

Poppy Seed

Joseph Pearce

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Translator Rosalind Buck

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Breslau (1938)

I

Max Friedmann slipped a hand under his wife's arm and hurried her across the market place.

"What's going on, Max?"

"It's a surprise. Trust me".

She trotted along like a child having difficulty keeping up with its father. When bystanders stopped, grinning, to point at them she lowered her eyes.

"Max, bitte!"

"Oh, don't take any notice".

In Albrechtstrasse it was so busy they walking more on the road than the pavement. A tram tinkled nearby. Gisèle sprang onto the path, her fingers clawing at the sleeve of her husband's jacket. The tram glided past, clanking angrily.

"We're nearly there," said Max soothingly.

When he turned into Sandstrasse, she understood where he was taking her in such a rush.

"Our bench isn't going to run away, you know!" she said.

"Well, tomorrow is the first day of winter".

Under the trees bordering the Ode a deep silence reigned.

Max let go of Gisèle's arm, took off his straw hat and wiped first his forehead and then the hatband with a handkerchief. Gisèle plucked a piece of fluff from the collar of his coat. Max gave her a half-smile.

"Is my hat crooked?" she asked, irritably. "Fancy rushing around like that".

"Not too crooked and not too straight. And mine?"

He put his hat back on his head.

"You've got thinner, you know".

"Impossible," laughed Max, "My head is still as full of you as when I first kissed you".

Gisèle looked at him suspiciously. How long would his good mood last? When they moved to the tenement block three months ago, after their son emigrated, she had noticed that Max had had all the stuffing knocked out of him. "It smells of boiled cabbage here," he said resignedly after a week. "It always smells of cabbage here," she retorted. Who bothered about minor inconveniences these days? Just as things were on the move, her husband lapsed into listlessness. She could see it in the way he held his hands behind his back as he stood in front of the window and she could hear it when he wished Frau Grünwald a good morning on the stairs.

"Come on," said Max, "I hope no-one's taken our bench".

He linked arms with his wife once more.

Gisèle fiddled in the layer of fallen leaves with the point of her shoes. She ran back alongside the lake in the park and danced through an ocean of leaves. A boat shooting through the waves. The white blouse of her sailor suit a flapping sail. Then she rubbed her dusty shoes clean with spit. The white patent leather had never shone so brightly. Would Mother know that spit was better than shoe polish? Before she rang the bell of her house she looked at her feet again. For a moment Gisèle felt her heart thumping in her throat in terror. The shine had gone! The shoes dingy, covered in dull smears. Her mother raised a finger in the air, her eyes chastising. Mothers saw everything.

"Autumn is the loveliest season, don't you think, Max?"

"Shame we couldn't come here more often".

Max took a deep breath through his nose.

"Smell that. The man who makes perfume out of that will become a millionaire".

Gisèle sniffed exaggeratedly several times along with Max. She used to come here almost every day to walk with her son. When Wolfgang was a toddler, sometimes he suddenly ran off so quickly she had to chase after him in a panic. Before you knew it a child like that would be in the water. Her husband suggested buying reins. She had given him a livid look. Max and his deadpan face! The more serious he looked, the greater the chance he didn't mean what he was saying. All the same, reins weren't such a bad idea. Men thought women could do anything. It was all right for Max to talk. Sitting for hours in a train compartment, strolling into a couple of shoe shops and telling jokes to the assistants. She wouldn't have minded spending her days like that, either.

The bench was on top of the Holtei hill under a horse chestnut. In the summer, it always stayed cool in the shade of its colossal crown. Now the tree was as good as bare, the ground a pincushion of plundered conker shells. Below, the water sparkled in the wake of a lighter.

Max brushed a couple of leaves from the bench with exaggerated care.

"Après vous, Madame," he said, with an elegant bow.

Gisèle couldn't understand what was going on. Max only spoke French when he was happy. In the early years of their marriage she had hated him for his French. She was jealous. Not because he laughed at her with her schoolbook French, but because it took him back to the front in France when he spoke the language. His happiest years. How many times had he said so? The resentment had long since disappeared, a man's world an unknown universe where contrary laws applied.

Max lit a cigarette. When the smoke prickled her nose she took his hand in hers. In the twenty years of their marriage she must have tried a thousand times to get him to give up smoking, but now it seemed as if the sharp odour of the cigarette was protecting her from the new times. She bit her lip. Her husband's sudden enthusiasm confused her. Did he want to stay in Breslau after all? Maybe it would be a good idea to bring up the subject of their emigration again. Would it help?

Max was as tight-lipped as anything and if he was asked for his opinion he always agreed with her. Anyone who thought that good intentions unravelled knots was sorely mistaken.

At the landing stage, a man in a sailor suit was casting off a pleasure steamboat. The snow-white ship glided away and drifted to the middle of the current. Then the paddles reluctantly came to life; a plume of soot stole out of the funnel and dissolved, as if the black smoke was ashamed to be seen against the blue sky.

"Did you see that?" asked Max, "There's no-one on it. It must be the last trip of the season. Did I ever tell you? My grandfather was tailor for that shipping company for years. A captain who came to fit his uniform once pushed his officer's cap down on my head. The cap was far too big; I couldn't see anything any more. I was so scared! My father and the captain laughed, but I didn't dare take the cap off. I think that's where my aversion to anything connected with the sea comes from. Do you think it could be? People are strange, you know".

