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In the Pedestrian Zone

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Deirdre lay back on Rolf's Persian carpet, the silk folds of his robe around her while, on the other side of the room, Rolf held a silver Art Deco lighter steady before his cigarette, superb as always in his pink if slightly overweight nakedness.

"I saw your wife yesterday in the arcade off the *Sternstrasse*," Deirdre said. "I think she has a lover."

It had been in the pedestrian zone, right by the shop that sold only fine chocolates and French champagne. Dusk was falling. Above, a whitened sky was scattering flakes of wet snow onto the cobblestoned streets. People put up umbrellas as they walked companionably arm-in-arm under the arcade's stone arches; young people rode over the cobblestones on large bicycles. It was a big excitement, the first snow of the season. A crowd of young people strode by laughing. Deirdre felt a familiar despair. Jokes were the worst. Whether she went back to New York from Frankfurt after one year or fifty, she would never be able to get German jokes.

Another woman was also enjoying the moment, standing motionless before a shop window. Her simple black cloth coat had looked vaguely familiar. Then Deirdre felt a shock of recognition.

Elise had made only one visit to the Bank where Deirdre and Rolf worked, but it could be no one else--the neat, tailored look; the short dark hair; the mouth a perfect Cupid's bow; the dark, clouded eyes above. Although at the moment they were not at all clouded. They were shining with joy, a joy so private and profound it could not possibly have had anything to do with the bracelet of twisted gold or the matched coral sweater in the display window. Amazingly, as Elise turned in Deirdre's direction, her eyes gave no sign of recognition. Instead, it was Deirdre who recognized the joy. It was what she always felt now, because of Rolf.

Rolf lit his Marlboro, took a meditative puff, then reclined himself comfortably on one of the two narrow maroon couches that by night served him and his wife as beds.

"Nonsense," Rolf he said curtly, flicking the little silver Art Deco piece shut. "Elise is much too *dry* to have a lover."

Deirdre hesitated.

"Of course it's distressing to think that Elise might have someone else. But perhaps with her business partner—what's his name again? Günter?"

Rolf inhaled slowly, a bit faster than usual.

"They can't be having an affair," he said. "Günter hardly knows Elise is a woman. Besides, he's married."

"So? You're married."

"Yes, yes, but that's different. Elise and Günter have known each other since childhood, they went to University together, they work together every day in their medical practice."

"So? We work together every day at the Bank."

"No, no, it's different. He's ugly, he's prudish, he's--"

Deirdre pulled the thin silk folds closer around her shoulders and began to laugh. For the first time since she had known him, Rolf looked unsure of himself.

"You just don't like Günter because he votes Social Democrat," she said. "You think he's a Puritan just like you think I'm a Puritan because I criticize your smoking. Are you sure it's not you who's the Puritan now?"

At once she fell silent, afraid she had gone too far. But Rolf merely smiled. As he stroked his dark, elegantly clipped beard, he looked at her in that way that always made her uncomfortable yet that she would not for the world have gone without.

Deirdre sat part way up, arranging her long red hair down one shoulder in a way she knew Rolf liked. From the window over one of the beds, she could see a construction crane moving slowly. Far below, a factory spewed black smoke onto a field of long, symmetrical vegetative rows--winter cabbage, or perhaps the tasteless, waterlogged vegetable they liked here called *kohlrabi*. Although Deirdre had been in Germany for almost a year now—it was December 1978—she still found this casual cohabitation of industry with agriculture odd, like the way you were expected to enter a room here right after knocking, or the superstitious belief that the best way to maintain a car was to drive it flat out on the autobahn.

"I did not give Elise those eyes, you know," said Rolf. "Those vague, clouded eyes. She had those when we first met."

Rolf crushed the remains of his cigarette into the crystal ashtray, then slid down beside her.

