found the manipulation of fictional characters a welcome expansion of my love of manipulating real people; I knew so well how to do it, and now I could do it in fictional worlds too. It provided that God-like exercise of power one can normally

only experience when killing people; and it was a lot less risky; more rewarding in some ways, financially certainly, but not in others. There is nothing so invigorating as reality. Even the most exquisitely and powerfully realised fiction provides only a weak shadow of reality. How can one put into a linear succession of words the wealth of experience that simultaneously bombards one in real life; just walking down the street, let alone intense experiences like making love - or killing?

I'm doing all right now. I'm doing very nicely, thank you. Does that bother you? It bothers me. I often sit here and I try and piece it together. I try to make sense of it. That's what writers do, isn't it, make sense of things. Hopefully. I could never have predicted it. I could have predicted a lot of things, and got them right, but not that. In an important way I'm only a writer *because* I was sent to prison. It's a bit drastic isn't it.

I've led many lives and I write them down. That's my material; I'm my material. I don't know what I'm going to do when I run out. Maybe I'll stop. Maybe I'll never run out of me. I've tried to get away from me a few times; but it's never worked, now it's pay back time.

I live alone. Alone is good. You know where you are when you're alone. You just do what you want when you want. No consultations, no disapproving looks, no disappointed sighs, no distractions, unless you want them, which is good for a writer.

I have an apartment in Hietzing, near the Schoenbrunn park; it's a bit suburban but it suits me, it's somewhere I can think, somewhere I can be me and wait for the subconscious to nudge its way to the surface with an idea in its maw. Sometimes I wake up with an idea or some lines in my head. When that happens I get up immediately and put them down. I keep going until they begin to dry up. When I'm writing it feels like driving a car along a winding country lane, I can only see

ahead as far as the next bend, but as I take each corner I can look ahead and see what's coming up, so I keep going, turning corner after corner. When I feel it starting to go I don't force it; I coast to a halt and leave it there. I know it will come back at some point, if I don't force things.

If I'm feeling energetic, or guilty, I go for a run. A run is a good way to start the day. As I put one foot in front of the other, settling into a solid rhythm, I feel I could go on forever, I feel like a machine, I feel liberated. I only run in the park, in the street you're out of place, you look foolish, but in the park you're in your element, you feel like you own it. I like to let my mind wander as I run along the track, and I make a point of observing everything around me. I observe the trees in their stately progression through the seasons, I observe the sky, its tone and the formations of clouds; and the different qualities of light. I suppose I appreciate these things more having spent so long in prison. And I like to watch the people, the dog walkers, the cyclists, the joggers and runners, some overweight but valiantly battling, others athletes, moving with a grace and ease that makes me envious.

Writing is fundamentally a tedious activity and doing too much of it could possibly drive you insane. That's how I look at it. So by lunchtime I'm glad of a break, I'm glad to get back to the real world. I like to meet people and have a friendly chat over a beer and a snack. It helps me to stay sane. It helps me stay in touch, and prevents me from getting too lost and involved in the fictional world I've been inhabiting in the morning. I spend plenty of time over lunch, especially if the conversation is flowing well.

I'm a sociable kind of person, fortunately for me I have a wide circle of friends and an even greater number of acquaintances. This is all the more surprising since they were all acquired since I got out of prison, except for a few who had visited me while I was still inside. I made a point of avoiding all my former friends from pre-prison days. They think I'm a snob. They think that because I'm famous now I don't

want to know them. But that's not true, I'm not a snob. I just don't want to be reminded of the things I used to do and the person I used to be. That's what I use in my writing and I don't want to live it as well. And I worry that if I got back together with the people I used to know I would get sucked back into my old ways. So instead of picking up my life where it had left off, when I was sent to prison all those years ago, I've invented a new life, a new me. I erased the past by writing it; the past became fiction, no longer real, no longer mine. I put it in a book and cast it adrift. I started inventing the new me while I was inside. I decided to re-invent myself, and I succeeded. So here I am, the new me, with the new me's new friends.

