

Who Was the Hatter?

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p 7-11

I would go to live with Great-Aunt Louise. That had been arranged years before. She gave me the guest room in the attic. The bed was piled high with embroidered pillows and in front of it stood a round table and a wickerwork chair on a knitted rug.

Your desk, she said.

She'd put books in the middle of it. Lamartine and Stendhal, as the most beautiful she'd ever discovered.

Then she led me to the wall across from the window.

Hanging there in silver frames were the photos of her life. Louise beneath hats of tulle, lace and little birds, sitting on café terraces in Spa, walking along the avenues of *Kurorte* in Bohemia, wielding floral teacups in Salzburg, peering through a telescope in Vienna.

I've got so much to tell you, she said. I've lived in the nineteenth century, I've seen people whose names you'll learn. But first let me help you unpack. There's lavender in the wardrobe.

At the front door she put a hand on my shoulder and said: I've always tried to seek balance. It's a good thing to live with. It arms you against other people who may be very different from yourself. Do you know which way to go to find the university? I would only need to follow the others. They'd got rid of their suitcases just like me and were recognizable by their writing pads or the almost empty briefcases they swung between their fingertips to the rhythm of their strides.

I hoped they were going in the right direction. But the self-assured among them proved unreliable. Along the way they were loudly cajoled into cafés by others of their kind and they disappeared for a long time or for good.

And we, the first years, stood still then, looked around, thought about the past and wondered whether to ask someone the way.

Yes yes, said the street-menders near the opera: round the corner and then left and then right, and it's the building that runs the whole length of the street.

Past entrance gates with rubbish bins and courtyards with autumn roses and finally white corridors with messages behind glass, we sought classrooms and occasionally came upon someone from the past, from last year, from secondary school, and asked for directions; but that person from the past was studying something else and needed to go to a different faculty,

somewhere in a different building and we looked back one last time and waved with the promise to meet before long, ran up worn staircases, smiled uneasily to people who moved aside or said something or pointed and then apparently we had arrived.

There was a sign saying GERMAN on an old brown, half-open door and behind it a white lecture hall with high windows and rows of long narrow tables and many chairs.

I looked behind to see who had run along with me all that way. He was gasping for breath, as if he'd been searching far longer than I had.

Has the prof not started yet? Can we still go in? he whispered and we peered around the doorframe. Welcome, welcome, someone shrieked and we saw a deserted lectern sticking up out of a writhing mass of future fellow students.

We climbed over knees and chair arms and then at last we were sitting right across from each other and we looked around and up, at the globular lamps on the ceiling, the bookcases along the walls, the blackboard on which it was announced that the professor would be half an hour late, until we abandoned our looking to get notebooks and pens ready and listen to bursts of singing about hussars somewhere in Germany and their passionate love affairs, even in the harsh winter, then looked at each other and wondered who the other was.

What's your name?

Didier. And yours?

Hermine.

There was a banging at the door. The entrance of a man in a dust jacket prompted resounding cheers; he spread his arms in a gesture that called for silence.

The professor, he said, and took a deferential step backwards.

And there was a small, slender figure walking in, threading his way towards the front and pausing now and then on his journey to take in with some irony an individual who looked confused.

He climbed the few steps to the lectern, placed his briefcase at the outer edge of it, leaned on his elbows, put his cheek in the palm of his hand and looked, got smoke in his eyes, coughed so much that his body jolted, removed the cigarette and spoke words I did not understand.

Write something, Didier whispered. Prepare a short talk in German about an author or a piece you've read.

Der, die, das, I thought, and Who rides there so late through the night dark and drear? The father it is, with his infant so dear. Goethe. About a father hastening through the night to a doctor with his dying child. There is fog. The old grey pollarded willows look like witches or ghosts. The child is afraid. Dost see not the Erl-King, with crown and with train? My son, 'tis the mist rising over the plain. *Es ist ein Nebelstreif*.

I want to see Vienna. I'm not going to the sessions this afternoon. I want to get away from Didier for a bit, if only to fulfil to a limited extent the agreement we made on the journey here: We'll each go our own way and in the evening tell each other what we've experienced.

I walk outside and wait in front of the carriage porch for the tram. The air in the street is hot and leaden.

I step in behind women with shopping bags who chat incessantly in friendly voices about the joys and sorrows of the suburbs, nodding and smiling at each other as if of the same opinion about everything without a single exception.

Don't I have to pay? I ask the woman next to me.

No, she says, because this is the second carriage and we all have tickets. If you haven't got one you need to take the first carriage. Then you can pay. And where are you from, then? From Belgium? Oh, I see.

The news is passed around by the inhabitants of the tram. Here and there it's taken as read that I've come to study music. Joint consultation follows as to where I must get out to look at this beautiful, beloved city.

The woman takes me with her along the Ring to the Heldenplatz. She points out where I need to catch the tram back this evening: Bellariastrasse, tram 49. I write it on a piece of paper to make sure I don't get lost.

