He Who Whispers Evening

Al Lichtenberg

Fröhlich's Café was one of the few places in town where we were still welcome; most of the others had put up signs barring us from the premises. It was only a matter of time until Fröhlich, too, would give way to Nazi pressure and bring out the hateful placards for all to see. Some of them were printed in crude letters resembling Hebrew characters, which we all thought in extremely bad taste.

The people around town didn't say very much about it. Some of them shrugged the matter off with remarks like "It will blow over soon enough" or "Give the rascals a chance to cool off." But mostly they kept quiet, and it was anybody's guess whether their silence indicated approval of the measures, or the discretion that's the better part of valor.

For us, the guesswork had pretty much stopped as we moved into the second year of "National Rebirth"—1934. But now there were new questions to occupy our nimble minds as we met at Fröhlich's.

There was some disagreement at our table whether it was proper for one of us to visit a restaurant displaying the signs—presuming that the trespasser could go undetected.

"My pride wouldn't let me," said Die Böpsin without hesitation. "If you want to keep your self-respect, stay out."

"Should we really obey a regulation which has no moral or legal basis?" pondered Gertrude. "They can't expect us to cooperate while taking away our rights. We ought to go on a sit-down strike, like the workingmen in France."

"To me it's a personal matter, like hygiene," said Eliza. "I would rather avoid contact because it might taint me. The very idea is repulsive." She spoke slowly, in a low wondrous voice that had attracted me from the beginning; I am susceptible to women's voices. And she had a way of tilting her blond head upwards, at an angle, looking through lowered eyelids at no one in particular.

"Let's be practical—there are occasions when you have no choice," said Conrad. "People who travel a lot—as I do—are dependent on public places. A man has to eat."

That amused Eliza. "You sound like Mack the Knife—*first feed your face, then talk of right or wrong*.

She was always quoting from something or other, but it was hard to say if she really cared. Eliza liked to quote poetry at random, or come up with examples from her own field, which was music. She taught piano to children and occasionally gave recitals at social affairs, community gatherings and such—nurturing a small, local reputation.

"That's right," said Conrad, swallowing a big piece of Linzertorte, a specialty of the house at Fröhlich's. "My mother has taught me the importance of good food. Just before I left home she reminded me to eat regularly."

Gertrude disagreed with everybody, as usual.

"You are missing the social significance of this issue; you must learn to see all sides of a question." Eliza's attitude was self-centered, she declared, and Conrad's downright mercenary. Although a serious student of sociology—and full of its jargon—Gertrude had never come to grips with such mundane matters as earning a living, and showed no understanding for the feeding problems of a traveling man. When she had to leave the university because of the Nazi decrees she decided to stay home and let Papa take care of things.

Die Böpsin grew impatient with all the glib talk. "The signs say that Jews are not wanted, and that's plain enough for me. I know when I'm not welcome." She nodded toward Conrad. "If you are away from home it's a different matter; that goes without saying."

"It helps a lot if you don't *look* Jewish," he said, smirking a little. "Not everybody can get away with it." Secretly, Conrad was proud of his Germanic exterior—blue eyes, snub nose and all that.

"What do you mean?" asked Gertrude sharply, her dark features flushing. "I don't like this kind of talk about racial characteristics. It sounds almost as bad as the Nazis."

"But you have to admit. . ."

"I admit nothing," she cut in, popping her big eyes at the boy who now wished he had never brought up the subject. "In fact I deny there is such a thing as a 'Jewish look.' Scientifically it's nonsense—I could prove that to you faster than you can say *Herrrenvolk*—and the whole discussion is repugnant to me."

"There, there—it's nothing to be ashamed of—or get excited about." Conrad patted Gertrude's well-manicured hand reassuringly. Several of the men at the table nodded in assent, and she was quickly pacified; it wasn't every day that they took so much notice of her, after all.

As to the other boys' names and identities, I have only the faintest recollection; in those days I paid more attention to the opposite sex. But I do remember Conrad well.

He was new in town, having just recently arrived from the provinces, with great expectations about city life. Our families were distantly related—in an undefinable way, as these things go with Jewish folk. His father had asked me to keep an eye on him: the boy was held to be a little wild and reckless, though well-meaning.

Keeping Conrad out of mischief proved no easy task. Beyond my capacity, as matters turned out. For anyone to think that I could restrain him just because I was a few

years older seems unreasonable, in retrospect. But at the time it was only natural to bring him along to Fröhlich's and let him meet the gang.

