

# **SNOW COUNTRY**

**by**

**SEBASTIAN FAULKS**

‘You will have realised by now that we are drifting towards great catastrophes [...] They have succeeded in establishing a reign of barbarity. Do not fool yourself. Hell reigns.’

Letter from Joseph Roth to Stefan Zweig, 1933.

In the houses  
The little pianos are closed, and a clock strikes.  
And all sway forward on the dangerous flood  
Of history that never sleeps or dies,  
And, held one moment, burns the hand.

W.H.Auden From ‘To a Writer on his Birthday’, 1935

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the second book in a planned Austrian trilogy, the first being *Human Traces* (2005). Each novel can be read on its own, however, without reference to the others.

Lena is pronounced 'Layna', rather than 'Leena'.

# **PART ONE**

# 1

From his height only a hundred feet above the trees, the pilot could see two people running over the ground below -- one coming out of a wood, another through a gate in the rustic lane, clinging on to his hat as he ran. Their goal was a long brown tent, set against a hedgerow that marked the border of a field.

Under the canvas, by the light of two kerosene lamps hung from a wooden pole, the surgeon raised a man's arm above his head. 'Hold this here.' A nurse gripped the wrist in position.

'Name?'

'Heideck,' she said, lifting a tag with her free hand. 'Initial, A.'

The surgeon's fingers numbered the ribs. 'Four... Five. If in doubt, go high.'

'What?'

'Let's go in here.'

A scalpel cut downwards, through a thin layer of fat and into the flesh. 'Where's the sister? I need someone to hold back the muscle.'

'She hasn't come. But I can do it,' said the nurse. 'I can secure his arm like this, look. Then my hands are free.'

She tied the wrist to a tent pole with her belt and put her fingers in the intercostal space. 'Is that all right?'

'If in doubt, aim posterior,' the surgeon said.

'What?'

'I'm talking to myself. My old instructor in Graz. Don't pull, don't pull. Just lift. Keep it out of my way. I'm going to put my finger under here, into the pleural cavity.'

There was a popping of air as the tissue parted. The man remained unmoving on the trestle, his eyes closed, his arm tethered behind his head. Blood came from his chest, first bubbling, then spurting up and falling over the nurse's shoes and on to the grass round her feet. There was a smell of gas.

In the darkening sky, the biplane banked and turned into the wind, making another long circle over the woods. The pilot could see a vehicle pull up on the farm track. Another man and a woman climbed out and started to run across the field.

'I need more light,' said the surgeon. 'I must have more light. We need to put a tube in to see if I can drain any fluid.'

He pushed back the left lung with his finger. 'There's a fragment of something here. We're going to have to extend the incision.'

'What?'

'Anterior. A long way. I need to get at what's in there. Is he still out?'

The nurse lifted an eyelid with her bloodied fingers. 'Yes.'

'Is there a better scalpel? This one's not very sharp.'

Breathing in, the surgeon slid the blade through flesh, making an incision round the rib-cage, half way across the back, the white skin recoiling either side of the purple wound.

The tent flap banged open and the man and the woman came in, breathing hard.

'You can wash in that bucket. There's disinfectant in the bowl,' said the surgeon.

While the others got ready, he swept between the ribs with his fingers. 'Are you all right?' he said to the nurse. 'You look pale.'

'It's the lamplight. I'm fine.'

'We need something to spread the ribs. Otherwise...'

‘There’s no equipment like that here. It’s just a tent where --’

‘It’s so dark. I can hardly see....’

With the help of the orderly, he pulled the ribs apart enough to reveal the indifferent heart, twitching in its bony cage.

‘He’s lucky,’ said the surgeon. ‘I can see something now. Move him on to his side. Give me the forceps. Now. Don’t twist his arm. Untie it now. You: hold his elbow up.’

Dusk was falling on the field as the pilot, his observations made, banked his plane one more time, gained height and set his course for home, fifteen minutes over the blackened landscape, along the river, using the spire of the church to guide him back to the raised landing strip.

‘I’ve got it,’ said the surgeon. He dropped a piece of metal into an enamelled tray. ‘Help me close the wound. You, stop this bleeding here. Nurse, give me whatever needles you have.’

‘We haven’t got the kind of thread you need.’

‘Just do the best you can. You do know how to sew?’

‘We used to make our own dresses at home.’

‘Is he going to survive?’

‘Of course he is. Poor soul.’

## 2

Anton Heideck arrived in Vienna at the age of nineteen in the wet autumn of 1906. The fallen leaves stuck to the pavements of the narrow street in Spittelberg in which, after a demoralising search, he'd found a room to rent. He was one of the few students not to press into the cafés after lectures in the hope of catching a glimpse of some literary hero. He didn't much like the verses of the young Hofmannsthal anyway; what he admired were the newspaper dispatches from Viennese correspondents in Paris and Moscow. This could be a life, he dared to think one day, when he was buying a late edition of *Die Presse*. Writing reports from a foreign country could be a way of engaging with the world -- not as the protagonist, but as the recorder of other men's actions.

