

Part 1: Entanglement

1.

Marie runs along the Ringstrasse. Swarms of midges fly into her face, into her eyes, her nose and her slightly open mouth. She sticks out her tongue and brushes the tip with her thumb and forefinger. A swathe of cloud pushes in from the left over the houses, driving away the summer blue. Rain has already started to spit and sprinkle onto heads and bare shoulders; walkers hurry to take shelter under awnings and seek refuge in coffee houses; kiosk owners move their papers under cover, shutters flap in the wind, umbrellas are opened. Marie's heels clatter along the pavement as she runs into the narrow alleyways of the first district. She opens a glass door and pushes the red velvet curtain to one side.

What a day!

Tourists lean over city maps and stir their light-brown *Mozartkaffees*; white-haired old ladies dig into creamy cakes with tiny forks. Students hide in corners behind wooden newspaper racks, rustling at the pink pages. The espresso machine rattles and hisses, spoons clatter, clouds of smoke hang overhead, hovering above the red-upholstered benches. In the middle of the room there's a maze of marble slabs, table legs and backs of chairs, amongst them are colourful rucksacks and a silk scarf that has fallen to the floor from the arm of a chair. Marie negotiates a path, fights her way through, avoiding and stepping over the obstacles. A group of teenage girls giggle behind their hands; next to them sit two young women, one with a baby in her arms. There is an opening in her t-shirt, and a nipple is already exposed, poking out into the room. Behind the newspaper racks heads are turned, mouths hang open, eyes are transfixed. And Marie, also distracted by the sight, stumbles over a chair leg and grabs hold of a table, which starts to wobble. A coffee cup tips over, the colour reminds her of a mudslide; murky and brown, the liquid flows over the table top and drips onto the floor.

A man peers out from behind his newspaper. He looks first at his coffee as it seeps away, and then into Marie's eyes.

With love it's like that. You can't choose your parents - you are just born into a family. But how does it work with the great love of your life (or even with a little one)? Fate, say the white-haired ladies, whose husbands have been buried for many a year. All of life is nothing but fate: who you marry, how many children you have, when you die and whether you have to bury your children before you go – all of it is down to fate. You can't do anything about it; you just have to go with it. And they're not so very wrong, these old ladies, for who decides whether you are in the right place at the right time, or in the wrong place at the wrong time, or in the wrong place at the right time, or in the right place at the wrong time? Who decides, if not fate? And who can be sure at the end of their life that they know which was the right time and which the wrong, which place it would have been better to seek out, and which it would have been better to avoid?

So there she stands, the woman who calls herself Marie, but whose real name is Laetitia, in the furthest corner of a Viennese coffee house, next to the mother with the large brown nipple, which the infant is now suckling on contentedly.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

With a quick movement Jakob, whose coffee she has knocked over, puts aside his newspaper and smiles at her.

Fate in the form of a coffee-coloured nipple is something quite special, it doesn't happen every day; such a fate must mean something big. Marie and Jakob both sense this, so they dab away diligently with napkins and tissues at the spilt coffee and call for the waiter. With sweaty palms they let fate take its course: Marie thinking of her own pink nipples and how they might look if she ever carried a child, and Jakob thinking of nothing at all. Marie's words fly over his head like puffs of smoke; when it comes to it, what she's saying is entirely irrelevant, there will be time to talk soon enough in a coffee house, that's how it is when two people get to know each other. But talking becomes a defibrillator – come on now, come; in every movement of her mouth the fear of not measuring up; stay here, don't stand up, don't leave.

Marie is one of those women who want to be liked. Perhaps that's why she smiles so much.

Jakob, who feels attracted by Marie's smile (by her pout, by her slightly crooked eye-tooth, by the three freckles on the tip of her nose, by the dimple in her left cheek), flirts freely and uses his best jokes. When Marie takes a cigarette from the pack he lights it for her, because that's the done thing, even though he no longer smokes. And as he watches her smoking and talking, gesticulating and smiling, he suddenly finds himself thinking of Sonja, thinks of how she'll be sitting on her yellow sofa waiting for his call, her mobile on the designer coffee table, her gaze fixed on the flat-screen

television: long live romantic soap operas on a Sunday evening, long live love! They hadn't gone to the Vienna Woods today like they normally did at the weekend; today the radio announcer had predicted rain, so he had been able to say that he needed to go to the lab in any case, at which Sonja had looked offended.