Sometimes I wake up and I expect my eyes to alight on the familiar cell walls, the nauseous texture of brick coated in a skin of thick grey paint, the light without a switch, the bare toilet bowl, the high window. But I don't wake up to these things, except in my nightmares, anymore.

I'm famous, you see. The writing has made me famous. I have the writing to thank. All part of the new me, the writing. When people are in prison they are supposed to dream of escaping, of going over the wall, of digging a tunnel; I tunnelled my way out with words. The fact is I shouldn't be out yet. Life imprisonment doesn't usually mean fifteen years, does it? Though fifteen years is long enough. But they had to let me go; because of the words. They wanted to let me go; because of the words. They could see I was a changed man and I am; I'm a man of words now. I'm made of words: my words; their words. Before, I was a man of violence, if you stood in my way you'd get hurt, it was the only way of doing things I understood. But now the words are my weapons: I sharpen them every day. I know how useful they can be; like a trusty blade they can get you out of awkward situations.

I'm having difficulty concentrating on my writing these days. Life is too distracting; I'm getting too famous for my own good, and I don't know what I'm doing, all my ideas seem to be going in the wrong direction, hitting dead ends.

I never had this problem in prison. I could sit in my cell and write no matter what was going on. I was consumed with a passion for words in those days. It was a new found passion so it had the intensity, it had the excitement, of a new relationship. Writing then was like having a new girl who would do anything you asked her to do; anything. It was very exciting. It puzzled the other prisoners. They couldn't understand why I spent so much time sitting in my cell hunched over a pad of paper when I could have been out of my cell, in the gym or the games room, or the exercise yard, hanging around with them. Some of them got jealous; they sensed that I would prefer to sit over the paper thinking up words than talk to them. They had an invisible rival, one that didn't make sense, especially if you couldn't read.

Arno, a convict I had originally shared a cell with, when I first entered the prison, couldn't understand what I was up to and couldn't come to terms with it. He kept trying to interrupt me.

I remember one time he walked into my cell and said, 'What are you doing?'

I said, 'What does it look like?'

He said, 'Don't get smart with me. *What* is it?' His voice was raised in inquiry and annoyance. Arno was illiterate and it was as if he suspected there was something about him in there; locked away in the writing; something he wouldn't like. I noticed this quite a few times, writing made them nervous. It was mysterious; this silent communication between the pen and the paper, it put people in mind of whispered conversations, secrets being exchanged; secrets exchanged with the page.

'What is it?' he said again.

'It's a story I'm working on,' I said.

'It's a story I'm working on,' he repeated, his voice mimicking a snooty, prissy tone. 'What's it about?' he persisted.

That phrase again: What's it about? Like a child's insistent questioning of everything. Like the need to be given one answer to everything.

'It's about an asshole who keeps pestering a guy when he wants to be left alone,' I said, realising as I said it that it wouldn't be a bad idea for a story at that, it would make a good prison story, but it wasn't the story I was writing. The one I was writing was about a pimp and his girl and how the girl was getting suspicious of her pimp, of how, at the same time, she was getting to the stage where she wanted to be rid of him, but didn't know how, but was still jealous of him showing interest in other girls.

'Is there any sex in it?' Arno said. He either didn't get my previous line was meant for him or had chosen to ignore it. It was quite possible he hadn't got it. Arno was not the smartest guy on the block. He mostly had brawn where brain should have been. But you had to be careful with him. He was stupid but he could take offence and he was not too good at controlling his temper. He was inside for losing his temper at the wrong time with the wrong person.

If the guys showed an interest in what I was writing they always wanted to know if there was any sex in it. It wasn't surprising. Sex was all they thought about. Sex and parole and sport. Sometimes you could feel the sexual frustration filling the prison. If you listened hard enough you could hear the stifled cries of desire echoing off the walls. It was a silent cry but it filled the air nonetheless. It created sparks. It made people irascible. It led to fights. That was desire. Everybody needed something to masturbate to, some object for all that pent up energy. So it wasn't surprising they thought the only good reason to be writing something was as jack off material. It showed a certain primitive understanding of the practical effects of writing. Perhaps they just wished that someone would write something sexy for

them; like a dirty letter from home. And if a story had sex in it it was easy to appreciate, all you had to do was see if it got you stiff or not. Simple.

