

# The Rope Snapps

## 1956

Rolf was pushing his bicycle through the soggy snow covering the streets of Göttingen. He was desperately searching for a large manila envelope that contained his American immigration papers. He had picked up the registered envelope at the post office half an hour earlier, had fastened it on his bicycle carrier, and now it was gone. It must have fallen off. He had been in a hurry to meet Barbara for lunch. Where had he lost the all important documents? The thought that he had to return to Hamburg and go through the absurd procedures at the US consulate once more filled him with horror, not to mention the money that this would cost him.

The events in his life were beginning to crowd in on him. His slightly senile professor was still unhappy with the results of his thesis research, but could not explain what else he wanted him to do. The next date on which the physics department held diploma examinations was at the end of May. This was March, he simply had to get this thesis over with. He had booked his passage to New York for the middle of July. Harvard had admitted him to the Graduate School and his American professor expected him in Cambridge in August.

And now, in addition to all this, Barbara had appeared in his life. Rolf had the depressing premonition that something had to go wrong in his plans, that his stack of cards had become too high. Was the lost visa the beginning of the end? He was determined not to let Barbara go, and the only place he could see in his mind where they could live decently as a married student couple was in America. He needed those visa papers more urgently than his diploma certificate.

He reflected on this while his eyes were searching the gutter of the street that he had come down on. He realized that all three parts of this jigsaw puzzle were so intricately interlocked that he had no choice, he would be forced to continue to pursue all three cards at the same time.

He searched for the envelope for another half hour without success and finally, with a heavy heart and angry with himself, pushed his bike towards the Franciscan Inn where he was to meet Barbara.

Much had happened in the four weeks since that Faschingsball at the Nansenhaus. Rolf had returned home that night with the near clairvoyant knowledge that he was going to marry Barbara. Yet he did not even know her full name! He had woken up Gerhard, his brother, with whom he shared a room, and had excitedly told him of the new woman in his life. Gerhard had mumbled, "and how many women have you asked?" had turned around and gone to sleep again. Still he remembered enough next morning to tease him with that "Barbara" for the next few weeks, until he too met her - and tragically fell in love with her.

Rolf had not spared his new love. The night after the ball he went three times through the bitter cold to her apartment. Only late at night did he see light in her room. A snowball to her window produced her smiling face. She had invited him into her room and fed him a slice of bread, a fried egg, and hot tea.

She was still the same just as he remembered her, direct without any affectations, quietly sure of herself, only - was it possible - more beautiful.

On Sunday, on a blindingly sunny snow day, they had gone on a long walk around a lake in the country behind her street, and Rolf had told her more about himself, his dreams, and his plans of going to America. He had visited a married student couple a few days earlier and had found them huddling by and cooking on a Franklin stove in a dimly

cheap one-room apartment. "No," he told Barbara, "I would never subject you to such deprivations. The only way how we could live together while I am finishing my Ph.D., would be in America. There I can hope for a scholarship that would support us both." She had listened quietly, with a smile in her eyes, but she had not answered to his renewed proposal.

Barbara got more beautiful by the day. Occasionally he would see her unexpectedly walking down the street going for lunch or on an errand. On these occasions she simply overwhelmed him with her beauty.

She seemed to walk on air two feet off the ground, very erect in her thin, light-blue trench coat, her head characteristically bobbing up and down, describing a wavy line above those of the other people. He could soon detect her from far away and would way-lay her at the next street corner. In those early months they did not hug or kiss each other when they met by chance, but in her clear blue eyes he could see that she was as happy as he, and they walked off together, arm in arm.

Rolf had learned that her father was a retired officer, and that her mother had died a few years earlier after a long, debilitating arthritic illness. During the many years preceding her death Barbara had cared for her invalid mother. A few months earlier her father had remarried a much younger woman who had become Barbara's close friend. Barbara loved her father dearly, but no, she did not have a boy friend. She had smiled, when Rolf had asked this slightly over anxious question.

Three weeks after they met, as Barbara tells the story today, Rolf proposed to her formally. He had visited his parents to tell them about Barbara and his serious intentions of marrying her. From this visit he had brought back a family tree and a book with pictures of his more or less illustrious but thoroughly bourgeois ancestors, a genealogical collection that his father, had spent his life on collecting. He had shown these proud documents to his beloved to convince her that he was worthy of her! And he had been quite serious about it.

