The Reader

Translated by Carol Brown Janeway

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'For generations to come, people will be reading and marvelling over Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*'
Evening Standard

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

W HEN I was fifteen, I got hepatitis. It started in the fall and lasted until spring. As the old year darkened and turned colder, I got weaker and weaker. Things didn't start to improve until the new year. January was warm, and my mother moved my bed out onto the balcony. I saw sky, sun, clouds, and heard the voices of children playing in the courtyard. As dusk came one evening in February, there was the sound of a blackbird singing.

The first time I ventured outside, it was to go from Blumenstrasse, where we lived on the second floor of a massive turn-of-the-century building, to Bahnhofstrasse. That's where I'd thrown up on the way home from school one day the previous October. I'd been feeling weak for days, in a way that was completely new to me. Every step was an effort. When I was faced with stairs either at home or at school, my legs would hardly carry me. I had no appetite. Even if I sat down at the table hungry, I soon felt queasy. I woke up every morning with a dry mouth and the sensation that my insides were in the wrong place and too heavy for my body. I was ashamed of being so weak. I was even more ashamed when I threw up. That was another thing that had never happened to me before. My mouth was suddenly full, I tried to swallow everything down again, and clenched my teeth with my hand in front of my mouth, but it all burst out of my mouth anyway straight through my fingers. I leaned against the wall of the building, looked down at the vomit around my feet, and retched something clear and sticky.

When rescue came, it was almost an assault. The woman seized my arm and pulled me through the dark entryway into the courtyard. Up above there were lines strung from window to window, loaded with laundry. Wood was stacked in the courtyard; in an open workshop a saw screamed and shavings flew. The woman turned on the tap, washed my hand first, and then cupped both of hers and threw water in my face. I dried myself with a handkerchief.

"Get that one!" There were two pails standing by the faucet; she grabbed one and filled it. I took the other one, filled it, and followed her through the entryway. She swung her arm, the water sluiced down across the walk and washed the vomit into the gutter. Then she took my pail and sent a second wave of water across the walk.

When she straightened up, she saw I was crying. “Hey, kid,” she said, startled, “hey, kid”—and took me in her arms. I wasn’t much taller than she was, I could feel her breasts against my chest. I smelled the sourness of my own breath and felt her fresh sweat as she held me, and didn’t know where to look. I stopped crying.

She asked me where I lived, put the pails down in the entryway, and took me home, walking beside me holding my schoolbag in one hand and my arm in the other. It’s no great distance from Bahnhofstrasse to Blumenstrasse. She walked quickly, and her decisiveness helped me to keep pace with her. She said goodbye in front of our building.

That same day my mother called in the doctor, who diagnosed hepatitis. At some point I told my mother about the woman. If it hadn’t been for that, I don’t think I would have gone to see her. But my mother simply assumed that as soon as I was better, I would use my pocket money to buy some flowers, go introduce myself, and say thank you, which was why at the end of February I found myself heading for Bahnhofstrasse.

CHAPTER TWO

T HE BUILDING on Bahnhofstrasse is no longer there. I don’t know when or why it was torn down. I was away from my hometown for many years. The new building, which must have been put up in the seventies or eighties, has five floors plus finished space under the roof, is devoid of balconies or arched windows, and its smooth façade is an expanse of pale plaster. A plethora of doorbells indicates a plethora of tiny apartments, with tenants moving in and out as casually as you would pick up and return a rented car. There’s a computer store on the ground floor where once there were a pharmacy, a supermarket, and a video store.

The old building was as tall, but with only four floors, a first floor of faceted sandstone blocks, and above it three floors of brickwork with sandstone arches, balconies, and window surrounds. Several steps led up to the first floor and the stairwell; they were wide at the bottom, narrower above, set between walls topped with iron banisters and curving outwards at street level. The front door was flanked by pillars, and from the corners of the architrave one lion looked up Bahnhofstrasse while another looked down. The entryway through which the woman had led me to the tap in the courtyard was a side entrance.

I had been aware of this building since I was a little boy. It dominated the whole row. I used to think that if it made itself any heavier and wider, the neighboring buildings would have to move aside and make room for it. Inside, I imagined a stairwell with plaster moldings, mirrors, and an oriental runner held down with highly polished brass rods. I assumed that grand people would live in such a grand building. But because the building had darkened with the passing of the years and the smoke of the trains, I imagined that the grand inhabitants would be just as somber, and somehow peculiar—deaf or dumb or hunchbacked or lame.

