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Seven Lies

James Lasdun

JAMES LASDUN

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SEVEN LIES

James Lasdun was born in London and now lives in upstate New York. He has published two collections of short stories, three books of poetry and a novel, *The Horned Man*. His story 'The Siege' was adapted by Bernardo Bertolucci for his film *Besieged*. He co-wrote the screenplay for the film *Sunday* (based on another of his stories) which won Best Feature and Best Screenplay at Sundance in 1997. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry, and currently teaches poetry and fiction workshops at Princeton.

ALSO BY JAMES LASDUN

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(co-edited with Michael Hoffman)

*Every lie must beget seven more lies if
it is to resemble the truth and adopt truth's aura.*

– MARTIN LUTHER

Part of this novel has appeared in *Granta*

September 14

A woman threw her glass of wine at me. It happened at Gloria Danilov's party at the Temple of Dendur. I didn't know the woman – hadn't spoken to her or even noticed her. Gloria had just introduced me to Harold Gedney, who detached himself from me almost as soon as Gloria left us. A moment later this woman steps up: 'Excuse me, are you Stefan Vogel?' 'Yes,' I say, and without hesitation she flings her wine in my face. Red wine: a great spatter of it all over my chin and neck and white shirt. She walks away swiftly but calmly, no one stopping her, and from the stunned way people look at me I can tell the assumption is that I must have said or done something disgraceful.

I got out of the place as quickly as I could, not looking for my attacker, just wanting to remove myself from the situation, and walked all the way to the Port Authority.

'Excuse me, are you Stefan Vogel?' 'Yes.' *Splash!*

The sheer reflexive speed of it. The strange naturalness this gave the gesture, as if it were simply an inevitability, a law of physics, that the acknowledging of my name should trigger a little violent deluge of red wine.

I sat at the back of the bus, a pariah; marinading in the clammy wetness. I was shaken, but almost more than that I was furious with myself for having come down to the party in the first place, against my own better judgement. And then, beyond both the shakenness and the anger, this *déjà vu* feeling to get in any crisis: that the attack only happened now in the most illusory sense; that in reality it happened a thousand years ago, and was therefore nothing new.

The lights were on when I got home. I took my stained shirt off in the car – didn't want Inge to see it – and put my jacket on over my bare chest, buttoning my coat up over that. Bundled the shirt behind a cupboard in the garage. Inge was downstairs with Lena, reading by the woodstove. She gave me her usual glazed smile.

'How was it?'

'Fine,' I tell her, 'lots of caviar.'

She keeps her eyes on me, trying – I sense – to resist the pull of her book. But if she has noticed I am home early, she doesn't mention it, and if she finds it odd that I am standing in the over-heated living room with my coat buttoned up to my Adam's apple, she doesn't, as I had predicted, want to get into a conversation about it.

After a moment she stretches and yawns:

'I think I'll go to bed.'

'OK.'

Another helpless smile, then off she goes up the little wooden staircase, Lena shuffling loyally along behind her, tail up like a bedraggled ostrich plume.

I came here into the spare room. Saw this jotting pad on the shelf – a spiral-bound notebook. The sight stalled me. I had a sudden, overwhelming desire to break my own rule of committing nothing to paper.

Some divination, maybe, that I no longer have anything to lose? Some notion of what cataclysmic event must have occurred elsewhere in the cosmos in order for a woman to have thrown her wine

my face at a party in New York?

September 15

Walked up to the quarry. Purple starry flowers blooming over the ditches all the way up Vanderbec Hollow. Maples and oaks still in their summer foliage, moving through the day like galleons in full sail. Though if you look closely the sails are getting tattered now, pocked and torn in places; nibbled by insects, the holes browning at their edges. Fall on its way.

Are you Stefan Vogel? Yes. *Splash!*

This desire to exorcise the past. Not only the remote or middle past (though that too), but last week, yesterday, just now . . .

RUSTLE OF newspaper from the study above me, the snip-snip of scissor blades: Inge working on her clippings. I picture her up there, pasting the heavy tidings of another week into one of the tombstone-sized albums she has been steadily collating over the years. As always, the image comes at me with the force of reproach; all the more painful for being unintended, or not consciously intended.

Snip-snip, snip-snip . . .

My undiminished love for her. Something in it verging on the idolatrous, as though for some higher creature that has come unaccountably into my possession. (Exactly how I feel about life itself realise: that it has come unaccountably into my possession, somewhat to its own dismay.)

September 17

A phrase of my parents' comes to mind, one that was forever on their lips or Uncle Heinrich's back in Berlin: *Nachteil kriegen*: to receive disadvantage.

Was that why I went down to Gloria's party, so as not to 'receive disadvantage'?

How in Berlin one was always in dread of not sufficiently abasing oneself towards some superior and thereby 'receiving disadvantage'. Not that Gloria would have cared less or even noticed if I hadn't shown up. So perhaps more a sense of missing out on possible *advantage*? A reflex of my inveterate opportunism? Though what 'advantage' could have come my way at this late date, I cannot imagine.

Or perhaps I was looking for precisely what I found?

