

HEIMITO VON DODERER

In The Maze

*Translated by
Vincent Kling*

This little trip to the Prater with Pauline was taking a good turn, at least here at the start. René didn't have the slightest idea where he stood with her, and it even seemed to him at times as if the pleasure of riding the carousel were really all this young woman had in mind, as if her avowals of happiness the previous day about going once more to the amusement park in the Prater in Vienna—that part is known as the "*Wurstelprater*" and also the "*Volksprater*"—were meant to be taken altogether seriously and weren't just a nice name for a rendezvous with him. Even though he could feel her warmth beside him on the tilt-a-whirl, and more still of her graceful body on the sharp curves, the rough-and-tumble of what's called centrifugal force made it impossible for him to detect any personal note in her movements, though such might in fact have been present. What's more, he would forget all about his infatuation for moments at a time and just luxuriate contentedly in this golden hour, the kind of unexpected day off from school that life actually does bring about every once in a great while (just when we've given up believing it can happen) by allowing chance to cause a big tractor trailer loaded with worries to miss its connection with the train we were supposed to board, an express filled with troubles.

May, secretive still in broad daylight, had taken up its post behind each newly unfolded leaf, had sketched in a green-gold aura around everything and sent small gusts of wind to quicken the tumult of so many leaf shadows on the sunlit ground. The gravel on the walkways was all speckled and constantly in motion, like a sheet of water. Now nothing would do for Pauline but to go into the wax museum, the "panopticum," as it's usually called here; she was sure this attraction would be tremendous fun. René walked in behind her, saying as he went a quick, brief, but almost melancholy farewell to the outdoors; inside, springtime was turned off as if someone had flipped a switch. On the other hand, the subdued, quiet rooms here were a place to rest one's eyes, painfully exhausted from too much light. It was a workday afternoon, so there were almost no other visitors besides these two. What presented itself to view soon enough wasn't quite so suitable for rest and recovery, however. Of course they knew they were in the Prater and inside a concession on the carnival grounds; yet all of these figures on display here, some free-standing, some in glass cases, confronted the viewer with a demand to be taken seriously, and the simple curiosity aroused by glances turning this way and that soon united with the power of understanding to draw the visitor deeper into this whole hodgepodge. Pauline appeared to have the better nerves; at any rate, Czar Alexander the Second, lying in a pool of his own blood but still breathing faintly, was an object of amusement to her inasmuch as his face resembled that of a gentleman with gold trim on his collar, a man just minding his own business, who was looking with a certain amount of righteous indignation at display case number 86, behind the glass window of which were bayadares, dancing temple prostitutes, in original costumes. Next to them, the "Middle Ages," complete with numerous instruments of torture, were spread out to view, while the exhibits farther along harked back to yet more distant times; the series continued with flint utensils and villages on stakes over bodies of water. René was trying

simply to make his way past all of this, which was no problem, because nothing seemed to be catching Pauline's interest. This indifference of hers now struck him, oddly enough, as no less false than her cheeriness earlier.

Located at the end of this room, however, was the entrance to the "Maze of Mirrors," done up in red and gold. To René, this archway seemed both a welcome exit from an unwanted diversion and an unexpected gift promising intimate time alone with Pauline. And indeed, there she went, stepping through the entrance at once, very energetic, and starting down the corridors of mirrors—at every crossing her own image came at her multiplied by four or five—with so ready a will that René quickly forgave her for the whole wax museum along with all its historical epochs, original costumes, and musty odors. At first, all they did was keep coming back to the same place—for the fourth time now, they thought—and when they purposely wanted to go back a fifth time, they were led along corridors of mirrors and crossings that all seemed exactly alike; they must have been going ever deeper in, though, probably toward the middle of the whole maze, because they ended up in a round room with banquettes upholstered in red. Pleased with herself, she took a seat in the same high-spirited way schoolgirls do when they just plop down backwards onto a bench, so that her legs lifted up off the ground for a second. René's keen eye was quick to notice an electric button installed between two mirrors on the nearest strip of corner molding; under it was a sign saying "Press To Call For Help." He sat down in such a way that his upper body was hiding this button.

