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Chapter 3
((pp. 30-38))

Herta was a beautiful woman, and it was said when she was young that she would surely go on to be a mannequin. That's what people said among themselves in Plothow. If this rumour reached her ears or someone asked her about it, she would tilt her head to the side and smile in a way that left it unclear whether there was any truth to it.

She was seventeen or eighteen, tall and (as people said) as thin as a twig. She worked as a seamstress at Parvus's clothing store, although for a few years now the sign above the entrance had shown a different name – Mill, the name of the man who had seized the shop from Parvus through blackmail or by exploiting the misery that had befallen the man due to his Jewish heritage in return for a ridiculously small sum of money. Parvus and his family had emigrated to the United States, to New York where he had worked as a tailor to keep their heads above water for the first few years while Mill strutted through the rooms of his house in Plothow and put on a show of being a businessman. But that didn't change the fact that people who shopped there continued to say, I'm goin' to Parvus's. Parvus had been chased away, but his name remained.

The owner of shares in a second clothing store in Berlin, acquired in the same way as Parvus's shop, Mill clearly had a crush on Herta, for after observing her for a while he made her a proposition. In spring and autumn, when the new collections arrived, he organized fashion shows for his female customers at the Berlin store, not far from Wittenbergplatz. 'Do you want to have a look?' he asked.

Of course she did. She drove to Berlin with him in his car and was allowed to model clothes along with other tall girls. She went down the catwalk, came back behind the curtain, was put in a new dress and sent out again every Thursday afternoon for a whole spring and a whole autumn, and when the season was over, Mill said to her as they waited at a level crossing, 'I've been having a think. You must become a mannequin.'

She looked at him with surprise, for that was exactly what she herself had been contemplating the entire time. Ever since she had realized that this would be her last trip to Berlin for some while, she had been pondering if it might not be possible to work there, even if it was in this strange profession. It would be different from shuffling around on her knees, pinning up hems, in the shop in Plothow.

‘I’ll help you,’ said Mr Mill. ‘You’ll start at Tauentzienstrasse, and we’ll take it from there.’

It might also have started there, I think, with that promise of a different and better life.

It was already dark. The lights of the train whooshed past. Sitting next to Mill in the car she thought, I’m going to live in Berlin. She told her friend Lilo, who worked in her parents’ shop and passed on the news to other friends: Herta’s going to Berlin.

Suddenly, however, Mill only came to the shop at night. He entered through the door in the yard and left the same way. The curtains were drawn, but one could tell by the light that filtered around their edges that he was sitting in his office upstairs, and a few weeks later the business changed hands. The name over the entrance was replaced again. When she came to the store one morning the name above the door was Berger, and the bearer of that name was obviously an even bigger blackmailer and profiteer than Mill, who, for whatever reason, had completely vanished. Berger was emblazoned in large gold letters over the entrance.

Yet still people said Parvus’s.

That was in December, quarter of a year before Georg first spotted her from the top of a truck.

The truck was driving along Brandenburger Strasse. He was sitting at the rear of the load bed with the tarpaulin folded back. It was around noon. He had his head propped against the tailgate and was squinting into the sun, his hands resting on the railing. He’d stretched out his legs and was lying more than sitting. He loved these drives, whose purpose was to transfer lorries from one place to another. There was a sudden lurch, and he was thrown forwards against the cab. When he got to his feet he saw that they had slammed into a tractor reversing out of a driveway.

At that very moment she stepped out of the shop directly opposite and stopped in the doorway.

He climbed down from the load bed, ran to the front of the truck and when he saw that no one had been injured, turned to look at the girl. She was still standing in the doorway, watching. Half an hour later they were sitting opposite each other at a café table. It was to this café that they would regularly come later on.

In the following weeks he came to Plothow more often. More often? As often as his military service allowed, and he also came when it didn't. When talking about it, he seemed surprised by such uncharacteristic neglect of his duties, and he would ponder for a second, as if to recall what caused it. He would sit there behind the house, in a corner of the garden out of the wind, staring at his hands.

This was how it went. He would leave the barracks in uniform and drive to the station where he had deposited a bag of civilian clothing so he wouldn't be asked for his leave pass if he were stopped. He took the bag from a locker and went to the toilets, locked himself in a cubicle, pulled off the uniform and put on the suit. He wrapped the uniform in a cloth, placed it in the bag and put it back in the locker. Then he bought a ticket to Plothow and got on the train.

She was waiting for him in the café where they'd sat after the accident.

The shop closed at six. Around half past six, after clearing up, she would come out and dawdle for a bit, looking in shop windows. It wasn't worth going home for an hour so she would wander up and down the main street or pay a visit to Lilo, whose parents ran the large radio shop at the top end of Brandenburger Strasse until, at about half past seven, she judged it was time to go to the café. She would sit down at a table by the window from where she could keep an eye on the street and the door through which he would enter as well as the clock above it.

He came shortly after eight and sat down opposite her. They laid their hands on the table and stared at them. The tips of their middle fingers touched, then their hands moved towards each other until their other fingers touched. His fingertips rested on hers. Finally, their hands advanced until they lay firmly on top of each other. She felt the coarse fabric of his trousers against her leg. As soon as it got dark he signalled to

the waitress and paid. They stepped out into the street and after crossing the bridge, went down to the canal via a flight of red brick steps so narrow that he had to go first before taking the then unpaved towpath. To their left the black ribbon of the canal shimmered, to their right lay a park designed by a student of Lenné's – a garden with rare bushes and trees, ponds and small humpback bridges spanning a stream. Now and then a barge puttered past. The smell of diesel hung in the air, and water lapped and gurgled against the stone embankment.