Barbara had not said yes or no, but had promised that she would make up her mind during the coming spring vacation, when she would be far enough separated from him to be able to think clearly.

A few days later Rolf had seen her off at the train station, and with a mysterious smile she had left him to his doubts. Rolf, deprived of her presence, went to a movie on his way home, to drown himself in a sentimentally sad love story, that played in Hersfeld, a town filled with some of the saddest memories of his first love, Brigitte. . .

One day a simple post card with a picture of Berlin arrived from Barbara: Yes, it said, she had decided to become his wife and follow him to America. An aunt, who with her husband had for many years moved around half the world, had asked her, "If you love this man, why should you not marry him and go with him to America?" This had dispelled her last doubts.

Yesterday she had returned to Göttingen. She had fallen around his neck and with tears in her eyes had only repeated, "Yes, yes! I will!" On the way into town she had told him of her visit with her father in Braunschweig and their conversation, and of Marga's, his new wife's promise to support them. "Father wants to meet you in Braunschweig in a week or two." She looked at Rolf with pleading eyes. - They had agreed to meet today to discuss this visit.

The prospect of having to face the old Oberst had caused a panic in his heart. Suddenly the situation had become truly serious.

He found her waiting at the restaurant with two girl friends from the school for medical assistants they attended. Jutta, a dark, moody, sensual type, was absentmindedly listening to her body. Helga was blond and moved freely, but her easy gayness aroused Rolf's instinctive distrust immediately.

Apparently both friends were fully apprised of the things that had happened

between Barbara and him. He found himself being greeted with a mixture of curiosity and intimacy. Notwithstanding that she was clearly the youngest, Barbara appeared next to these two young women, several years more mature, simpler, and clearer. And while Helga and Jutta tried their female games on him, Barbara was simply herself, unchanged, quiet, direct, without any mannerism.

They did not make a show of their affection before the two girls. But how much he loved her!

Barbara immediately detected his worried preoccupation. So he told her of his disastrous loss. "Why don't you go to the city's lost-and-found office? Maybe some one has found the envelope and taken it there." She proposed very practically.

"Yes," Rolf answered sheepishly, "why have I not thought of that myself?" But he knew very well, why it would have never occurred to him to take anything he had found to that office. His deep distrust of all kinds of official institutions had kept him from going there.

A day later he did go to city hall, and indeed she was right, some good soul had found his papers and had dropped them off there!

"So, it was not this rope that had snapped," was all he could think of.

Later Barbara and Rolf went for a walk along the "Wall", a park that covered the former defenses of the city and surrounded the inner part of town. Faced with her clear resolution, her father had not objected to her decision, but he had made his blessings of their union dependent on a longer conversation with the "young man".

"My dear man," she laughed, "prepare yourself, you will have to ask him quite formally for his only daughter's hand!"

His knees became weak. "How does one do that?" He asked gloomily. "I don't know that either," she said, "but he is not as conservative and intimidating as he appears. Be simply yourself and everything will work out alright. Marga will be our good angel with him. Unfortunately, father has arranged it so that she will not be at home when you come. You are invited to appear in Braunschweig next weekend."

"Will at least you be there?" He asked discouraged. "Yes," she said, "but not when he talks to you. He will take you on a long walk through the woods. If everything goes well, he will surely take us out to his favorite restaurant in the evening." "Oh," she continued, "I am sorry, but on this first dinner out together you will have to drink a beer with him. He now works as an accountant at a brewery in Braunschweig."

In the end everything went exactly as she had foreseen, only in order to get to Braunschweig Rolf had to sacrifice a good deal of his pride.

Barbara had gone to Braunschweig by train on Friday evening. She had a reduced-price student ticket. Rolf had been offered a ride by a clinical doctor who lived with his wife in another part of the apartment Rolf and Gerhard roomed in. Dr. Eggeling and his wife came from a village near Braunschweig and they had been the sympathetic but amused witnesses of the entire happening.

"Now, Herr Hopeful," he had started in the voice of Herrn von Stroheim as soon as they were on their way, "you are to be promoted to Officer! Congratulations!" Eggeling was more than ten years older than Rolf and had suffered the military on his own skin, but the Hollywood movie stereotypes had recently gilded these memories.