"My first boat trip was with the school. We walked up the gangplank in Indian file with our hands on the shoulders of the person in front. We squashed up together on the benches. There was so much wind my hair blew in my eyes whenever I looked at the water".

"Do you know where the boats spend the winter? Your hands are roasting, Gisèle".

"It comes from all that running".

The sun burned through the naked branches. The city lay coquettishly spread out before her.

Gisèle watched the steamboat until it went out of sight around the corner. As long as her husband was resigned to his lot she had no difficulty in keeping her restlessness at arm's length. Now he was in good spirits she didn't know what to do with herself. She didn't want to think about the past. Nostalgia was for weaklings. What was past was over and done with. That conviction would imbed itself in her one day.

She didn't dare ask Max if they could leave so soon.

"I'm looking forward to the concert tomorrow evening," she said. "Imagine being in the same room as Margarethe Jacobi!"

"Her bosom is fuller than her voice".

"Max! You shouldn't say things like that!"

"Well, if I can't say it to you than who can I say it to?"

Gisèle stared at her shoes. Her husband liked risqué jokes but, after all, now his friends had left the country, she ought to understand that he had to make fun with her more often. What was it but innocent jesting? A mischievous boy who had decided to remain a comic. Her father had been just as much of a tease. She could still see him lying on his deathbed. When she looked at those sunken cheeks and the eyes and mouth wide open as if he had been struck dumbfounded, she had wanted to rip off that mask, because underneath was another face, her real father, who would have laughed with death.

Max' fingers pressed into her hand.

"You know me," he said.

"I know you through and through".

Max leaned back and sucked the cigarette smoke into the very depths of his lungs, as if he wanted to fill himself with the hush. A dove flew down and peered timidly at their silence.

X

Gisèle descended the steps with her hands deep in the sleeves of her fur coat.

"I want to go to Cosel first".

"What are you doing outside in this cold?" called Max. "Do you want to catch pneumonia? Have you been there long? It's only twenty to two".

"I needed some fresh air and the sun is shining".

"Why do you want to go to Cosel?"

"It's been some time".

Gisèle leant so heavily on Max' arm he had to brace himself to support her. At the top of the steps she had wanted to throw her arms around Max' neck and pour her heart out, but as they went down the distance between thought and deed grew with every step.

"There's no point in going," said Max. "The Shabbos is beginning. The graveyard is probably already closed".

"Why have Jews always got to be different? Christian churchyards stay open on Sundays, don't they? When do you have to time to visit your family's graves otherwise? Aren't we going the wrong way? Hohenzollernstrasse is that way, isn't it?"

"This is Hohenzollernstrasse. I can't imagine why you want to go to Cosel now. Is the day after tomorrow too late, or something? The dead don't have almanacs".

Gisèle said nothing. She had an urgent appointment with the dead. Every time she laid a stone on her parents' grave they spoke to her. She still regretted the fact that she had not consulted them when the decision was made to send Wolfgang to England. A blunder she paid for every day. Nothing good awaited her at Doctor Kornicker's house. The man had such a honeyed tongue he could have lured a bear away from a beehive. Her father had often warned her of such types. Businessmen have a nose for cunning wiles.

It was dead quiet in the lane. Now and then a lump of snow detached itself from the branches of a tree in one of the gardens and slid noiselessly to the ground. Although the sun was still shining brightly, the clear sky was shot with colour and the pale skeins of cloud drew across the heavens like fingers pulling at a veil.

"Not so fast," said Gisèle. "The houses here are lovely".

They looked over the snow-bedecked hedges at the big houses rising up from the blue shadows of the trees. In the failing light, the walls seemed to burn, as if ignited by a crystal fire.

"A winter fairytale, don't you think, Max? Everything so pure and unspoiled".

She could not imagine she would be happier in England. The adjustment would take years. Who would want to give Max work? If they lived modestly they could continue to get along under their own steam here for years.

"That's where Wolfgang's paediatrician lived," said Max. "His wife and children fled to Switzerland. No one knows where he is. I wonder who's living there now".

The dormer window caught the last rays of the sun and reflected its blinding signals.

"I think it's empty," said Gisèle.

Just then, the front door of the house flew open and two boys ran outside. Max and Gisèle stopped. The boys, wearing the Hitlerjugend uniform, shot out onto the pavement and ran wildly in

their direction. The one in front halted suddenly and stooped to tie his laces. His friend took up his post behind him.

“Heil Hitler!”

He took his hat out of his trouser pocket and put it on.

“Heil Hitler!” said the other boy, indifferently, without looking up.

Max took off his hat.

“Heil Hitler,” he said.

“Get a move on,” said the boy with the hat to his friend. “We’re holding up these old folks!”

He nudged his friend in the back with his knee. Suddenly, the other one sprang up and tore off.

“Wait for me, asshole! Oh, sorry!”

“Your hat,” called Gisèle.

The boy looked at Gisèle unabashed, picking up his fallen hat from the ground.

“Thank you, Madam”.

He sprinted off.

“What a nice, polite boy,” said Gisèle.

“He really reminded me of Günther”.

“Günther, your nephew?”

“Yes, my nephew”.

Max kicked at a heap of half-thawed snow so hard that his shoe sank into the slush.