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Most of the time, our table conversations turned to different subjects, the things young people talk about, regardless of the political order—Old, New or otherwise. We were all in our twenties, more or less, except Die Böpsin, merry widow and town gossip, nearing middle age but young at heart. The nickname was bequeathed to her by her late husband; among other, more tangible assets, to be sure, because Bops left her well provided for.

Most of us had met at the Berlitz school. Everybody who had brains enough was studying languages now, in preparation for the exodus. English was the favorite choice, Spanish next and Italian a poor third. (France, preoccupied with troubles of her own, had all but closed her borders to refugees by then, and most other foreign countries had restrictive immigration laws.) It was like a roulette game, with people never quite sure *where* they would wind up.

Only Conrad refused to be concerned over the political situation; he didn't sign up for anything.

Eliza took Italian, and Gertrude was in my English class. Her strong urge to communicate frequently interfered with the lessons; when talking became hazardous she would resort to scribbling notes, or sign language. Miss Smith, the instructor, an active member of the local Anglican community, once seized the opportunity to demonstrate the richness of the English tongue.

"We have many expressions to describe people who are too effusive," she said tartly and thin-lipped, in her best British manner. Then she turned to the blackboard and wrote "chatterbox," "blabbermouth," and "gossip" in a neat column. Gertrude was temporarily silenced.

Not for long, though. Already at the third or fourth lesson she began to discuss Eliza in no uncertain terms.

"I have the distinct feeling that she is phony," Gertrude whispered to me. "These affected airs she's putting on—they are just camouflage, designed to cover up."

She had known her for a long time: they had gone to the same girls' school together, more or less on the same level without ever being classmates, and Gertrude had never been able to figure her out. It was obvious that Eliza's mannerisms presented a challenge to her own clear-cut, rational way of thinking—but why did she have to get so wrought up about it?

There was more to it than a mere difference in temperaments, or a divergence of opinions, so Die Böpsin told me. She knew all about the hidden tension, and little prompting was needed to make her talk.

I had guessed right: at the center of the controversy was—a man.

"It wasn't at all surprising that they shared an interest in this boy." She mentioned the name of one of the town's leading Jewish families, no longer of any consequence now. "He was a very eligible young man, and many a girl included him in her plans."

"Perhaps he didn't even realize it," I suggested.

"He did in the case of Gertrude and Eliza—they let him know, each in her own peculiar way. Gertrude is very straightforward, evidently, while Eliza's methods are a little more devious.

"I noticed that; and there are other differences, even more apparent."

"Yes," sighed Die Böpsin, "it was an uneven contest, weighted in Eliza's favor from the start. I think Gertrude never quite forgave her for it although in the end the victory turned sour."

"What happened?"

"The affair was going strong, for a time, and it seemed mutual; then suddenly there was a cooling off. I know what caused it, too—pride and prejudice, you might say. The boy's mother put her foot down; according to her, Eliza's background was unsuitable, she didn't come from the 'right people' and was found wanting in social grace."

"But Eliza had a *great deal* of poise," I contended. "And what's wrong with her family background?"

"Nothing, really, except that she comes from rather modest circumstances. Her father runs a small grocery store."

"I suppose Gertrude felt vindicated over the outcome—a bit of *Schadenfreude*, perhaps. And how did Eliza take it?"

"Rather hard at first, I'm afraid, but over a year has passed since. The boy in question got married recently, to an eminently suitable girl, and his mother is very pleased."

Oh well, I thought, some people never learn. They still pursue the old snobbish notions, trying to maintain their tidy little class system while the whole tottering structure is about to come down.

And then I suddenly realized why Eliza had looked familiar when I first saw her at Fröhlich's, making me feel that I had seen her before—*someplace*.

The Böpsin wanted to do something for the young people, now that we were excluded from most of the gay spots in town. She asked us up to her place for an informal get-together.

"I am not going to fuss," she had said. "My home is small but cozy—we'll manage."

The neat little flat where she lived alone was in a fashionable neighborhood. Furnishings and knick-knacks had a *Jugendstil* flair, dating back to the time when she was first married. They boys tried to be on their best behavior.

When Gertrude arrived she made straight for Conrad and, with much finger wagging, engaged him in an earnest conversation. Like a real bluestocking, Gertrude was indifferent to matters of outward appearance: her skirts were always too long, she wore health shoes and her dresses were not stylish, failing to make the best of a really quite well-proportioned figure. The didactic forefinger bothered me, too. Now she accused Conrad of being light-headed—just out for a "good time"—without realizing the seriousness of the situation; somebody had to set him straight.