The Styrian town in which he had been brought up was known as a centre of Catholicism and the old ways; to Anton as a boy it had seemed simply disconnected from anything that was urgent, or desirable, or worth striving for. His brother Gerhard was seven years older and did everything that was asked of him by their father: he was the *victor ludorum* at the school athletics and took his first communion with shining hair and a pious look; he was the subject of admiring reports from his teachers at the end of the year. His parents hardly seemed to notice Anton, who sometimes wondered if his arrival in the world had come as a surprise to them. Gerhard treated him with maddening tolerance when Anton broke up the track of his model train set -- by mistake, almost certainly -- or when he used his elder brother's bedroom for a wrestling match with Friedrich, his friend from school.

Their father ran a sausage business, successful enough for Anton to follow his brother in due course to the Gymnasium and sit with the other

little scholars, their backs aching, their eyes strained by the dim light. Friedrich's family was also in trade, but their timber business was a hundred years old and carried the air of noble forests -- unlike the sausage factory, with its daily deliveries from the slaughterhouse. Friedrich, who was fair-haired and taller than Anton, seemed to glide over the surface of the world, knowing the right way to greet a friend of his parents in the street or what to tip a porter. Anton hoped that by walking with him, invariably half a step behind, he might catch something of the grace he lacked.

There was not much in the school curriculum to hold their attention. The days were long, the teaching uninspired; there was no understanding of the need for activity or adventure. A ten-minute break in a corridor was all that was on offer before they resumed their places, two by two, on the wooden benches in the schoolroom. In winter, the hours were extended by the blue light of gas jets; in summer the windows were covered so that the sunlit outdoor life could not distract them from learning.

After lessons, Anton and Friedrich would walk home down the Bahnhofstrasse, talking furiously as they looped through the smarter districts where families had lived in the same houses for three generations. They had laughed at the lack of intellectual curiosity they imagined behind the high railings and double front doors, from where they could hear the sound of piano scales, practised by the daughter of the house in the dying light of a winter afternoon. They swore to one another that they would never descend to such an existence.

Throughout the eight years of school, Anton assumed he would go on to the university in Vienna, then make his life there. To settle anywhere else, he and Friedrich agreed, would make it seem as though they were in some way joking; and, as he discovered within a day of his arrival, Vienna was

nothing if not serious. Almost every building was a palace or a concert hall or a ministry. He wondered where the poor people lived; there seemed to be no simple lodgings, no slums or tenements to break up the imperial vistas, with the Archduke processing each morning between palaces in his horse-drawn carriage.

The city saw itself as the centre of civilization. From the excitement with which people spoke about them, it was as though they still expected Beethoven or Haydn to show up any day at the Esterhazys' town house for an impromptu performance. People boasted about how when the old Burgtheater was to be dismantled and rebuilt, they had been among the audience who refused to leave until they could take away a splinter of the stage in their pockets. Not himself much interested in music, Anton found it hard not to laugh when even the fishmonger offered a critique of the brass band as he strolled in the Prater with his wife on a Sunday afternoon.

After a time, he discovered that there were in fact poor areas of the city, that the grandeur could abruptly stop and the cobbled streets become winding and narrow. His Spittelberg lodging was in a house that belonged to a Polish widow. A commercial traveller and two other students were his fellow-lodgers and the house had a distinctive smell, as if hundreds of dead mice had been boiled in strong tea then left to rot behind the plaster. The landlady's daughter, who was said to be a prostitute, lived with her mother on the ground floor. She came and went through a back door that opened on to a courtyard with a low gallery. In the evening, men would walk through from Sigmundsgasse and buy white wine from a stall.

Gerhard, who had studied medicine at his father's insistence, told Anton that if he studied philosophy he could avoid all contact with the university until his final year, when he would have to present a thesis and sit a single exam. The rest of the time could be spent in the bars and concert halls,

riding horses and chasing women. He warned Anton that he might never have such a chance again and it was his responsibility -- his duty, almost, to make the most of it. This uncharacteristic advice made Anton wonder if his brother wanted him out of the way, so that he would not emerge later as some sort of rival. He needn't have worried, Anton thought: medicine held no appeal for him.

The main problem for Anton was that he had no money. His mother had wanted him to go straight into the family business; his father could see the advantages of the university, but only if he studied medicine, like Gerhard, or, at a stretch, law. If he insisted on philosophy, then he would have to fund his own studies -- by teaching and whatever odd jobs he could find. Chiefly because he wanted some breathing space after the Gymnasium, Anton agreed; but it was a second-rate experience of the capital. The Opera was beyond his means and he found he was allergic to horses. When it came to women, he was deterred not by shortage of cash but by a lack of confidence. His moustache was an embarrassment; the coarse hairs grew round the rim of his nostrils and out of the lip membrane itself. His eyebrows were thick, his hair wiry and his nose rather hooked. He tried to befriend the landlady's daughter, but she seemed to have sniffed out his poverty. When he suggested an evening together, she laughed. He told himself that women held no interest for him, but it was not easy when the glance of a dark eye that happened to meet his on the street caused him an ache in some space behind the lungs.