“You should dry your shoes out as soon as we get home”.

“I know that. I’m a shoe salesman, aren’t I?”

“Are you cross because that boy called us old folks?”

Max turned up the collar of his coat.

“I’m a World War veteran, Gisèle. You tackled problems one by one. A good soldier never shot at random; he aimed at one particular enemy, as if he was the only one charging. That’s how you stopped the attack of a whole regiment”.

“Was it the Hitler salute? Oh, Max, it doesn’t mean anything. You remember what happened at Easter? Paul, the Meyers’ eldest son? Heil Hitler, Frau Friedmann, he said, I’ve brought the matzos. You couldn’t stop laughing”.

“They were kids, Gisèle, and I was frightened. I can stretch my right arm out a thousand times more, but then what’s left of me? A deserter gets what he deserves, but who punishes a coward who feels ashamed every day for still being alive?”

Max stamped angrily on the ground several times with his wet shoes.

“This is number 64,” he said. “We’re nearly there”.

Gisèle could hear he had everything under control again. Men thought that women could not see into their hearts. That Hitler boy wasn’t anything like Günther. Max had given himself away. That

row with his brother was still on his mind. Last week they saw him with his son on the other side of the street, but before they could decide whether to acknowledge him or not, Rudolph and Günther had disappeared around the corner.

Doctor Kornicker's house was set, like all the others, in a big garden. A path had been cleared through the snow in the drive. Gisèle let Max go first. A snowman was standing guard by the door.

"I didn't know he had children," said Gisèle.

A married man was more likely to agree with her than a bachelor unused to having to make allowances for other people, who would undoubtedly stick stubbornly to his own opinion.

"Look at that," said Max. "The snowman's eyes are made from buttons instead of coal. How funny".

He rang the bell. When the door opened and Doctor Kornicker bade them a warm welcome, Gisèle stepped absent-mindedly inside and allowed herself to be helped unresistingly out of her coat. She heard nothing the lawyer said and shook him by the hand and nodded as if her body was someone else's and she was not responsible for her actions. The pale shadows on the tiled hall floor blended. Which shadow was hers?

XI

Max and Gisèle sat on the leather sofa in the drawing room and waited for their host. Although there were big windows and a glass door looking out onto the garden, the room had already withdrawn into the shadows of late afternoon. Gisèle hardly dared move. When she did, the sofa creaked.

"I don't like leather chairs," she whispered. "Much too hard, cold in the winter and you stick to them in summer".

Max took a pack of cigarettes from jacket pocket.

"Wait until Doctor Kornicker comes back!"

"Why are we talking so quietly?"

He put the pack away.

The clock on the mantelpiece was just striking with a round, bronze tone when Doctor Kornicker entered with a bottle of wine in his hand and a bundle of papers under his arm.

"My apologies for making you wait so long; my housekeeper had hidden the corkscrew. Her Shabbos always begins a day earlier".

He set the bottle down on the coffee table, threw down the documents and took three glasses from the sideboard.

"Why do I say such awful things about my dear housekeeper? I couldn't possibly do without her".

"Good personnel are hard to find these days," said Max.

"Martha has been loyal to my family since Bismarck lay on his deathbed".

The lawyer filled two glasses and handed them to his guests.

"I'll be interested to know what you think of the wine. It comes from Assmanshausen. A red Rhine wine. You seem incredulous. Our country has many surprises in store, you know".

He poured a glass for himself.

"My housekeeper knows me better than my parents ever did. There is no one in the whole of Silesia who can make a better Kartoffelsalat".

"Do you mind if I smoke?" asked Max.

"Goodness, where are my manners,"

Doctor Kornicker jumped up and offered Max a cigarette from his silver case. When he attempted to give him a light, the lighter kept sticking.

Gisèle sipped from her glass. The sour wine made her mouth pucker and a grimace of disgust passed over her face. Why didn't that awful man offer them coffee? Had he never heard of etiquette?

The lawyer sat back down and lit a cigarette for himself. He continued undisturbed to click the lighter until it lit.

Gisèle trembled from nervousness. She had felt so calm on the way. Now, pins and needles were pricking all over her body. Everything irritated her. The clicking of the lighter, the gloomy room, the furniture like sarcophagi.

"So, what's my brother planning to do with us?"

Doctor Kornicker laid the cigarette in the ashtray and calmly folded his hands, like a monk about to pray.

"Herr Rosenthal has informed me that he can acquire a visa for both of you. He asks if you are prepared to accept his proposal".

"Why doesn't he ask himself?"

"No direct contact with your on the part of Mr Rosenthal has ever met with success. He is of the opinion that I might be able to dispel your objections".

Gisèle stared at the ashtray. The smoke from the cigarette writhed in all directions, as if tortured by a sharp pain.

"Erich knows why we don't want to leave," she said. "When things get back to normal my son will be returning to Breslau".

"With all due respect, madam, others in your situation would give their last groschen to get out of here. Do you really believe what you're saying? Why don't you follow the example of your relatives? They have all left the country".

"Except my brother," said Max.

Doctor Kornicker tapped the ash from his cigarette.

"My point exactly. Rudolph Friedmann would like to leave, too, but he can't. When was the last time you spoke to him, Herr Friedmann?"

"This has nothing to do with his brother. What I want to know is what my brother is cooking up. I'm talking to you. Why don't you look at me?"