The poor boy became so ill at ease that he fumbled and dropped his teacup. It broke into bits and made a mess on the nice Persian rug. Die Böpsin was visibly shaken because it was from her good *Meissen* china set and when someone turned on the record player and suggested dancing she vetoed it firmly, recommending some well-behaved parlor games instead.

It would have been a dull, tedious evening if it hadn't been for Eliza. When she began to play some improvisations on the piano, everybody relaxed. Her fingers seemed hardly to touch the keyboard; with an expression of faint amusement, she launched into a Chopin waltz.

How graceful she looked in that sleeveless dress!—a comparison with Gertrude seemed inevitable. No doubt Eliza had her faults—the languid airs, the affectations and mannerisms—but it was all so attractively "packaged."

Eliza knew how to wear her clothes to the best advantage, in a taste running to unusual color combinations which accented the reddish blond hair and pale complexion. Her features were small, almost childlike. She had a lascivious line around the mouth but the forehead was well-modeled—usually held at an angle with that up-tilt. Somehow her appearance stood out from the crowd and marked her as something special: better or worse than average, but *different*.

When I walked her home after the party I noticed a small bouquet of violets in her suit lapel.

"One of my admirers gave it to me," Eliza explained impishly.

"A passionate young man, no doubt," I said, in spite of myself.

"Quite so." After a well-timed pause, she added, "very *young*, I mean. He is all of eleven years old—one of my piano pupils, you know—and he adores me."

"I see. Do you have many students?"

"Not enough, unfortunately; I wish there were more. I like to work with children. They are more sincere than grown-ups."

"You sound disillusioned. Has somebody let you down—personally, that is?"

"Perhaps so. We all have our disappointments." Her eyes took on a wistful expression, and she pouted.

I remembered what Die Böpsin had told me about Eliza's affair; the conversation had taken a bad turn, through my own fault. Rather than drop the matter I decided to pursue it a bit further.

"There *was* someone, but it's all over now, officially." She put great stress on that last word, in a way which made me wonder. What goes on?, I thought.

"You mean you are still good friends, only in a different way," I suggested.

"Perhaps. You also might say that it isn't really finished—as far as my *feelings* are concerned."

"Yes, the heart has its reasons…" My voice trailed off, letting the aphorism hang in midair. Eliza would know the rest, undoubtedly. I was more confused than ever.

Our walk led us through a park, and we lingered a while at the swan pond. The big white birds were dozing under weeping willows near the banks. Eliza began to recite a Rilke poem—about trees in the snow that reach out with their bare branches towards a wintry sky while forlorn travelers make their way among them. It seemed a little incongruous, this being a warm summer night, but I was touched nevertheless.

"Do you know the 'Ballad of the Outer Life'?" she asked. "It's my favorite Hoffmansthal poem."

It had many stanzas, telling of the ways of the world, of wide-eyed children and old people, but I remembered only the last line, rendered in Eliza's wondrous voice, at the swan pond: "*Und dennoch sagt der viel der Abend sagt*"—"Yet he says much who whispers evening."

The houses on the other side of the park were smaller, barely maintaining a semblance of respectability. We were approaching the town's working class quarter, a section little short of a slum. When we passed a dowdy-looking grocery store Eliza said with studied carelessness: "That's my father's place," and a little farther on she stopped before a modest tenement building, explaining that she lived there. She said it all rather nonchalantly but I could sense that she was anything but proud of the lowly surroundings which had been scorned by the social arbiters.

Before we parted that evening Eliza once more recited from the Ballad, but now she said it in an almost devilish way: "Yet he says much who whispers evening." She was a girl of many moods.

At last I could be sure where I had first seen her: I had stopped at her father's store on a few occasions, for my brand of pipe tobacco, and noticed the girl with the grave, almost haughty expression wait on customers while the older man jabbered away and acted as if running a small grocery store was the most important thing in the world. Wrapping smelly cheeses—or pickled herring—was no job for a girl like her, and she let the buyers know it; only the children dropping in on hasty errands got an indulgent smile, and a treat, perhaps.

Since her music teaching—for want of pupils—did not take up all of her free time, she filled in by helping out in the store—at Papa's insistence, no doubt. It was the price Eliza had to pay for having had her way with the music studies, years earlier when she left school. Little wonder she hated the old man; and a real little philistine he was—a Spiessbürger from the word go.