Are you Stefan Vogel? Yes. *Splash!*

Certainly I was apprehensive. Even debated whether to retreat as I came to the entrance of the party. I scanned the crowd milling among the Egyptian ruins. There were some familiar faces from our old New York days: the Chinese historian; that Czech couple we had dinner with fifteen years ago at their NYU apartment; the macho Cuban playwright who told Inge he'd written a part for her in his new play; one or two others – the remnant of Gloria's old retinue of dissident émigrés and exile sprinkled, as always, among her bankers and politicians. To the extent that any of them recognised me they seemed friendly enough. Taking this to be an encouraging sign, I stepped into the fray, seizing a glass of champagne from one passing waiter and a black alp of caviar from another.

'Stefan!'

Gloria sees me from behind a pillar and sails over. Both arms extended, her large old head tipped

back in mock reproach, she takes my hands in hers, grasping them warmly.

‘How kind of you to come! And where is your beautiful wife?’

‘I’m afraid she couldn’t make it.’

‘Ah. What a shame. Give her my fondest regards. How lovely to see you! How long has it been? Must be five years at least!’

I nod vaguely, not wanting to discompose her with the fact that it has actually been more than ten since we fled New York and closer to fifteen since I picked up my last honorarium from the offices of the little Cold War quarterly she financed back in those days.

‘Now you’re living where, exactly?’ Gloria asks.

‘Aurelia. Up in the mountains.’

‘I suppose you must love it.’

She looks at me with her kindly, guileless eyes. Her way of seeming only to acknowledge what is loftiest in one’s nature, disregarding the rest, so that one feels gathered up for a moment, handed back to oneself in the form of a bouquet made exclusively of one’s virtues and dreams and potentialities.

‘Dear Stefan.’ She gives my hand a little pat. ‘Now, to whom shall I introduce you?’

The hostess must move on. But I don’t think it’s insincere, this warmth of hers. She must have kept literally dozens of us on the payroll of *The Open Mind*. Pure charity. A fervent anti-communist but utterly democratic in her social instincts, as demonstrated by her choice of who – *whom* – to hand me off to:

‘Hig!’

With a decisive movement she leads me towards a man standing at the side of a cluster of elder matrons. I recognise him immediately as Harold Gedney.

‘Hig, I want you to meet Stefan Vogel. A wonderful dissident poet. He and his wife fled the former East Germany in – when was it, Stefan?’

‘Eighty-six,’ I tell her, bearing the various inaccuracies of her introduction in silence, as I must.

‘Stefan very kindly read manuscripts for us at the magazine. Hig of course was on the advisory board. There, now.’

And with that, bestowing on each of us her elevating smile, she moves on.

Gedney turns from the ladies, sending a ripple of unease through their group. He looks at me with his pointed, ruddy face cocked appraisingly. I have been familiar with this face since my teens in the German Democratic Republic, where it formed one of a half dozen human images into which the abstraction ‘America’ would resolve itself in my mind. It was always gentle and frail and tired-looking, giving the impression of a sad god working overtime to help the human race, and now it is even gentler and frailer and more tired-looking than ever. The crest of sugar-white hair rising from his forehead looks almost ethereal in its silkiness; a veritable halo.

‘A poet?’ he asks – slight tremor of age in his voice.

I hasten to disavow the name:

‘Well, no, not really. I’m –’

‘I don’t have much time for poetry.’

‘Good God, I would hope not. A man in your position!’

Gedney gives me a circumspect look, as if unsure of my tone. I recall suddenly that he has been drawing fire recently, this distinguished elder statesman; a little late showering of opprobrium at the twilight of his career. I have heard his name mentioned in connection with the hostility towards America currently surging across the globe. Even some talk among his enemies of bringing him to account for certain of his past actions and policies. I try to think of something I can say to show him I'm not being ironic; that I am on his side. But his hand is suddenly thrust out towards mine. I shake confusedly, hear him say, 'Good meeting you, young man,' and stand there blinking as he walks firmly away.

Beside me the ladies dart reproachful glances in my direction. They must have been hoping to reclaim their high-ranking consort after he was done with me. Meanwhile, a young woman is approaching . . .

'Excuse me, are you Stefan Vogel?'

A fair-haired woman in a grey dress. Pearls at her ears and throat. Her face broad and smooth, rather pale. As she moves towards me I have the sense of a soothing presence coming into my field of attention. I do notice that she isn't smiling as she asks her question, but her very seriousness adds to her calming air. I look into her eyes, anticipating some balmlike, restorative conversation with her.

'Yes,' I reply.

And out of the points of light gleaming about her, the goblet of red wine, which I have never previously noticed, detaches itself, coming perplexingly towards me, in a perplexingly violent manner, its ruby hemisphere exploding from the glass into elongated fingers like those of some ghastly accusatory hand hurtling through the air at my body until with a great crimson splatter I am suddenly standing there soaking and reeking, blazoned in the livery of shame.

The shock, but then also that familiar, muffling *déjà vu* sensation; kicking in as soon as the shock wears off: the sense that despite the appearance of new damage, any harm done to me was in fact done aeons ago. *It has already happened.* Therefore nothing has changed. And therefore it is not important.

