



EWALD ARENZ

DIE LIEBE AN MIESEN TAGEN / LOVE ON LOUSY DAYS

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English sample translation

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How quickly the garden had run wild! In the first few years, she'd kept driving out there. Pruned the apple trees in late winter. Planted things out in the cold frame in March. Picked the blackcurrants in June... all things she'd never done before. All things that Paul had shown her. Wasn't it meant to be women who loved gardening? It had never meant much to her, but she'd always liked watching Paul at work. Because he always got so absorbed in whatever he was doing at any point.

Clara climbed out of the car. The door slammed more violently than she'd intended. It was unusually windy. Changeable and chilly – that was the way these early April days had been so far. Like her. Changeable and chilly. But something had changed, something had been set in motion. That was why she hadn't been here for so long, and that was why she had now spontaneously driven up here.

The cottage looked the same as it had always done when they arrived. The blue-painted shutters closed. The roof might possibly be a little lower than before. The old grapevine, its trunk

leaning wearily against the façade, had yet to bud. The grapes were always late. But the dogrose by the fence, with its tendrils that had gone unpruned for years, looked as though it had cast out fishing lines in the direction of the house. The red of last year's hips was a glowing enticement against the wild, cloud-scudded sky on this windswept, blue spring day. If she photographed it like that, it would surely not be so difficult to find a buyer. She picked up the camera and attempted a few pictures. She could capture a little of the mood. The mood around the house. Not the one inside her; she didn't want to touch that for fear of breaking it. She opened the letter box. The key was still inside it, buried beneath ancient flyers. And then, as if carried in on a fierce gust of wind, it all came flying back just the same. The memory of the many times they'd come, to renovate, to paint, to bring up old furniture that they'd bought at flea markets, and finally, just to spend a weekend here. Those small, almost forgotten satisfactions that only turned to happiness in retrospect. Not having enjoyed the moment enough! Some little thing never quite fitting! When Clara thought back, she found it hard to believe that, back then, she hadn't sucked it all in, lapped it all up until she was sated with that happiness, full, so full that she'd grown tired and her eyelids had gently drooped with that happiness. She straightened up and lifted the camera again. That wouldn't happen again. Never again.

Later, she sat on the veranda that they'd built together. She'd taken one of the chairs from the woodshed and tipped it up against the wall. She loved sitting like that. Always had, ever since her schooldays. In limbo, always around that balancing point that you could only hold for a few moments without leaning against something or falling forwards again. Sometimes the sun shone red in her closed eyes and she felt a fleeting warmth on her face, then a cloud would pass over in quick succession and the temperature would drop equally rapidly. She had never sat so alone and so quiet here before. The silence allowed the old pictures to rise up. Let the memories come; they no longer floored her. A gust swept around the corner of the house, hitting Clara, and she instinctively jerked up her feet to avoid tipping over; the chair landed hard on its legs, making her laugh. The memories might not floor her, but the wind could. Reality. The here and now. The mere fact of having survived yesterday was no guarantee that things would work out again now.

She looked through the photos. She still needed to take a few snaps of the interior. The sky was pretty clear just then, so the light inside ought to be nicer.

She walked back into the house. It was like stepping into a church in winter. The house hadn't been heated for ages and the cold took her breath away. Yet the sun shone through the windows, drawing everything in friendly, soft lines. The pale brown wood of the low table. The faded cushions on the old 1950s armchair. Even the blurred, off-white tiles in the little kitchen. Everything

looked as warm as honey, it photographed beautifully despite the icy cold. She exhaled as she stepped back out through the front door into the open air. The wind suddenly seemed friendly and mild.

The museum of my love, thought Clara. For sale.

(pp.5-7)

Elias wheeled down the narrow alleyway between the cemetery and the oldest houses to the top of the steps that led down to the lower part of town, dismounted and shouldered his bike. He could have taken the longer way around the cemetery, as he usually did, but this path was nicer. These April days, before the spring came in with a vengeance, were the best. When it was still cool and windy, like today, but the sun was already shining through the scudding clouds, lighting up the world, sketching fleeting promises on the walls and the asphalt and the passing trams. Promises of something that he couldn't even truly name. Sometimes that tormented him. Like lost notes from a wonderful song that drifted over to you. And although you desperately wanted to hear that song in full, you couldn't even say exactly which direction the notes were coming from, and the moment you started walking, you were making too much noise to still hear them. At such moments, everyday satisfaction felt empty. As if there had to be far more.