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Conrad and I went swimming together, and we met Eliza at the pool. She looked her best in a two-piece bathing suit, displaying a trim figure and shapely legs. Her ankles were a bit on the heavy side, though, and so were her wrists, but she had elegant hands—as if to make up for the deficiency—and the long piano fingers rarely relaxed.

That summer of 1934 was seething with unrest: it was the time of the Röhm putsch, and the air literally buzzed with bulletins, rumors and conjecture. Was Hitler really in trouble? Or was he so safely in the saddle now that he could dispense with Röhm's army of brownshirts? The radio announcements had an incoherent, topsy-turvy ring, quite unlike the "doctored" propaganda handouts which were Göbbels's stock-in-trade. Whose side was *he* on, anyway?

My two friends hardly listened to the radio bulletins. It was quite obvious that Eliza had made an impression on Conrad; he talked incessantly, in a very animated manner, telling her of his interest in sports and motor cars, and even professing a familiarity with the arts, after a fashion. Then he left us for a dip in the pool, and we watched him do some fancy diving from the high board.

Eliza was fascinated; in moments like these her face took on the wide-eyed expression of a very young girl.

"Quite a daredevil—that's Conrad," she muttered. "It's nice to meet an outdoor type, for a change."

"Conrad's very athletic," I had to concede.

"His tastes in music are rather shocking, though. Imagine someone raving about Offenbach and Suppé, as he does."

"Perhaps you could give him some lessons in music appreciation—enroll him as a student," I quipped.

"It's something to think about. I am so glad you are looking after my interests."

"Just bear in mind that Conrad is not old enough for you," I said, still joking. "Other than as a pupil, I mean."

"That depends. Suppose you let *me* decide when the time comes. I need the warmth of companionship—someone to look after me, you know." She said it gravely, still looking like a little girl, but sad. And her former aloofness was gone. Then an air of recognition came over her face.

"It just occurred to me that 'Conrad' and 'Thomas' have the same vowels; rather alike, the two names, don't you think?"

"Only by the sound of it," I said, grudgingly. I knew what she meant; Thomas Mann was one of her favorite authors, often referred to in quotations. "Why is it that you are always quoting from books, rather than taking life as it is?"

"Did you eve read *Disorder and Early Sorrow*?" she countered. "I am very fond of his stories because they are so true to life—as I have found it. There's your answer, pure and simple."

There it was again, Eliza's latent lament, unspecified but clearly referring to the drab home surroundings, the run-ins with her father, to a life that fell painfully short of her hopes. It always made me pause—this restlessness of hers, this living in a dream world where she could play a part, centerstage, as it were.

Doubt and hesitation were not in Conrad's make-up, outgoing and curious as he was. Eliza opened up a new world to him and he seized the opportunity for a brief spell of happiness.

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It was an odd day when Gertrude could not be found at Weber's bookstore. Weber's wasn't much of a place, as appearances go. Tucked away in a side street, its narrow storefront escaped attention, but what it lacked in outward pomp was made up for by the intriguing interior. From the front where Weber held forth ran a cavernous passageway flanked by high shelves, leading to an alcove just big enough for a table, bench and some chairs, with books all over the place. It was very *gemütlich*.

A few days after the Röhm putsch, I found Weber and Gertrude engaged in a lively discussion. Weber had previously been active in left-wing politics and was now an ardent critic of the regime; only a mere technicality (he had never been a card-carrying Communist) saved his store from being forcibly closed. They couldn't prove anything, and at that time at least, the Nazis were still maintaining a semblance of legality.

Weber offered a new explanation for the overthrow of the brownshirts, and Röhm's demise:

"It was the price Hitler had to pay for the cooperation of the army," he said. "The generals couldn't tolerate millions of armed storm troopers roaming the street—it was a threat to their own existence. Hitler, in turn, needs the army for his plans of conquest, and so they struck a bargain."

He reached under the counter and brought out a recently published book by a military expert who advocated alignment with the Soviet Union to safeguard Germany against the West. Replete with footnotes, cross-references and maps, the volume was intended to demonstrate that Russia and Germany were "natural" partners historically, an unbeatable combination for peace or war.

Weber had a gleam in his eye; this was grist for his mill. Affable enough towards everybody—especially book buyers—he was really indifferent where people were concerned. The "cause" meant everything to him, even at this late hour, and the book was right in line with his ideas about Russia. It had been passed by the Nazi censors; Weber took this as a sign of something being in the wind—a relaxation of the regime's violently anti-Communist stand, perhaps.