The scent of his soap, so subtly flowered, mingled with the sensation of the soft, yet still scratchy, dark beard against the back of her neck. As always, she found herself thinking of a

small boat far out to sea. That was what she always saw when he made love to her, the two of them in small boat passing over a quiet sea. Deirdre closed her eyes to see it better--or perhaps simply to avoid the sight of the gray woolen owl on the wall directly above, the comical handcrafted owl so ugly she could only assume it had been put there by his wife.

There was just time for one more amazing burst of pleasure--why not take it? In another year she would be back in New York. In the meantime, it was all of as little consequence as bonbons, or champagne.

Snow falling on a black wool collar. Tiny curls framing the face. A bracelet of twisted gold on a matched coral sweater set. A pair of dark unseeing eyes, burning with joy.

Of course Rolf was right. He must be, and yet. . . .

Atop fake fir arches, lights in the shape of candles blazed at the entrance to the Frankfurter Christmas Fair. It was just past eleven on a Saturday morning. Merchants in heavy jackets swayed from side to side as they cried their wares through the cold, damp air: fat-cheeked porcelain cherubs; tea-glasses held tightly in silver holders; *lebkuchen*--square-shaped molasses cookies shaped like men, flavored with cinnamon and anise. Deirdre pushed her way through the crowded, narrow aisles. Stopping at the first table, she fingered a sweater. Would her father like it? Or her mother? Always hard to predict the taste of those two dour old people in Bay Ridge. Still, she had to buy them something, and now. This time tomorrow she would be on the plane home.

It was the last Saturday before Christmas,. Saturday--a day to be dreaded, a day alone.

"How much, please?" shouted Deirdre in her best Plattdeutsch.

Although Rolf had strictly forbidden her to use dialect at the Bank, she was convinced it provoked less hostility in the markets than her efforts at standard German.

"Two and fifty," said the merchant.

He was staring at her, or rather at the long red hair which, more anything, marked her as foreign. German women kept their hair short—much more practical in this northern climate. There was a particular shade of red women here dyed their hair as they got older, but Deirdre's much lighter, more coral. She had learned that on her first day as the Bank's Assistant Manager for Foreign Accounts (US), Frankfurt Office.

"What unusual hair," said Renate had said as she rose from her chair, shaking Deirdre's hand so hard it hurt. "I suppose you get it dyed that color in America."

Renate was envious, Rolf said. Deirdre's transfer had blocked the promotion Renate had expected. Deirdre could count on Renate only for smiles and politeness and disinformation. For some time, he said, Renate had been having an affair Herr Siebste, the Manager for Domestic Accounts. That would be her way up in the firm.

Really? said Deirdre. Herr Siebste was so much older than Renate, wooden and funereal as the single white carnation on his desk. Besides, they hardly spoke.

Watch when Renate is on the phone talking so low you cannot hear, said Rolf. Then see if you can find Herr Siebste.

It was true. At such times the door to Herr Siebste's office was closed.

"Will they marry?" Deirdre asked.

Rolf spoke as if to a foolish child.

"Of course not. Married couples are not permitted at the Bank."

"A pullover, young woman?" said the vendor, an older man in a shabby coat. "Look, finest wool. How about a pillow? Surely there must be someone for whom you need a Christmas gift?"

There was, there was, yet what could she buy Rolf that he would not have to hide from his wife? She had spent an entire afternoon looking for his soap, yet nothing the salesgirl had trotted out had quite the right smell.

Wanting suddenly to buy something, anything, she pointed at two red velveteen pillows with an ornate ruff, ugly enough that perhaps her parents might not insist on saving them--as her mother liked to say--"for good." They were certainly as ugly as the owl on Rolf's bedroom wall. Besides, if she bought them, she could go home.

"Two, please," said Deirdre, careful to use the dialectal *Zwo*.

At home, the silence in the little one-room flat was so loud she could almost hear a pattern in it. As she waited for the electric kettle to boil, she switched on the television Rolf had insisted on loaning her. On the First Channel was an old-fashioned jazz heard nowhere outside Germany, forbidden in the 1930s as *Negermusik* that passed here for Americana. On the Second Channel, the inevitable, incomprehensible sitcom--a group of portly middle-aged people convulsing in belly laughs. On the Third Channel, the equally inevitable, left oriented political offering. A sad-faced Turkish man was about to be sent home for *Schwarzarbeit*—working without a work permit.