Doctor Kornicker took a last draw from his cigarette and carefully extinguished the butt in the ashtray.

"I have a busy practice, Frau Friedmann. Just like your brother, I would like to have this case settled quickly. Common sense is not a servant you can show the door with a click of the fingers. Herr Rosenthal expressly asked me in his letter to take care of your brother-in-law's case. Evidently no one else is concerned about him or his family".

"Oh, is that so!" cried Gisèle. "Poor old Rudolph is complaining, is he? Is he concerned about us, by any chance? Time after time we've lent him money when he's got mixed up with some shady

business partner or other. We've never asked for a pfennig back, but when we needed money from him for our son's visa he started a row with my husband and blamed us for having no sense of family. It was Rudolph who then broke off relations with us in a scandalous letter".

"My brother is a generous man," said Max. "He believes you should keep money moving. I'm sure he didn't have two pfennigs to rub together".

"Why are you always defending your brother? He's a hopeless case. Always has been!"

"I am the lawyer for the hopeless cases," said Doctor Kornicker, curtly. "I don't wish to get involved in your rows, but I do know that everyone would benefit from distinguishing between major and minor issues in these times. Are you prepared to emigrate? Do you wish to be reconciled with Herr Friedmann? No? Then this conversation is over and I will inform Herr Rosenthal of your decision".

"Which country can my brother-in-law get a visa for?" asked Max.

He shifted up to the edge of the sofa.

"You are a diplomat, Herr Friedmann".

Doctor Kornicker waited, as if afraid to make the announcement.

"Palestine".

"Palestine?"

Gisèle screamed in horror. Max laid a hand on her wrist and saw a black bird flapping up in the garden.

"How long will it take you to get everything organised?" asked Max.

He grabbed Gisèle's hand and intertwined his fingers with hers.

"There's nothing for you to do at present. I know the right people in the right places. If there are any documents for you to sign I will drop round. A fast procedure takes a few weeks, but if things don't go so well it can take as long as six months. Some civil servants work more slowly when they see you don't know what they want. Luckily, Erich Rosenthal is a generous man".

"It takes a wise hand to shave fools," said Max.

"I don't want to go to Palestine," said Gisèle, pulling her hand away and sounding like a spoilt child.

"Herr Rosenthal has promised to do everything he can to reunite you with your son in Palestine".

The clock on the mantelpiece forgot to tick.

Gisèle sat up straight. What more could you add to those words? She would do anything to see Wolfgang again, but now the opportunity presented itself, she felt tricked. The lawyer was arranging her future and Max had given in to a superior force without a struggle.

"Well, Palestine is better than Bolivia," said Max. "Six months ago a friend of mine and his wife emigrated to La Paz. Like going back to the dark ages, he wrote. Now they're trying to get into the United States".

Gisèle laid her hands in her lap and looked out at the garden. The setting sun was streaking the tops of the trees with red gold. No matter how she tried to continue resisting, she realised that deep inside all resistance had evaporated. She didn't even blame Doctor Kornicker for trapping her. And Max? There was no point in asking him what he really thought. Transparency was an illusion, a hall of mirrors at the fair where you continually hit your face against the glass.

She picked up the glass of wine and drained it. Although the sour liquid contracted the muscles in her mouth, she forced her lips into a smile.

"How long do we have to think over my brother's proposal?"

"This is your last chance to escape this snare, Frau Friedmann".

Doctor Kornicker inclined towards Gisèle and spoke in a conciliatory tone.

"When you're sailing over the Mediterranean Sea with your husband and son you will look back on this day with gratitude".

"Well, why aren't you fleeing? Doesn't your wife want to go?"

Gisèle was no longer interested in the answer. The battle was long since over.

"I'm not married".

"Not married? But you've got children, haven't you? The snowman!"

"The only child in this house is sitting in front of you".

The lawyer laughed with exaggerated heartiness.

"Did you see I used buttons for the snowman's eyes? Martha wouldn't let me take any coal. According to her it's going to be an uncommonly harsh winter. I had to stand in the corner for ten minutes as punishment".

He stood up and collected the bundle of papers from the coffee table.

"I need your signature now. Would you like to follow me?"

Gisèle and Max stood up together. When she walked around the table her husband laid a hand on her shoulder. She turned around. The evening light hid Max' eyes even deeper in their shadow.

"Everything will be all right, darling. The week's not over an hour before the Shabbos".

Gisèle looked outside. The trees raised stiff arms to the heavens. The frost would bite hard tonight. She thrust her hands into the sleeves of her blouse, as if wanting to warm herself ready for the walk home.

XII

"What's going on here?"

Gisèle appeared in the living room in her nightdress.

"Where is your dressing gown, Gisèle?"

"I heard a lot of noise. My dressing gown is on the bed".

Max lit the candles in the Shabbos candelabra and went over to the doorway of the kitchen so he could survey the set table at a glance.

"Is your headache gone?" he asked, walking to the bedroom.

Gisèle nodded and sat down. When she looked at the flickering candles the tiredness came back. She was awake, but then again she was not.

"Stand up, darling," said Max.

He helped her arms into the sleeves of the dressing gown, pulled the cord tight and tied a double knot in it. Gisèle flopped back onto the chair.

"It's a quarter to eight. You were supposed to wake me at seven".