'I WAS BOUGHT . . .' Always imagined I would begin a memoir with those words if I should ever write one. A *me-moir*.

'I was bought' – instead of the usual 'I was born . . .'

I was bought

I was purchased

September 19

Tech and telecom stocks tumbling again. Good year on that front at least: accounting scandals, fear of terrorism, current administration's economic policy, all battering nicely at the markets. Even Intel is sinking. I shorted it at forty and again at thirty; now it's under twenty. Feels like betting on gravity, or on death.

This wondrous provision for gambling on failure! How it caught my imagination when it was first explained to me back in New York. I felt I'd stumbled on something like a professional calling. The first practical and profitable way I'd found of exploiting my own personality; my capacity for doubt; my tendency to expect the worst. I seem to have an instinct for companies in trouble; corporations

with rotten wood under their gleaming skins. Too bad I lack the recklessness that ought to go with it. ~~A little less caution and we'd be rich instead of just getting by. Own a nice house instead of renting this little cottage.~~ Not have to rely on Inge's job at the health food store for our insurance. Would that have made a difference? I doubt it. Not that Inge doesn't appreciate the finer things in life (I always wished I'd been able to buy good clothes for her), but the lack of them is not what ails her.

Even so, I should like to set her up with a truly large sum, and for that, as for everything else at this point, my own annihilation seems increasingly the most elegant solution.

Convert myself into gold: one way of remaining with her for ever!

September 25

I walked Lena up to the quarry. She's still limping, but chased a squirrel and almost caught it too.

How Inge nursed her back to life after the truck hit her, instead of putting her to sleep as the vet recommended. Carrying her out into the sun every day on that wooden rack, till her pelvis healed enough for her to walk. Massaging her every morning, boiling hamburger meat for her. Then, since that seemed to help her sleep, bringing her up onto our bed at night.

My objection to that. Ostensibly on grounds of hygiene – her wheezing, her drooling and hair shedding. But really it was just a kind of peevish jealousy that made me deliver my ultimatum: the dog or me.

I could swallow my pride and go back upstairs to our comfortable bed. There's nothing to stop me and I believe Inge would welcome it. I could undress and climb in with her, find some way of opening a conversation. She would no doubt do her conscientious best to be responsive, as she would too if the talk should lead me to attempt more intimate things, though I know also the expression I would find in her white-lashed eyes (crow's-footed now at their corners but more beautiful to me than ever in the grave way, like two great aquamarines grown richer in their lights as their settings tarnish) if I were to lean over and kiss her: that papery look of good-natured effort and insuperable reluctance, flattened by each other into the same blank plane.

Fantastic freshness in the air up at the quarry. This autumn vigour that feels so like the energy of life, growth. Trees still a dusty, steely, end-of-summer green, but on a slope below me there was a single maple with half its leaf dome turned scarlet –*splash!* – like some trendsetter's bold new fashion statement; this year's embroidered shawl or silk pashmina.

I sat on a slab of bluestone in the rubble under the white birches. Burnt yellow plumes of goldenrod down by the old radio tower. Wild vines coiling all over its chain-link fence.

Inge, my Sleeping Beauty! Her spellbound air: deeper and deeper with every year that passes. Whose kiss will break the spell? Mine, if I can get this right . . . A farewell kiss.

Felt calm, looking out over the twilit valley, a bird singing its evening song from the cliff above me, birch trunks glowing like alabaster in the dusk. To disappear from this – like the swan in the poem – stepping off from the solid ground of existence into the water; gliding there 'infinitely silent and aware'. Or would one just sink like a stone?

No concept of hell in the Bible. I read that in a magazine some evangelist group left in my mailbox. No basis for those lurid medieval fantasies of eternal torment. 'The wages of sin is death' that's all. The unrepentant sinner merely passes into nonbeing: which after all is what he wants.

increasingly, while he's alive; the prospect of new life being steadily more problematic and tiresome to him.

September 26

Another single tree turning – this one a delicate lemon yellow, a poplar down by the pond. Distant, intangible pathos. This other universe, with its own moods and meanings, its own not quite decipherable language for expressing them.

A word I learned recently: 'catabolic'. Having to do with the breaking down of organic matter. I see myself as a catabolite: my peculiar identification with this season, my gravitation towards autumnal things: forms, sensations, experiences, shaped by their relationship with the extinction towards which they are travelling, rather than the act of creation from which they sprang. The implosive beauty of collapse.

'I was purchased, my Uncle Heinrich informed me, for two truckloads of oranges . . .'

God! I can almost hear myself reading it aloud on one of those book programmes on NPR, though it would have to be some Hadean equivalent of that worthy institution, since the publication of such a document would of course be incompatible with my continued existence on this earth.

'We are delighted to have the late Mr Vogel on our show tonight. Mr Vogel, would you be so kind as to read us the opening passage of your memoir?'

'I'd be glad to: *I was purchased, so my Uncle Heinrich informed me, for two truckloads of Seville oranges. My wife, something of a celebrity in those days, was more expensive . . .'*

Do I dare?