Sonja and him: it just doesn't work anymore. The love's gone, burnt out, reduced to ashes, like the contents of the rapidly-filling coffee-house ashtray. All that remains are brown stubs, bent and misshapen. Sonja wants walks in the Vienna Woods, Sonja wants a child, Sonja wants responsibility. Jakob, in contrast, can no longer imagine a life with Sonja, let alone a life as a family of three. So he lets himself be pulled back to the coffee house by Marie's dancing dimple. What is she talking about anyway? He has to listen for a while before he can pick up the thread, but she doesn't seem to be waiting for clever remarks; no, not even for a nod of agreement. In rapid phrases she's talking about herself, about her job as a teacher of French, psychology and philosophy, her first sixth-form class (none of her students has failed the year, what a relief!) and how glad she is that she won't have to see the new headmistress for six more weeks.

"And you? What do you do?"

Jakob grins. He finds himself thinking about how his father would wish for nothing more fervently than to see him standing by a large blackboard in front of hordes of young people, writing out and explaining formulae.

"I'm working on my dissertation at the moment, quantum teleportation over long distances," he says, and is already scared he's boring her, but she just looks at him with big eyes and asks, "quantum tele... what? I've never heard of that before."

So he talks about his work too: about the small laboratory under the Danube, the fibre optic cables in the Viennese canal system, and the sender and receiver stations called Alice and Bob. He talks about the small particles of light he entangles, and about the impacts their research will have on the future.

"I'll show you the lab, if you like. Only if you're interested, of course."

"Absolutely!" Marie quickly assures him.

And that's how easily a repeat encounter is secured.

Jakob and Marie, Marie and Jakob. If the little god of love with arrows on his back really did exist, he would be looking down now with pleasure, smiling once more to no-one in particular, before taking himself off to his next assignment.

When the coffee house shuts, they go for a walk through town, following the same path that Marie had taken when fleeing from the rain, past churches and the palace, through archways, down to the Ringstrasse where the swarms of midges have since disappeared. Marie wraps her arms more

tightly around her body and Jakob, who doesn't have a jacket with him to offer her, puts his arm around her shoulders, pulls her closer and says, "You've got goose pimples." He has completely forgotten Sonja and her flat-screen TV; or perhaps not, perhaps he just pushes the image of her out of his head. He doesn't want to think about his relationship now. And so he walks along the Danube canal, his arm draped around Marie's shoulder, then over the bridge to the Augarten, around the Augarten, into Castellezgasse, up the steps and into Marie's flat, where a cat immediately nuzzles against his calf and noisily demands its food. Jakob shakes the animal off and presses Marie to him - this wonderfully unfamiliar Marie, this wonderfully smiling and fragrant Marie - he presses his lips on hers and pushes his tongue into her mouth: come here, don't go away; but she pushes herself away from him, laughingly turns a pirouette and flits into the kitchen to open a tin of cat food.

And as Marie cuts her finger on the tin and wonders whether it was smart to bring somebody she has only known for a few hours straight back to her flat, and as Jakob - who only has eyes for Marie's smile - sucks on her finger, the Viennese police pull Joe's corpse out of the Danube canal. His body is doughy and bloated, a bit like those of new mothers fresh out of the maternity ward.

2.

The summer drains everything; it sucks at leaves and rivers and extracts bodily fluids from people. Trams stink of tourist sweat and cars of the damp shirts of managers and fresh baby sick. The Danube canal also stinks, of dead fish and rotten leaves. Only Sonja's apartment is nice and cool, thanks to the new air conditioning, but Jakob doesn't want to go there anymore. He'd rather lie in Marie's armpit and lick the last drops of sweat from her body. So he doesn't notice when Sonja calls and shrieks into his mobile's voicemail, asking what the hell is going on, has he gone completely mad, just leaving her the key on the kitchen table, what a total arsehole he is! But that's just how life is sometimes. As the builders below Marie's window drill into the core of Vienna, Jakob drills into the core of Marie; and as Sonja's tears fall down her face, beads of sweat fall down Jakob's, until in the end they are both dehydrated. Whatever happened to the great love story? Their shared bed is no more, nor their shared fridge; Sonja drinks mineral water in her renovated old apartment, Jakob drinks mineral water in Marie's studio flat, and when they both lick their lips they taste salty: Jakob's from Marie's sweat and Sonja's from the tears of heartbreak.