"You were sleeping like Adam in paradise. Do you know where the silver Kiddish cup is?"

"In a box. I haven't unpacked it yet. I should have lit those candles".

"Well, it's the intention that counts. And I should be at shul now, but I'd rather stay with you".

"I'll get the cup, but give me water instead of wine; I can't face any more wine".

When she went into the kitchen, Max was talking to himself.

"Who are you talking to?"

Max was arranging gefilte fish balls on a plate.

"They say it's the first sign of madness," he laughed. "I was practising the prayer my grandfather used to say every Friday evening. The words easily came back to me. I think you might find the horseradish sauce a bit too hot. Try it".

"You know I can't stand spicy food".

Max scraped a tiny bit of sauce from the plate with a fork.

"I'm not a little child any more".

"Open your mouth and close your eyes".

Her eyelashes quivered as her lips curled around the tines of the fork.

"Not bad".

She took the tea towel from the hook next to the draining board and polished the silver cup with it.

"You've put my best embroidered handkerchief on the bread," said Gisèle.

They sat down at the table.

"What's wrong with that? Cornflowers are the most beautiful flowers in the field. Anyway, why did we let Erich and Martha take that nice challah coverlet of ours with them? They celebrated Shabbos far less often than we do".

"Your yarmulka, Max. In the drawer of the bedside table".

Max pushed his chair back and disappeared off to the bedroom for his skullcap.

Gisèle stared into the light of the candles. For the first time since they moved to the tenement block she didn't mind the living room. It was as if the devil had a hand in it. As soon as you started liking something you had to leave it behind. It wasn't fair.

"My yarmulka needs ironing," said Max.

He filled the cup with wine and wrapped his fingers around the bowl.

"The heavens and the earth were finished, the whole host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made..."

It was a mystery to Gisèle why she felt so happy. For months she had been chasing her own tail like a silly dog. She stroked her porcelain plate with a finger. It was all so simple. A set table, the rituals of the evening before Shabbos.

When Max brought the wine to his lips the light of the candelabrum sparkled in the cup. Then he cut a slice from the bread, broke it and sprinkled the pieces with salt.

"Give me the piece with the least salt, please," said Gisèle. "Didn't they have any bread that was better baked?"

"There's lots of poppy seeds on it. Poppy seeds bring happiness and plenty".

They ate in silence. The questions burning on Gisèle's lips remained unspoken.

Every peace has its price. March music filtered into the room from outside in the corridor. A door slammed. All was quiet again.

"I'm going to write my letter to Wolfgang, now" said Gisèle. "How surprised he'll be to hear we're going to be reunited soon".

"Shall we walk down to the post box together? Then it can go with the first collection in the morning".

London (1939)

V

The bench stood between two lindens. A watery sun glinted through the leaves.

Gisèle waited for the right moment to speak. The longer she waited, the more she would calm down. A storm flood came and went, the water fell; that's just the way it was.

Max lit a cigarette. When he started coughing he took a handkerchief from his pocket and spat phlegm into it.

A gust of wind set the leaves lispings.

"You don't see many linden trees here," said Max, putting away his handkerchief. "I always got linden blossom tea at home. My grandmother used it for all manner of ailments. She claimed that she had reached such a ripe old age because of linden blossom tea. It was sweltering the day of her funeral. A real scorcher".

"Linden tea is only any good for colds, the rest is all old wives' tales. I thought your grandmother lived so long because she drank vodka every day".

While Max took long, slow draws from his cigarette, she frantically tried to think of something else to say. At home she would find the right words straight away. There, you went and sat at the table and discussed the problems at your ease. The clock on the mantelpiece struck, you heard familiar noises in the street, someone called out in the stairwell. Should she tell Max she missed that familiarity? He wouldn't believe her. On the train to the Hook of Holland she had already been talking enthusiastically about Palestine. The day before they left she was still referring to it as limbo; a day later she was so happy she didn't know what to do with herself. Why was she so restless and moody? She had Wolfgang back, the ship lay ready to sail and tomorrow Erich would get the visa. Admittedly, her son had been reserved and pensive recently, but instead of getting worked up about it she had to be more understanding than ever. He had lost his parents a year earlier and now he was about to be uprooted for a second time. No wonder the boy was upset.

"Summer is coming far too early," said Max. "It can't last".

"You always let everybody walk all over you".

"England has a maritime climate. That's a guarantee for changeable weather".

"They were making a fool of you".

"What happened this evening has nothing to do with me, Gisèle. Why make such a fuss about such a little thing?"

"I'm suffocating in that house. Edith and Steffi interfere with everything".

"A temporary inconvenience, no more of a nuisance than the hard seats on the train to Schreiberhau. He got out stiff and aching, but an hour later, we were falling asleep under our eiderdowns in the guesthouse and all our discomfort was forgotten. London is an intermediate station. We're just passing through. Fish and guests smell in three days".

"Well, I didn't come of my own free will".

"Do you remember the first day of our honeymoon?"

"I've never been so cold as I was then".

"We were standing arm in arm on the balcony of the Aurora guesthouse when an old woman with a shopping bag walking past in the street below. Remember what you said?"

Gisèle sat bolt upright. Anecdotes from the past that you had forgotten yourself but others had remembered frightened her, as if a flaming arrow would skim past her soul and illuminate all the secrets.