Pauline at once began chattering away, rapidly and at great length, and as he casually and quickly kissed her hand, she unfolded a panorama encompassing the narrow circle of her everyday life, the overriding concern of which, it soon became quite clear, seemed fixed on her virtue. It apparently played the major role in all her dealings, but it was never truly placed in jeopardy, and that, she emphasized, was because commonplace individuals were forever misjudging her character. And going on a first impression, it really did seem that wrath was the most frequent emotion stirring her soul; suitable occasions for arousing it apparently presented themselves to her in great profusion. Not one foot out the door without a man trailing behind her, "to the rear"—that's the expression in general use, probably with a rooster in mind—not one minute's peace with her husband in a restaurant without an assault on her marriage from some nearby table. René at first nodded his casual agreement, ready to concede for the sake of making conversation that all men were disgusting at heart. He was stroking her arm the whole time, and finally, as if comforting her, he put his own around her waist, which she allowed. While she launched into an elaborate story about a situation that had been a huge burden to her for years now, talking in her steady, rapid way—a man who worked with her husband was really badgering her with his lovestruck attention, of course in vain and with no hope whatever of success—René was gently planting his first gentle kisses on her throat and the neckline of her dress. And when he kissed her on the mouth, she let it happen in a quick, offhand way, holding her little doll head still for a second, just long enough to receive the kiss, and then she was off again at once, chattering away with utmost vivacity. It would appear that this love-crazed colleague of her

husband's must be a man highly to be marveled at: handsome, rich, and bright, to begin with, and a first-class race car driver and all-around athlete as well, though his most remarkable aspect was his very distinctive and undoubtedly complex personality, which seemed, in spite of all his brilliant qualities and his wealth, to have constrained him to a lonely, withdrawn life. He paid no attention to women other than herself, as she told it, wouldn't even give them the time of day, however much they were forever swarming around him.

"He seems to resemble you, then, at least in that respect," said René, looking for a favorable chance to interrupt this lengthy report about so splendid—but at the moment, after all, so distant—a specimen. He'd also reached the point of finding his intuitions from the tilt-a-whirl agreeably confirmed. She seemed, incidentally, caught up in the rapture of her narrative as she was, not even to have registered his comment. While half-sitting on his lap, she completed the picture of her hero—she'd already told René all about the man's magnificently furnished villa and a stamp collection whose monetary value put it in a class all its own—she completed the picture of her hero by describing his exceptionally tactful and noble character. René was on the verge of asking her why it was, then, that she came to be sitting on his lap in the Prater, but instead he made a very energetic effort to divert her attention from this idealized image. He succeeded, too, if only for a minute, in effecting a retreat into silent and heavy mutual kissing. But "twixt the cup and the lip," as they say, she was off and running again (instantly picking up the thread) into the actual main part of her story, a detailed account of the many distressing attentions—all doomed to failure, of course—to which this godlike being had been subjecting her for years. René's gradually shifting her off his lap; his standing up; his giving her a clear view of the button that said "Press To Call For Help"; and, for that matter, his downright calling it to her attention with a completely phony exclamation of surprise ("Now whatever do you think *this* can be?")—all any of these actions succeeded in doing was creating a couple of interruptions, momentary at best.

He knelt down in front of her now, resolved to carry matters to the limit, and his tender solicitations were definitely advancing to a critical stage. Pauline, however, swept away by her own story, was just recounting how this whole business had reached the point—in spite of her staunchness—of her husband's forming a totally unjustified suspicion, whereupon she passed on to a minute description of some confrontation involving her husband and his unsuccessful rival that had taken place in a café; the outcome had turned out well only because she had resolutely stepped in, although during the whole episode the nobility of the unhappy lover had been revealed in all its true glory. René's caresses had meantime reached the critical stage; returned heartily enough, though in an on-and-off, now-and-again way, they were at once deluged anew by her heroic saga of unshakable virtue.

He stood up suddenly, walked over to the button, and counted silently to thirty. She was still entirely caught up in describing the man's lofty character when the alarm bell sounded, shrill and unceasing, like a final, despairing cry for help. Very soon the quickly approaching footsteps of an employee could be heard. Now René was able to find ample confirmation that wrath was one of the

principal emotions in Pauline's soul—her wrath *at him*, after all, was now so manifest in her facial expression that there was nothing left for the young man to do, after the couple had been rescued from the maze, but to walk the young lady to the streetcar stop. This took place amidst an almost complete silence. It seemed to René, though, as if he'd experienced the altogether perfect instance of how a love story should end—by pushing a button.

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