Gertrude was receptive to the idea; she thought highly of Weber and sometimes held him up to me as an example of *l'homme engagé*—a man committed to a cause, motivated by ideals—a fighter, in short. Although she shared some of Weber's ideas about the coming revolution she was different in one respect: she cared about people.

Especially about men; in the privacy of Weber's backroom she told me of her affair with a married man. Intellectually he was far below her, she implied, but he had plenty of sex appeal to make up for the deficiency. She gave details, always referring to him as "friend"; using the English term seemed more intriguing to her, in addition to preserving anonymity. "Friend" was high, wide and handsome, *very* attractive—and quite contemptuous of education and higher learning, especially when found in women. It was more than a little degrading, and she had been on the verge of breaking it up several times in the past.

"With you it is different," Gertrude assured me. "We have many interests in common, and I enjoy our talks. You have a good mind, always groping for answers, but it needs developing."

We argued tooth and nail. Bourgeois complacency, formalist thinking and sheer cynicism were only some of the blunders she cited me for. But not all was lost, Gertrude intimated; under her dialectic guidance I might yet see the light.

I called her a parlor pink. Once, in a weak moment, she had admitted doubt whether she would really like to *live* in a rigidly planned society; perhaps it was more fun to *talk* about it.

"It's the discussion stage I like best," she conceded, "to think and talk and theorize how it all would work out." She said it dreamily, with a blissful expression; but then a change came over her.

"Now it's very hard," she sighed. "They want to control everything, even your thoughts. The Nazis are shrewd; their masterminds realize that all hangs together by a common thread—economics, science, politics, even the arts—and they want to dominate every phase of it, at the source, allowing no opposition."

Gertrude was an articulate critic of the new regime, and quite weary with regard to the general outlook. "Only my sense of humor prevents me from killing myself," she told me in another moment of self-revelation. She, too, was not above making statements for sheer effect—but how different from Eliza.

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Eliza seemed completely immune to Gertrude's little barbs. I always wondered whether she was unaware how Gertrude felt about her—or simply indifferent to it. She refused to be drawn into conversational gambits on the subject of their former "rivalry."

All she would say, on occasion, was something like: "Gertrude *means* well" or even "That was a rather perceptive remark Gertrude made, don't you think?" True enough, she usually accompanied such comments with that indulgent smile of hers, but never showed a trace of resentment.

That's how it was after the talk they had in Weber's backroom. It was a chance meeting: Eliza was rummaging about for some second-hand sheet music when Gertrude arrived. I was reading a magazine, minding my own business. Gertrude seemed disturbed about something.

"Do you remember Christine Seidlitz?" she asked Eliza abruptly, without paying attention to me at all. "She used to be in my class at school."

"You were quite friendly at the time, I seem to recall."

"Yes, we kept in touch even after I went away to college, and we would see each other during vacations."

"Christine and I were never close, but I liked her," said Eliza. "What has become of her?"

"She took up chemistry but that's unimportant. What got me down is the way she acted after the changeover. Christine proved a great disappointment to me."

"I know what you mean. We all had to face it—the sudden rift—people fading out of your life from one day to the next—things like that."

"She went out of her way to avoid me. It almost seemed as if she feared the contact might incriminate her."

"Surely not *all* your old friends could have turned away from you. For my part there were some happy exceptions."

"Wait till you hear the rest of the story. Yesterday I had a letter from Christine, asking me to meet her at once. It turns out there is a new development: they discovered that her mother is of Jewish birth, although baptized as a child."

"That makes Christine a non-Aryan, I guess—subject to the race laws."

"There are special regulations for such cases. *Mischlinge*, as they are called, retain the status of second-class citizens, you might say."

"The whole thing is a mystery to me, an insoluble nightmare. I don't think I'll ever be able to grasp it." Eliza suddenly looked tired, as if the strain was too great for her. A moment later she asked: "What is Christine going to do now?"

"She wants to leave the country as soon as possible, and asked me for advice. After the way she acted I am not sure she deserves a helping hand. Besides, what can I do? Everybody knows how difficult it is to get entry permits to foreign countries; I can't even get a visa for myself."

"I think you ought to try and help her," said Eliza. "This must be a very trying experience for Christine—like being expelled from a club without prior warning. Some of us had premonitions, at least."

"I don't understand—that's getting too subtle for me. Anyway, it is not in my nature to turn the other cheek. I'll have to think it over." Gertrude started to cough. "Isn't it awfully smoky in here?" she remarked.

I noisily emptied my pipe, and Gertrude was startled to see me emerge from the alcove.