The great love story is interchangeable, like everything in life.

Paperbacks by Konsalik are also interchangeable - every week a new edition, a new fate, a new great love story. That's why the eighty-two-year-old Hedi Brunner goes to the newsagents. Old

ladies have two foolish qualities: they read too much Kosalik, and they drink too little mineral water – habits that in the summer can cost them their lives.

Jakob's grandmother is lucky that the newsagent calls an ambulance and half an hour later she is lying under white sheets with a saline drip in her veins. On Jakob's voicemail the messages from his mother join those from Sonja, but the jackhammer under Marie's window means Jakob doesn't pick up any of them.

So the dog days go by, the cat hairs stick to Jakob's body and his research work is left to rest. When Jakob finally pulls his mobile out of his trouser pocket and charges the battery, he can't keep up with the messages. Where is he, moans his mother, his grandmother has had a fall and needs his help now; where the hell is he hiding, shrieks Sonja. But at the end of the day everyone needs a little bit of recuperation, time to themselves. When Jakob climbs aboard a tram the next day with a few bottles of mineral water and a couple of love stories, Sonja is lucky: this time he picks up.

Two rows in front of him a fat passenger called Herbert Sichozy chews on his sausage-filled roll and listens in, grinning.

They didn't keep his grandmother in hospital for long. She is already back sitting in her rocking chair, with a blanket over her knees despite the heat, reading one of her Kosalik paperbacks.

"No wonder your circulation is playing up," says Jakob.

He puts the mineral water in the pantry. Yes, of course he is well; yes, he's making good progress with his thesis; excellent in fact, he'll be finished soon. The world wants to be lied to, and his grandmother more than anyone.

"And?" asks his grandmother. "How is Sonja?"

Always the same questions, like a warming blanket in high summer: no air gets in, the smell of decay spreads itself out, but it can always be aired again tomorrow. It's well known that secrets are even more difficult to air than a grandmother's stuffy flat, and that's saying something. And if she's going to die tomorrow, Jakob thinks, why should I burden her? She should just believe that I'll soon have my doctorate and will marry Sonja. So he leaves her with two new Kosalik paperbacks, six bottles of mineral water and a dream of great-grandchildren.

He runs down the stairs with a spring in his step.

But fate has other ideas. With a red felt-tip pen it scrawls over his feelings of happiness so that at the end they look like a homework book. Damaged overhead cables, according to the announcement, and Jakob still doesn't think anything of it. He leans back comfortably, at least there is some space in the tram, he can do a bit of undisturbed reading. Damaged overhead cables: how

long can that last? Ten minutes, perhaps. He looks at his watch. He's early; he's easily got a buffer of fifteen minutes, so he reaches for his Penguin Classics paperback. When Jakob reads literature it is always old and always in English. After seven pages of Wells' *The Time Machine*, though, he does start to get a bit anxious. The driver is still standing on the pavement, with a cigarette between his lips, surrounded by a pack of annoyed passengers; he shrugs his shoulders – they won't be going anywhere soon. Jakob looks anxiously at his watch. He snaps the book shut and reaches into his trouser pockets. Where has he put his mobile? It's not in his left back pocket, or in the right one either, so he undoes his back pack and rummages around, turning its contents upside down, but in vain - the mobile has gone. Bloody pickpockets, miserable scum, now they've stolen his mobile and with it Marie's number! Swearing, he jumps up and runs down Alser Strasse. Why had he stayed sitting there for so long? Why hadn't he got out when the others did? He's only got seven minutes now, he'll never make it! And of course, to top it off, he gets a stitch. Perhaps he should have gone jogging with Sonja like she always wanted, then he wouldn't now be so out of breath, because he would have been fit and would have been able to sprint down Alser Strasse like a gazelle, getting from the Währinger Gürtel to Stephansplatz in five minutes. Instead he needs a full twenty-three minutes, and when he finally gets there he can only see a bunch of tourists and a little heap of dog shit. So he carries on running down the street, over the bridge to the Augarten, around the Augarten, into Castellezgasse. He rings the bell, waits, rings again. But Marie is not at home.

3.