It was still early and he had plenty of time. He hadn't needed to leave Vera so soon, but sometimes he just couldn't stand it with her any longer. At those times, he lay awake beside her, heard her peaceful breathing, and the thoughts streamed through his head although he followed none of them up. It was like watching yourself thinking. Those morning moments were the most truthful. It was at those very times that he could no longer bear to lie there – because he had the sense that he was in the wrong place. Standing here in the cool of the morning, at the foot of the steps in town felt right. He mounted and cycled sedately down the road to the town wall. There was a front garden there that delighted him every spring. It belonged to one of the few 1870s villas still standing in the suburbs. There was an ancient magnolia in the garden, its branches reaching higher than the second floor. Every year, since the first time he'd been here, he'd looked forward to it flowering. There was something soothing and familiar in the buds opening every year. Sometimes, in winter, when he passed the fence overhung by the magnolia branches, he stopped to study the first hints of the buds. They always returned. The time would come when he would no longer pass by.

He thought briefly of Vera. Don't, he told himself. Why did relationships always have to be difficult? Why couldn't she just let him be the way he was?

He'd reached the garden, braced himself with one foot on the sandstone base and held onto the iron railing. The blossoms had not yet opened. They probably needed another few days. That was how it was meant to be. Nobody tugged at the magnolia buds to make them open. They either flowered, or they didn't. Yes, thought Elias, as he pushed off and pedalled away, people weren't plants and relationships weren't magnolias. But the image was fitting all the same.

Although he was unusually early, Mareike was already standing on stage, pushing the tubs of rubber trees to and fro. Elias sat down in the small auditorium and watched in amusement. He couldn't have done anything else. Mareike had amazing ideas, but couldn't always express them in the way you'd expect a director to do. He liked the atmosphere of a theatre in the morning. It had been similar almost everywhere he'd worked this far. The quiet before the technicians, or the other actors, arrived. There was a very faint, dry smell of make-up and the unmistakable odour of burnt dust on the spotlights. Eventually, they'd get LED spots here too, and that would disappear. Would he notice? After all, it often took ages to notice that something was missing. Like old people, whose hearing grew worse and worse until the birds seemed to be singing soundlessly in the trees above them, at which time they realised that they hadn't been able to hear them for a long time.

"Does that look better?" Mareike asked breathlessly, once she'd dragged all the tubs into a row at the front edge of the stage. Elias raised both hands innocently.

"Depends what you want," he said. "If you're trying to tell us that we're not good enough... that the audience would be better off unable to see us act at all, then you've succeeded."

"You don't have to see the whole stage!" said Mareike, completely caught up in her idea. "You guys then clear them away, little by little. Over the course of the play. The same way the truth comes to light, little by little."

It wasn't such a bad idea.

"So houseplants and rubber trees are our grand delusions. Hm," Elias said, "I always thought as much."

He'd only meant it as a joke, but those were the most amazing moments in his profession. Along with the applause, obviously. Standing at the edge of the stage after an intense performance, gradually slipping back from the role into real life and becoming aware of the audience again and realising that the applause was for you. Yes, that too. But the deep moments were generally the quiet ones, like now. The times when a phrase suddenly echoed inside him as it would in a cathedral. Grand delusions.

"Hey," he said to Mareike, climbing up from the auditorium to join her on the stage, "I guess you can't truly live if you're in the wrong life."

"Good line," said Mareike thoughtfully. "Really good. We could use it for the programme."

"I know."

For a second, he was tempted not to say anything more.

"It's not mine. It could've been, though," he added hastily, with a smile. Mareike grinned indulgently.

"The rehearsal doesn't start for another half hour. You don't have to be in character yet."

She knew him pretty well already he thought, as he crossed the little stage to the dressing room that adjoined it almost directly. The theatre wasn't large. Hanging on the stairway walls were the posters from last year's productions. A few for young people. A mini opera. A play by Sarah Kane... they hadn't quite nailed that one. It wasn't bad here but, all the same, he sometimes missed the bigger stages. The whole apparatus around you. Always giving you the feeling that everything there revolved around you, even if you weren't playing a leading role. Here, they even had to do their own make-up. But, on the other hand, he got to see Jule more often.

He walked to the window and looked down into the backyard. Around it on three sides were red, windowless façades. It would've looked even more confined if it weren't for the large lime tree in the middle, spanning the few tables.

Back then, everything had felt right. Mona and he, having just left stage school. The theatre – a whole new world. And the two of them freshly landed on its coast, full of desire to explore, roam, discover it. Everything there was. The ability to be everything you wanted. But above all, battling and loving.

Stage fights. That's how they'd met. The fencing teacher had been a genuine fencer, and now and then she'd shown them the proper blows, lunges, parries. Mona, who could be so gentle, was wild then. If you came out of a lesson without bruises, it hadn't been the real thing, she'd once laughed. And the two of them always together. Stick fighting. Sword fighting. Stage punch-ups. Those were the best. Once, they'd enacted a fight in the middle of the street. People had come running, called the police, and then, in mid-brawl, they'd kissed and run away, hand in hand.