In later years I dreamed about the building again and again. The dreams were similar, variations on one dream and one theme. I’m walking through a strange town and I see the house. It’s one in a row of buildings in a district I don’t know. I go on, confused, because the house is familiar but its surroundings are not. Then I realize that I’ve seen the house before. I’m not picturing Bahnhofstrasse in my hometown, but another city, or another

country. For example, in my dream I’m in Rome, see the house, and realize I’ve seen it already in Bern. This dream recognition comforts me; seeing the house again in different surroundings is no more surprising than encountering an old friend by chance in a strange place. I turn around, walk back to the house, and climb the steps. I want to go in. I turn the door handle.

If I see the house somewhere in the country, the dream is more long-drawn-out, or I remember its details better. I’m driving a car. I see the house on the right and keep going, confused at first only by the fact that such an obviously urban building is standing there in the middle of the countryside. Then I realize that this is not the first time I’ve seen it, and I’m doubly confused. When I remember where I’ve seen it before, I turn around and drive back. In the dream, the road is always empty, as I can turn around with my tires squealing and race back. I’m afraid I’ll be too late, and I drive faster. Then I see it. It is surrounded by fields, rape or wheat or vines in the Palatinate, lavender in Provence. The landscape is flat, or at most gently rolling. There are no trees. The day is cloudless, the sun is shining, the air shimmers and the road glitters in the heat. The fire walls make the building look unprepossessing and cut off. They could be the firewalls of any building. The house is no darker than it was on Bahnhofstrasse, but the windows are so dusty that you can’t see anything inside the rooms, not even the curtains; it looks blind.

I stop on the side of the road and walk over to the entrance. There’s nobody about, not a sound to be heard, not even a distant engine, a gust of wind, a bird. The world is dead. I go up the steps and turn the knob.

But I do not open the door. I wake up knowing simply that I took hold of the knob and turned it. Then the whole dream comes back to me, and I know that I’ve dreamed it before.

CHAPTER THREE

I DIDN'T KNOW the woman's name. Clutching my bunch of flowers, I hesitated in front of the door and all the bells. I would rather have turned around and left, but then a man came out of the building, asked who I was looking for, and directed me to Frau Schmitz on the third floor.

No decorative plaster, no mirrors, no runner. Whatever unpretentious beauty the stairwell might once have had, it could never have been comparable to the grandeur of the façade, and it was long gone in any case. The red paint on the stairs had worn through in the middle, the stamped green linoleum that was glued on the walls to shoulder height was rubbed away to nothing, and bits of string had been stretched across the gaps in the banisters. It smelled of cleaning fluid. Perhaps I only became aware of all this some time later. It was always just as shabby and just as clean, and there was always the same smell of cleaning fluid, sometimes mixed with the smell of cabbage or beans, or fried food or boiling laundry.

I never learned a thing about the other people who lived in the building apart from these smells, the mats outside the apartment doors, and the nameplates under the doorbells. I cannot even remember meeting another tenant on the stairs.

Nor do I remember how I greeted Frau Schmitz. I had probably prepared two or three sentences about my illness and her help and how grateful I was, and recited them to her. She led me into the kitchen.

It was the largest room in the apartment, and contained a stove and sink, a tub and a boiler, a table, two chairs, a kitchen cabinet, a wardrobe, and a couch with a red velvet spread thrown over it. There was no window. Light came in through the panes of the door leading out onto the balcony—not much light; the kitchen was only bright when the door was open. Then you heard the scream of the saws from the carpenter's shop in the yard and smelled the smell of wood.

The apartment also had a small, cramped living room with a dresser, a table, four chairs, a wing chair, and a coal stove. It was almost never heated in winter, nor was it used much in summer either. The window faced Bahnhofstrasse, with a view of what had been the railroad station, but was now being excavated and already in places held the freshly laid foundations

of the new courthouse and administration buildings. Finally, the apartment also had a windowless toilet. When the toilet smelled, so did the hall.