"Your father has stabbed himself in the eye with a yucca plant – now would be a good time for you to finally come and visit again!" her aunt instructed, so Marie took the D-line to the South Station. Now she's sitting in an Intercity 365 named *Archbishop Johann*, trundling over the Semmering. The open carriage is new, only the rattling of the train reminds her of earlier times, when her father would sit her in a compartment with some old ladies and ask them if they could kindly keep an eye on the child. How old had she been then? Ten? Eleven? The ladies had got on her nerves; their mouths always hung open and exuded the stench of old women's mouths, displaying their furry tongues and false teeth; they had talked at her and even believed that she would be interested in their stories. On her arrival her grandmother was always standing at the station, asking why Hugo hadn't come too, a question that little Laetitia Maria couldn't answer for her. Right up until she died her grandmother waited for a visit from her Hugo, but Hugo never came. Marie travelled alone to Graz: there on Christmas Day, back on Twelfth Night; there on Palm Sunday, back on Easter Monday; only in the summer holidays was she able to stay for longer. Her father stayed in Vienna and was free to do as he pleased. The women he met while Marie was away knew nothing about his

daughter, and even less about his dead wife. They were there to ease the pressure in his chest a little; their names were of no importance for that.

Marie chews on her finger nails and looks out of the window. She remembers the haystacks that used to be in the fields here, and the anticipation that used to grow as she passed each one. The haystacks were only there in the summer, just after the schools broke up, when the long holidays lay before her like a fresh green playing field, and Vienna slipped further away with every station – Wiener Neustadt, Mürzzuschlag, Bruck an der Mur. At her grandmother's in Graz there was freshly cooked food and vanilla pudding, and the cave railway, which they rode on every year: a blanket over their shoulders, a second over their knees, past the wax hedgehog family and the colourful fairy-tale figures. Afterwards up the Schlossberg hill, to the clock tower, *Griß di Gott, mei liabes Graz*, then back down the steps. Sometimes they would take the funicular railway up to the top and the steps back down, or take the steps up and come down on the funicular. There was always the Schlossberg hill, always the welcome song, always the cave railway. And then eight weeks' worth of swimming at the pool in Eggenberg, walks in the town park and cooking puddings.

At the end of the holidays her grandmother would pack her rucksack with long bread rolls cut in half, filled with Dachstein sausage and pickled gherkins, and would pour raspberry juice into an empty drinks bottle. At the station she bought colourful comics with speech bubbles, *Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Huey, Dewey and Louie*. The taste of the rolls and the sight of the colourful comics delayed the final goodbye a little, so Marie would save half the snack and the stories for the next day, even though by then the sausage tasted a little rancid and the raspberry juice a bit like the hot chocolate her primary school teacher always put on the radiator.

Marie takes her thumb nail out of her mouth. The skin around the nail is red and hanging in shreds. She looks at her watch. In half an hour she'll be in Graz.

Why had her father moved back there? Of all places he had chosen Graz, and on top of that, her grandmother's old flat. The last little piece of security, forty-eight square metres of home: a kitchen, where once pudding had been cooked; a bed, which smelt of fabric conditioner; and a loo, where a delicate scent of roses always hung in the air. How had her grandmother managed to get that scent into the loo, and why could she, Marie, never manage it?

Now her grandmother's flat no longer smells of African violets and rose-scented soap, now it stinks of ashtrays and Styrian cheese and her father's sweaty feet.

Perhaps Marie should have taken the flat that time.

"Don't you want to move here?" her grandmother had asked, when she could only whisper, with creases around her mouth and red-veined eyes. But without a job, how could Marie have paid for it? In Graz it was so difficult to find a teaching job. Everyone came to Vienna. Like her cousin,

who had moved from Thal to Vienna specifically because she couldn't find a job, either in Thal or in Graz. Now she works as a support teacher in a school in the Ottakring district, taking on the difficult cases that nobody else wants and teaching the children German.

Marie looks out of the window. She recognises the paper mill. In twenty minutes she'll be at the main station, by then she needs to have re-discovered her smile. Where is it hiding? It's not behind the seat, nor is it above on the luggage rack. Marie can see her grandmother in front of her, the way she opened her mouth and made her diaphragm twitch. That was her favourite game. Her grandmother would pretend that she had lost her laugh and then they would throw themselves into the search, looking all over the place: in the cistern, under the rug, in the bathroom cabinet and behind the shower curtain. Once, Marie found the laugh in one of the rubbish bins in the courtyard. "Look, there it is!" she called and ran to her grandmother to put it back in her mouth, whereupon her grandmother laughed loudly and the echo resounded off the walls of the stairwell and tumbled down the stairs.