Their first sex had been like that too. Like stage fencing. They'd probably both felt like they were only acting a part, that it was all just a play, could never be serious. It was amazing. And then when Mona had got pregnant... they could never have named Jule anything but Jule. What else could the daughter of two stage-struck twenty-one-year-olds have been called? And in the same way that they were in love with each other, they were in love with Jule. Until eventually the stage fights turned into real fights. Over the way that life should be, away from the stage.

We can't just act out living together, Mona had screamed. We have to really do it.

But everything is just an act, he'd screamed back, and had meant it. How else could you live your life?

They'd split the same way they'd found each other, but it had been an unequal struggle. How could you parry a real foil with a stage dagger? It breaks, and the foil hits you, and runs you through, and suddenly you can't breathe for pain because your love is blown apart, as if in an explosion. Love alone wasn't enough. Love was like a soft metal. It had to be honed in everyday life

before it could be both supple and firm. Like a fencing foil. Mona had understood that. He'd been content with the emotion, and everyday life hadn't interested him.

He pushed open the window and breathed in the cool spring air, his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the still-sparse linden. Then...

All the same: what a joy Mona had been. For him. For Jule. Because, despite everything, they'd never forgotten how and why they'd first fallen in love. At least that had held them over the last fifteen years.

And Mona had been right: you couldn't playact life. That was probably why he'd been early for the rehearsal. Because he was, once again, playing at a difficult relationship.

"But this time," he confided in an undertone to the tree, "but this time there's no child."

(pp.8-13)

It was too chilly to sit outside. The morning's blue had long since vanished and the sky was uniformly grey. Elias could see Vera through the large window of the café on Lutherplatz, sitting at the small table that was her favourite. She was reading and looked both engrossed and very beautiful. Her hair tied back in a ponytail, her profile showing a cheeky nose that was maybe a trifle too snub, her book in hand. As if posing for a photo.

I love the images, he thought, as he locked the bike to a lamppost, the images, not her. But that had been the deal. Don't fall in love with me she'd laughed at the start, on their first few days away together, lying in an overly soft B&B double bed in the early morning.

I won't, he'd replied with a similar smile, suppressing the little feeling of arrogance that meant: I won't, but you will.

She looked up as he walked in and laid the book on the table.

"Long rehearsal? Was Mareike happy?"

They kissed briefly. He sat beside her on the bench. Vera liked it when they sat side by side, when their legs touched, when he put his hand on her back. At first, he'd always sat opposite her because he preferred being able to look into each other's faces when you spoke. But perhaps she was right.

You like having a table between us, don't you? Always at a little distance.

Since then, he'd sat beside her. But he only did so for her sake. Because she liked it better that way.

"Nah," he said lightly, "Mareike's never satisfied. But that's a good thing. I prefer that to directors who never give a proper lead. Who never tell you what they've actually got in mind. And then you try something and they..."

"... say 'no showboating'." Vera completed his sentence. In the same tone.

Why didn't he like that? That had been exactly the way he told it. But it was as though she were laying claim to something that didn't belong to her. This theatre jargon, these old in-jokes that you and your colleagues kept repeating, the whole... it was simply as though it wasn't her place to speak in that tone. But – whatever. There was always something that bothered you about someone else. Like the way she hated him sitting opposite her. He guessed he'd just have to accept it. Perfection didn't exist.

"Yes, something like that," he said. "But I think it could turn out pretty well. You'll see."

Vera was pleased.

"Did you get me a ticket?"

“Yes. No problem – I’m the leading man.”

She laughed.

“It’s a two-person play...”

“Exactly,” said Elias smugly, “you see?”

She pulled her phone from her bag.

“Will you come with me to look at a house? We could make a day of it. There’s a lake nearby. Fancy it?”

There were a few photos; even on the small screen, they looked very pretty. He liked old houses. The pictures reminded him of the large rooms of his childhood, the hallway with the solnhofen stone tiles that were so wonderfully cool under your bare feet in summer, the heavy oak front door.

“What for? I can’t afford to buy a house.”

Why was he so brusque? He’d love a day out. It was... maybe it was just the way she’d asked him. He pulled himself together.

“Why are you looking at houses? You like your flat don’t you. It’s perfect. Especially the bedroom.”

He smiled. Leant over and kissed her. Sometimes that overcame him, and a warm feeling for her rose up in him. Those were lovely moments.

“Oh yes, the bedroom.” She leant her slim leg against his. “Why were you up so early this morning?”

