

The Café with No Name

A novel

by

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Sample translation by Charlotte Collins

1.

At half past four in the morning, Robert Simon left the apartment he shared with the war widow Martha Pohl. It was the late summer of 1966, and Simon was thirty-one years old. He had breakfasted alone: two eggs, bread and butter, black coffee. The widow had still been asleep. He could hear her gentle snores emanating from the bedroom. He liked the sound; he found it oddly touching, and from time to time he glanced through the gap in the door to where he could picture the old woman's nostrils flaring in the darkness.

Out on the street, the wind came gusting towards him. When it came from the south it brought with it the market smell, the stench of refuse and rotten fruit, but that day it was in the west, and the air was fresh and cool. Simon walked past the grey residential block for retired tram workers, past the Schneeweis and Sons sheet metal workshop and a row of little shops that were all still closed. He walked along Malzgasse to Leopoldsgasse, and crossed Schiffamtsgasse to reach the corner of little Haidgasse, where he stopped to look in on the former Marktcafé. Pressing his forehead against the glass, he narrowed his eyes and peered inside. Tables and chairs were piled on top of each other in front of the big black counter. The wallpaper was faded, and bulging here and there. It looked as if the walls had faces. They need air, thought Simon. The windows would have to be left open for a few days; only after that would he start painting. The mould and the damp. Old shadows and dust. He pushed away from the window, turned, and crossed the street to the market, where Johannes Berg was just rolling up the blinds outside his butcher's shop.

'Good morning,' said the butcher. 'You can cut me a few blocks of ice, if you want.'

'I've got enough to do with the vegetables,' said Simon. 'Nineteen crates of swedes.'

The butcher shrugged and applied himself to winding down the awning with a crank handle. He was sweating, and the back of his neck glistened in the morning sun.

'I'll grease the hinges for you later, if you like,' said Simon.

'I can do that myself.'

'Last winter you greased them with rancid lard. In spring, the stink reached all the way to the Prater.'

'It wasn't lard, it was suet.'

‘Just let me know if you want me to help,’ said Simon. ‘I can do it afterwards. Won’t take long.’

‘Fine,’ said the butcher. He unhooked the crank, set it down beside the entrance and wiped his hands on his bloodstained apron. His face looked soft in the subdued light beneath the red-and-white striped awning.

‘Going to be a nice day today,’ he said. ‘Very sunny, but not too hot.’

‘Certainly is,’ said Simon. ‘I’ll see you later.’

He was a lanky man with sinewy arms and long, thin legs. His face was tanned from working outdoors, and his tangled, ash-blond hair fell over his forehead. His hands were large, and criss-crossed with the scars you get from handling rough wooden crates. His eyes were blue. They were the only really beautiful thing about him.

He walked slower than usual, and many of the traders raised a hand to him, or shouted some friendly words. It was his seventh year on the market, but today was his last day, and, watching him go, they didn’t know whether they should feel sad, or be glad for him.

At the loading area he heaved crates of swedes or onions onto his shoulders and carried them to Navracek’s fruit and vegetable stall. He cut the green stems off the onions and the shoots out of the potatoes, restacked the winter firewood to stop it going mouldy, and piled up empty pallets. For the fishmonger he scrubbed scales, slime and blood from the ice tubs. He crammed the dirty ice and the staring, open-mouthed fish heads into a sack, and lugged it to the refuse collection point. Later, he went to the stall that sold toys, wooden cars and small, brightly coloured tin carousels and scratched the rust off the floor grille with a scraper. He had always taken pleasure in his work: the variety, the physical exertion, the cash that jingled in his pockets at the end of the day. He liked the cold, clear winter air, the summer heat that softened the asphalt until bottle caps sank into it; he liked the market traders’ hoarse voices, shouting over each other, and the thought that he was just a small part of one huge, noisy, breathing organism.

Before the market closed for the day, he went back to the butcher’s. Using a jar of fat he had got from the ironmonger, he greased the tilt joints of the awning. He dipped a finger in the fat, then spread it over the hinges and threads of the big adjusting screw. He took his time over it, rubbing and dabbing at the screw for so long that his fingertips began to hurt.

‘You’re going to rub right through the metal if you carry on like that,’ said the butcher. He took a wallet from the knife drawer and extracted a note with clumsy fingers.

‘Forget it,’ said Simon.

The butcher shrugged and put his money away. 'You can come back any time,' he said. 'There's always work for a man like you.'

'Thanks.'

'Well, I wish you luck. But we'll be seeing each other, anyway.'

'Yes,' said Simon. 'We'll be seeing each other.'

