

## *The Optician*

The petite old lady said she had time. Also that she did want to see me again. She scribbled down her phone number on a piece of paper that she had fished out from somewhere. Her name was Shella Klar. I divided the scrap of paper in two and wrote on the part that was blank. As she left the optician's shop I observed her figure, enveloped in her coat, and felt concerned about her. Would she be able to look after herself amidst the Saturday crowds and not get knocked over, or would she be overlooked? Shella Klar is small. Has become smaller with age. She said she had to go shopping, so that she'd have something in the house if someone came to call on her, and mentioned the foremost delicatessen in town. Next Monday was her birthday, her seventy-fourth.

Just before getting to know Shella Klar, I had turned round involuntarily as she entered the small optician's shop. I experienced the entrance of a queen, uncertain in her step, yet obviously a diva, focusing all eyes upon herself, with hair as short as matchsticks, wearing a long, bright summer coat and big big sunglasses. No, no, she could wait, she said, warding off the friendly optician, she had time, then she took off her glasses. She wanted to have them cleaned. She had brown mousy eyes in a clear face. I smiled to her, as one smiles to a pretty child and said that this was my first pair of multifocal lenses. Beautiful frame, she said, but these glasses will ruin your posture. She seemed to have a certain wisdom about her. I asked if she wanted to see me again.

She had *danza eleganza*, she said when we met, as arranged, in a coffee-house. Her slender hand flew around above the teacup in an arabesque movement. I suspected an illness. And she told me about how she had fled to England in 1938. She had always been a dancer, throughout her life, and had sometimes also painted. At various periods she had even done completely different things. Depending on the circumstances. In Paris in the 1960s, she had hired students to drive tourists around the city in their wealthy parents' limousines. She would love to teach her 'body technique' again. But now, now I should accompany her to a bar with piano music. I proposed the Loos Bar.

The waiter brought out large cushions from the bar's 'lower deck' and Shella let her delicate back, now rather bent, sink down into them. Like an odalisque, I joined her. Our walk from Café Prückl through the city to the Loos Bar had brought us closer together. Afterwards

we drank martini cocktails. There was no pianist in the narrow bar, which rather resembled a ship's cabin. But there was the song 'Chawa Nagilha Chawa', later Cole Porter, and still later Frank Sinatra. On our stroll through the city I had offered her my forearm and she had supported herself on it, walking very slowly. By Wollzeile we had got as far as Paris, to the boyfriend that she had had there. So, my dear, she had said, and took me by the hand, now we shall walk faster.

She had taken a fancy to the Loos Bar. Making our way across St. Stephan's Square she had told of the *Strohkoffer* club in the cellar of the bar. There she had danced with Albert Paris Gütersloh, with Johann Fruhmann and all the others – in the years of post-war Vienna. When darkness fell we left the bar. The young waiters, who had offered us their own cigarettes, insisted we come again. They seldom had guests like us. Shella's Paris lover still preoccupied me. As we were once again strolling hand in hand, up Kärtnerstraße to the taxi rank, I asked Shella if she had a boyfriend now. No, she said, no, unfortunately not. But she'd like to have one. I delivered Shella to the taxi driver as if she were some valuable freight. She didn't want to take the subway, she'd had too much to drink she said, perhaps it would make her feel sick.

The following day, upon entering Aromat at noon, I saw a man seated at the regulars' table whom I had never seen there before. Not so old, but work-worn. Despite the heat, he was wearing an earth-brown, double-breasted suit that closed with golden buttons, underneath which was a green-and-pink checked flannel shirt. An ugly person, such as Joe Berger had been, or Quasimodo. Added to which, he had a measure of modest but mischievous insight into the possibilities of his own existence, a wakeful sagacity about life which lent a certain beauty to his gaze. I sat down next to him and he began to talk. About his work as a builder, about how he had built a house for his son, and about his brother, who had three women. Was Herr Wenzel bothering me, the owner of the place inquired. I finished spooning up my soup and listened. If a woman would only give him the chance, Herr Wenzel said, he would be able to show her a lot of tenderness. Although of course he wasn't handsome like his brother. I thought of Shella and wished that she had been the right one for Herr Wenzel. Could he see me again he asked, as I was leaving.

I left, thinking about it. About love, desire and about life in general. About Shella and Herr Wenzel. About my role in this game. First of all I went to the optician's. Instead of the

pair of multifocal glasses, which I gave back because they left too much unfocused in the field of visual transition, the optician made me two pairs. One for the near distance. And one for the far distance.

Gabriele Petricek

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