“I had to help Mareike with the staging.”

It was both true and untrue. He took the thing that had happened later, by chance, as his reason because he couldn’t get his head around the reality.

The waiter came over and he ordered. The café was only half full. The music was quiet and unobtrusive. The hiss of the coffee machine, the muffled clatter of cutlery, the diaphanous weave of conversations where you couldn’t make out the words and only sensed the mood – he loved all of that.

“So, will you come?”

He nodded.

“Sure. And if there’s a lake, we can swim.”

He said it perfectly seriously.

“It’s April!” Vera exclaimed before realising that he was just pulling her leg. Her expression brightened.

“Great! I’m looking forward to it. I really am!”

She drained her cappuccino excitedly. He found that so sweet in her. You could see everything about her, every emotion. Her face was an open book.

“Fancy another?” He pointed to her empty cup. “Mine probably won’t arrive till after we’ve left. Looks like you got priority service.”

“Because I’m prettier,” she said.

He leant back.

“Most waiters judge more by a customer’s wallet than their appearance. I’ve got money on me. You probably haven’t. But they don’t know that and they think you’re loaded.”

“Because I’m prettier,” Vera repeated.

Elias gave an exaggerated sigh.

“If you repeat it often enough it might eventually get through to me. Exploit it then, and get the waiter’s attention. I really would like my coffee.”

She waved, and he paid her just as little attention as he’d done to Elias. They both had to laugh. At moments like these, when you just stayed on the surface, things felt good and not fake.

(pp. 20-23)

“Annemarie has gone again. I need to have a lie-down for a while.”

Her father’s voice sounded quavery and old. For a moment, as she automatically checked the time on the display, Clara wondered when that had started. Papa had never been the sporty type. Always a thinker. Deliberate. No, she thought, her lips twisting mockingly at the memory, not deliberate. Lost and incredibly slow in all everyday matters. Except in speech. There, he’d always been forceful, almost fiery. That had probably been the thing that prompted her mother to marry him. Despite being his exact opposite in so many ways. He could speak. He could think. But when it came to practical things, he’d been as lost as she’d been adept.

“Do you know where she’s gone?”

“What?”

Clara rolled her eyes. Fortunately, he couldn’t see that over the phone.

“Papa! Can you please use your hearing aid when you call me?”

“The batteries are dead. You could bring me some. They’re those tiny little...”

Clara interrupted him.

“Papa! Please! Do you know which way she headed?”

“No. I need to go and lie down. My blood sugar’s low and now... can you come? Or are you at the newspaper?”

Now he asks me, she thought. After we’ve been on the phone for three minutes already.

“No, I’m not at the newspaper. They laid me off. What about Jan? Can’t he drive?”

Her father’s interest was piqued but went off on a tangent.

“Why did they lay you off? What happened? Are they allowed to just do that?”

Clara smiled, against her will. Why was her father like this? Forgot everything else the moment a subject that interested him came along. She could probably now spend the next half-hour listening while he lectured her on what was legal and what wasn’t, why the global economy – whatever that might be – was to blame for her being laid off and so on, without any need to say a word. Or, more precisely, without the chance to say a word. That was probably also why, if he’d called Jan, he hadn’t answered him. She cut the conversation off brusquely.

“Papa, I’m leaving now. See you soon.”

“That’s fine,” he replied, and hung up. No goodbye. Presumably mulling over all the legal implications that his daughter’s redundancy might have on world peace.

When she left the house, she felt the fine drizzle on her face. Rain didn't much bother her mother. Better rain than snow. In winter it was always much worse. The days were short and cold and dangerous. Now, in spring, not so much could happen. Unless of course she didn't find her.

It took her over half an hour to get to the western edge of town. Despite everything, she liked these sudden escapes from the everyday. Like a flood, or heavy snowfall on a winter night bringing all traffic to a standstill. An emergency, where other rules applied. Not going to work, breaking off anything else you might be doing, just having a single, clear goal – getting on top of the situation. She was pretty good at that. She had more difficulty with getting back to everyday life.

Her parents' flat was in a rather ugly building in a pretty area. You could still make out the village structure, even if the 1980s' newbuilds had encircled and almost overgrown it, and some of the old farmyards had turned into carparks and supermarkets. Luckily, she'd long left home when her parents had bought the flat.

Where was Mama? She drove slowly down the residential streets, slowly enough that she could glance into the front gardens and driveways too. Someone kept honking behind her; she indicated and made an impatient hand gesture out of the window, telling the other driver to go past. The car revved up and roared past, making it clear that she'd been too slow. She knew that. But she could hardly mount a light-up sign on the roof: looking for my mother – she has dementia.