To quote one of my own poems – ha! – Do I dare disturb the universe???

Do I?

But why this persistence in thinking I could possibly have anything left to lose? Just the sheer habit of being alive? Haven't I always known I was going to have to break this habit some time? Well, that time has come! *Splash!* Inge, my darling, this is for you. I'd write it in German, but we fled that language, didn't we? Now I think in English, even dream in it. Here goes. Sell it to the highest bidder . . .

CHAPTER 1

I was purchased, so my Uncle Heinrich informed me, for two truckloads of grade B Seville oranges. Inge was more expensive. She was something of a *cause célèbre* in Berlin – a well-known actress those days, as well as a prominent agitator in the peace movement – and the authorities in the form of East Germany, whatever else they might have been, were astute merchants. For her release they demanded hard currency: five thousand dollars' worth of deutschmarks.

The money and oranges were given by the West German government to the Diaconical Work, a charitable trust of the Protestant Church, who in turn handed it over to the East German Agency of Commercial Co-ordination, *Koko*, where a friend of my Uncle Heinrich's was deputy director.

Such was the procedure in what was then known as *Freikauf*: the selling of dissident flesh for goods or hard currency.

On the eighth of June 1986, an overcast day with dots of moisture sparkling in the warm grey air, Inge and I were escorted in an unmarked van to the Potsdam side of the Glienicker Bridge, which we then crossed on foot, Inge's eyes full of tears, mine dry, each of us carrying two suitcases; without speaking, without pausing for breath and without looking back.

Two months later we were on a Lufthansa flight to JFK. The Muhlenberg Institute, an organisation of Lutheran pastors who had been in contact with Inge's father (himself a pastor, who had fallen from favour with the official 'Church in Socialism' for his work helping to reunite families divided by the Wall), had sponsored our immigration, guaranteeing a loan to help us settle, and lending us a small apartment above a homeless shelter in the East Village, which we were to supervise in lieu of paying rent.

We had had no intention of settling in West Germany, or for that matter anywhere else in Europe. America was always our destination. Nowhere else would do. In my case this was a straightforward decision: for as long as I could remember, America had been the point of convergence for all the unfulfilled cravings of my parched soul, and the idea of getting out of the East had always been inseparably bound up in my imagination with that of finding some way of transplanting myself in the magically enriching soil of the New World.

So far as one can ever account for such things, I suppose this fixation must have had its origins in my father's professional failure and the measures my mother then took to find other means of fulfilling her ambitions.

The chain of events began in 1974. My father, a lawyer by training, had been quietly consolidating a career in the diplomatic service of the German Democratic Republic, where his speciality was negotiating fine-print details in the Friendship Treaties springing up between the GDR and other countries in the Eastern Bloc. It was a humdrum if respectable occupation, but after the rest of the free world had followed West Germany in granting full diplomatic recognition to our republic in 1973, and the UN itself had opened its doors to us, my father was selected as a junior member on the GDR mission to that august body, and our lives looked set to change.

For a few months he shuttled back and forth between Berlin and New York: kindly, remotely befogged by jet lag and overwork, but always bearing gifts of a radiant strangeness – Slinkies, watch-

for deep-sea divers, a wireless that woke you with a cup of instant coffee. These little marvels formed the entire body and substance of my image of New York, and as I discovered many years later when Inge and I flew in, the picture they had created was strangely accurate: there below us were the toys and gadgets from that brief period in my family's life; metamorphosed into an entire city of hope and flowing steel, of vast, luminous, multi-dialled watches, of buildings like giant radios with towers of glass and streaming water.

My father's visits grew steadily longer. There was talk of a permanent posting, even of our being sent out there to live with him . . .

New York! America! In those dark ages of absolute division between East and West, the very word 'America' seemed to bristle with dangerous, glittering energies. Like 'Moscow', it named the source of some ultimate fright and power. Bonn was our West German sibling: object of rivalry, contempt, occasional jealousy; but America and Russia were parental figures, and upon them we projected all our fantasies of supernatural and possibly cannibalistic strength. Nominally, of course, one was our friend, the other our enemy, but both gave us the same peculiar excitement to contemplate.

For my mother, the idea of our being sent to live in New York played directly into her sense of our family's innate superiority. She and her brother – my Uncle Heinrich – were of blue-blooded Silesian descent. Naturally this was not something to brag about in communist East Germany, and they had been quick to drop the 'von' from the family name after the war. But in their quietly indomitable way, these two had maintained a sense of themselves as somehow ineffably superior to other people, and moreover they had managed to transmit this sense to those around them, not by any crude arrogance or self-aggrandisement, but by a certain aristocratic *froideur*; a mixture of haughty reserve and sudden graciousness, which bewildered people, intimidated them, and filled them with a kind of strained awe. My mother in particular was an expert in that particular form of psychological control which consists on the one hand in withholding, or at least delaying, a smile or word of kindness when the situation seems to call for one, and on the other in bestowing her approval of something – when she chose to do so – with a magisterial impersonality, as if she were merely the channel for an objective fact that had been handed down to her by some celestial source of judgement. The effect of the latter was to make one feel elevated, officially congratulated, as it were; as if a medal with the head of Lenin on it had been pinned to one's chest.