That evening, he didn't take his usual route home. He walked along Leopoldstadt's little streets, over Praterstrasse and Vorgartenstrasse and all the way up to the Danube, where cargo boats and barges emerged from the shadow of the Imperial Bridge and made their way upstream in the glare of the evening sun. When he reached the site of the old machine factory he began to run. He ran down the unpaved path along the river bank, past huge lumps of concrete, pits full of rubble, piles of scrap metal and rusty iron railings. Driftwood and swollen cardboard boxes slapped against the shore. Black-headed gulls screeched high above him, and above the Danube water meadows on the northern bank the suburban children's kites were bright, tiny specks in the sky. He panted as he ran, open-mouthed, arms flapping. Sweat poured down his face, and in his neck he felt the pounding of his heart. Squinting against the sun, he saw in his mind's eye the café with its dusty seating area, the tables and chairs in the dim light, the faces in the papered walls, and as he ran on, stumbling and with aching lungs, under the Augartenbrücke, down a partially eroded embankment, over hot, clattering gravel, past black bulrushes and brambles with scraps of paper fluttering on their thorns, he felt he could go on running like this forever.

2.

Robert Simon was standing on the corner outside the café at nine o'clock the next morning. The owner of the building, Kostya Vavrovsky, had summoned him. 'Be on time,' he had said.

'Otherwise someone will pinch the business from under your nose. It's a good location, and the economy's starting to boom again these days.'

As far as the location was concerned, one could take a different view. The district around the Karmeliter market was one of the poorest and dirtiest in Vienna. Many of the basement windows were still coated in dust from the heaps of rubble the war had left behind, which provided the foundations for the new blocks of municipal housing and workers'

accommodation. Vavrovsky was, however, right about the booming economy. The newspapers used by the fishmongers to wrap their char and Danube trout spoke of great things. A shining future would arise from the morass of the past. Everywhere machines were clattering, hammering and screeching, and the steam over the freshly tarred roads mingled with the scent of the lawns in the Prater and the damp, pungent air that the wind blew in from the Danube water meadows.

‘It’s going to do well,’ said Vavrovsky. ‘Believe me, I know something about business.’ He produced a bunch of keys from his pocket, opened the front door and stood back to let Simon enter. ‘There’s a lovely light in here once the windows have been cleaned. Keeps the heating costs down, too.’

‘Is the boiler working again?’

‘It was never broken. Just a bit blocked.’

Simon looked around. He had been here a few times in recent weeks, but now everything just felt gloomy and shabby. The glasses on the shelves were dull with dust. Streaks of limescale trailed across the sink. On the floor behind the counter lay a single black ladies’ shoe.

‘All this is yours now,’ said Vavrovsky. ‘If you go about it right, you can open in a few days’ time.’

He placed the key on the counter and smiled. ‘I’ll drop in for a drink sometime,’ he said. ‘Not far for me to come!’

Kostya Vavrovsky lived on the top floor of his house, in two-and-a-half rooms under the roof. Just two days ago, he and Simon had sat at his kitchen table going through the lease. As Simon tried to make sense of its many paragraphs, he heard the pattering and scratching of pigeons above his head and wished he were up there with them, where he could look out over the Prater meadows and, in the other direction, to the shaded slopes of the Kahlenberg. The complex wording filled him with unease. For as long as he could remember, rather than giving him a sense of order, letters had tended to confuse him. As a child, he had not spent much time in school. On the day when, clutching a piece of bread and an exercise book, he first set foot in the primary school in Malzgasse and was shown to his seat among forty-three other children, the war was at its height. Less than three years later, one early morning, Allied bombers transformed the school building and the basement air-raid shelter into a black, smoking pile of debris.

Even then he could hardly remember the time before the war. His father was a sort of storybook figure, a shadow who—at least he had this, the only image he still retained—had walked out of

the door in a heavy coat with his marching orders in his pocket and had never come home again. Just three months after the news of his father's heroic death in the field hospital, Simon's mother died of blood poisoning, which she had contracted removing rust from old iron nails. Too confused really to be sad, from then on Robert lived in a home for war orphans run by the Sisters of Charity. Over the time he spent in the home among all the other lost children, his parents' faces, and everything about them, began to fade. What remained were the memories of a heavy coat and an apron dress that smelled of cooking, along with the blurred image of a staircase bathed in yellow light and, on the top step, a pair of spectacles with finely scratched lenses, whatever that might mean.

The young Simon experienced the end of the war as a kind of suppressed rejoicing. People couldn't take in the fact that it was over, and the horror in their faces only slowly gave way to an expression of tentative relief. Then they began to clear up. Out of the classroom window, Robert could see people with shovels, pickaxes and buckets crawling over mountains of rubble. At lunchtime, some sat on the bullet-riddled ruins of foundation walls, eating bread and drinking tea out of tin cans. Here and there a sharp pair of knees poked up out of the rubble where someone had lain down for a rest. Sometimes, Robert thought he recognised his parents among the dust-grey women and men: his beautiful young mother, a shovel raised high above her head; his father, a grubby hat low on his forehead, his face hidden behind a veil of blue cigarette smoke.