Her mother generally wandered towards the town centre. But not always. It was equally possible that something had distracted her and she'd walked into the nearest house that had its door open.

Systematically, she drove down street after street, and every time she turned a corner, she got the feeling that her mother would instantly turn up in the road behind her. But not looking wasn't an option either. She crawled past an older man who was walking his dog in the rain. He looked over and gestured to her to stop. Clara braked and rolled down the window.

"Are you looking for someone?" The man pointed back behind himself. "I just saw an old lady with a cat on her shoulder... she was somewhat disorientated... but she wouldn't let me help."

Clara smiled.

"Thank you. Yes. That's my mother. This way?"

The man nodded and pointed to one of the side streets. Cul-de-sac. That was why she hadn't been down it. Clara turned. In the narrow street, she recognised her mother right away by her determined gait. It was a bitter twist of fate. Her mother had always been afraid of growing frail. And she hadn't. In her mid-seventies, she didn't look the least like an old woman. From a distance, you could have taken her for fifty. She stopped beside her, looked up at her through the window and felt relief.

“Hello, Mama.”

“Toni!” said her mother. “There you are at last.”

Impatient, but pleased, as if they’d been supposed to meet up hours ago. Her hair had frizzed slightly with the damp. Her cheeks were red from walking. She had a firm grasp on the cat on her shoulder. She immediately walked around the car to climb in.

“I’m Clara, Mama.” What was in a name? Perhaps a daughter was just a daughter. Whichever one it was. At least she still recognised that they belonged together.

“So, where were you going?”

Her mother pointed to the cat.

“The...” the word failed her. “The... flyers. The cat ran away and the flyers were trying to fill her.”

Clara translated in her head. Birds. Kill.

“Mama,” she said soothingly, “buzzards don’t take cats.”

“Yes, yes,” said her mother. Just like she used to do when she wasn’t in the mood for a discussion because she completely disagreed and there would be no changing her mind. The fear that buzzards would take the cat dated from before her illness and was at least three feline generations old. Although... nobody knew when these things started. Maybe that had been a first sign, even then, and none of them had noticed it.

Mama had pulled the belt around her and was now trying to slot the end of it into the air vent. Clara helped her.

“Shall we go for a coffee?”

That almost always worked. Mama had always loved going to cafés. I guess we all inherited that, thought Clara, or else we were conditioned into it from an early age. Suddenly, she remembered a winter morning – it must have been a Saturday. Mama had taken all of them to a Konditorei, where she’d met a friend. But the four children had only ever had two cups of cocoa to share between them. Papa had only just set up his legal practice and Mama had never had enough money. Funny childhood. But nice.

“I’d love to!”

How easy it was to please her. As Clara reversed in the cul-de-sac, she felt a twinge of conscience. Maybe she just didn’t spend enough time with her parents.

“You know what, Mama?” she said, on the spur of the moment. “Forget the coffee. We’ll go for a glass of bubbly. You, me and the cat.” Mama’s laugh was like the old days.

(...)

(pp. 24-29)

They went in her car. Elias's was in the garage again. As they headed away from the town centre, he looked out of the window in silence, watching as the gardens grew larger, the buildings thinned out and the countryside expanded. He liked this sudden transition into open space. The sky was light grey and there was a pale green shimmer in the crowns of the chestnut trees that lined the country road. Some of the fields had already been sown while others were still fallow. The juxtaposition of already and not yet was a strange reflection of his inner self. This feeling, which was strongest in the spring, that everything was yet to come. That he was waiting for something. That *this* year, it would come true, fulfil what life was really all about.

"What are you thinking?"

Vera was a good driver. Now and then she glanced at her phone, even though they just had to follow the road all the way.

"About there being emotions that you only feel in spring."

Vera looked at him briefly.

"Being in love?" she asked. Her smile opened a door that he didn't want to step through. Why did she keep doing that? Demanding devotion, a confession. Obviously, you couldn't be ... well... together for eighteen months without having feelings for each other. But he didn't want to be asked about those feelings. Because, at moments like those, he had to admit that he didn't have the feelings for Vera that he should. That he took more than he gave.

"I'm opposed to love," he answered lightly. "Love just messes everything up and is responsible for every major war in world history."

"What rubbish. You just don't want to admit it because you'd be making yourself vulnerable. Because love makes us weaker."

The landscape was now one of gently rolling hills, and he thought he should keep this place in mind for a bike tour. Because he disliked the way the conversation was going, he returned to her first question.