"Äh, the Herr Oberst is going to inspect his future son-in-law, ha?" He continued, imitating the use of a monocle. "Have they taught you simpleton how to kiss the hand of the most honorable Frau Oberst?" And to Rolf's horror he grabbed his hand, shook it lightly and produced a perfect hand kiss - while driving with his left hand nonchalantly racing down the Autobahn.

Gloating in Rolf's obvious pain he continued mercilessly. "For heavens sake, that you don't touch the hand of the Gnädige Frau with your mouth, that would be the most horrible *faux pas*. And that you don't make a sound when you do that! Unthinkable what could happen. Otherwise the conclusion could be, äh, unsuitable for a promotion to Son-in-

Law."

And in this vein he went on all through the journey. Rolf would have liked to jump out of the car. In the end Eggeling had thought of something really special as his *dernier coup*. With a very serious mien he asked Rolf whether he was aware of the fact that statistically the Rh-positive blood type occurred with much higher probability among daughters of military officers than in the general population. This could, as Rolf surely realized, lead to serious complications during the birth of children that had been fathered by a man that did not come from an officers family. Rolf swallowed this stale joke whole, and good Dr. Eggeling and his pretty wife must have laughed for weeks about him.

Father Lattmann did use a "Iorgnon" - with which he read the menu at the restaurant - but he did not exclaim "Äh!" as did Herr von Stroheim in the movies. He was very gentle with his future son-in-law, despite the fact that they both realized after the first hours that he and Rolf transmitted on totally different wavelengths - sometimes it even seemed to Rolf that they came from two different countries. In the end Rolf did not find it too difficult to ask half seriously "Sir, I ask for the hand of your daughter." And Father Lattmann laughed his short laugh and said, "Na, ja!" and the dreaded scene, obviously equally embarrassing to both of them had passed.

The long walk through the woods - a special Lattmann tradition - on the other hand was less harmless. Rolf was grilled in detail by his father-in-law on what his professional aspirations were, when he would finish his doctorate, how much money he was expecting to earn, and what kind of job he hoped to find eventually.

Fortunately, the old officer had no idea of the shoals and pitfalls of an academic education, nor of how long it could take to earn a doctoral degree. He did not ask when Rolf would come back from America nor where he was planning to marry his only daughter. Rolf would have been terribly embarrassed to have to explain these "minor" details. - And Barbara had not mentioned that their wedding was likely to take place in America without him.

They ate venison at a "suitably decent" restaurant, and to celebrate the day and to please Barbara, Rolf drank a glass of beer with her father, something he would have never done on his own.

For the night his future father-in-law had rented a room for him in a "pension" - despite the fact that there would have been ample room on a sofa bed in their apartment. So Rolf had to spend this very special night all alone by himself, far away from his beloved Barbara.

On leaving, Father Lattmann had decreed that he and Marga would travel to Göttingen in a couple of weeks so that Marga could also get to know Rolf.

During the following weeks worked Rolf day and night on his thesis. He had decided to write a first draft of his experiments. He had found an exceedingly competent secretary to whom he tried to dictate the text "into the typewriter". But to his dismay he discovered that his chaotic mind was not disciplined enough to give the text the necessary structure in this off-hand manner. He had had to return to writing everything by long hand. His panic was growing by the day.

When Father Lattmann and Marga arrived they had agreed to meet with Rolf and Barbara in the "Kronen-Keller", the best restaurant in town.

On the way to the meeting Rolf tried with all his might to suppress his argumentative alter-ego, which rebelled against another embarrassing subjugation to bourgeois convention. "I hate to be reduced to a second inspection by the monocle. Why can they not take me the way I am." It growled from the depths of his person and succeeded in intimidating Rolf's weekend rational functions to the point that the meeting with Marga very nearly turned into the farce that good Dr. Eggeling had prophesied.

Because of the excellent Prussian education that everyone had enjoyed, the two parties arrived so exactly in time that they met each other in the rotating doors of the restaurant. - And still at war with himself, Rolf tried to kiss the hand of the Frau Oberst

precisely at the moment that he and Marga were being ejected from the contraption! Marga chuckled with laughter and despite her trying to help him, he very nearly fell into the arms of the stony-faced doorman. The entire premeditated production had turned into a comical catastrophe.