'Yes, it has some sex in it,' I replied, knowing as I said it this was going to be a mistake, but I couldn't stop myself.

'Yeah!' he sounded a lot more interested now.

'Yes.'

'Read it to me.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I haven't finished it yet.'

'I could let you know how it's going.'

'What?'

'I could let you know if you're on the right track.'

This from a guy who has never read a book in his life.

'I'm busy right now.'

'Maybe later.'

'Yeah.'

'When you've finished it.'

'Yeah.'

'You could try it out on me. I could let you know if it works, you know.'

'I'll see.'

'I'll see you then.'

'Yeah.' He left. I was in the middle of writing a line and I didn't have a clue what it was I was going to say anymore. I sat for some time staring at the page. The words became stranger and stranger before my eyes, dissolving their meaning and becoming mere ink trails. A tangled path that led nowhere.

I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out and watched it waft around the cell, a lavender cloud that hung in the air like ectoplasm. I waived it with my hand and it flew off in all directions and disappeared. It just disappeared. Wouldn't it be good to disappear like that, I thought. Vanish like smoke.

I took another look at the story. It wasn't any good. I didn't believe it even though I was in it, so who would? It was feeding time anyway. I left my cell and joined the queue of men shuffling along, pushing their compartmented trays along the shelf of the cafeteria, collecting components of a meal like a car travelling along a production line.

I sat at one of the tables and started to eat without enthusiasm or disgust. The food was not too bad and I had got used to it, it no longer tasted of anything, just as an un-lived life becomes greyer and greyer until there is no longer any contrast between one day and the next. I ate because I had to, not for the fun of it.

Arno appeared at my table and announced to whoever was listening: 'Karl's writing a story.' Then he looked at me and said, 'Have you finished it?'

'No,' I said. He looked disappointed.

'Why not?' he said with all the indignation of an editor who wants to know why you're late with your manuscript.

'You interrupted me. I couldn't get started again.'

'So you're blaming me,' he said, angrily.

'I'm not blaming you. It's just what happened. It wasn't anybody's fault. The story wasn't very good anyway, it didn't deserve to be finished.'

'You can read it to me anyway.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'It's not finished.'

'When will it be finished?'

'I'm not going to finish it. It isn't any good.'

'He's just pretending to write,' chipped in Christoph. Christoph was in for fraud and thought he was a class above the other prisoners. 'He just pretends to write because he thinks it makes him special.'

I ignored Christoph. 'I'll write another one,' I said to Arno. 'And when I've finished it I'll read it to you. But don't go pestering me. It'll take a while to write and the more you interrupt me the longer it will take.'

'Don't hold your breath,' said Christoph.

I got up and took my tray to the collection point. Christoph thought he was clever but he was just arrogant. I could see him as a successful conman. He had the confidence to pull that sort of thing off. And he could talk. And that is all you need; confidence, talk, and an angle.

He was trying to bug me but I just ignored him. I wanted to keep my nose clean. I didn't want to do anything that would be likely to count against me if ever a chance of parole came up, however unlikely that might seem.

It is important, in prison, to know when to fight. The idiots fight all the time, the weak never fight and consequently get trampled on and used at will by the other prisoners. I always asked myself, what can be gained, what might be lost, before deciding whether to fight. Most people in prison don't exercise that kind of detached intelligence and so I did well. I was not constantly in trouble like those who fought all the time. I was sufficiently feared to avoid attracting the sadistic attentions of the other inmates. The weaker ones I could intimidate, to the powerful I provided useful services, and so they protected me.