"You would have given anything for that woman's life. A simple soul with simple cares, you said. I think you still envy her".

"Would you rather have married someone like that?"

"There's no such thing as a simple woman".

Gisèle slumped against the back of the bench again. Was Max right? Edith fluttered over any complications. What did Edith have that she didn't? Why was she so easily put off her stroke?

"Will I feel better in Palestine, do you think?"

Max threw his cigarette on the ground and stared for a moment at the curling smoke before grinding out the butt with the heel of his shoe.

"There is providence in every leaf that falls. So let's enjoy the moment. Shall we go to a concert, the two of us?"

"This city is far too big and far too crowded".

"Listen, we're all dead tired. Think about everything we've gone through over the past year. It's a wonder we're not at each other's throats more often. I've got great admiration for your brother. A new life in a strange country, a daughter growing up fast, Wolfgang coming over, then his sister and brother-in-law suddenly appearing and all cooped up together in a house where dwarfs wouldn't want to live in. Without Erich none of us would have had a future".

"Well, Wolfgang hasn't got his visa yet".

"You're fighting shadows, Gisèle. Look, a squirrel. Shame we didn't bring any bread".

"How long has Erich been promising that visa? Tomorrow. Always tomorrow".

"These things take time. When you start wandering around in the labyrinth of bureaucracy you often get lost. Erich's not trying to buy a bag of potatoes at the market, you know!"

"Anyway, who says Wolfgang wants to go with us?"

"Now you're talking nonsense, Gisèle. Of course Wolfgang is coming with us. Don't be so silly".

"He's got a girlfriend. A doctor's daughter".

"A doctor's daughter, eh? Bull's eye. Every Jewish mother's dream".

"You're not taking me seriously, Max. Why do you think he's hiding the relationship from us? Wolfgang's not my Wolfgang any more. It's as if I don't exist. His face lights up when he can speak English. And why is he studying so hard? The holidays have started and he's still always got his nose in a book. Maybe he wants to continue his studies here".

Max took a new cigarette out of the pack and put it in his mouth.

"Well, that's a turn-up for the books! You couldn't get him to do his schoolwork even if his life depended on it at home".

He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and exhaled a thin wisp of smoke.

"Where has this girlfriend suddenly popped up from?"

"They're in the same class".

"Come on, that's just puppy love, Gisèle. Weren't you ever desperately in love with a boy in your class? Well then. And did you give up everything for him? Did you marry him? No, you didn't, did you?"

"I wasn't allowed to look at boys".

"No, of course not, so you did it sneakily".

"In my day you had respect for one another. I can come up with a few choice words, too, you know. Pure in heart and pure in mind".

"Were we really such goodie goodies? I can remember the stories my grandfather told. Everyone was as poor as Job, but the children had fun, anyway - not at school of course, that will always be a trial - but in the woods and fields around the village, where they met up with the girls. Their clothes were full of holes, they ate porridge every day, but even then love knew no bounds or blemishes. In any case, you ought to be proud that Wolfgang is successful. Or would rather he was ugly as sin, like Krakauer's eldest son? People crossed the street when they saw him coming".

"Poor boy. But he did get married, didn't he?"

"For the bride-price his father paid even I would have married him. You needn't laugh; I'm serious".

"What will Erich think of me? The last thing he could do with now is a mad sister in the family. Do you think I got worked up about nothing, Max?"

"Even fools sometimes come out with a wise word. Don't look so worried, Gisèle. You brother's got more sense in his little finger than a lot of other people have in their whole body".

"Let's go back, I'm getting cold".

They stood up. Max flicked his cigarette butt away.

"Do you mind walking around the lake first?" he asked. "I've got to work up the courage for when we sail. You get quite heavy storms on the Mediterranean, apparently".

"You did all right on the journey over to England, didn't you?"

"Held out for a long time, you mean. The man who was sick in sight of port. A wonderful story to tell our grandchildren. And that seagull that dived and caught a big chunk".

"You don't know when to stop, Max. A little bit of respectability, if you please".

There were ducks lying asleep in the grass at the edge of the lake.

"Do you think we'll ever have any grandchildren?" Gisèle asked.

"I'm sure we will. What do think of the name Felix for our first grandson? I wish my parents had called me Felix. You can choose the name for our first granddaughter".

"Will we ever see Breslau again?"

"Without a doubt. Who wants a war? These are modern times. As soon as Herr Hitler comes to his senses we can go back to our heimat. Anyway, I still owe Karsten and the boys at the station a round. Who would have thought that Schalke 04 would have won the football championship? Don't laugh at me, but I'm homesick for a big glass of cold beer in the Schweidnitzer Keller.

A duck woke up with a start. It turned its head towards Max and Gisèle, rearranged a few feathers with its beak and went back to sleep

"Have you ever had a good look at the ducks in the Japanese garden in Scheitnig?" asked Max. "There are some really exotic ones. Some with a crest on their heads, others with a waving bunch of plumes. Do you think they're Japanese ducks? Or maybe they escaped from the zoo next door. No, they can't have; they clip the wings of everything that flies there".

Gisèle took a deep breath. It was better not to think about Breslau. Before you knew it, you would be overwhelmed with nostalgia. Goethe had written some moving poems about nostalgia. It was a shame she could never remember a line, no matter how often she read them. Maybe she didn't believe in God enough and the ordeals that fell to her lot now were a punishment.