Outside, the snow had begun again--a tight, dry snow this time that gave promise of sticking, just like New York snow. A memory of the woman in the arcade drifted idly by. Could she really have been wrong? She did not think so, and yet--

The kettled whistled, the kettle hissed. Deirdre struggled against the sharp sense of disappointment that often came now when she found herself alone. It angered her, this sense. Before, she had always liked being alone.

It was an herb tea, dark and aromatic as mint or ginseng but not exactly like either. "Something very special," Rolf had said with a smile as he had tucked it into her purse one afternoon as they parted. It comforted and soothed, it put her back in the boat. As she sipped, she could almost feel the delicate hands, the soft pressuring lips. Perhaps it was really a medieval German love potion. Perhaps that was why she could not find it in the *Apotheke* in the *Kaiserstrasse*.

A buzzer sounded, then sounded again.

Deirdre jumped. It was the German telephone.

"Hallo?"

It was Rolf, breathless. Deidre could feel her spirits lift. She had not expected to hear from him again in private before she left for America.

Could she meet him at two, at the corner of *Sangenring* and *Friesenstrasse*? They had planned to go to his mother's, but Elise had to see a patient. He had already called his mother and changed the time. Did Deirdre have a piece of paper handy to take down the tram directions?

He was whispering now. She wrote quickly; she hated this part of the business.

The 42 tram was filled with old ladies in black and snot-nosed, sullen-faced children. The heat was full on, the air saturated with a smell of wet umbrellas. As Deirdre looked up, her eyes met a carefully guarded stare, then another pair of eyes that looked away. Uneasy, she pulled her hair to one side and tucked it inside her coat. Across the aisle, two old ladies bemoaned the lack of proper hygiene among the Turks, their bar fights on the weekends.

At last, at last the tram stopped at the corner where Rolf had told her to wait.

"Going my way?"

Wearing a leather jacket she had never seen, Rolf reached over and opened the door. She had seen an ad for one just like it in the *Marienplatz*. It looked exactly the same in reality although hardly thick enough to be warm.

"Hel-lo," said Rolf with an archness that in anyone else she would have found unbearable. "Well, you. Are you going to stand there forever or are you going to get in?"

And then they were off, roaring down the autobahn, the sound of the wind whistling past the windows of his sports car like a small plane hurtling toward take-off. Already the speedometer was churning steadily towards 200. On both sides of the road, the trees began to blur.

Deirdre leaned back and closed her eyes. It was all right, it was all right, they were in the boat again. She hardly bothered to listen to Rolf's chatter. Had she seen the comedy last evening? No? Pity, it had really been quite good. And how was the little television? He was sorry he did not have an extra one in color just now.

Something was happening; the car was slowing.

Deirdre opened her eyes to the sight of metal wreckage smashed up against the median. Bodies leaned half out of the windows like lifeless, bloodied dolls. It was the same kind of sports car, a Peugeot convertible. She recognized the type even though it was now merely some pieces of twisted steel. A helicopter lowered itself from the sky with a loud whirring noise. Then it was gone. Once more the car was barreling down a wide expanse of near-empty road.

Rolf shook his head sadly.

"Careless. Somebody must have made a bad mistake."

"Mistake. But surely it was an accident."

"An accident? Why an accident? It's not even raining, much less icy. No, no. It's not easy to drive this kind of car you know. Some people just can't do it."

Rolf smiled.

"You just want to think it's dangerous to go this fast because you were enjoying it so much. Isn't that so, Didi?"

It irritated and pleased her, how he flattened her name into something so German, so ordinary.