Marga was visibly amused by the strained attempts of everybody to keep the form of convention, and despite the embarrassment caused by his awkwardness, Rolf liked her immediately. He sensed that she was much closer to him than her husband.

To divert Rolf from his misery, Marga directed the conversation to Rolf's visits of Italy and Greece. She had studied and later worked for many years at a famous academy of fine arts. She knew Italy well, but Greece had always eluded her. Soon Rolf got all excited by telling her his cherished stories from the three-months-long wanderings with Gerhard through these countries two years ago and in a description of the art treasures he had seen there.

Father Lattmann had meanwhile ordered an aperitif for the ladies and a first-class cognac from the Champagne for the gentlemen. Telling of the days of his encampment in the Champagne during the war, he proceeded to Rolf's horror to flip the precious stuff down like an ordinary Schnaps. Yet this *faux pas* on the old officer's part was like oil on his still hurting self-respect.

Each was given the freedom to chose what they wanted to eat. Barbara ordered *Ragout fin* something she always seemed to order in expensive restaurants. Marga suggested *Coque a l'orange* to Rolf, something he had never tried before. Because his customary "Wolters"-beer was not available in Göttingen and with deference to the ladies, father ordered a bottle of wine.

The wine and the orange-chicken tasted excellent, but hungry as he was, Rolf ate much to fast - or was it his excitement and the alcohol. Anyway towards the end of the dinner Rolf suddenly felt sick and had to excuse himself hastily. He was just able to reach the toilet before he had to give up all the beautiful things he had just eaten.

Ravaged he sat down on the toilet to get a breath of air. If only he had not drunk the cognac and the wine on his empty stomach, he thought. But it was not the food alone that made him dizzy. It was obvious, he was decidedly trying to ballance too many things on one weak point at once, - but how could he back out now?

Usually he felt much better immediately after he had thrown up, but the cramps were not yet over and his considering the state of his affairs did not help either. His stomach was beginning to retch again. He sank on the tiled floor before the toilet, and once more it turned black before his eyes. It was then that he heard his alter-ego shout at him, "Ha, this is what you get for trying to suppress me. Finally I will get even with you," kicking him once more hard into his nervous, nearly empty stomach.

White as chalk he returned to the others. Concerned Marga asked him, "Are you not well? Probably you work too much and have not eaten properly for days!" Rolf, grateful for her sympathy, weakly waved his hand, "It is nothing. This happens to me sometimes when I am excited and hungry. My stomach simply flips and it scares the wits out of my friends." He thought of the last time this had happened to him at a friend's house in Greece, where an exhausting march through a very hot day, a glass of Ouzo and a bowl of cabbage salad had proven to be the explosive combination. The lady of the house had prayed for an hour at the bedside where they had obliged him to lie down to recover.

Marga brought up their plans for the official engagement celebration. "We would very much like to invite your family and Barbara's brothers to a family celebration in Braunschweig. They should all get to know each other now. Whom would you like to invite and when do you think you will be finished with you diploma examination?" She asked Rolf.

Rolf pulled himself together and answered meekly: "The final examination will be on May 28." - But how he was going to get his thesis finished, read, and approved by that day, he did not dare to think of. He went silent and Father Lattmann made the final decision, "We shall hold the engagement on the weekend three weeks after the

examination. I shall have the announcements printed, and we will send them to a list of close relatives that you will prepare together. Oh, yes, your title will then be 'Diplom Physicist'. Is that right?" "Well, yes," said Rolf and unnecessarily added, "this is abbreviated to 'dipl. phys.', in lower case letters."

On the way to the railroad station, Barbara's parents were returning to Braunschweig that night, Marga put her arm through Rolf's and tried to revive his strength. She asked him about his dreams for his future, and Rolf, deeply moved by her delicate sensitivity came out of his defensive shell and described to her the chances and difficulties he saw before them, including the possibility of staying in America. She listened to him with seriousness and more understanding than he had ever hoped for. She understood very well what he tried to suggest, but neither then nor later did she ever misuse his trust or betray him. Much later Rolf realized that he owed Barbara to Marga's intercession with Father Lattmann on his behalf.