For a long time she watches me go and waves until we've both disappeared among the crowd.

Coaches drive across the landscape of buildings and squares that is the Hofburg. Radiant sunlight settles on the yellow dress and hat worn by a tourist with ravishing lovers.

In the Burgkapelle a duke is being married. People flock outside the church to hear the birdlike voices of the Vienna Boys Choir singing for the service.

I walk under the golden dome and the wrought iron of the Michaelertor. Elderly people cautiously squeeze their way through the traffic and when they discover the passer-by to be a foreigner they become young again and point out with merry gestures the baroque glory and magnificence left from the past, described in the family annals as still contemporary.

I cross the street to the Michaelerkirche, intending to turn off along the Kohlmarkt; at the side of the church is a passageway between two buildings. The city suddenly becomes narrow, level and tall. The sun cannot penetrate. The paving stones are cool and the houses angular as if they've been slid back here and there to create a square for the occasional strolling dog. Behind grey windows someone is playing piano, rigidly, tiringly. The sounds find no outlet; they're like a wrought-iron carillon around the Mount of Olives, a late-mediaeval Stations of the Cross in relief set against a wall, in which Christ strides from one suffering to the next and is so unobtrusively miserable that I barely recognize him among the many sculpted human figures.

I try to remember for Didier what he looks like and what he does, but I keep losing him. And I can't possibly stay here long; one might be taken for what one is not: a beggar at the maids' doors of times gone by. I want to beg the city for a favour, urge it to give up its deepest secrets. But from a notice on a front wall I learn that hawking and begging are forbidden here. Nothing is traded at the doors. Nothing is either given or received.

Further along the Kohlmarkt, beyond the Demel pastry shop that conceals its exquisite refinement from me behind frosted glass panels and garlands of ethereal greenish and pinkish bonbons, no doubt served on ancient porcelain plates and eaten with silver knives and forks, is

the Graben, where the road-menders throw the traffic into confusion and place wooden duckboards over holes and trenches and scatter dust and grit around and watch the women in headscarves on their way to the Peterskirche, the most sumptuous of all Vienna's churches. In its golden twilight I go to sit by the Nepomuk altar and look at the depiction of the foolish saint being thrown into the Vltava. The women are there too, and with their hands in front of their faces they vie for the favours of the Baroque God who lives in this colourful house with its stucco and gleaming cupolas as if in the palace of a lazy opulent courtesan who has become queen.

Oh but this isn't Vienna. I will never, ever find the city on my own. Didier will have to come with me and lay his hand on my shoulder and put his thoughts into my eyes.

The Dorotheergasse is close now. At Hawelka they serve coffee with small jugs of water. And would I like to eat warm *Buchteln*? 'Buchtly' were the little cakes my mother made for my father. Or were they *koblihy*, or *palacinky*? I can't remember. It's a long time ago.

'Herr Ober' points to the tables and chairs and says:

Nothing has changed here since the start of the century.

So Milena Jesenska was definitely here and sat on my chair or on the red sofa against the wall where she held Kafka's hand and said:

I'm a married woman. Even for you I can't leave my husband.

I look on my street map to see where to go next.

I walk along the Herrenstrasse. I walk through a dilapidated alleyway where perhaps Café Herrenhof used to provide warmth and love for poets and where a sign tells me that only at my own risk can I pass through here to get to the next street, past time-worn passages, balustrades, wrought-iron shafts. It reminds me of Prague, about which I know merely the few stories my father told, and those of Meyrink, Kafka, Kisch, Janouch, Urzidil, Haas or Daisne.

It gets dark. Vienna lights its streetlamps. They burn charmingly around the Minoritenkirche, the church of the Italians who ended up here God knows how and who shuffle across the wooden floor and stretch out their hands to the old polychrome Madonna.

I get lost in the Volksgarten where at close of day little elderly men and women are still sitting on the garden chairs, pressing the fringes of crocheted shawls to their flabby throats to protect themselves against the wind that playfully threatens them. Sometimes they stand up and saunter over to a chair close to the exit and now and then they extend the trip as far as the trees and bushes that conceal the 'pissoir'. The word is in large letters on a sign and next to it stands the lady with the towel, smiling at basic human needs and feeling rich because in times of overpopulation or other woes she'll always be able to reserve the first place for herself.

I climb into the tram in the Bellariastrasse and take the second carriage because I'm too tired to rummage for coins.

I arrive too late for the evening meal, but I can still get bread and tea.

I sit at the table with three similarly delayed Poles. They speak twenty words of English and a comparable amount of French and German and tomorrow we'll make friends with Maria and with 'friend of you', '*Freund von Sie*'.

I go to the room. Didier is writing a letter. I tell him about all the things I've seen.

He's agitated because I've been gone so long, as if he's missed me, as if I'm becoming indispensable, in Vienna at least.