You might imagine that in a socialist society a personality such as hers, with the distinctly unegalitarian idea of life that it projected, couldn't possibly thrive. But somehow she managed to short-circuit the mental processes by which people might form a criticism of her in political terms and confront them instead on a more intimate and primitive level of the psyche, where authority, if it succeeds in imposing itself as such, is unquestioningly believed in and – how shall I put it? – quaked before.

She was no beauty, with her sturdy little frame clad always in the drabest brown and grey clothes, her crooked, slightly jagged-looking front teeth that dominated one's initial impression of her face, and made even her oldest acquaintances prefer to shake hands with her than exchange kisses. But there was something forceful, even magnetic in her appearance. Her dark brown, slightly protruberant eyes, encased in folded, lashless lids, possessed an unusual mobility and expressiveness. As they narrowed attentively, tilted to admit a faint sardonic lightness, gathered into their corners the traces of a codified smile, flashed with anger or coldly averted themselves from your gaze, drawing behind them an almost visible portcullis, one felt – with the fascination of seeing anything naked – that one was observing the fluctuating movements of the very organism to which the names Frieda, Frau Vogel

Mother, all referred. For as long as I can remember, there was a patch of pure white in her greysish brown hair, such as you see in certain city pigeons, and this too seemed the mark or brand of some quality that set her apart, though I was always uncertain whether it represented something done to her or something she was liable to do unto others.

All of this – the haughtiness of her manner, the crooked teeth, the naked, imposing eyes, the little arctic patch on her head – was contained in, and to some extent tempered by, an overall burnish of tragedy; a kind of final, stabilising layer that had been added to her portrait during the middle part of the 1970s. This was the tragedy of thwarted ambition, and my father was to blame for it.

In his profession hard work and competence landed you in Hungary or, God help you, Romania; above-average skills might get you as far as one of the West European Permanent Representations; a certain type of well-connected career lackey would end up in Moscow. But in the private hierarchy of my mother's imagination, a mission into the *Imperium Americanum* was an acknowledgement of those entrusted with it that they were the very *crème de la crème*, the crack troops, the elite. As our posting there grew more certain, all the chilly potency of that vast opponent seemed, by virtue of our association with it, to decant itself into our lives, and for several weeks we emitted an eerie glow among our friends, like that of immortals from legend, imprisoned for a term among mankind, but now at last able to reveal their true lineage.

Naturally my mother pretended to make light of these developments, even to disparage them. At the mention of America, or New York, or the United Nations, her lips would purse with a look of involuntary annoyance, as if some ancient personal grievance were being referred to, after which she would rather affectedly change the subject. Nevertheless, she saw to it that people were told of our imminent elevation. Allusions to my father's jet lag were dropped nonchalantly into conversation with our neighbours. Our friends in the Politburo, the Gretzes, were invited to dinner with Uncle Heinrich, who could be counted on to raise the subject with a twinkle of indiscretion, and thereby ensure that they were properly confounded. Heinrich himself, whom my father had helped get a job in the Office of the Chief of the People's Police, spread the word among our acquaintances in the security community.

Once, to my chagrin, my mother made an appearance at the school my brother and I attended, asking to be allowed to sit in on my history class. The subject was a comparative analysis of the emancipation of the serfs in Russia and the abolition of slavery in the United States. The idea being instilled in us was that the Americans had had no ideological interest in freeing the slaves, and only happened to do so by accident, whereas the Russians, as their subsequent history showed . . . et cetera. My mother sat at the back of the classroom with a stern expression. Halfway through the class she stood up and called to me in a quiet voice:

‘Stefan, come with me, would you, please?’

Writhing inwardly, I rose and made my way towards her under the puzzled eyes of my teacher. We went to the office of the principal, whom my mother proceeded to harangue about the poor quality of the class.

‘I don't see that the interests of our children are well served by quite such a crude portrayal of the Western powers,’ she declared. ‘I hardly think that those of us obliged to have direct contact with the capitalist system’ – placing a hand on my arm – ‘are likely to benefit from being taught about it in terms of caricature . . .’

I stood beside her; oppressed, heavy, numb; assuming the posture that now seems characteristic of

my entire adolescence: hunched, eyes averted, blank-faced; a kind of permanent, petrified shrug.

The principal eyed us shrewdly from beneath her portraits of Marx and Engels. She must have been trying to decide whether my mother was raving mad, or was perhaps privy to some new educational policy development forming itself in the higher echelons of the party. Luckily for us she seemed to choose the latter. She promised to investigate the matter personally and see to it that the teacher in question was properly reprimanded. With a curt nod my mother thanked her and we departed.

The culminating act in her *folie de grandeur* (it amounted to that) came one evening while my father was away in New York. She, my brother Otto, myself and our 'lodger' Kitty (our maid in all but name) were seated at the dinner table, which, as usual, Kitty had covered with a cotton cloth before laying, when my mother suddenly exclaimed, 'The linen! The von Riesen linen! We'll take it to New York!'