"In early spring, everything's open. There's a sense that anything could happen, however huge. There's a kind of... not really a yearning. It's hard to put into words, it's like, as if it were tugging at you, gently, but you can always feel it. In the distance, and up above, and for a moment you mustn't even breathe because, just for these few moments, you think that there really is some great happiness out there somewhere, glinting brightly in the distance for a second, if you're just still enough. And then you'd know which way you had to go. To find happiness."

Vera paused for a brief moment, didn't look at him as she said: "When you talk like that... I know what I like about you. How can you be that sensitive one moment when you're so often indifferent to everything?"

Elias laughed and put his hand on her thigh.

"I'm an actor. Sensitivity is just playing a part."

"Idiot," she said, half joking, half serious, but she left his hand where it was.

They couldn't have been driving for longer than twenty minutes, but they missed the almost-invisible turning twice. The map on Vera's phone wasn't detailed enough, and Elias had insisted that it wasn't a road, just some farm track that would lead them at best to a gingerbread house. They went round in a big loop before ending up back on the narrow street that led into the tiny village. There was a large inn, there was a chapel, and there was a bakery.

(...)

(pp. 32-24)

Then there was the house. It was small. And decidedly pretty. It must have been repainted a few years ago, but the paint had now gently faded. A dogrose was running wild over the fence, its tendrils reaching up over the small wooden gate. You really could imagine, thought Elias, that if a briar spent a hundred years running rampant like that, you would actually need a sword to cut your way through to the castle. Not that this was a castle. It was little more than a cottage, one-and-a-half storeys high.

"There's a car there." Vera pointed to the vehicle parked by the fence. "Maybe she's inside, or in the garden."

They looked for a bell. There wasn't one. Vera pushed the little garden gate open and they walked up to the front door. It was locked and there was no doorbell here either.

"I'll go round the back," said Elias.

"I'll wait here," said Vera, trying to see in through one of the windows.

The garden was large. To left and right, a narrow brick path led around the house. It too looked as though it had gone long unused; green shoots were sprouting amid the brickwork. He ducked under the branches of an elder tree, and stumbled as he came around the corner, slap into the wooden veranda which was a good twenty centimetres higher than the path.

Clara had heard the voices outside the house with half an ear, but hadn't been expecting them to be the prospective buyers already. It couldn't be as late as all that; she'd left her phone in

the car and paid no attention to the clock chimes. She'd walked through the house one last time – she didn't want anything personal on display beyond the furniture. Mind you, everything was personal. The paint on the walls, the tiles, the stripped and oiled doorframes... all the things you do when you buy a ruin, she thought with a tiny smile. When you have no idea how much work that will really be. Once upon a time, she'd been mad about large manor houses... just as well she'd never come into the unfortunate situation of having to throw money down the drain. Even this little cottage had been a money pit – the kind where you didn't even hear an echo from the bottom.

It was icy in the house. She ought to let a little warm air in. She opened the patio doors and saw a man stumble onto the veranda, fall to his knees and immediately get up again.

"It's a long time since I had that happen," said Clara.

Elias rubbed his knee for a moment, but he hadn't fallen hard. The woman was leaning on the doorframe. She was wearing a skirt suit; it looked unexpectedly fashionable and didn't fit with this little house in the least. Could she be the estate agent? Vera hadn't mentioned one.

"Sorry?" he asked.

Clara glanced at him. It was hard to say whether he was in his mid-thirties or over forty. Younger than her, anyway. There was something boyish about him, but there were a few fine lines around his mouth, which... well, who knew.

"A man falling to his knees in front of me before introducing himself," said Clara dryly. "It's a long time since I had that happen."

"I think it's more fitting this way around. Besides, then I don't have to apologise for just walking into your garden. Should I introduce myself now, or was that sweeping bow enough to go on with?"

Elias had liked her response, and it prompted his cheek. Some people reacted differently from most others. Very rarely. People who didn't act shocked and then ask the blatantly obvious 'are you hurt?', just because it was the thing to do.

"I was expecting a woman," Clara said now. "Are you with her, or did you fall over on my veranda by chance?"

"The lady is round the front, waiting for you. I'm just the entertainment. Is this really your veranda or are you the estate agent?"

Clara had to laugh.

"The estate agent? Me? Do I look like I am?"

Elias glanced around the garden. Old fruit trees, and a few younger ones between them. A wonky, ancient shed. A cold frame that had run so wild that you could only just make out its concrete edging. One of the panels in the wooden cover had broken. Then he looked back at Clara.

“In comparison to the garden, certainly.”

She liked the fact that she didn't know right away when he was being serious and when he wasn't. She looked down at herself. How long had it been since she'd had a conversation like this? So light. There was nothing to it but the pleasure of playing skilful balls to each other.

“I had the choice,” she said, “between a gardener and a dressmaker.”

Elias smiled.