By the time he left school, the city had been transformed. The dust and ashes had sunk into the ground. Many of the ruined houses had been cleared away; the patches of wasteland were overrun with weeds; small children played with shrapnel and splinters. Little by little the gaps were closed. Municipal housing was shooting up everywhere: buildings ten storeys high with light-coloured plaster, glass entrance doors, apartments with tiled bathrooms and indoor toilets.

On a warm day in May 1947, Robert Simon stood in the Prater with several hundred cheering Viennese and watched as the giant Ferris wheel, skeletonised by bombs and now freshly renovated and relieved of fifteen carriages, finally began to turn. He, too, shouted and cheered, but at the same time he somehow felt a fraud. He was uneasy in the shadow of this creaking monster, whose struts seemed far too delicate to bear those wooden carriages with their laughing, waving occupants. He shivered in the warm spring air, and much later in the day he was still thinking of the Ferris wheel with concern. It was too big and too heavy, he was sure of it. The steel would break, near the axle or on the joints above the carriages. There was no way the whole construction would hold up over time. He marvelled at the enthusiasm that had surged over him and swept him away, and felt ashamed of the way he had shouted in the midst

of all those strangers, yet he wished that one day he might float in one of those red boxes, high above the febrile bustle of the city.

He left school at fifteen without a hint of regret. He could read and write, and could point on a map to the most important countries and their capitals, which was enough, in his opinion, to make his way in the world. Given the lack of healthy men, he had no difficulty finding work. With a group of emaciated Silesian Germans, he laid knee-high dry stone walls in the vineyards of Grinzing, pulled weeds, and scratched limescale and wine lees from the vats in the cellar. He filled the bomb craters in the city park with rubble and earth, and knocked the iron out of the ruins of the Südbahnhof. For a while, he worked as a busboy and cleaner in the beer gardens of the Prater; and perhaps it was here, darting between the tables in the light of coloured Chinese lanterns, on the lookout for empty glasses, chicken bones and cigarette butts, that the seed of a longing was first planted: to do something that would give his life decisive purpose. To stand behind the counter of a bar of his own some day.

Robert Simon lived with the Sisters of Charity for the remainder of his youth; later, he lodged in a Workers' Welfare Association hostel, before eventually finding the furnished room with the war widow through an advert in the newspaper. CLEAN LODGINGS AVAILABLE TO DECENT PERSON. TEMPORARY OR PERMANENT. NO CROOKS, NO DRINKERS, NO WOMEN. POLICE REGISTRATION. FIXED SLEEPING HOURS. LAUNDRY, COOKER AND WIRELESS RADIO. BREAKFAST ON REQUEST.

During the interview, Simon stood in the widow's apartment trying to make a reliable impression. He had borrowed a funeral suit from a work colleague and greased his hair with pomade. The sleeves were too short, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He felt stupid in his outfit, as well as too big and too clumsy for such ladylike surroundings, with the upholstered furniture and the two delicate-limbed porcelain dancers on the window ledge.

'Good,' said the widow. 'So here you are.'

'You're probably looking for someone quite different,' said Simon.

'Who would that be?'

'Don't know. Someone better suited to here.'

'Do you want to see the room or not?'

He nodded, and they went next door. The room was small and clean. A bed, a wardrobe, a window overlooking the interior courtyard, a crucifix on the wall.

'Looks good,' he said.

'Yes,' said the widow. 'Everything just so. You could put another picture on the wall, perhaps.'

'Not too big, though,' he said. 'Or it'll swallow up all the light.'

He felt the widow's gaze on his back. A coldness welled up inside him. He put his hands in his trouser pockets and stared at the wall.

'Do you want it?' the widow asked.

'Yes, I'd like that very much,' he said, after a moment's silence. Then he turned to her and they shook hands.

By then, he had already been working at the market for quite some time as a casual labourer, the advantage of which was that he could occasionally bring back a bunch of celery, a few floury potatoes, a piece of liver, even a packet of ground pork to put on the kitchen table for the widow. He had enough to get by, was content with his life, and as far as he was concerned things could have carried on like that for quite some time.