It turned out that a trunk full of family belongings had survived not only the war but also the upheavals following Yalta that had left my mother and her brother orphaned and penniless in what became East Germany. The trunk was in my mother's possession, stored in the basement of our apartment building. Among other things it contained a full set of Irish linen, including tablecloths and napkins, every piece embroidered with the von Riesen initials and family crest. Upon some fantastic new whim, my mother had taken it into her head that this linen, spread on a communist table in New York (I suppose in her imagination she saw herself as some sort of society hostess in the diplomatic world), would strike just the right note of mystery and coolly ironic humour, while at the same time impressing people tremendously.

'Nobody will know *what* to make of us,' she declared. 'And we won't explain. Just –' and she gave a sort of aloof shrug as if indicating to some fascinated inquirer that she personally had never troubled her head to wonder about anything so trifling as a set of initials that happened, yes, since you ask, to coincide with those of her own maiden name. On these rare occasions, when the outward guard of her demeanour was let down to reveal the rather childlike cravings and fantasies it served to advance, there was something endearing about her. Our hearts went out to her then; we felt we were being gathered into some rich and vulnerable conspiracy, and our loyalties were aroused.

Otto and I were sent down to fetch the linen as soon as dinner was over. To do this we had to go through Herr Brandt, the janitor, to let us into the storage room.

'Try to keep Brandt from poking his nose into our things, would you?' my mother asked. 'Not that we have anything to be ashamed of. But he can be a nuisance. Here, take him one of the miniature bottles and ask for the keys to let yourselves in. Tell him you'll give them back to him when you're finished.'

It went without saying that Brandt was a police informer, and my mother was probably right in imagining he would think it his duty to make a report on something even so trifling as the retrieval of a set of initialled linen from a trunk. It was also known that he could make himself obliging over practically any matter in return for small gifts, preferably alcoholic. He was especially partial to the Schaad-Neumann brand of aquavit, impossible to get hold of in the GDR, and my father made a point of bringing back a set of miniatures whenever he went to the States, for the express purpose of lubricating Herr Brandt. Thirty or forty of them were lined up in a double row at the back of a shelf in our larder.

Taking one of these frosted, cylindrical bottles, Otto and I went down to Herr Brandt's headquarters on the ground floor.

Ours was a modern building, constructed from the cheapest materials, but well maintained, and with a few grandiose trimmings, as befitted its inhabitants, who were mostly party officials of one kind or another. Four white pillars stood incongruously in the middle of the brick front, marking the entrance. The lobby was floored with polished slabs made of a pink and white agglomerate, like slices of vitrified mortadella. A bronze bust of Lenin, looking oddly piratical, stood on a plinth by the elevator, which generally worked. On every floor was a plastic indoor plant, the leaves of which Heide Brandt could be seen laboriously squirting and buffing on Sunday mornings. A powerful odor compounded of floor polish and boiled meat pervaded the stairwell, and there was a more or less constant sound of toilets flushing.

Brandt was in the glass-walled office to the side of the main entrance, surveying the empty lobby with his usual dull stare. He wore a crumpled brown jacket over a sweat-soiled undershirt in which his womanly breasts and very large stomach bulged and sagged like pumpkins in a sack. Black stubble glistened on his whitish skin in the artificial light of the little booth, and the bulging roil of scar tissue between his throat and ear gleamed like satin. This scar, so he claimed, was from a grenade wound he received during some battle on the Eastern Front. To my youthful and admittedly subjective eye, it was a decidedly unheroic-looking scar, and in fact had something furtive and guilty about it, like some malignant companion that had attached itself to this otherwise vague and uninteresting person. It was the scar – it seemed to me – that compiled reports on the comings and goings of the inhabitants of our building; the scar that had to be propitiated with bottles of Schaad-Neumann aquavit. Brandt himself gave the impression of living under its tyranny. For his own part he would have been content to pad around the place keeping the plants shiny, the floor waxed, supplying the tenants with cheap eggs from the poultry co-operative where he had a special concession. But some incomprehensible malignance had settled upon him, and he was now its servant.

Once, when I was quite young, I had seen him carrying a parcel to the door of an elderly couple who lived on our floor. The parcel, which evidently contained either a mirror or a framed picture, slipped from his hands and fell to the floor with a smash and tinkle of breaking glass. He stooped down at once to examine it, prodding the wrapping with his fingers, an expression of grave concern on his face. Then all of a sudden a most extraordinary cynical sneer took possession of his features. Fully aware of me looking at him, he dumped the parcel at the door of the elderly couple and padded off shrugging as he passed me by, as if to say, *Nobody will know it was me who broke it, and even if they suspect, there's nothing they can do about it*. Furthermore, he seemed to convey that my having witnessed it, far from alarming him, in fact implicated me in the deed itself, making me no better than him. And the strange thing was, I did feel mysteriously implicated, and guilty too. It was the first time I had seen an adult do something patently and knowingly 'wrong', and the idea that such a thing could be came as a profound shock. From then on, whenever I ran into Brandt on my own, he would give me a contemptuous, almost taunting look, as though to say that he and I knew each other too well to have to pretend to be respectable citizens.