“If you can afford a dressmaker, why are you selling the house?”

His ball had skimmed the net.

“Think about it,” she answered mockingly, “or look at my clothes.” He had to laugh. Phew, she thought. She hadn't intended to give a serious answer.

“Come on, we'll open the door for your wife.”

She pushed the veranda door right open. Elias stepped into the house. It was very cold.

“We're not married.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” asked Clara, already shaking her head with reluctance before she'd finished the question. It was none of her business. It was just revenge for the one about why she was selling the house, and he couldn't help that. He'd asked it as part of their little game, not to hurt her.

“Such a pretty house. I like it when a place isn't renovated to death. When you don't drive the ancestors out of the walls.”

He actually says ancestors, thought Clara. She couldn't help remarking: “And you don't like answering silly questions.”

They'd reached the front door.

“Nor do you,” replied Elias promptly. “Nor do you.”

Clara opened the door.

“Hello,” she said, stretching out her hand, “Clara Wagenbach.”

“Vera Steiner,” said Vera, light-hearted and fresh; and looking at Elias. “Have you two already met?”

Photogenic, thought Clara, very pretty, and was instantly irritated with herself. Why had that been her first thought? She was neither twenty nor thirty anymore and, anyway, she'd always hated that kind of self-comparison. All the same. Sometimes, other women were like a mirror to her, reflecting an image that wasn't the way she saw herself.

Elias wasn't quick enough. Clara said, easily, “Your husband fell on his knees before me. I'm afraid that doesn't mean I can reduce the price though. Come in.”

Vera looked questioningly at Elias.

“I stumbled on the veranda and fell at her feet. Not very elegant.”

Vera laughed.

“Typical. So impatient.”

It wasn't true, he thought, he wasn't that impatient. Sure, he sometimes stumbled, or even went flying, but that was because he didn't like walking slowly. He always ran. Not from impatience but because he liked to. For the first time, he realised that Vera never moved fast. He'd never even seen her walk quickly. Whereas he... he could never take the stairs slowly. Like his mother. She still ran too.

Clara walked ahead of them into the small living room. The air from outside had finally made it a little warmer and friendlier. Perhaps that was why it felt funny to lead this couple in. Because it was more reminiscent of the place they'd had back then. Cold would have been simpler and more distant. She turned around. The woman had stopped.

“This is lovely,” she said, “great taste. Did you do this all yourself?”

Clara nodded.

“It took a few years.”

It had taken ages, and sometimes she had had the feeling that the shared work was the only thing holding them together. But then events had turned out very differently.

Elias watched Vera as she knelt down by the stove and opened the flap. A draught gusted into the room, bringing the cold smell of extinguished woodfire with it.

“Are you selling the house furnished?” asked Elias. Suddenly he was genuinely interested.

“That depends,” said Clara. “At any rate I can't take it with me. My flat is too... it's already furnished. Of course, I can clear the house if you want it empty.”

“I like some of the things a lot,” Vera said quickly. “We can discuss all of that later, of course, if we decide to buy it.”

If we decide to buy it! Why had she said that? Was she playing at love, betrothal and marriage?

“Neither of us can afford this house,” he said curtly.

That was unexpected. Clara saw Vera Steiner's impatient, annoyed head movement. And then the return of her winning smile.

“We still have to ponder the finances.”

Elias was on the point of saying that he certainly had no intention of buying a house with Vera, but Clara just replied: “If there's no disagreement on big decisions, you're not a real couple. Harmony generally means indifference.”

Elias had to laugh. And there it was again, that surprising ease. Peculiar woman. Vera smiled. Clara went ahead of them into the little kitchen. The Solnhofen tiles were still there on the floor. Elias studied the slight dips worn into the tiles by a hundred years of taking the same path. The wall tiles were in strong colours; they glowed like a present-day accent in this old house. It looked fresh, he thought. Vera studied the wood-burning cooking stove.

“Is this the only stove? You cook on woodfire?”

“That heats the whole cottage, and the water too. It’s kind of the central heating. This place wasn’t made to be lived in forever.”

No, indeed it wasn’t, she thought, but back then they hadn’t known that.

“Nifty,” said Elias. “And the wood’s in the garden? How romantic.”

“When you have to light the fire at six on a winter’s morning for there to be hot water, you won’t find it so nifty,” retorted Clara drily.

“Ah, there we are,” Elias replied, “now I know why you want to sell the house. You’re no early riser.”

He’d picked the ball up again. Second set. Whether or not the two of them wanted to buy the house – the man was witty.

“I don’t want to sell the house at all,” Clara said, in faux seriousness. This rapid back and forth felt surprisingly light and pleasant. “I’m a social psychologist and I’ve spent years studying decision-making within couple relationships. The house belongs to the university.”