"Were you here all this time? No wonder it's so stuffy in here."

"Forgive me, if you can," I said. Gertrude turned on her heels and disappeared down the hallway, without saying another word.

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Conrad spent more and more time with Eliza during the summer. In the beginning, I was still able to compare notes, as it were; he, too, walked her through the park, listened to poetry, was shown that paternal establishment, the grocery store. But soon he took off on his own, for a whirlwind romance.

Always obsessed by speed, Conrad had a car now. He had bought a second-hand Daimler-Benz quite reasonably, had souped it up a little and had taken the muffler off. It didn't look like much, but it sounded impressive.

Eliza had gone away for a brief holiday, and one evening Conrad came over to pass the time.

"There is something I'd like you to do for me," he said. "You can help me write a letter to Eliza."

"Write your own letters," I suggested curtly.

"You are much better at it than I am. I find it difficult to put my thoughts on paper."

"Just let your heart dictate."

"Don't be corny. Eliza is very clever with words, and I want this letter to be just right."

"You want to know something?" he went on. "People have the wrong impression about this girl because she likes to put on airs. But when you get to know her better she stops pretending, and you find out that she is really okay. Then she cuddles up like a kitten that looks for a little warmth and affection."

There was a short pause, and then I said:

"Why don't you write her just that, in your own words? I think Eliza would appreciate it; in fact, it might be news to her."

Later that evening, Conrad took me for a little spin in his roadster, with the top down. When we got to the Autobahn he stepped on the gas and soon we hit a hundred kilometers. It was a bit too fast for my liking, but Conrad was a good driver, and the road was perfect. It had just been completed, as part of the throughway system which now began to crisscross Germany in all directions—the roads Hitler built.

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The language classes at Berlitz resumed in the fall, and after the lessons we gathered again at Fröhlich's Café. The owner was still holding out against Nazi pressure to put up the signs. Gertrude was there, and so were the others. Conrad came, too—he had signed up for Italian—for no other reason than to be close to Eliza.

But she was absent, and nobody seemed to know why. Conrad thought she might not be back from her vacation, but he wasn't sure. The following week, neither Conrad nor Eliza showed up and then we decided that something was amiss.

It all became clear in the course of the evening when Die Böpsin told us the latest news. She had it on good authority; being an unimpeachable source on matters of social gossip, she had everybody's ear. It made her quiver with excitement.

Eliza was engaged. It had happened on vacation when she met this Mr. Kantorowitz, or some such name, a doctor from Hamburg, mature and of solid habits, with an established medical practice, according to a close relative of the bride. A good match by

all standards, and a positive find for Eliza, a girl from quite average circumstances, after all. Everybody knew that she had been rather self-conscious, not to say ashamed about her background. Moving away from it all to live in a big city like Hamburg was a perfect solution. It might even prove beneficial to her career as a concert artist.

And so it went. Die Böpsin was in her element, enlarging on the subject to the exclusion of all others, even Gertrude, who was remarkably quiet that evening.

I met Conrad the next day; he knew all about it—from Eliza herself, who had called him as soon as she got back. They had gone for a long drive together to talk things over; she was very concerned how he would take the news and begged him to have understanding for her position. It was imperative that she get away from home and be on her own; this marriage offered the perfect solution since her future husband was well able to provide for her.

It didn't need to affect their relationship in any way, she assured Conrad. Her feelings for him had not changed at all; they were in a class by themselves, so to speak. She had realized from the beginning that their affair could never be anything else, due to the age difference and because Conrad had never made his intentions clear. But he should know that she felt for him the same way as before—as she had from the very start. If he was willing, they could go on as if nothing had happened, without concern for the other man; at least for a while. The marriage would not take place until the following year, at the earliest.

Conrad seemed pale and distressed when I saw him, days after his meeting with Eliza. In spite of her assurances to the contrary, he could not help feeling rejected, and he was thrown into confusion by her strange proposal to carry on, which he had neither accepted nor turned down. Torn between affection and hurt pride, Conrad was unable to act—and plainly suffering.

All I could try to be was a good listener.

"I don't know *what* to do now," he said as I left him. "Should I marry her on the spot, or try to forget about the whole thing? Frankly, I am not ready to do either."

"Think about it for a few days," was my advice. "You don't have to decide right now, as matters stand."

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In view of Conrad's unhappy state of mind, it may not seem too far-fetched to ascribe his accident to a kind of mental lapse; he had much to be absent-minded about, after all.