After he had graduated with an unremarkable degree, he continued to live in much the same way. His aim was to make a living as a journalist. His first article had been published in the student paper in his second year at the university and he had gone on to write on politics and foreign affairs with a fluency that seemed almost suspicious -- as if he somehow didn't

mean it. His output was checked when he graduated. Student magazines were happy to take long articles on anything from German naval policy to where you could find the best strudel, but established papers were less keen. Anton lacked gravity and age. One or two of them allowed him a filler in the social or financial pages, but he was unable to persuade them to send him to Paris or New York.

His mother wrote to say that Anton's father despaired of the boy ever making something of himself and she was beginning to feel the same way herself. He put the letter aside.

'I am a superfluous man,' he told Friedrich, as they drank white wine at a table in the courtyard.

'Have you been reading Pushkin again?'

'No, I came to that conclusion all by myself. I've always found it hard to believe that there was any space for me in this world. Anything with my name on it.'

Meanwhile at night in his small room, Anton tried to map out a life that didn't include blood-sausage or the opposite sex. While he waited for another magazine commission, his rent could be paid by tutoring the children of rich families in mathematics, French or English; the work enabled him to leave Spittelberg and travel to more pleasant parts of the city.

Among his pupils was a boy called Erich, whose family occupied the entire first floor of a building in Döbling, a wealthy area that backed onto woods and vineyards. Once a week, long after he had graduated from the university, he caught a tram there and was let in by the porter. He ran past the doors of the lift, up the curved stone steps two at a time, his feet soundless on the crimson runner, rang the bell and waited for the maid to open it.

On one weekly visit, in the spring of 1913, Anton was waiting in the drawing room, still breathing heavily from his sprint upstairs, when he heard a piano. At this time of the afternoon, he would have expected the tinkle of an exercise or bagatelle -- something built on a pattern with a little flourish at the end, when the variation was complete. What he heard was a piece in which the chord changes seemed to follow no pattern. It was only after two or three minutes' listening that they seemed to make sense. He went to the door of the music room and peered in to see who was producing these mournful sounds.

Behind the vase of cut flowers on the piano, he could see the head of a young woman, her hair falling forwards as she played. The light from the tall windows fell across the lid of the piano, but the player remained in shadow. It was neither Katrin, the elder sister, nor Birgit, the little one. The music gathered speed, then seemed to run of steam -- to fall away and meander. Anton ventured further into the room, but the pianist was concentrating too hard to look up. As he took a pace or two closer, he could see that she was not following a score and wondered if she might be improvising.

It occurred to him that he should avoid giving her a shock; the last thing this woman in her reverie would want was the sight of him staring at her. He began to retreat over the Turkish rug, but when his shoe touched the parquet, the wood let out a small creak and she looked up.

'I'm so sorry. I was intrigued, and I... I'm sorry to disturb you.'

'That's all right. I'd finished.' She spoke with a foreign accent. He stood up and crossed the room to shake hands.

'My name's Anton Heideck. I'm here to give Erich his lesson.'

He didn't catch all she said in return, but gathered her first name was Delphine and that she was there as a companion for Katrin.

'A "companion"?'

'She's supposed to learn French from me.'

'I see. How long have you been here?'

'Three weeks.'

'I haven't seen you before.'

'I try to keep out of the way.'

'And... do you like Vienna?' It was a feeble thing to say.

Delphine was a little older than he was, perhaps thirty-two or three. Her eyes were expressionless, like the surface of a deep pond; a thin shadow of dark hair ran along her upper lip.

'I do. I have seen very little of it. Katrin's father likes us to be accompanied when we go out. But, yes. I like it.'

'It's... large, isn't it?'

'I've lived in Paris so I don't mind that.'

'You're a Parisian?'

'My family come from Rouen. Most of them are still there. Have you been to France?'

'No,' said Anton. 'Not yet,' he added, as though his ticket was in the post.

'Are you a teacher by profession?'

'No. I'm... I don't have a profession. I studied philosophy at the university, travelled a little and now I'm trying to make my way as a writer. Or a journalist, to be more precise. And you, Mademoiselle? Are you a professional musician?'

'Good heavens, no. I would... At least only in my daydreams. I'm from a family of four daughters in Normandy. One of us is married, the others wait for husbands. Or so my father thinks.'

'Have you been to concerts in Vienna?'

'Only one. A piece by Richard Strauss. I didn't like it.'

'Oh. Would you prefer to hear some... Beethoven, perhaps? Or Haydn?'

'Or perhaps Mussorgsky. Do you know him? But I doubt that Katrin's father would allow it.'

'Suppose Katrin came too?' He had lost control over the words escaping him. He could never afford three tickets.

'I can ask. Excuse me, I must go and talk some French to her now.'

She left the room with a rustle of silk and Anton heard her footsteps disappear down the corridor, purposefully, as though she couldn't wait.