Then the market café on the corner closed. It was a gloomy, run-down place. The café owner, a former vintner from southern Burgenland whose vineyards had acidified under his feet, had taken it over after the war and kept it going for years with no ambition for it whatsoever. He was a taciturn, monosyllabic man who spent most of the time sitting on a stool near the entrance, gazing out at the street with bleary eyes. His beer was too warm, and everyone on the market knew that the hard-boiled eggs swam in their glass for more than just a couple of days. Simon still liked to go there. He liked the ivy that grew up the front wall and in summer was filled with the buzzing of insects, and he liked the cobblestones that were so worn and smooth that you had to squint when the sunlight fell on them. Sometimes, at the end of the day, he would sit at one of the tables and gaze across at the market, where the traders were scrubbing their counters and sluicing scraps off the pavement. He thought it surely couldn't be difficult to get people to come here: cold beer, clean glasses, and a proper coffee machine, not the misshapen lump that sat in there on the counter producing nothing but noise and dark bitterness.

One day, the landlord disappeared. One of the market traders said he had gone back to Burgenland and was wandering like a ghost through his former vineyards; another swore blind that he had seen him in a sawmill in the Waldviertel, pulling long planks out of the frame-saw amid an ear-splitting racket, his ears plugged with wax and his gaze focused on the darkness between the blades of the saw.

But that was just gossip from a few know-it-alls, and when the landlord still didn't show up all winter and a velvety layer of dust settled on the café windowpanes, he was soon forgotten.

Meanwhile, night after night, Robert Simon tossed and turned in his room in the war widow's apartment, driven by a longing once sparked beneath colourful Chinese lanterns that now flared up anew, until one morning he leaped out of bed and, without eating breakfast or even combing his hair with his fingers, he set off on the short walk to Haidgasse, climbed the six floors to Kostya Vavrovsky's attic apartment and, panting and with a thumping heart, applied for the lease on the old Marktcafé.

3.

Robert Simon started work the very day Vavrovsky placed the bunch of keys on the counter and left him standing there in the dim light of the main room. He opened all the windows and watched a swarm of tiny black flies rise up from behind the counter and sail out into the street like a spectral shadow. He tore down the wallpaper and painted the walls with a thick layer of white paint. Days were spent shuffling across the floor on his knees, scraping the dirt from the floorboards with sandpaper wrapped around a length of square-edged timber. He sanded the chairs and tables, and coated them in an acrid-smelling liquid whose vapours put him in a state of hazy exhilaration for several hours. He put the furniture out on the street to dry and watched the grain of the wood start to move in the sunlight. Later, he scratched the limescale off the fittings and the rust from the hinges of the kitchen door that led to the narrow light well at the back. Unlike the main room, the kitchen was in not too bad a state; the Burgenlander had used it for storage, and had clearly slept there on occasion. Simon lugged crates of empty wine bottles, five sacks of crumbly corks, a pile of dirty linen and an old bedframe out onto the street. He cleaned the cooker and tiles with a soft leather cloth, and left bits of bark and fir twigs toasting in a saucepan for half a day to banish the sour smell. Beside the front door he cut a large rectangle in the ivy and screwed a blackboard onto the wall for food and drink. He wanted to put a sign over the door, too, but no matter how hard he pondered, he still had not come up with a suitable name for his café. He discussed the matter with Johannes Berg, who was following his progress from the other side of the street. The butcher said that, as far as he could tell, the name was the most important thing.

‘Why don’t you just name it after yourself?’ he said. ‘Restaurant Simon. That’d look good on a sign: it’s short and memorable, and you can make the letters nice and big.’

That was one possibility, Simon answered, but it felt a bit conceited to him. Also, he was opening a café, not a restaurant.

‘Maybe it doesn’t really matter,’ said the butcher, after some consideration. ‘After all, the Danube existed before anyone called it the Danube. So your café remains nameless, and that’s as it should be.’

The evening before the café opened, Simon was sitting at the kitchen table eating dinner with the war widow. She had caught a cold picking greens in the Danube water meadows, and was wearing a thick scarf despite the summer warmth. Her eyes were red, and when she lifted her spoon to her mouth and breathed through her nose she made a wheezing sound.

‘The soup is delicious,’ said Simon.

‘Nettles are good just now,’ said the widow. ‘They’ve got the whole summer in them. Onions, garlic and marrow bones, that’s all you need. The bones on their own are almost enough to give it taste.’

Simon liked these evenings with the widow. He was thinking that this would be the last for a long time. He had decided he would manage without a day off. In the beginning, especially, he would need every penny; he couldn’t give up a seventh of the takings.

Over the past few weeks, he had thought a lot about such things, but suddenly he wasn’t sure any more that he had thought enough. Something heavy was seeping into his heart: the thought of the unknown, the many difficulties and obstacles that lay ahead; saying goodbye to his carefree youth.

‘Do you think my café can be a success?’ he asked the widow.

‘Why wouldn’t it be a success?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’ve taken on too much. I mean, who am I, after all?’

‘It’ll all work out just as it should,’ said the widow. ‘I have a good gut feeling about it.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I do say so. We should always hope a bit more than we worry. Anything else would be daft, wouldn’t it?’