The collision took place in the business district at the intersection of two narrow streets. According to witnesses, Conrad's Daimler-Benz came out of a side street at undue speed, hitting another car which was already well into the crossing. Its driver, a Mr. Halberstamm, was badly hurt and had to be taken to the hospital; his car was a wreck.

Conrad had gotten away with mere scratches; so had his car. The police had started an investigation.

Conrad was badly shaken, and rather scared. I felt responsible since his parents had asked me to keep an eye on him. Suddenly he had become the center of attention, and everybody in our circle was offering advice. We met in Weber's backroom, for a secret strategy meeting.

"Let's face it," said Die Böpsin, "Conrad is not the most cautious driver. I noticed him taking the corners too sharp when he gave me a lift."

"What are you trying to do?" she was asked. "We want to help the boy—not lecture him."

"We are not here to sit in judgment," said Eliza.

"It hasn't even been proven that he is guilty," someone else remarked. "That depends on the right of way, a very ticklish question." The city had no traffic lights as yet.

"My parents feel I should not take any chances," Conrad said; "that I should get out of the country right away. There is no future here for young people, they say."

Now Gertrude spoke up, excitedly wagging her forefinger. "I am against flight. It is cowardly, and makes a bad impression; you might never be able to forgive yourself."

Weber had the final word. "Let's find out, first of all, how the injured man is getting along, and see whether he is going to press criminal charges. Get a lawyer and let him look into the insurance angle. Then wait and see."

Die Böpsin promised to inquire about Mr. Halberstamm's condition; as always, she knew someone who was mutually acquainted. I offered to see about a lawyer. For a man of his stripe, Weber had shown a lot of horse sense.

Gertrude was still out of sorts because of the flight plan which Conrad had mentioned, and she voiced her concern after most of the others had left.

"Although there is a human life in the balance he doesn't seem to feel any remorse."

"What do you expect him to do," I shrugged, "wear a hair shirt?"

"I can answer your question," said Eliza. "Conrad and I have talked it over. He really hasn't been able to collect his thoughts. For the moment, he is simply afraid, and with good reason. With everybody pressing in on him, and the police investigating the case, his immediate reaction is to defend himself, not to beat his breast in self-reproach. That's quite natural, I think."

* * *

Eliza received the bad news about her fiancé a few days after the recital; luckily, because it might have cramped her style had she known about it then and there. On the other hand, it may not have had any bad effect on her playing. Eliza was resourceful—and a good trooper.

The recital was at the *Kulturbund*, a recently formed group devoted to music and the theatre which served the recreational needs of the now isolated Jewish community. Some of their programs were excellent, and it spoke well for Eliza that she had been asked to play a selection of piano pieces; mostly Chopin, and one of Liszt's Rhapsodies. She looked radiant, even distinguished, and gave a fine performance, competent throughout, with occasional flashes of brilliance. There was generous applause at the end, and when Eliza joined us later she had everyone's attention. With animation she talked about the lyric element in Chopin and his contribution to the chromatic style.

The morning edition of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* carried the item on one of the inside pages, inconspicuous and with typical reserve; *not* a notice about Eliza's recital—which would hardly have deserved such attention—but quite a different story, under a Hamburg dateline.

Dr. Kantorowitz, Eliza's fiancé, had been arrested, facing an indictment for abortion; he was charged with a series of operations, literally dozens of cases, which were illegal within the narrow confines of the law. He had been under surveillance for some time and finally the police were able to crack the case. An early trial was scheduled in line with the speed-up in legal proceedings which had been instituted by the Nazis.

It was inescapable to link the news with Eliza, and with Conrad, whose own case seemed almost trivial by comparison. What was she going to do now—would she stand by both these unfortunates in their hour of need? I resisted the impulse to call her, thinking that my interest could be interpreted as mere curiosity.

But I spoke to Conrad. Eliza had been informed, he said, and stood up under the blow as well as could be expected. She was in touch with the doctor's family by telephone; they claimed that he was the victim of a frame-up, denounced by a woman—a midwife who had been sending him "cases." He was being persecuted for political reasons.

When I asked him about his own case he sounded glum. Mr. Halberstamm was still on the critical list, and Conrad had received a summons to appear at police headquarters for a hearing the following week.

Some family business necessitated my leaving town for a brief period, causing me to miss our next meeting. But I got back in time for the one after that. Eliza was absent—she had left for Hamburg to be at the doctor's side during the trial.