"Hey, you're shivering from cold," said Max. "Do you want my coat?"

"Aren't you cold yourself?"

"A war veteran like me? In the trenches they called me Iron Max".

He took off his coat and hung it around her shoulders.

"Do you want my hat, too?"

Tel aviv (1948)

V

"Let's go to Dehmel First, Henri".

Gisèle put the order slip back in her handbag. Henri Schlumberg threw his cigarette butt out of the window and started the car.

"We'll have to take a detour," he said. "Ha-Yarkon is closed off".

They drove through deserted streets. Henri braked at every junction, as if scared of danger lurking at every corner. In Dizengroff, groups of men in shirtsleeves were standing here and there, a rifle over their shoulder. Now and again one raised a hand; the rest took no notice of the white limousine, but continued to mill around nervously, as if seeking shelter in each other.

"Are we losing the war, Henri? I've seldom seen such dejected faces".

"The victors wear stained, frayed uniforms, too, Frau Friedmann".

He coughed up a ball of phlegm and spat it out of the window. When he turned into Arlozorov, he took a cigarette out of the breast pocket of his shirt and put it in his mouth.

"Is Max sticking to his decision not to smoke any more?"

"If he'd gone on smoking we would have buried him already. Anyway, he feels better since he gave it up".

"He looks worse," said Henri, lighting his cigarette. "If you don't mind me saying so, you look dead tired, too. Did you stay up all night with Max?"

"I couldn't sleep from the heat. Even on the balcony there was no air. It was like a hand gripping my throat. If I could choose between heat and cold I'd choose the latter".

"In the camp we had no choice".

The car drove into Schlomo Ha-Melekh. The shutters of most of the shops were still down and men were mooching around aimlessly on the pavement.

Gisèle grasped the handles of her handbag firmly. Did Henri wake up in such a bad mood every day? She pitied Max. She wouldn't last a week with such a misery guts.

"What did you think when you were liberated, Henri?"

"I thought about the soup we wouldn't be getting. We're there".

The car stopped in front of the wrought iron gate of a villa. A snow-white wall, above which you could see the crowns of palms and cypresses, closed the house off from the outside world.

They got out. Henri opened the boot, piled the ten cartons of cigarettes onto one arm and closed the boot again.

"I'll stay in the car," he said. "Max always has a coffee with Dehmel. I advise you to accept the invitation, that bastard is quite capable of finding another supplier".

He rang the doorbell. Gisèle thought it was a pity Henri never said a word about the camps. Pouring your heart out about terrible events could be a relief. Mind you, after four years in the trenches, Max didn't want to talk about the war, either, but luckily he found comrades from the front he could reminisce with. If, like Henri, you had nobody, then of course you became surly and cynical.

A black Arab boy in a long, white gown appeared. He opened the gate and bowed low.

"My master awaits you, sir". He ignored Gisèle.

Henri looked at Gisèle and she returned his look.

"Please tell your master I'm dreadfully sorry, but I have to decline his kind offer. My husband is ill and I shouldn't leave him alone".

Henri handed over the cartons of cigarettes one by one.

"Ten pieces," he said, "Tell your master the bill will be sent on later. And wish him a good Shabbos".

Gisèle and Henri walked back to the car and got in. The door was hardly shut properly before Henri drove off.

"You'll regret this," he said, without looking at Gisèle. "Max can write a epitaph for his custom. Where to now?"

"To Mehersohn. Whatever you might think, Henri, Dehmel is not a heel. Besides, he's up to his ears in debt to Max. A haltered horse doesn't run away".

Henri grumbled something unintelligible and changed roughly to a higher gear.

"What exactly did the doctor say," he asked. "Will Max soon be rising from the dead, or will I have the honour of escorting you again tomorrow?"

"Max is exhausted. Until he's well again, I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me, Henri. Don't worry. I'll pay you just as much in a minute".

She prayed the morning would pass quickly. You could never do anything right as far as Henri was concerned. Why wasn't he happy to have come out of the camp alive? Everybody in this country was disgruntled. Complaining was about the only thing they had to hang onto, complaining about an uncertain future, complaining about the injustices of the past, complaining about prosperity and adversity. Contentment is the greatest treasure, Max always said. She felt a lump in her throat. Max had the world in a matchbox, but in the ten years they had been here had hadn't found any good friends. Everyone had so much ambition, such great expectations. She shook her head.

"Something on your mind?"

"My son's coming to visit soon and there's still so much to do. When I think about him I'm all of a flutter. A mother wants her child. You can't live on hope alone".

"I don't agree with you, there, Frau Friedmann. Hope is the only illusion worth having".

In the narrow streets around the market in Kerem Ha-Teimanim, the car disappeared into a sea of shoppers and heavily-laden donkeys. From time to time, above the subdued murmuring of the crowd, rose the cries of the market vendors. Gisèle sniffed the heady scent of spices and over-ripe fruit. She closed her eyes and let herself drift on the noises and smells of a blind world.

La Paz⁽¹⁹⁵¹⁾

II

The full moon hung in a sky of the deepest black and cast a silver net over the roofs of the town. A dog gave a drawn-out, plaintive cry; another protested, barking gruffly.