It had got dark in the room. The widow was saving electricity, but he knew that the streetlamps would soon come on outside. In the twilight he could see her hands on the table like two slim shadows. For one brief moment he had a sense that they were moving towards him, but then he saw that her hands lay still.

4.

Robert Simon opened his café at precisely twelve noon. The first customer came in barely ten minutes later. Simon knew him slightly; he was a fruit farmer from the Wachau valley who sometimes rented a gap between the stalls on the eastern side to sell his apricots out of a basket. He sat down at one of the outdoor tables and stared gloomily over the pavement.

‘What can I bring you?’ asked Simon, who had put on an apron and stuck a pencil behind his ear. The fruit farmer looked at him, startled.

‘I know you,’ he said. ‘You work on the market.’

‘Not any more,’ said Simon.

‘What’ve you got?’ asked the farmer.

‘Coffee. Lemonade. Raspberry soda, beer, and wine from Stammersdorf and Gumpoldskirchen, red and white. To eat there’s bread and dripping, with or without onions, fresh gherkins, and pretzel sticks.’

‘That’s not much.’

‘It’s the first day. Besides, this is a café, not a restaurant.’

‘I’ll have a Gumpoldskirchen. White, in a glass with a handle,’ said the fruit farmer.

The next customers came around half past twelve. They were two old acquaintances from the Prater, both with pale, puffy faces thanks to their fondness for Bohemian beer. They ordered two glasses and sat by the window, where they put their heads together and talked in whispers. Soon afterwards, a gang of roadworkers appeared. They had spent the whole morning pouring tar and smoothing its steaming surface with long-handled laths, their faces covered with damp cloths. They ordered water and beer, and ate potatoes they had brought with them, which they had wrapped in tinfoil and baked in the hot tar. A neighbour from the apartment block next

door asked for an espresso with milk and a dash of rum. Two elderly ladies in summer dresses and flowery hats sat down at the next table along from the fruit farmer and ordered a red wine and a lemon soda.

More and more customers came: people from the neighbourhood, shift workers, employees in shirtsleeves, the girls from the Schottenauer yarn factory. Simon ran back and forth, took orders, poured beer, filled glasses, washed them in cold water, polished them with a cloth, wiped the tables with another. He fished salted gherkins out of the glass using a pair of wooden tongs, and with a thin spatula he spread dripping on the bread he had ordered from the baker at the market and fetched that morning, warm from the oven and swaddled in a white towel like a new-born baby.

Later in the day, the market traders came. Word had got around that the café had opened again, and they were curious. They sat at the tables or leaned on the counter, where they ran their hands over the smooth, sanded wood and watched Simon drawing beer.

‘A pint of beer! A glass of red for me! Three glasses of white! Two on the house!’

There were quiet moments, too, when the conversations dried up and everyone leaned back as if all exhaling at once. Then Simon would stand behind the counter, holding glasses up to the light to check that they were gleaming, and when he turned and put a glass on the shelf he saw himself in the mirror, with his apron, the pencil behind his ear and an expression of quiet incredulity.

At six, the butcher came. He sat down, ordered a small glass of red and looked slowly around the room.

‘I told you,’ he said. ‘With or without a name, it’s fine as it is. And it’s going to get even better, Simon, just you wait and see!’

5.

A bus full of sad women set off in the evening sunshine. It bumped its way off the site of the First Floridsdorf Fine Textiles Factory and drove past the Jedlesee cemetery, little orchards in bloom, wasteland and building sites, along the Old Danube with the bathing huts that smelled of warm wood, over the Imperial Bridge and on into the grey labyrinth of Leopoldstadt. Now and

then it stopped, releasing one or two women who waved one more time before disappearing into the entryway of a house or behind the low door of a basement apartment. The young sewing assistant Mila Szabica alighted at the Praterstern. For a moment she stood staring after the bus, which circled the roundabout and then threaded its way into the evening rush-hour traffic on Nordbahnstrasse.

Mila lived in a box room apartment on Aloisgasse, with an indoor toilet and a view of the bright yellow façade of the Wilhelmshof Hotel. She was a country girl, dark-haired, small and round, with permanently reddened hands and big, hazelnut-brown eyes. Her parents, apple farmers from Southern Styria, had sent their only daughter to the city a few years earlier, where she had started work in one of the *secure jobs for life* advertised by the fine textiles factory. When she left the farm that foggy morning to take the early train to Vienna, she felt a hairline crack run through her heart, and something inside her dissolved; she didn't know whether it was an oppressive weight, or the heavy, warm feeling of home. She huddled up on the bench, her face hidden in a woollen scarf, and wept for the entire journey. At midday, when she finally got off the train at the Südbahnhof in Vienna, she felt strangely light, and would have liked to kick off her clumpy peasant shoes and walk barefoot down the platform and on into the city.

