



Photo: Martina Tesarová

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Day of the Burnt Toast

“Exactly thirty-three years ago today, Roger, was the day that Gerhardt explained his vision to me. I knew nothing about Plato then, but I had always been optimistic. At least until I’d fallen in love with the count.”

“What count?”

“Juliet didn’t tell you about Count Zborowski?”

“No, not that I recall. But my mind was fuzzy that morning.”

Fingertips planted lightly on her cheekbones, eyes bright and excited, Elena said, “Count Lech Zborowski was a cad, a brute at times, and a charmer. But I loved him. I’ve loved all the men in my life. But I’ve never had another die as needlessly as Zboro. Nor benefited so much from their passing.

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“I was so naive in those days, Roger. I was swept off my feet by a foreign accent and an old Bugatti. I’d moved to Europe after 1968, you see. I left San Francisco after the summer of love and moved to London, then further east: Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Berlin. Zboro, Count Zborowski, lived in Berlin and he knew how to push E’s buttons. Oh, did he ever. And so many of them were just aching to be pushed. We were right out of a bad novel. The night I met the reprobate, he took me for a ride on empty East German roads at breakneck speed in his beautiful old car, a Bugatti with its pathetic little headlights and loud roar. After that, we were inseparable and insufferable. We were together for nine months, mostly in West Berlin, when Karol Wojtyla became the new Pope. Zborowski woke me from sleep one early afternoon and announced we were going to Krakow immediately. Wojtyla used to preach in the Zborowski family cathedral there, so a huge family celebration was called for.

“Zboro had connections, papers. He went back and forth through the Iron Curtain like it a revolving door emblazoned with the Zborowski coat of arms. So we threw some things in the car and off we roared, top down, of course, in the rain. But he drove so fast the windscreen took care of most of it.

“We got to Krakow a day later and everything turned absurd. All that had been done was *so* Polish. A thousand, two thousand, bottles of vodka, had

been bought. Everybody was a Zborowski, or a close relative, or something. And everybody had bottles of vodka in their hands. They were shooting vodka. I drank considerably more than I do now, so I tried to keep up. Forget it. You do not keep up with a bunch of Pollacks when the competition involves alcohol. Especially if you're a twenty-nine-year old dilettante. "Viva la papa!" I remember them shouting over and over, shot after shot, my head reeling. Then Zboro had an acute urinary attention event."

"No," said Roger.

"Yes," said Elena.

"The third night of our binge in the name of Christ, he suddenly couldn't urinate. Jesus, what idiots we were! I had no idea what was going on. Zboro was bellowing and screaming, pounding the wall in the office of a physician friend. This friend of his, this quack, wouldn't take Zboro to the hospital because it was staffed with Communist flunkies. He only located a catheter after I begged and begged him to do something besides keeping Zboro in a hot bath spiked with turpentine, assuring me it was an old folk remedy. This man had taken the Hippocratic Oath, Roger; he had certificates on the wall. He drank vodka and sang songs into his stethoscope as he inserted the catheter into Zboro's penis, or tried to. It broke off. A catheter broke off in my lover's penis because this doctor of stupidity was so clumsy, so inept, so drunk and callous about his dying friend that he had gotten the thing, antique, glass, out of a museum. It all happened like that."

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Elena tried to snap her fingers, but they wouldn't make a sound because she had just wiped her eyes with them.

"I really...I really get sick remembering it so clearly. This was supposed to be a celebration, Roger. Pope John Paul was adored in Krakow. The Zborowski's loved him, they loved Lech, they would have done anything to save him. I know they would have.

"I so lost it over the catheter and the quack doctor that I managed to shoot an entire bottle of vodka, right there, in the office. I woke up with the worst hangover in my life and Zborowski was dead. His friend's medical skills killed him, assisted by my neglect. Uremia, poisoned kidneys, systems failure, it was horrible. I was a wreck, Roger, let me tell you. A wealthy wreck, as it turned out. Zboro left me a small fortune and his villa in Brno. Lost and numb, I couldn't return to Berlin. So I went to Brno with Ludek, our chauffeur, a Czech who had served the Zborowski family since he was a boy, in a big old Trabant sedan. The villa saved my life. I met Gephardt there, in that romantic, derelict dwelling overlooking the Wilsonova Forest. And there, as fate would have it, with Olga, we started the Walnut Klub."

Hands flat on her desk, blue veins pumping, Elena gazed into the air of the room like she could see through it into the distant past. Suddenly at a loss for words, she remembered her greatest love: his melancholy face, his frail body, his soft voice, the way he would touch her ear and send a current

throughout her body. She remembered how Gerhardt had drawn parallels between his once robust health and the collapse of seemingly indestructible empires. How he saw an alternative vision of empire, one in which men such as himself—ill, in pain, vulnerable, old—would not be banished to Siberia but honored with a series of clubs, clubs that would admit women as well. His vision had flourished like a hot house rose in the glassy confines of Communism, a rose seeded by Plato's *Politics*, which imagined a world where the regeneration of people as they aged was the norm, not a fantasy. In Plato's world, which Gerhardt had explained patiently to her, the older you became, the younger you were until, facing death, you were a child in a loose skin suit, ready to return to your basic nature, which was joyful, sexual, and erotic.

"Is there more?" Roger asked, snapping Elena back into the present.

"Oh dear, excuse me. Yes, there's more. Lots more."

"If you're not up to telling it today, we can continue tomorrow."

"No, today's the day, Roger. Just give me another few moments."

Elena clasped her hands, centered herself and continued.