Like everything else life in prison is a balance of power. Officially, technically, the guards have all the power. But they know and we know that that is a convenient fiction. In practice a prison, any prison, is run with the consent of the prisoners. Unless there is an extraordinary level of surveillance a large portion of the life of a

prison takes place outside the orbit of the authorities. It has a life of its own. To survive in prison you have to be able to function as part of the official prison and as part of the unofficial prison. A double life. In prison we are all undercover agents.

Chapter Three

Memories.

Mother. It's a word. But what does it mean? What does it mean to you and what does it mean to me? It's almost certain that what it means to me isn't what it means to you. To me Mother means absence, emptiness; imagination. I have to imagine my mother. I have to remake her in my image. Like a director with a favourite actress I keep casting her in new roles: the whore, the saint, the heroine, the martyr. I invent them all and they are all equally true equally false. That's where she exists, between worlds, in the spaces between things, in the gaps that open up and can swallow us whole, between one certainty and the next. We all need a little certainty, that's why we cannot bear very much reality, and that's what mothers are for; to give their children certainty; the certainty that they will always be there, that everything will be all right, in the end, even if it's not true. But my mother didn't give me any certainty; instead she gave me an unquenchable hunger for her presence. So I imagined her. I made her present in my imagination. In imagination she could be reliably there but not reliably the same person; in imagination she would always change, change from heroine to villain, saint to whore, saviour to nemesis. I had to make her up as I went along and, depending how I was feeling, she would come out differently, bright or faded, pristine or tarnished. In dreams I would always be searching for her. I kept having the same dream. It was always set in an Arab bazaar; something from a film I'd seen, I suppose. The bazaar was crowded with people but there was only one person who mattered to me and I had to find her. But the bazaar consisted of an endless array of narrow alleyways that would twist and

turn and double back on themselves and you could spend a lifetime wandering in there getting nowhere, forever turning back on yourself; and the longer I looked the greater panic I would feel, and the panic would both slow me down and drive me on; I *had* to find her. And always the dream would end in the same way; finally I would find her, but as I got closer to her she would begin to be swallowed up by the ground, as I ran to her she would be sucked down by quicksand, slowly going down, and I couldn't get near her because I too would be swallowed by the quicksand, and I would stretch out my arms to her but they would never be long enough and she would always be swallowed up and the ground would close up over her and it would be just as if she had never been, and I would wake up screaming.

When it was practical for her to do so my mother left me with my uncle, her brother Erhart, and his wife. She gave them money, from her trade, to look after me. Erhart's wife left him shortly after I moved in. I don't know why, other than the obvious reason that he was a horrible slob. To a small child he looked like a character from one of those nursery stories which end in people getting eaten alive or burned to death in an oven. The kind of cheerful tale that gives childhood such a rosy glow.

He looked relaxed, but he wasn't as relaxed as he appeared. He needed a drink to face the day. He needed several more to get through it. As the day wore on and the accumulated quantity of alcohol in his veins reached a certain level his personality would gradually change. He would get less and less amiable; the world would seem to him to become more and more hostile and unfair to Erhart. This would make him angry. When he was angry he would take it out on the little soul, who seemed to him to embody so many of the things that made his life suck. He resented the child because he was one of his main sources of income; and being a child it was impossible for him not to demand a certain quantity of time and resources from his uncle. Karl's blind demands for attention annoyed Erhart and cramped his

freedom. The child was a millstone around his neck; this was how Erhart told it; the child had incessant needs, grew out of everything that was bought him, ate ceaselessly, played noisily and mischievously. The child needed discipline. That was what Erhart said. But the kind of discipline Erhart dispensed had the appearance, and was in fact, closer to random displays of violence and eruptions of pent-up aggression than the carefully calculated moulding of a personality.

When his mother visited they had to clear up the place as best they could, before her arrival, so that things would appear managed and under control to a certain extent. Erhart resented the presence of the child but also feared his withdrawal and the consequent blow to his finances that would entail, so he always felt profoundly ambiguous about his sister's visits. Fortunately she was usually too preoccupied and in too much of a hurry to notice very much. The old bruises that showed here and there could always be explained away as the result of the boisterous play of a growing boy.