Marie shoulders her sports bag. Her grandmother isn't on the platform, and won't ever be there again. Marie takes the escalator down, goes past the snack stall, breathes in the smell of kebabs and ammonia and goes up the other side again. The tram is already at the stop. Marie hands the driver a two Euro coin, takes her ticket and change in return, puts her bag away and falls down on the seat.

Her father enjoys eating Styrian cheese, a relic from his youth. Otherwise there is nothing left from his youth anymore, everything smells of decay. Marie opens the window, leans her upper body out and breathes in the sound of birdsong.

"Shut the window, you know this pollen is no good for me," her father says. A cotton-wool ball is stuck to his left eye. As he cuts a piece of bread with a knife the crumbs fall onto his knee.

"You shouldn't smoke so much," Marie says, hanging on to the window, kicking away an empty cigarette box with her toes, "and particularly not now because of your eye pressure."

She pulls her head back in again. As she does so she plucks a smile out of the air, a smile for her ailing father. She shuts the window, picks up the empty cigarette packets from the floor and goes into the kitchen. It smells like a south Italian rubbish bin in forty-degree heat when the bin men are on strike. Marie goes to the hob and lifts the lid on the enamel dish. In the pot, drops of grease are waltzing with splotches of mould, everything is turning, and not only in the pot but also in Marie's stomach; she runs to the loo, pours the beef soup down the bowl and at the last minute manages to swallow down the acid rising from her stomach.

"What are you doing there? That soup was still good!" her father calls.

From the living room Marie hears the snap of his lighter. She flushes the soup away and sits on the toilet seat. She imagines what it would look like if the eye pressure made her father's eyeballs burst: a plop and then a hopping over the carpet. She leans her forehead against the cool tiles, stays sitting for a while, then stands up and goes into the bathroom where she looks for her grandmother's Colgate; her father uses Crest. Marie squeezes toothpaste onto her finger and rubs it over her teeth.

That evening they take the tram to the main square and fight their way through the crowds. Her father mumbles: "Shitty tourists, all pushing and shoving, no one can survive this," in Marie's head she hears the old yodel that her grandmother used to enjoy singing so much. *Wo i geh und steh, tuat mir das Herz so weh.*

They walk up Sporgasse, past the Sorger Café, whose tables her mother had landed next to when she fell to the pavement that time. In the town park children are running around with dogs, throwing sticks for them and then being pulled back just in time by their mothers grabbing hold of their braces before they can jump into the pond after the dogs. Marie would have loved to sit with them, kick the shoes from her feet and watch the children as they howl and the dogs as they chase ducks, but her father walks straight past the park café; he hates the town park and he particularly hates mothers with small children.

The inn her father takes her to is even gloomier than her grandmother's flat has become since he moved in. A young man stands at the bar with his head bowed, his back bent, and a dark look on his face. He stares into his beer as if he were waiting for better times. What is he waiting for, Marie wonders, what could possibly happen here?

Men sit around the regulars' table, telling each other about their bits on the side; every few seconds deep male laughter rumbles out from the corner. In their tales they come to earth in the form of swans, their beer bellies are magicked away and they become Olympian gods.

"When do you next have to go the doctor?" Marie asks her father, who is pushing at the bits of beef with his fork and crumbling bread into the oil like a sulky child.

"On Friday."

Then one of the men at the regulars' table yells over: "How's Helga?"

Marie turns around. Red bald head, walrus moustache, his arm draped over the bench, eyes pressed together, a laugh squashed behind his Adam's apple. And her father also squashes something behind his Adam's apple, namely a piece of beef.

"This is my daughter, Laetitia," he says. His voice, that ought to sound firm, falters; his voice-box hops over meadows and fields like an escaped bouncing ball, while the moustache at the

neighbouring table bores on, a revolting grin in a fleshy face. His gaze rests on the father's cotton-wool ball; Laetitia as a daughter doesn't really interest him.

"Ha, has she scratched your eye out then?"

"He hurt himself on a yucca plant," Marie explains, as if she has to protect her father, even though he really belongs to them, she thinks, otherwise they wouldn't be asking after this Helga.

She turns back.

"Who is Helga, then?"

Helga would be the first woman to have a name, but her father just says "nobody" and calls for the waiter.

When they leave the inn he nods to the men sitting around the regulars' table, they nod back and raise their hands in greeting. As Marie walks to the door she can feel the looks of the men boring into her back like needles.