"See, Gerhardt was Lech Zborowski's antithesis. Physically frail, he was kind and slow and tender. He asked me what I thought, and gave me space to express it. The morning I'm alluding to, the morning thirty-three years ago, was when we truly met. I'd seen him before, one of the bunch of dissidents that came to the villa most Sundays, kicked tires, and bitched about the Communists. But I'd never talked to him.

"We'd only been in Brno for five months or so. I was just thirty-five, living illegally with Ludek, who took few pains to conceal his activities from the authorities. But that Sunday, as the others complained about women and the Moravian weather in the garage, Gerhardt made his way upstairs, leaned on his cane and confided to me that he was not really a dissident, but a philosopher. And he thought it would be more fruitful to talk to a young woman than to the men below.

"Well, I didn't have a toaster in the villa. Only a large griddle. I usually stacked sliced rye beside it, the burner on, so that Ludek, Petr, Andreas, Gerhardt, all the regulars who came on Sundays, could toss a slice or two on the griddle. Usually they'd hang out in the kitchen, making sure the toast didn't burn. Well, this morning, Gerhardt and I got so engrossed in talk after I put some toast on for him that we wandered out to the balcony and his toast burst into flames."

Elena laughed or shrieked—it was impossible to separate the sounds, a combination of joy and terror.

"You should have seen him run, Roger! Off the balcony, through the dining room, and into the kitchen, like an old wind-up doll knocking a cane against chairs and the wall. It was then, watching this man put two hundred percent of what he was into getting to that burnt toast, that I knew he had a

lot of life left in him. And I decided I wanted to know him. I wanted to spend time with him. And I did.

“He was witty. Older. I was confused. About life, about existence. I was pondering the big question, what are you going to do with your life. And here came this fifty-five year old man with a cane and I let him in. Even now, more than twenty years after his death, I can still feel the way he would traipse his fingers along the rim of my ear. Always the left one. It still sends tingles down my neck and along my jaw bone and into my heart. Gerhardt gave me such pleasure, Roger. Such pleasure as a woman can ever imagine.”

Then she burst into tears, hands to her face. And sobbed with her entire body shaking, hair down on the desk, tears splashing. “I’ll stop in a second. I will. I’m so emotional these days. Please forgive me. It’s so unprofessional.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind. Don’t worry about it.”

Peeking through the hair like a girl through vines in a jungle, Elena said, “I really don’t know what’s gotten into me. The club has always been able to weather storms. The question now is, can I?”

Roger shifted around, shoved a hand through his hair. “I think you’ll do fine.”

“Yes, I will, won’t I? Thank you, Roger, for reminding me of that.”

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Listening to Elena’s recollections, Roger had felt his own worries dissipate. Her story of the club’s beginnings was even better than the massage she had given him. He wished that Gerhardt was still alive, so he could meet him. He said, “So the Walnut Klub was the dream of a young woman and a dying older man?”

“A very alive dying man. Amazing, isn’t it, that a wide-eyed young woman besotted by a dying older philosopher could, almost out of the blue, imagine men being rejuvenated as they grew older? Becoming more passionate, more fiery in their appetites, more concerned for their partners even as they faced imminent death. When it came time to die you would be at the very zenith of manhood. That was the idea, one borrowed, I discovered later, from Plato. But so what? One philosopher helps another. The dream of sexual pleasure and erotic fulfillment peaking at death is a powerful one, don’t you agree? Gerhardt said that if such a thing was possible, the whole planet would be at peace because men would not mind growing old. On the contrary they would long for it. The sensuous rewards of age would counter biological

deterioration. Give death a lovely pillow.”

What a wild idea, Roger thought. A world in which no one would be afraid of growing old.

“Of course, it was, as you said, Roger, the dream of a dying man. A very alive dying man who died just the same. And, I’m sorry to report, his death was no fun. Only tears, sorrow, and great pain.

“But long before that, before his death, our villa of disgruntled dissidents and romantic philosophers became a small medical pleasure club whose number one patient was Gerhardt Paessler himself. And whose shape came from the wonderfully sordid mind of a madam, a former flame of Ludek’s father who appeared out of nowhere.

“Her name was Olga. She was the adoring grandmother of two lovely little girls who came to the villa with her every day. Olga would untie her scarf, send the girls out to play in what she always referred to as the ‘magic forest,’ request a beer, flop in one of the villa’s Morris chairs, and recall the harlotry of the tragic days and nights of World War II, when Brno had been swept clean of young man. Its Nazi-patrolled streets knew little gaiety, only the shuffle and cane click of war survivors. Such men, many of whom were old, needed a different kind of erotic care, Olga told me. And she educated me on how to provide it. She had provided it with a brothel run like a tight ship. A secretive ship whose true purpose was never revealed to the Nazis nor their successors, the Soviets. A purpose well suited to the club Gerhardt imagined, a club that eased the wounds of time. A club that loved sensuality, was sensitive to the vulnerabilities of age, preferred the touch of hands to the technologies and drugs so popular today and, I must add, so threatening to our club’s future.

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“What a character Olga was! Such a raconteur. She savored one Dragon after another, each served in a tall pilsner glass brought from the kitchen by a fawning Ludek on a silver tray embossed with the Zborowski coat of arms. We sat there in the Morris chairs of the dead count, drinking and dissecting the most intimate details of erotic pleasure and how they could be adapted for the old, the ill, the dying. All the while Olga sipped at the white cumulonimbus head, her lips entering a cloud, and occasionally laughed like sex and everything to do with it was God’s biggest joke on human kind.”

“Whatever happened to Olga?” Roger asked.

“She disappeared.”

“That’s terrible.”

“True. But it saved the Walnut Klub. Olga’s disappearance made us cautious. We limited membership then to eight or ten men. Some of them survived, and so did we.”