Rolf flicked the turn signal and guided the car down the exit ramp. Once more the forests began to distinguish themselves into trees. An elegant gold sign in the old-fashioned script proclaimed they had reached *Cafe Wilhelmsschloss*, family-owned since 1623. As they waited on filigreed chairs at a little table on the mezzanine, Deirdre watched the couples strolling through the eighteenth century green maze below.

"Rolf, are you still quite sure that what I saw in the pedestrian zone didn't mean anything?"

"Why yes Didi," said Rolf, smiling but not at all amused. "Quite sure."

The waitress set down two pieces of cake, each surrounded on all sides by a piece of plastic, and a pair of *cafe Viennois*.

Deirdre pushed down a thought that would spoil everything if she let it: a desire that they too might walk like other couples along an elegantly manicured path.

What was Rolf saying? Ah yes, he was chattering about the antics of Herr Siebste and Renate. Suddenly his face went serious. What was happening with that arbitrage she and Renate had been doing? The spread was how many basis points?

She would have to re-do Renate's calculations of the float, Rolf said--by hand if need be. How many times must he tell her not to trust Renate?

Deirdre contained an impulse to reach across the table and stroke his beard. The whole matter had been troubling her more than she had wanted to admit, and now it was solved. Here, as everywhere, he solved it for her.

Rolf looked down at his watch. His faced shut tight as the wooden blinds Germans rolled down outside their windows at the end of every day, the *rolladen*.

"Oh dear. I was expected at my mother's half an hour ago. I must go before she calls Elise."

"Can't you make some excuse?"

"Of course not. Please, Didi. Look--I will get you a newspaper to read."

With the tiny gold coffee spoon, Deirdre sprinkled some light brown sugar crystals atop the crests of perfectly foamed cream and watched them fall. How different were they--was she--really, from Renate and Herr Siebste?

"Here, *liebchen*. There's a tram stop outside--it's the number 15, direction *Hauptwache*.

Do you have a card?"

As she rose to leave, she saw the little Art Deco lighter, placed at right angles to his plate. How beautiful, how coldly perfect its polished silver surface, its carefully etched *R*.

As she put it in her *Tasche*, she was surprised to find how much it pleased her, this sign that the farewell had upset him too, at least a little.

It was cold in New York--colder than Frankfurt, much colder than she remembered.

The snow fell in drifts only to vanish an hour later, burned off by heat from the subway grates. Scraps of newspaper lingered underfoot like discarded love letters. Champagne was only for New Year's; chocolate bon-bons found only in candy shops. The subways seemed full of women with old-fashioned cloche hats, plain black wool coats, and perfectly shaped, lipsticked mouths. Drugstores sold aspirins, not enchantments. At Rockefeller Center the tree was smaller than she remembered and as she watched, one of the skaters fell.

"So--when are you coming back for good, Deirdre? You look terrific. It must agree with you, being over there."

It was her old officemate Maryellen. They were drinking whisky sours—whisky sours!-- in a crowded bar on Fifty-Seventh Street one evening during Happy Hour. They had been scholarship girls at Fordham together, then the first women management trainees at the Bank. With a shy smile, Maryellen held out a photograph--a thin-lipped young man with horn-rimmed glasses and too much hair, standing before a large and amazingly ugly house. Maryellen was married now. She and Jack had a house in Connecticut.

Deirdre broke a potato chip in two, then put it back in the bowl.

Everyone she knew was married now.

Evenings she went off into the bedroom with a cup of the tea Rolf had given her and brushed out her hair. She placed the monogrammed silver lighter so she could see it or its reflection no matter where she looked. With the sight of Rolf's emblem, the loneliness took on a familiar, profiled shape. The scent of the tea only sharpened her senses, otherwise glad enough to be dormant. In the night she woke to the neon hands of the clock glowing in the darkness, never more than an hour later than the last time. Owls, large-eyed and shrieking, flew through her dreams. As the half-light of dawn finally broke through the narrow venetian blinds, she could almost feel the soft familiar hands, almost smell his scent. At six she rose to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen, tiptoeing on the cold linoleum floor.

"Deirdre--are you all right?"