Karl didn't talk to his mother very much when she visited. It never occurred to him to complain. He thought everything was normal, that all families were like this, and most of the families he had contact with provided proofs that similar things were common place and not worth mentioning. So he didn't talk much. He answered questions and there it was. For a long time Karl was a little confused about who his mother was and wasn't altogether sure that the heavily made up woman who visited from time to time really was his mother. She would always smile at him and give him a hug and her big red painted lips would descend towards him and make him feel as if he was going to be eaten up. Sometimes he would flinch away and this upset her. He would feel bad about that. Sometimes Erhart and his mother would talk amiably above his head; other times they would argue angrily and he would get worried about what was going to happen and what it would mean to him. One time, in the middle of a loud disagreement, she suddenly grabbed his arm very hard and dragged him

away with her. Erhart followed shouting. Karl pleaded to be allowed to stay, fearing the unknown that lay ahead in the iron grip of this woman with the blood red lips; this slowed her pace and eventually she released him and left him with Erhart. Karl had never heard the expression 'better the devil you know' but he knew certain devils and was less well acquainted with others.

This display of loyalty to Erhart, who certainly did not deserve it, was perhaps a mistake, it prolonged his incarceration in Erhart's shabby apartment and created an additional level of coolness between him and his mother. Later he would wonder what it would have been like if he had gone with the woman, whose elaborate hair and bright lips both intrigued and repelled him. It was the first big decision he had faced and he had not been prepared for it. It had all come upon him too suddenly, and in his panic he had chosen the known in face of the unknown. It was a decision he would learn to regret and later in life he would continually opt for the unknown, the high risk, the different, as if all his life he was trying to re-write that original decision, searching for a crossroads long since passed.

At school Karl was always one of the shabbiest looking kids among a pretty shabby looking bunch. The teacher immediately marked him down as trouble before he had had a chance to do anything. From his appearance they decided they would not waste much time trying to educate him but would instead devote most of their energy to containing his disruptive influence. This often took the form of pre-emptive strikes and if ever someone was chosen to be an example to the class of what would happen to boys who misbehaved it was usually Karl who was the example.

The techniques employed by his teachers bore a remarkable resemblance to those so recently employed by the Nazis for the subjugation and intimidation of occupied populations. The holding of hostages and use of retaliation against the innocent for acts of resistance were regularly employed.

Karl determined that in order to earn the punishments that came his way anyway he might as well misbehave, and digging into his psyche, he unearthed powers of leadership which led to him becoming the leader of a gang, whose principal source of income was extorting money from other pupils by means of terror. In this way Karl first experienced the heady sensation of success. In contrast to the predetermined failure of his school work Karl was a success in the playground, and the street, where he was alternately admired and feared. His early training in injustice and the power of manipulation served him well in his later life; as a craftsman ceaselessly and largely unconsciously draws on the lessons of his apprenticeship in the execution of his trade, so Karl drew on his early training in resisting and inflicting fear, how to become popular and how to subvert authority in his later career as a thief and a pimp. His teachers taught him better than they knew that there was no justice, only the exercise of power, and that what you want must be fought for with whatever means are at your disposal.

Since extorting money out of his fellow pupils could only provide a limited supply of cash Karl and his gang took to organising shop lifting expeditions. They would enter a shop in a group, and while some of them distracted the shopkeeper with questions and orders for inaccessible items, the others would stuff their pockets with contraband and escape the premises undetected.

Or so they thought. Clearly this technique was not as fool proof in reality as it had appeared in theory and one day several police officers visited the school and interviewed some of the pupils, which resulted in a number of charges being laid at Karl's feet.

Erhart was not pleased when the police turned up at his apartment with Karl in tow. From now on Karl began to hate the police. His bitter enmity was derived from a feeling that they were unnecessarily interfering in his life and preventing him

from enjoying himself and getting what he wanted. He hated anybody who stood in his way.