

Bedtime Stories

by Josef K. Strosche

Even before I tap on the door I know I am being watched with one eye. My footsteps have surely given me away. A swift tug on it reveals her to me—half of her, that is, and I slink past the threshold, to her. From her eyes I see that she has cried.

“Did anyone see you?” she asks me.

“No. No one saw me. I took a cab.”

She says she can smell December on me when I shed my brown leather jacket and drape it over the chair before her desk on the far side of the room.

“Why didn't you wear a heavier coat? That's not warm enough,” she says, fondling my chest and arms.

I ignore her question and instead take her face in both hands and kiss her. “Let's have a drink,” I tell her and slide my palms down the side of her to her waist, thick now on account of the heavy robe.

She walks to the closet next to the door:

“All I have is this.” She announces it more as a warning. In her hand she rattles a droll little bottle, cyan and opalescent. I shrug with optimistic eyes, though I'm sure I've failed to disguise my dread. Stationed atop her dusty *Lehr- und Übungsbuch der Deutschen Grammatik* I find two coffee mugs, stand to rinse them out at the basin that is wedged between the door and her bed, but am halted. She takes them from me with a smile, goes and cleans them, returns and pours us two equal measures of the clear spirit.

“Ach,” I groan. “Tsiporo.”

“Tsipuro,” she says, correcting me from the corner of the bed across the way. She sips and smiles, and then lights a cigarette. “You say it like an American.”

“I am an American,” I say. She smiles. “Okay—what time is it anyway?”

“Four.”

“Okay. What happened?”

"I sent him that message." Damn

"Which message?" I light my own cigarette, lean back in the small chair and fold one leg over the other to feign some disinterest.

"The same message I sent you."

Of course I want to see you / come over / you can come right now / I missed you / see you soon.

"I knew that was going to happen sooner or later."

"What exactly did it say again?" I ask.

"Read it for yourself."

I rescue my phone from my pocket and double-check it. "It's harmless enough," I lie. "It could be to one of your friends. He can't read German anyway."

"He called." Damn

"What did he say?"

"Well, of course he wanted to know why I'd sent him a text message in German, and at three in the morning." Smoke whistles out from between her lips while she slides a hand through the length of her hair.

"What did you—?"

"I just told him I'm drunk and was thinking in German so it came out in German."

"Good."

"I knew this would happen sooner or later. I knew it."

I finish my cigarette and push it out in the ashtray we share on the cold tile floor between our feet. When she rises to refill our mugs I swivel from my chair into her seat on the bed.

She hands me the poison, which I sip once before setting it on the ground. She too takes a drink but leaves the mug on the desk. Now that she stands in front of me, I notice that her robe has come undone at the waist to reveal a caramel midriff. In my head I can hear her *ach ach Θεέ μου ach* and I am reckless, so I slip two fingers behind the elastic band of the satin pajama bottoms and pull her toward me, where skin meets lips. She bends down, kisses me,

and positions herself on her back next to me, propped up on her elbows.

"I hope he forgets about it," she says, halting her approaching predator before he can pounce. I sigh and depart from the bed. "Hey. Hey, what's wrong?" she asks.

I turn and show her my cigarette pack and raised eyebrows.

"Oh." I gesture to hers on the desk. "Sure," she says and nods. "I just hope he forgets about it before."

"Before," I repeat loudly, lighting her cigarette and then my own. I accomplish another drink by pivoting my arm on the elbow that digs into the mattress.

"Before."

"Before he gets here?"

"Yes," she says and ashes.

"That's true. It's only two more—." She shoots me a look and I take a drink. "He'll forget about it, love. Don't worry about it."

The audible jet stream from her mouth glides past my face, a part of it into my left nostril on its way by. I stare at her, fixing on her eyes the way I do when I try to talk to her without speaking. She looks away, off into the tiny void that is the center of the room.

"I still can't believe she isn't here yet," she says.

"When exactly was she supposed to arrive?"

"Over a week ago now."

"Has she ever been late?"

"Yes. A couple of times. Never this late though."

"What do you think?"

"What can I think? What do you think?"

"I shouldn't tell you what I think."

"Why not?"

"I just shouldn't."

"You don't have to. I know what you think."

"You do, huh?"

"Yes. I do. You want me to be," she says. "Come on. You want me to be, don't you?"

"Maybe," I say, unable to hold back that damned grin.

She doesn't smile, does not look at me. "What would we name him?"

"I don't know." I notice the plastic lighter rotating in my web of fingers. "We'd need something neutral, I suppose. Or something that applies to both, rather."

"We're crazy. Do you know that? That we're crazy?"

"It could be fate."

"We're crazy."

"Yes," I say and ash. I miss and it falls onto her bedspread. She looks at my face, scolds me with her eyes and licks her fingertip. With her moist digit she picks up the ball of black and gray ash, as if with a magnet to a BB, and deposits it in the dish where it belongs.

I lean in and kiss her lips and get up from the bed. From the inner breast pocket of my jacket I retrieve sheets of photocopy paper that have been stapled and folded lengthwise. For a minute I stand in front of her desk, flattening the pages and glancing over and though them. When I can nearly hear her brain tell her tongue to interrogate me I return to her:

"Read to me."

"What?"

"Read to me," I tell her. "It's a story, written by a Greek immigrant in Germany, in the seventies I think. He wrote in German and translated it a decade later into Greek. It's about his childhood. He tells about his visit to a monastery with his father and grandfather. You know, to the ones on the mountain, on that peninsula. Mount."

"Mount Athos."

"Yes. I already read it in German. Now I want to hear it in Greek."

"You won't understand it."

“I know that. You know that,” I say. “But I want to hear it anyway.” She stares at me. I know I've confused her. But she smiles and kisses me, takes the papers and flops down onto her stomach. I rest on my side, watching her while a hand rubs her bare back beneath shirt and robe. I follow her mouth as it maneuvers and negotiates the words and the lines and the sentences, producing the sounds that I adore and that thrill me. She reads well, I conclude, her intonation and pacing perfect. At the end of the first paragraph she stops and looks over at me. I needn't say anything to let her know that she should go on, and she does.