Otto told him we needed to get into the storeroom. He rose with a lugubrious sigh, evidently meaning to accompany us.

'No need for you to come,' Otto said suavely. 'Just give us the key and we'll let ourselves in. Here, this is for you. Compliments of the house.'

Brandt hesitated, holding the bottle in his hand as if he didn't know what to do with it. Then he winked unpleasantly – or rather it seemed that his scar winked – and unhooked the key from the ring at his belt.

The storeroom occupied a large area of the basement and consisted of a series of open cubicles behind a single steel-mesh fence with a padlocked door in it. We opened this door with the key Brandt had given us, and by the dim light of a couple of naked bulbs found the cubicle that corresponded to our apartment, picking our way between the many glue traps Brandt had set out, in which insects and the occasional mouse lay in odd contorted positions, some of them still twitching with life.

There in our cubicle, among bits and pieces of old furniture which we no longer used, lay my mother's trunk: not so very large, but with ornate hasps of tarnished brass at every corner and great florid brass buckles that intimated a world of strange and remote ceremoniousness. I suppose I must have seen it before, but I had never taken much notice of it, and certainly never looked inside.

A sweet, mildewy smell rose as we opened the heavy lid. It was neatly packed, everything stowed in small boxes or bundles. The linen was in one corner, in a rust-coloured cotton sack, itself monogrammed with the intertwined initials and three falcons of the von Riesen crest. My brother looked on impassively, apparently less intrigued than I by this faintly mouldy-smelling exhumation of our family's past, while I poked around, turning up a set of silver spoons, an old marbled photograph album and a case of pocket-sized books beautifully bound in dark green leather.

'Come on,' Otto said, grabbing the pile of linen, 'the mother'll start fretting.'

I looked at the case of books. Of all things, it was a set of poetry: *World Poetry in Translation Volumes I to VI*. I didn't know or for that matter care very much about literature, but I had an instinct for contraband, and the thought of anything – poetry included – that might not be officially approved of automatically excited my interest. I opened one of the books: poetry on one side, German prose translation on the other, but Otto was growing impatient.

'Let's split,' he said, 'it gives me the creeps down here.'

Closing the trunk, we went back upstairs, Otto waiting for the elevator with the linen while I returned the key to Herr Brandt.

Seeing me alone, the man immediately relaxed into that familiar contemptuous expression.

'So did you find what you were looking for?' he asked.

I muttered that we did.

'And what was that?'

I looked at him, more surprised perhaps than I should have been by this flagrant reneging on his tacit contract to turn a blind eye: here after all was a man who had obviously broken every bond of decency with his fellow human beings. His face, or rather the swelling tissue at his neck, seemed to stare at me with a brazen leer as if to say, *So what if I accepted a bribe to mind my own business? You know me better than that . . .* However, it was apparently out of personal amusement, to remind me that we were both contemptible creatures, that he asked, rather than any real interest, for when I said 'Oh, just a few odds and ends,' he merely gave a chuckle and let the matter drop.

Upstairs, my mother and Kitty unpacked the linen. It had lain so long in the trunk that the folds seemed to have made permanent creases in the material, and the creases themselves had discoloured slightly, forming a grid-like pattern over everything we unfolded. But the silk-embroidered monograms were intact on every corner, shiny as the calm areas on ruffled water, and in spite of the poor state of the linen itself, my mother still seemed entirely satisfied with her idea.

She and Kitty spent the next day washing the linen and wringing it through the mangle. The following morning, when my father returned from New York, he found them ironing it in the kitchen.

It was evident that all was not well with him. Normally he was fastidious about his appearance, careful to keep his wavy black hair well combed, aspiring to a well-groomed anonymity in his dark suits, plain ties and clean white shirts. Even after his all-night flights back from New York he would look spruce and tidy, if a little tired. But this time there was a strange raggedness about him: his tie loose, his shirt dishevelled, his jacket crumpled as if he had used it for a pillow. Most unusually, he had not shaved at the airport. And there was a haggard look in his red-rimmed eyes as they roved around the pieces of linen draped all over the kitchen.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, turning up the corner of a tablecloth and examining the embroidered initials.

My mother told him, ‘I thought it might come in useful when we go to New York.’

‘Put it away. Get rid of it.’

It was extremely rare to hear him speak sharply to my mother. She retorted at once:

‘What’s the matter with you, Joseph? Didn’t you sleep on the plane?’

‘Kitty, leave us, would you?’

Kitty slipped out of the kitchen. My father waited till he heard her close the door of her room.

‘Are you out of your mind?’ he asked my mother.

‘Joseph, please don’t speak to me in that manner.’

‘As if your family isn’t enough of a liability already, you have to go flaunting your ridiculous heirlooms in front of strangers . . .’ He waggled the embroidered corner at my mother. ‘Von Riesen . . . What do you think this is, the Hapsburg Empire? The court of King Ludwig? Are you crazy?’

‘I would hardly call Kitty a stranger.’

‘You have no idea who she talks to.’