It was her mother's voice, anxious and strong, in what she recognized for the first time as a New York accent.

In the afternoons, the bars drew her in, and she would find herself making circles on a tall, fogged glass with her index finger. The smell of the cigarettes and the drink gave pleasure—or at least a partial and temporary respite from pain. But the men in the bars had hands composed of fat, unfeeling fingers. Now and then one would sidle up, smelling of whiskey and unfamiliar flesh.

Christmas Eve it snowed again. By morning the steps were frozen, and a thin white dusting covered the street. One by one, Deirdre's older sisters and their husbands descended from the farthest suburbs, children—ten in all—in tow. By three o'clock the lights of the Christmas

tree blinked as if with exhaustion. The bare wooden floors of the little row house were covered with crumpled gift paper, abandoned toys, and squabbling children. In the living room, the women complained among themselves. How unhappy they all looked with their carefully penciled eyebrows, their tiny diamonds!

At the opening of the gifts, her mother and father exclaimed politely over the pillows. Deirdre was pleased: perhaps it would be all right after all.

Then her mother rose, a pillow clutched to her chest. They were too beautiful to be used every day, she said.

Deirdre objected: they were only velveteen, not real velvet.

"Nonsense," said her mother. "It would upset your father to use something so nice for everyday."

Announcing that thirty years with the Post Office had rendered him unfit for so much human company, her father lumbered slowly towards the back room where the men waited for him with cigars and cheap brandy.

"Still with the long hair, eh Deirdre?" said her father as he passed. "Always so independent, always a mind of your own. I suppose you think we're not good enough for you now you've been over there."

Deirdre leaned up against the mantelpiece, head throbbing. A memory of the gray woolen owl floated into her mind—its dull button eyes, its thick-skeined hair.

The phone rang. Deirdre began at once to crash through a pile of wrapping paper.

"It might not be for you, you know," said her mother.

But it was.

"Are you all right?" she shouted over the line.

There was a pause, followed by a crackle.

"Yes, yes, it seems things are not quite as I thought--but we can talk about it when you get back. You *are* coming back, aren't you?"

The nervousness in his voice gave her a thrill almost as strong as if he had been in the room.

"Well, I'm glad at least *one* of us is not having any difficulties right now. I can hardly wait to see you--"the familiar chuckle made her heart jump--"in the flesh."

"Rolf?"

She had a sense that asking would be a mistake, yet surely there was no reason not to.

"The owl--the owl in your room? I was just thinking of it the other day--such a funny little owl. Where did it come from?"

"Oh, that old thing." There was an embarrassment in his voice. "It doesn't *go* any more, does it? It was a present for my wife a long time ago, when we became--how do you say?--involved. I should get rid of it now that so much has happened between you and me." He made a sound in his throat that was not quite a laugh. "Especially now. Well, toodle-oo, or whatever you say in America for *Tschüss*."

"*Tschüss*," she said, trying with all her might to get the dreaded *ü* sound right for once.

"Oh Rolf--I have your lighter. You left it in the *Cafe Wilhelmsschloss*."

"Oh, good," he said, his voice sounding normal for the first time. "I thought it was lost forever."

"Oh no," she answered with a sudden absurd infusion of hope. "Nothing can be lost forever."

As she walked down the ramp from the train station, Deirdre threw off her coat as if it was already spring. The terminal, so much newer and cleaner than she remembered, seemed filled with elegant and serious-looking people, all walking with a brisk sense of purpose. At the first kiosk, she stopped for a newspaper.

"Zwo Mark fünfzig."

An old man with a wizened face slapped the change from her 10-mark piece on the saucer with a rude thump, then showed her his back.

But it still felt like coming home.

Outside, she waited for the tram next to two Turkish women, heads covered with scarves no doubt from Hertie's Department Store. Under a familiar pale gray sky, the number 6 tram clicked its way slowly through the switches. Clutching the silver monogrammed lighter in her pocket harder and harder between her fingers, she did not know whether to laugh at herself or cry. *Hurry, hurry, hurry*, she thought, in the same rhythm as the tram, slow and deliberate but finally moving forward.