Mila's character was robust. The other factory girls had the advantage over her as far as skill and dexterity were concerned, but she made up for it with perseverance and hard work. She was reliable, didn't allow herself to be distracted by any amusements to speak of, and, above all, stayed well clear of the trade unions. If she carried on like this, said Herr Steinwender, the acting authorised signatory, they might even offer her the prospect of promotion one day, to regular seamstress or perhaps—who knew what was possible?—to supervisor.

Six times a week, Mila took the company's diesel bus to Floridsdorf in the early morning, sat all day long in Hall 2, Row V, bent low over her rattling Singer sewing machine, and was transported home again in the evening, with a stiff back and aching fingers, where she cooked herself an evening meal and went to bed early.

The bus had disappeared. Mila turned to go home. As she walked, she slipped her hand into the pocket of her summer coat and clenched it around the money in the envelope. It was the last pay packet of her Secure Job for Life. The Chinese were coming, Herr Steinwender had explained to them the previous week, at a hastily convened employee meeting; nothing to be done, they were simply cheaper than Austrians. It was infuriating, but, at the end of the day, it was a fact; incidentally, they could thank the trade unions if they felt so inclined. The acting authorised signatory's laughter echoed tinnily beneath the high roof of the factory workshop, and the

women sat down again at their machines to sew up the sleeves of the final Floridsdorf blouse collection.

In the envelope were one thousand two hundred and eighty-three schillings. Together with the savings Mila had sewed into her mattress, it would be enough for three months. Maybe even four, if I manage it carefully, she thought. But it won't need to last that long. The Chinese may be cheaper, but I'm young and strong and determined.

The next morning, she set out to look for work. She scoured the newspapers in a shift workers' café on Zirkusgasse, noting down the jobs she could apply for. There weren't many. She hadn't learned how to do anything except the piecework on the sewing machine. She knew how to push and turn the fabric exactly as the pattern required, how to change the thread with a few flicks of the wrist, and how to apply a couple of drops of oil to keep the bobbin capsule working; that was all. She wasn't a good cook, and she felt she was too ungainly and uneducated to work as a sales assistant in a department store or beauty parlour. But she knew about housekeeping, and she had strong arms and legs, not like the dolled-up young women who strutted about the Prater at all times of day and night and clearly felt they were above darning the holes in their own stockings.

The weeks passed, and there was no work to be found. Every morning, Mila walked across the city with a piece of paper in her hand, calling on the addresses one by one. Often, the job had already gone. Or else the requirements were too high, especially for reading and writing. Once she was rejected because of her coat, which was threadbare at the sleeves and the edge of the collar. Another time it was on account of her figure. 'With all due respect, young lady,' the manageress of an inner-city lingerie and hosiery boutique had said to her, beneath the starry brightness of its crystal chandelier, 'you are simply too fat for our shop.'

Perhaps Mila would have found work on one of the agricultural farms on the ragged edge of the city, or further out, on the farms and fields in Gänserndorf, or in the forest district, but she had had enough of working in the rain and wind and under a burning sun.

One afternoon, she arrived back in Leopoldstadt tired and with aching feet. She got off the tram at Taborstrasse and took the little detour across the market. She liked the thronging crowd, the housewives' shrill voices, the cries of the market traders, and the aroma that hung over the fruit and vegetable stalls, which could give way to a putrid stench as soon as you turned the corner. She stopped outside the butcher's and watched him cutting up a sirloin of beef.

Eyes narrowed, tip of the tongue between his teeth, Johannes Berg separated the meat from the bones, first with a saw, then with a boning knife, before cutting the fat off the meat. He wiped the bits of fat and cartilage off the board with an energetic sweep of his hand, smacking them down onto the tiled floor. As he wrapped the individual pieces of meat in greaseproof paper, ready to put on ice, his gaze fell on the young woman outside the shop. Her wide eyes; her pale, frozen face. For a moment she stood there, motionless, then she buckled and collapsed.

When Mila came to, she was sitting on the pavement with her back against a fire hydrant and her legs outstretched.

‘I think I fell down,’ she said, as the butcher’s shiny red face swam up in front of her.

‘Some people can’t tolerate meat,’ he said. ‘They can eat it, but not look at it.’

‘No, no, the meat looks good,’ said Mila, still a little dazed. ‘And you were cutting it so beautifully.’

‘You still fell down, though. You should drink something. Come on, I’ll help you up.’

The café wasn’t very busy that day. A man in overalls was sitting at a table by the wall, smoking filterless cigarettes and drinking coffee. Robert Simon was standing on the counter in his socks, wiping the dust off the ceiling lamps.

‘Simon, a soda!’ he heard the butcher call from outside. ‘And a couple of pickled gherkins, too.’