Meanwhile Conrad had been to his hearing, and he told us an earful. They had asked him all kinds of questions that had no bearing on the case; how much money he was making, how he could afford a car and other irrelevancies merely intended to wear him down. Then the interrogator went through a stack of papers until he located the accident report. Conrad described him as a wild-eyed ruffian who kept pounding the table as he spoke.

"I see here that the driver of the other car was also a Jew; that puts an entirely different light on the case. It is of no interest to us if you Jews try to kill each other off—in fact we welcome it because it makes our job that much easier."

Before he dismissed Conrad he laid down the law to him.

"Under the present regulations we have to prosecute if charges are brought by one of the parties, even though he may be a Jew. But I can assure you that will be changed very soon."

Now angry outcries were heard at our table, restrained only by the presence of the ladies. When Die Böpsin announced that Mr. Halberstamm was much better and would be discharged from the hospital in a matter of days, everybody relaxed. She didn't think he would press charges—provided the insurance came through.

Conrad had been pretty lucky but the experience left its mark on him; it had taught him a lesson. He began to realize that, while he had never taken an interest in politics, he was deeply involved in it nevertheless. Gertrude had a long talk with him, explaining it all from the sociological point of view. It was then and there that he seriously began thinking of emigrating.

A notable change had come over Gertrude, too—it concerned her attitude towards Eliza. The two girls began to see more of each other, and Gertrude's former criticisms gave way, first to a mute, and then to a more and more outspoken recognition of the other girl's qualities. Eliza had proved her mettle in a crisis; true enough, the affectation, the mannerisms were still with her, but they were only surface things, caused by an urge to rise above her environment. Apart from that, she had the makings of a real person—and a true person.

Circumstances had something to do with it, of course. The girls were pretty much left to themselves now. Gertrude had finally ended the affair with her "friend"—his sneering at intellectuals became unbearable, she claimed—and Eliza was waiting. Her fiancé had been sentenced to two years at hard labor, about average for a case like this, with the possibility of an earlier pardon.

Conrad went to South Africa the following year; the "country of his choice" had liberal immigration laws and a short waiting list; fewer and fewer countries encouraged the influx of refugees now. The young people in town had nowhere to go since even Fröhlich had to put up the signs barring Jews, and Weber's bookstore had been closed by the Nazis.

For the moment at least, the girls had only each other.

* * *

I lost touch with the old circle when my company transferred me to Berlin. It was a welcome, if temporary change, because the big city provided a measure of anonymity; its very size made it difficult for the Nazis to enforce discriminatory measures. And during the

1936 Olympics all anti-semitic signs and publications were removed from the capital—not to alarm unsuspecting foreign visitors.

Out of the blue, Eliza called me one day. After an extended stay in Italy she was on her way to Hamburg, to be on hand for her fiancé's release. They were going to get married as soon as he was free, within the next few weeks.

Over lunch at an intimate little restaurant, Eliza told me of her Italian travels in well-nigh ecstatic terms.

"I never dreamt Lugano could be so beautiful; and the people are kind and generous. We lived in a chateau on the lake, and Giorgio sat at my feet while I played the piano. These were the happiest months in my life."

Giorgio was a count, I was told, scion of a distinguished family which had attracted the wrath of the Fascist regime. All that remained to him was the ancestral castle on the lake shore where he lived alone—until Eliza appeared. They went on trips together.

"We visited Florence and Venice, then we toured the Riviera in Giorgio's Bugatti," she recounted. The very names had a romantic ring, and the mention of sports cars provoked memories in me.

"Have you heard from Conrad?" I inquired at a suitable moment.

"Not lately. I couldn't keep up the correspondence."

"That's too bad. I always thought you would be friends forever."

Eliza shook her head. "It was only a brief flirtation. If it hadn't been for Conrad, things might have turned out differently between you and me."

"You mean Conrad came between us?"

"Perhaps. But it's never too late. Where there's a will, there's a way."

She sounded quite detached now, and wasn't even looking at me. The waiter brought the dessert, with an obsequious bow.

"How long are you staying in town?" I asked casually.

"I intend to take the evening train to Hamburg. Actually I *could* stay over—my in-laws don't expect me until sometime tomorrow."

I had a previous engagement, too urgent to be put off, and Eliza took the evening train. But I saw her off to the station, standing on the platform while she leaned from the second-class compartment window. There was little more to say, so I asked her whether she still remembered the "Ballad of the Outer Life." I had gotten to like it myself, in a way.

"How could I forget?" she said. "*From having seen such things, what profit comes?—Yet he says much who whispers evening.*"

Then the train started to move, and that was the last I saw of Eliza.