Vera looked at a loss, glancing from Clara to Elias and back again, not catching on right away.

“Don’t worry,” Clara explained cheerily, “it’s not true. I’m a photographer. But your husband seems to like playing games. Would you like to see the upstairs?”

Vera nodded.

“He’s an actor. That accounts for it. Yes, I’d love to. If it’s as pretty upstairs as it is down here, then we could just stay right away.”

Elias followed Clara and Vera up the very narrow, steep staircase. Why did she have to say that he was an actor? It was just a job, but she always said it a bit as though she were adorning herself with him. He was being unfair to her. She just liked it when he was on stage. And it was OK to be proud of each other, right? At any rate, in a normal relationship... pah, he just didn’t know what it was between them anymore.

The first floor was little more than an attic with two large rooms. But the generous dormers let in the light and the colour of the April sky, and made everything bright. Both rooms were bedrooms. Simply furnished. A rug. A bed. A clothes trunk in the left-hand room, and a small, rustic-

style wardrobe on the right; it hadn't been restored and its doors sagged on the hinges. The pitch of the roof lent a certain air of quiet to both rooms.

Two bedrooms, he thought. Two single beds. The psychology of partnerships... the notion made him smile.

Clara opened the window over the garden.

"You can see the whole plot from here."

Extensive, thought Elias. But not too open. The wooden fence must be very old. Behind the still-bare fruit trees, you could make out the little chapel tower. A cottage garden. You could still see the old beds, although they hadn't been planted for years by the look of things, and the paths between them.

Clara and Vera were on their way back downstairs, but he stood at the window for a while. It was lovely here. Truly lovely. So, why was she really selling the house? For a moment he imagined that other life. A place like this. Quiet. Nature. But at the same time, he knew how much he loved being on stage, the buzz of first nights, his life in town. You probably always stood in that tension between two lives.

What was he still doing up there? Clara was making conversation with Vera Steiner. Or, rather, Vera was talking and she was being amused. The younger woman was easy to listen to. The conversation bubbled without much contribution from Clara. A little naïve in her views, perhaps, but smart. There was no contradiction in that, and it added to her charm. Clara could understand what he saw in her, and suddenly felt lumbering in herself. You could only be that carefree when life had yet to truly leave its mark on you. Or maybe she'd never had that kind of lightness in the first place.

Elias came down. Clara noticed the way Vera's eyes followed him. As if she hadn't been certain that he'd reappear. Strange.

"Do you like it?"

Clara wanted to go back outside. She wanted to leave the house behind. But you needed a notary for all these things. She wished she could have just drawn up a contract on the spot and taken the money. But things didn't work like that.

"I love it," said Vera Steiner cheerily. "Our taste is very similar. It really is gorgeous. But, of course, we have to talk it over a little."

Elias was now standing beside her. The act was annoying him. It wasn't right to give the woman hope that they'd buy the house. It was downright unfair, but at the same time he didn't want to show Vera up. After all, he'd come along and taken part in it. And that in itself was typical of him – seeing the right thing, but not doing it. He was furious with himself.

“We have to go. I’ve got a rehearsal.”

Vera looked at him in surprise. He’d almost snapped.

What’s up with him? Clara thought. It would be fascinating to photograph the two of them. They weren’t a harmonious couple. And there would be a genuine buzz there – something like an electric forcefield spanned between them the whole time. She suppressed a smile – Vera must get a shock every time they touched. He was crackling with energy... what *is* up with the two of them?

“I... didn’t we want to go to the lake?” Vera asked in surprise. Her laughter had vanished.

“We won’t have time now.”

Vera said nothing else, but Clara could see that she was unhappy about it. She seemed to pull herself together, turned back to her and beamed at her, as best she could.

“I’ll give you a call. Thank you. It’s a very beautiful house, really.”

Clara nodded. Then she glanced at him. As he noticed, he relaxed for a moment.

“Yes,” he agreed, but thoughtfully, “it is a beautiful house. Thanks for showing us around.”

He stretched out his hand. She took it. No electric shock, but... good. It felt good and warm.

“Not getting down on your knees in farewell?” she asked maliciously.

Elias immediately released her hand, swept an imaginary tricorne from his head and dropped elegantly to one knee. Then, without a word, he was back on his feet and out of the door ahead of Vera and Clara. Clara laughed in surprise.

“That’s a fascinating man you’ve got there.”

“Yes,” Vera answered drily. “Which isn’t always easy.”

Clara was still standing by the fence as they drove away. He didn’t look over to her as the car passed the garden. All the same, she was unusually cheerful as she went back to the house.

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