Through the open door he saw Johannes Berg crossing the street with a young woman, his arm carefully placed around her shoulders.

He wiped the lampshade one more time and leaped down from the counter, quiet as a cat.

‘I fell down,’ said the woman. The two of them were standing in the doorway now, and Simon could see how white her face was.

‘It’s nothing to do with the meat,’ said the butcher. He propelled Mila over to one of the tables and sat down beside her. Simon made a soda water, fished a few gherkins out of the jar and came to sit with them.

‘Thank you,’ said Mila. She drank the water down in one gulp and bit into a gherkin.

‘Would you like another one?’ Simon asked.

Mila shook her head. She took a second bite, then burst into tears.

‘Oh,’ said the butcher. ‘This is...’

‘No,’ said Mila, sobbing. ‘It’s nothing, really it isn’t.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Simon. He was so surprised and confused that for a moment he couldn’t think why he was sitting here at the table with the two of them. He cast a surreptitious glance at the butcher, but he had lowered his head and seemed to be contemplating the stains on his apron.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ said Simon. Only once in his life had he ever seen a woman cry. That had been at school, when fat tears had suddenly run down a Sister of Mercy’s cheeks in the middle of dictation. None of the children had known why she was crying; probably not all of them even noticed, because after a few moments, which nonetheless seemed endless to the young Robert, she had wiped her face with the sleeve of her habit and the dictation had continued.

‘Don’t you want to tell us what’s wrong?’ asked the butcher, who had raised his head again. ‘I mean, people don’t cry just like that, for no reason.’

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ stammered Mila. ‘It’s just that I don’t have a job. I lost one, and I can’t seem to find another. No job, no prospects, no money. And I’m so hungry that even a gherkin tastes good.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said the butcher.

‘I’ll be all right,’ said Mila. She had stopped crying now and was rubbing the tears from the corners of her eyes with her fingertips.

‘Not a nice situation,’ said the butcher. ‘But I’m sure something will turn up.’

‘I’m sure it will,’ said Mila. ‘Something always does.’

‘Do you want another soda?’ asked Simon.

Mila shook her head. ‘I think I’d better go,’ she said.

‘How about if she came and worked here?’ asked the butcher.

‘What?’ said Simon.

‘She could work for you.’

‘Why for me?’

‘You can’t keep up on your own. Running yourself into the ground, on your feet all day. You said so yourself.’

‘I really do have to go,’ said Mila.

‘You stay where you are. We’re going to discuss this now,’ said the butcher. ‘I mean, the café’s doing brilliantly. Better than you ever thought it would, Simon.’

‘Yes, it’s not doing badly, all things considered.’

‘Which means you could do with some help, couldn’t you?’

‘It’s not that simple,’ said Simon. ‘Have you waitressed before?’

Mila shook her head.

‘Well then, it won’t work out.’

‘No need to make out it’s harder than it is,’ said the butcher. ‘You weren’t a café owner, either, before you started. And now you are. You could give it a try. If it doesn’t work out, then it doesn’t.’

Simon considered for a minute, then said, ‘Do you have any interest in this sort of work?’

‘I need work, not an interest,’ Mila answered. ‘I can get along with most people, and I’m sure I can carry a few glasses. If I drop them, you can dock my wages for all I care. I can work. See the calluses on my fingers? You couldn’t cut them with a kitchen knife. I’ve got rent money till the end of the month; after that I’ll be out on the street. So if you have a job for me, thanks very much, I’ll take it.’

Simon and the butcher looked at her.

‘All right, then,’ said Simon eventually. ‘We’ll give it a try. What’s your name?’

‘Mila.’

‘Mine’s Simon. The café hasn’t got a name. If you think of one, let me know.’

‘All right,’ said Mila. ‘But I’m not promising anything.’

6.

A huge man appeared on the doorstep, with short, black, uncombed hair, and a broken nose beneath small, watery-blue eyes. It was René Wurm, one of the wrestlers from the Heumarkt. In summer, cheered on by thousands of spectators, René fought other men like Georg Blemenschütz, Gerd ‘Bambule’ Franticek, or Vlado Knievskov, the Georgian Bear. During those weeks he was a hero in silk shorts, the sun reflecting off his skin that shone with sweat and oil, fêted and invincible until the final round of the day, which he always had to lose, to

Blemenschütz or Orlic the Barbarian. The rest of the year he worked on the bumper cars, touting and selling tickets. His announcements were known for being the dullest in the Prater, but his appearance ensured discipline; the young drunks and rowdies respected him, and went elsewhere to bloody each other's noses for their girls.

'Mind the door!' Simon called from his position behind the counter. Too late: the door slammed shut, dust trickled from the door frame and the glasses tinkled on the shelves.

'Bugger that,' said René.