Standing at the door of Rolf's flat, she hesitated. It seemed an eternity after she knocked, and then suddenly it was too late. Once more they were in the boat--far, far out.

Afterwards, she lay quiet on the deep pile of the rug, enfolded in the robe's cobalt-colored silk as Rolf went off to the kitchen to fetch tea. As she opened her eyes, she noticed to

her surprise that on the other couch, the linen been pushed aside, exposing the starched white sheets. It made for an odd impression of violence.

"So where is she--your wife? You said something had happened."

Rolf set the silver tray down and looked away.

"It seems you were right after all. My wife--Elise--she is leaving me."

They had it all arranged, Elise and Günter. They had already signed the lease for a flat on the *Königsallee*. They had begun negotiations to adopt orphans from Thailand--two of them. Those who lived in rich countries had an obligation to the poor, Günter said. His wife had already given her consent to the divorce. All that was left was for Rolf to agree.

"You cannot imagine, Didi," said Rolf in a strange, high voice. "My heart was beating as if I might die right there and then. She was not *asking* me, you understand. She was *notifying* me, as if I was the person who brings the breakfast rolls."

Rolf rose, walked over to the window and looked out over the crane, the factory, the perfect vegetable rows. As he turned and walked back, the scent of his soap reached her along with the rich warm haze of the tea.

"You know, Didi, we really did nothing compared to them. We were discreet; we were considerate. I will never forget how he made fun of me to my face last Valentine's Day, standing in that very doorway, telling me how I really ought to bring Elise a present since she had a mouth like a Cupid's bow. 'A Cupid for your Cupid,' he said. 'It's the least you can do.' The cheek of it!"

They had done it in his own home, on his own bed, in the kitchen, at resorts in Bavaria--it was unspeakable.

Deirdre put a hand on his arm. It was trembling and cold. She took a sip of the tea to calm herself: at least that was the same.

"But you told her, didn't you? I mean about us."

Rolf reached for a lighter in the same style but even more elegant than the one still in her pocketbook. In the silence left by her question, the *click* of the starter echoed in the room.

"What difference does it make what I said?" Rolf said. "It's all over, that's the main thing. Why we could marry now, if my mother accepted you."

Deirdre shivered, then drew the thin blue silk around her shoulders. Marry? A foreigner in Germany for the rest of her life? Yet to go back seemed equally impossible. From above, the owl looked down, more tacky and bedraggled than she remembered.

"Your mother? What does your mother have to do with it?"

"Really, Didi. Of course she would have to approve. It's not as if a couple can live outside society."

"But what would I work at? You said married couples were not permitted at the Bank."

"Why, somewhere else of course."

"But if I couldn't get a work permit? I wouldn't want to be a *Schwarzarbeiterin*."

"But Didi," said Rolf, stiff with the hurt look of one who had expected to be understood.

"I would *protect* you. You would be my *wife*."

If only she could close her eyes and make everything exactly as it had been before. The delicate feel of his beard, the scent of his soap, his lips slowly parting hers as the boat moved through calm waters.

Rolf sat down on his wife's bed and stared past Deirdre with his stranger's look that mingled petulance and rage.

"Ah, Didi--" he murmured. "What a joke it all is. What a ghastly joke."

Her tea was cold in the heavy cup. Outside, the crane moved slowly back and forth across the colorless sky. As the factory whistle sounded, a rush of black smoke burst upwards in the air. A group of young people were riding single file on large black bicycles through the vegetable rows. As they reached the miniature traffic light at the end of the path, they slowed to a stop one by one.

"I won't cut my hair if I stayed," Deirdre said, louder than she intended. "Not even if you asked."

Rolf turned to her with this new stranger's face, an image of petulance, of barely suppressed rage.

"I would never think to interfere so personal a matter," he said. "But really Deirdre, don't you think that in this important moment there are far more important things we need to decide?"