He had put his arm around her and when they thought nobody could see them from the bridge any longer, they stopped and embraced, took a few more steps and stopped again. He ran his hand over her back and when it was completely dark and the bridge was far enough away, he drew her down the bank.

He came to Plothow every other Tuesday, but she always knew that something might crop up and that she might wait in vain.

She would stare at the clock over the door and if he still wasn't there by nine she would know that he wasn't coming and had been detained in Magdeburg. Moments earlier she had been sitting in a special café, but now it was special no more. She saw the tables with their grubby doilies and sticky Bakelite sugar pots, the wallpaper blackened by the stovepipe and the stupid, unevenly arranged pictures; all the things she hadn't noticed while she could reckon with his imminent arrival now stood out. All of a sudden, objects had lost that special feel and revealed their true nature. And it was the same out in the street into which she stepped out after settling the bill; the street too had changed. She took the same path as with him, but all of a sudden it was only Plothow she walked through, the town she had hoped to escape with Mill's assistance.

She passed the stairs leading down to the canal, but when she was alone she stayed on the road and only at the end of the park did she turn into the village-like part of town and the wide, cobbled street that led out to the bleaching green, a meadow almost on the edge of town that was lined on one side by single-storey houses and on the other bordered a small pine wood. As she strode towards her parents' house, she told herself that if he hadn't come today it was because he couldn't but next time he definitely would. She felt a double yearning, one for him

and one that existed even without him but to which, for simplicity's sake, she gave his name: Georg.

Every other Tuesday, that was when she waited for him.

Generally he came by train, though occasionally a friend who was driving to Potsdam would give him a lift in his car. He got out at the turn-off to Havelberg and as he approached the café where she was sitting, he would see her through the window, her head, her neck, her narrow shoulders poking through the thin fabric, and think that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on. And when he came unexpectedly, at night, without having been able to warn her, he went out to the bleaching green, climbed over the fence into the front garden and knocked on the shutter, two short raps in quick succession, then a third. She slept soundly, but at this signal she would wake up. She would throw on a dress over her nightshirt, creep past her parents' bedroom, which lay on the other side of the hallway, go through the laundry room into the yard and slide open the iron bar locking the gate.

'Quietly,' she would say, 'quietly,' laying a finger over her lips.

He wore heavy boots whose heels clacked on the slabs of the yard when he trod firmly. She would take his hand, and he followed her on tiptoes. They kept to the shadow of the cowsheds, whispered to each other and leaned against the wall in the passageway through to the garden.

'Where have you just come from?' she asked and before he could answer, she would entwine her arms around his neck and pull him down to her.

When her parents knew she was meeting him, they said, 'Eleven. Back by eleven.'

Georg was a soldier, a career soldier, on his way to being an officer, and they didn't like her meeting up with him. No more than they'd liked her trips to Berlin with Mill. That is to say, he didn't like it, her father. He didn't want anything to do with those people, whereas her mother was undecided. On the one hand she admitted that her husband was right, but on the other she liked him. She'd seen the boy only once, but she liked him as much as her daughter did. She liked his voice, his gangling gait, his timid manner. She didn't say so, though. She would never have said anything with which her husband didn't agree.

On Tuesday evenings they stayed up. They waited in the golden glow of the lamp hanging over the table, he reclining on the sofa behind his newspaper, she on the chair at the head of the table, busy with work she would otherwise have put off until the next day, some needlework or shelling peas; the clock ticked, the paper rustled, the peas fell with a clatter into the brass dish – until they heard their daughter’s footsteps on the sandy path that skirted the meadow. When they heard her come into the hallway, he would stand up, open the living room door and watch (without a word) as she peeled herself out of her coat and hung it on the coat rack.

Then he closed the door again.

Sixty kilometres roughly, three quarters of an hour it took Georg to get to Plothow. Three quarters of an hour there and three quarters of an hour back. He came by train, sometimes by car, and took the first train back the next morning. The carriages were full of workers on their way to the early shift in Burg or Magdeburg. He sat in a corner by the window and hoped the train would be on time. It didn’t bear contemplating what would happen if he didn’t make it back to barracks undetected.

He also came to Plothow when he knew he could only stay for an hour, and he came too when he could stay for longer but knew that she had to go home well before his train left. He brought her out to the bleaching ground and walked around until it was time to go to the station. He had a taste for streets behind streets, for nooks and crannies where nobody ever came because they were so out of the way and dingy. He passed the sugar factory, the docks, walked along the small street behind the town hall where the prison was, returned to the bridge and gazed at the canal below, running straight as a die through the countryside. It didn’t bother him that it was dark; it was never truly dark anyway. The street lamps were no longer lit, but the moon shone, and the stars.

From Magdeburg it had been easy to visit her. What was a two-hour journey? But then he heard that his unit was going to be transferred to Koblenz. He came one night, unannounced, to tell her the news. They leaned against the wall of the cowshed side by side and discussed what to do.

‘I’ll come to Koblenz,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll visit you.’

But a month later the war her father had predicted broke out. That was why he was against these people, because war followed hard on their heels. This redeployment, as they didn't know while they leaned against the cowshed wall, as they couldn't have known, was already part of the war, and he was not redeployed to Koblenz either, but to the slate town where she was to set foot eighteen years later.

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