I don’t remember what we talked about in the kitchen. Frau Schmitz was ironing; she had spread a woolen blanket and a linen cloth over the table; lifting one piece of laundry after another from the basket, she ironed them, folded them, and laid them on one of the two chairs. I sat on the other. She also ironed her underwear, and I didn’t want to look, but I couldn’t help looking. She was wearing a sleeveless smock, blue with little pale red flowers on it. Her shoulder-length, ash-blond hair was fastened with a clip at the back of her neck. Her bare arms were pale. Her gestures of lifting the iron, using it, setting it down again, and then folding and putting away the laundry were an exercise in slow concentration, as were her movements as she bent over and then straightened up again. Her face as it was then has been overlaid in my memory by the faces she had later. If I see her in my mind’s eye as she was then, she doesn’t have a face at all, and I have to reconstruct it. High forehead, high cheekbones, pale blue eyes, full lips that formed a perfect curve without any indentation, square chin. A broad-planed, strong, womanly face. I know that I found it beautiful. But I cannot recapture its beauty.

CHAPTER FOUR

“W AIT,” SHE said as I got up to go. ‘I have to leave too, and I’ll walk with you.

I waited in the hall while she changed her clothes in the kitchen. The door was open a crack. She took off the smock and stood there in a bright green slip. Two stockings were hanging over the back of the chair. Picking one up, she gathered it into a roll using one hand, then the other, then balanced on one leg as she rested the heel of her other foot against her knee, leaned forward, slipped the rolled-up stocking over the tip of her foot, put her foot on the chair as she smoothed the stocking up over her calf, knee, and thigh, then bent to one side as she fastened the stocking to the garter belt. Straightening up, she took her foot off the chair and reached for the other stocking. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Her neck and shoulders, her breasts, which the slip veiled rather than concealed, her hips which stretched the slip tight as she propped her foot on her knee and then set it on the chair, her leg, pale and naked, then shimmering in the silky stocking.

She felt me looking at her. As she was reaching for the other stocking, she paused, turned towards the door, and looked straight at me. I can’t describe what kind of look it was—surprised, skeptical, knowing, reproachful. I turned red. For a fraction of a second I stood there, my face burning. Then I couldn’t take it any more. I fled out of the apartment, down the stairs, and into the street.

I dawdled along. Bahnhofstrasse, Häusserstrasse, Blumenstrasse—it had been my way to school for years. I knew every building, every garden, and every fence, the ones that were repainted every year and the ones that were so gray and rotten that I could crumble the wood in my hand, the iron railings that I ran along as a child banging a stick against the posts and the high brick wall behind which I had imagined wonderful and terrible things, until I was able to climb it, and see row after boring row of neglected beds of flowers, berries, and vegetables. I knew the cobblestones in their layer of tar on the road, and the changing surface of the sidewalk, from flagstones to little lumps of basalt set in wave patterns, tar, and gravel.

It was all familiar. When my heart stopped pounding and my face was no longer scarlet, the encounter between the kitchen and the hall seemed a

long way away. I was angry with myself. I had run away like a child, instead of keeping control of the situation, as I thought I should. I wasn't nine years old anymore, I was fifteen. That didn't mean I had any idea what keeping control would have entailed.

The other puzzle was the actual encounter that had taken place between the kitchen and the hall. Why had I not been able to take my eyes off her? She had a very strong, feminine body, more voluptuous than the girls I liked and watched. I was sure I wouldn't even have noticed her if I'd seen her at the swimming pool. Nor had she been any more naked than the girls and women I had already seen at the swimming pool. And besides, she was much older than the girls I dreamed about. Over thirty? It's hard to guess ages when you're not that old yourself and won't be anytime soon.

Years later it occurred to me that the reason I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her was not just her body, but the way she held herself and moved. I asked my girlfriends to put on stockings, but I didn't want to explain why, or to talk about the riddle of what had happened between the kitchen and the hall. So my request was read as a desire for garters and high heels and erotic extravaganza, and if it was granted, it was done as a come-on. There had been none of that when I had found myself unable to look away. She hadn't been posing or teasing me. I don't remember her ever doing that. I remember that her body and the way she held it and moved sometimes seemed awkward. Not that she was particularly heavy. It was more as if she had withdrawn into her own body, and left it to itself and its own quiet rhythms, unbothered by any input from her mind, oblivious to the outside world. It was the same obliviousness that weighed in her glance and her movements when she was pulling on her stockings. But then she was not awkward, she was slow-flowing, graceful, seductive—a seductiveness that had nothing to do with breasts and hips and legs, but was an invitation to forget the world in the recesses of the body.

I knew none of this—if indeed I know any of it now and am not just making patterns in the air. But as I thought back then on what had excited me, the excitement came back. To solve the riddle, I made myself remember the whole encounter, and then the distance I had created by turning it into a riddle dissolved, and I saw it all again, and again I couldn't take my eyes off her.