Gisèle let the freezing air bite her nose and eyes. Every night she stood before the open window in her fur coat, recovering from the closeness that woke her from her sleep, making her gasp for air. When would she get used to the altitude? She looked at the mountains, which appeared to lean over the city like giants. The mountains had swallowed the moonlight. The rents in their flanks were veiled in shadow, their peaks stained with pallid snow.

Gisèle shivered. The thin air made her light-headed. Erich urged her to have patience. It only took a year for Edith to adapt to her new surroundings. Why did Erich look at his shoes when he said his wife had died of a tropical disease? Was he keeping something from her? La Paz didn't have a tropical climate, that much she knew. She found her brother's explanation so suspicious that she asked Doctor Zuckermann if you could die of a tropical disease here. Her doctor had reassured her and then taken the time to name every fatal disease you could contract in Bolivia, summing up the symptoms and the consequences. He enjoyed explaining it. She had the impression he wanted to keep her in his surgery as long as possible. Not that she minded in the very least. Doctor Zuckermann was a handsome man. Every time she wanted new sleeping pills he laughed mischievously as if he wished to let her know in a roguish manner that what she was asking was not wise. She needed the pills because the tea she drank every day had no effect, even when she told Consuela to put twice as many coca leaves in the teapot as the doctor prescribed. Although the maid spoke no German, she always understood what she wanted. Her spirit lived in a world where human language had been replaced by raised voices and gestures.

At night everything changed. The moon drowned the houses in its chilly light and threatening figures grabbed at the motionless stars from the valley. She had landed on a strange planet, an indifferent universe where people meant nothing and disappeared unnoticed. Consuela was the third Indian housekeeper so far. Every time Erich fired one and hired another, she watched their passivity in amazement. They came and went; no one seemed dissatisfied or disillusioned. Their

flat, swarthy faces gave nothing away, as if they accepted prosperity and adversity with equal grace. Right from the moment she arrived five months ago the country had filled her with an animal fear. Erich stood on the apron at the airport; she came down the steps and waved. What a commotion when she fainted in the arms of another passenger. Lucky she was at ground level! Now you've got something spectacular to write in your first letter to Wolfgang, said Erich, but she didn't have the strength to smile.

Gisèle took her hands out of the pockets of her fur coat and pressed warm fingers against her jaws. The chilly skin tingled. Hollow footsteps sounded down below and the chemist's guard dog growled on the other side of the street. Gisèle stuck her hands back in her coat pockets and listened with her head tilted upwards. The stars were sprinkled over the city like icing sugar.

When all sound in the Calle Mexico had died away, she walked to her room and shut the window. The casement stuck, so she pushed against it with her shoulder until it closed with a bang. In the corner where her bed stood, she heard rustling. Quick as a flash, she slipped off her fur coat, draped it over the covers and crept into bed. The rustling continued. Gisèle peered over the edge of the sheets. The moon had plastered the walls with marble-white light. It was time to take stock. The first day she had been given a bouquet and chocolates by some good friends of Erich's. The flowers had wilted after a day and the chocolate was covered in a white bloom. From shards came nothing more than broken shards. She mustn't be downcast, she wasn't a sparrow with a broken wing that had fallen out of its nest and been picked up out of pity. Returning to Israel was out of the question; travelling to England impossible. If Max had been with her he would have cured her with one of his home-brewed adages.

The rustling under the bed stopped. Gisèle lay on her side and closed her eyes. How deep did Erich's sorrow go? Had his weak moment during their walk been of a temporary nature or was it an omen of far worse things to come?

She tossed and turned in the narrow bed. If she lay on her left side she banged her knee against the wall and if she turned quickly to the right she became so dizzy that her head seemed to spin around the room. Should she take another sleeping pill? Mechanically, she reached out her hand and felt for the bottle of tablets on the bedside table. Her fingers glided carefully alongside the alarm clock and over a book. The bottle was in her handbag! She withdrew her arm and stuck it between her legs. It was too cold to get up. Tomorrow morning she would call Doctor Zuckermann and make an appointment for after coffee at the club. She mustn't stop long. Her friends already had nothing better to do than sit around all day drinking and gossiping. That Gitta Schildhauer, in particular, was a bitch. Naturally it was she who had given her the spoiled chocolates. Franz Schildhauer owned half of all the tin mines in the country, but his wife clung on to her money like the devil to a soul.

Gisèle turned onto her back and let out a loud sob. Doctor Zuckermann had never been married. That often happened with attractive men. Were they unable to choose or did they set their sights too high? She wouldn't have to be asked twice if he invited her to dinner. Hotel Europa made quite a reasonable chicken soup and the stuffed carp wasn't bad, either. Would Doctor Zuckermann have already seen the hummingbirds in Coroico? Condors and hummingbirds. Erich had written in his letters that Bolivia was a land of contrasts. She hadn't known what to imagine, unless he was trying to subtly let her know she wasn't wanted. She had suppressed that uncomfortable thought.

A church clock lethargically tolled five times. In an hour, Consuela would be getting up to make Erich's breakfast. A giant's shoes don't fit a dwarf, Max had said. The meaning struck her with a shock. It was so simple! The wisdom she sought in the great poets and their exalted verses spoke with a thousand times more volume here. Keep things in balance, adjust, adapt.

"Thank you, dear Max," she said out loud.