At this time of year—it was the end of October, and cold—he was always in a bad mood. The summer was over; the wrestling season, culminating in the big tournament during which the gold victor's belt was fastened around his waist three times, only to be snatched away again immediately afterwards, was over; there was almost nothing left of his fee. All that remained were the injuries from innumerable blows, kicks, shoulder clamps and choke ties.

'A plum brandy, please,' he said to Mila, sitting down at a table between his friends, the fishmonger Frank Wessely and Harald Blaha, the former treasurer of a gasworks who had taken early retirement.

'You start boozing already, at this time of day?' asked Blaha, blinking with his right eye. The left had been taken out by a piece of shrapnel in Novorossiysk; since then, he wore one made of glass that he would sometimes, after the fourth or fifth beer, prise from its socket and roll across the table.

'A plum brandy is hardly what you'd call boozing,' said René.

Mila brought the schnapps, and he knocked it back. 'Bring me another,' he said. 'And for these two, as well.'

They drank the schnapps and ordered beer.

'I'm going to stop doing the bumper cars,' said René. 'It's too stupid. No one comes now, anyway, in the autumn.'

'What will you do?'

René shrugged. 'Don't know. I should be living in America. They have fights there all year round. Arenas so big you could fit half the Prater in them. The proportions are all different. It's the same with the prize money: four or five fights, and you've got enough to last you a couple of years. You just have to be with the right trade union. In America, with the right trade union, anyone can make money.'

‘That’s how I imagine it,’ said Wessely. ‘Being rich, if only for once in your life. Sacks full of money, then losing it all again straight afterwards.’

‘Why losing it?’

‘It often happens that you only know what you had when it’s gone.’

‘I’ve never heard anything so idiotic in my life,’ said Blaha.

They ordered another round, and as Mila leaned over the table to put the glasses down, Wessely put his hand on her arm.

‘Leave it,’ said René quietly.

Wessely removed his hand. Mila cleared the glasses in a few quick movements and walked away.

‘It was just fun,’ said Wessely. ‘A man’s allowed a bit of fun, isn’t he?’

‘I’m in stitches.’

‘Want to see something?’ cried Harald Blaha. ‘Watch this!’ He pulled down his lower eyelid and stuck his forefinger deep into the socket behind his eye.

‘Leave it where it is,’ cried Wessely.

‘Yes, leave it in,’ said René.

‘Always the same,’ said Blaha. ‘Whenever anyone tries to lift the mood...’

‘A glass eye is not what you’d call lifting the mood,’ said René.

‘I would have liked to see it,’ said a customer at another table, a man with ash-grey hair and oval spectacles, which, oddly, he took off every time he sipped his drink.

‘Believe me, it’s not a pretty sight,’ said Simon, from behind the counter. He had seen Blaha’s eye roll across the table once; it was such a vile and ugly image that it haunted him for weeks, even in his dreams. Besides, he had heard an undertone in René’s voice, and he knew what the Heumarkt wrestler was capable of when he had been drinking. Just a few weeks ago he had lifted a scaffolder out of his chair, carried him out of the café and dropped him onto the pavement like a sack of potatoes. The scaffolder had claimed that the socialists only had the workers’ backs so they could ride about on them. That was a mistake, because René believed in a red future. He possessed a party membership card, and he kept a photograph in his wallet that showed him, after one of his finals, arm-in-arm with the mayor of Vienna, Bruno Marek.

‘Without us, you’d still be crawling around building sites for twelve hours a day, six days a week, with no prospect of a pension, you dickhead!’ he had yelled at the scaffolder as he lay sprawled on the pavement.

‘Another round, Simon,’ cried Wessely. ‘But Mila’s not allowed to lean over the table any more!’

‘Shut up,’ said René.

At midnight, Simon sent Mila and the last customers home. One by one they stood up and staggered woozily towards the door. Only René remained sitting, huge and immovable as a piece of rock in the smoky haze. Simon washed up the last few glasses. He wiped down the salt shakers and brushed out the ashtrays. As he took off his apron, he cast his eye about the room, over the tables, the benches, and the shelves with the miniature lightbulbs that made the bottles glow. He had been on his feet for fifteen hours.

‘I’m nearly forty,’ said René. ‘I’m at least ten years too old to be kidding myself, and yet I still do it. Where’s that going to get me?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Simon. ‘We do what we can. We only find out later if it was right or not.’

‘That’s exactly how it is,’ said René. He stared into space for a while, then pushed back his chair, placed a banknote on the table and made to leave.

In the open doorway he stopped again. Simon felt a gust of cold air, and saw a milky glimmer outside in the night, around the wrestler’s head and shoulders. René slowly turned around, and his face was lit up with childlike wonder.

‘It’s snowing, Simon,’ he said. ‘I’ll be damned—I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more beautiful in all my life!’