My mother’s eyes gleamed dangerously. She asked in a tone of deadly self-control:

‘Joseph, what is the matter? Did something happen in New York?’

‘No!’ he shouted. He seemed to quiver. And for a moment a look of fear crossed his tired, careworn face.

For my mother was right. Something *had* happened in New York. It appeared my father had made a blunder. What he had done, I learned later, was to have slightly overestimated his own licence to make concessions in the finer detail of an informal round of arms negotiation; a minute conciliatory gesture that he had believed himself empowered to offer, but which had been relayed to a member of the Soviet SALT II negotiating team stationed in Geneva and promptly aroused that personage’s imperial ire. On the diplomatic stage at that particular moment in history, when the two sides of the globe had worked themselves into an inflammable sweat of paranoid terror about each other’s intentions, the smallest things were charged with an exaggerated significance. There was the well-known incident of the Soviet official who forgot to remove his hat when he greeted President Nixon in Moscow for the signing of the SALT I treaty. The negligence was interpreted by the Americans as a deliberate affront, and the newspapers spent many days speculating on what precise grievance was being symbolically expressed. Given that this year, the year of my father’s blunder, happened to be the very year in which our state was prevailed upon to change its constitution, and proclaim itself ‘forever and irrevocably allied’ with the Soviet Union, my father had good reason to be worried. History doesn’t relate what happened to the official who forgot to take off his hat, but there is little reason to believe that he was forgiven for his error.

At any rate, my father wasn't. A few days after his return he was told that he had been removed from the UN team.

My father must have guessed that that was to be his last trip; in addition to the usual case miniatures for bribing Herr Brandt, he had brought with him presents of an especially poignant 'Americanness': a raccoon-skin hat for my mother, a New Mexican turquoise pin for Kitty, a calculator for Otto, and for me a set of metal ballpoint pens, each in the shape of a famous American skyscraper. These joined the other knick-knacks and gadgets he had brought home on earlier trips, and because they were now part of a finite series, never to be further augmented, they acquired a hallowed quality in our household. They were the sacred relics of a brief, visionary connection with a reality larger than our own; one that had tragically eluded our grasp.

CHAPTER 2

So much for my family's glorious ascent into the international political elite of New York.

To my mother's credit, she never directly reproached my father, but the tragic aura she assumed from then on must have been a living reproach to him, and even if it wasn't, he certainly subjected himself to enough reproach of his own. Quite a rapid change came over him: he continued to work hard (he was sent back to the Friendship Treaties, and the subsequent agreements on technology sharing with other Warsaw Pact countries), but under what seemed a steadily thickening glaze of failure. He wasn't the type to respond to criticism from his superiors with defiance or counter-criticism. What he seemed to want were opportunities to show his loyalty and diligence, if not in order to be reinstated, then at least to be acknowledged as a faithful servant. At the same time, though, he had obviously lost his self-confidence, and with it the air of quiet capability that had once impressed people, so that even if his blunder had been forgiven, he was clearly no longer suitable for a high-level career in the diplomatic service. His appearance grew shabbier. He aged. There was something distracted and disconcertingly meek in the way he smiled.

As for my mother's 'tragic aura', it was a complex thing; a hybrid, I believe, of resignation, disappointment, and a kind of tactical reorganisation of her forces. There was humility in it – just enough to deflect the *Schadenfreude* or downright vengeful delight of her acquaintances, and to convert what had formerly been a rather too flagrant haughtiness into something more subtle and sombre and dignified. If she could no longer intimidate people by the suggestion of hidden powers in her possession, she could make them respect her out of consideration for the magnitude of our loss. She made a point of telling our friends and neighbours what had happened, always in a tone of sad but unself-pitying acceptance of our misfortune, thereby establishing the event in terms that were acceptable to her, and gaining control over people's reactions to it.

It was at this time that the word 'intellectual' first entered her active vocabulary. Pretty soon it was joined by other, similar words, such as 'cultural' and 'aesthetic'. 'So and so is an *intellectual* fraud,' she might be heard saying, or 'So and so has no *aesthetic* sense whatsoever.'

At first these remarks had a tentative quality, like somebody trying out a new way of dressing and pretending not to be anxious about what others might think. But people seemed to accept them without protest, and the self-consciousness soon left her. Before long it was apparent that she had constructed a new hierarchy of values by which to organise the world in a manner that once again accorded with her invincible sense of our family's worth. If we were not to take our place in the inner circle of the political elite, then so be it: we would dazzle and confound others from our eminence in the sphere of *real merit*, which was to say the sphere of culture and ideas and, above all, *Art*.

Given that none of us had accomplished anything at all in this sphere, her successful transformation of our whole tone and image as a family must be counted as quite a triumph. Her own education had been a ramshackle affair, interrupted by the war (though she claimed to have had a tutor at the age of eleven who had made her read 'everything'), but her brother Heinrich had been through university, and at one time contemplated a career as a man of letters. He still subscribed to the official literary publications, and in his position as senior counsel at the Office of the Chief of the People's Police, he had easy access to the best artistic circles, which from time to time he still frequented.

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