Barbara reminded Rolf, and he had himself thought of it many times lately, that they also needed to visit his parents as soon as possible.

Rolf had discussed Barbara with his parents on his last two visits home. His father had mumbled "This is a very difficult decision that will influence your entire life." Miffed by so little enthusiasm, Rolf had remarked somewhat sharply, that he felt old enough to make such a decision. To which his father had said, "For this decision one is never old enough."

Mother had hugged Rolf and had tried to give him advice for his pre-marital life. He had laughed at her whole heartedly and been forgiven.

However, the deeper reason for Rolf's reluctance to take Barbara home was that he was embarrassed to confront his beloved with the impoverished home and life of his family and the tensions between its members. Compared to Marga's beautiful antique furniture and the harmony of her apartment, his parent's home was sadly depressing. By necessity they still lived in the drab "mercy" pieces that mother's relatives had dumped on them when they had arrived as refugees from Silesia. There was nothing pleasing to the eyes in his parent's home, and Rolf's visits there always left him depressed for days.

When they finally arrived, his mother received them in her kitchen apron. She fell around Rolf's neck and greeted Barbara warmly but formally. She had been in the kitchen to prepare a "Mittagessen", the large, warm German main meal of the day. To her, in good eastern German tradition, food was the best tonic in all critical situations in life. His father was nowhere to be seen. To avoid the emotional stress of meeting his future daughter-in-law, he had gone shopping in town. Shortly before the meal was ready he appeared with two sacks of vegetables.

Over the plentiful food the tense atmosphere relaxed slowly, and after coffee was served, father allowed Barbara to be drawn out of his shell. She sat down with him on the old sofa bed, and he showed her the same photo album with the pictures of his forebears that Rolf had shown Barbara two months earlier. Later he got a book with pictures from Silesia. She responded to these shy demonstrations of affection with love and attentive patience, and father became more and more talkative. Rolf torn between his happiness about this woman's sensitivity and his pain about his old father's stunted emotions retreated into the kitchen to help his mother wash the dishes.

Mother took her hands out of the sink, dried them carefully and hugged him in tears. "Where only did you find this girl? Look how dear she is devoting herself to your father. I worried so much about what kind of daughter-in-law you would bring home. How could you be so lucky to find such a good and beautiful woman?" Rolf thought almost jealously of how easily Barbara in her quiet ways was able to beguile other people. He did not have such talents, his direct ways either made close friends or shocked enemies of people he met for the first time.

Barbara devoted herself so single-mindedly to his parents, that Rolf caught himself feeling neglected. And when on top of this his father asked to accompany Barbara to her

train on the last day, Rolf almost exploded. But Barbara let it happen, and the three of them walked, Barbara between father and son, through the night to the small train station. When his father, holding his Basque cap shyly in his hands, being illuminated, like in a silent movie, by the rapidly passing light shafts from the windows of the departing train, stood there like an early-graded student, Rolf finally understood that his father was waving to the woman whom he must have dreamt of himself at one time.

Feverishly Rolf had finished the writing of his thesis. His old professor had returned the first draft with the caustic remark: "You disappointed me. You write like a journalist not like a physicist!" Words Rolf chewed over for several years. The professor had passed him off to one of his assistants, who had read the thesis and commented, "I don't understand Professor B.. Your work is not as bad as he claims. It should be fully sufficient in every respect as a diplom thesis." He had suggested some improvements and Rolf threw the old man's remarks to the winds with the thought, "It doesn't matter, it's all the same. I don't need the senile B. any longer. I am going off to an new life in America!" Professor B. after an extended discussion with his assistant had given Rolf a "C" for his work and Rolf, relieved, consoled himself that nobody would ever see his thesis again.

There was only one more month until the final examination. This was going to be a detailed oral of one hour each in four separate subjects, some of which, like chemistry and mathematics, he had not worked in for almost two years. Rolf realized that there would not be enough time to prepare himself well and that his passing this ordeal would depend more on luck than his expertise.

His preparations became more hectic from day to day. To his great dismay he found that his memory was much worse than it had been two years ago when he had passed his first such examination with a B in three subjects and an A in experimental physics. Now his thoughts often wandered elsewhere, and Barbara's loving concern did not help, in fact it proved more of an additional obligation, adding to the pressures. Often he fell asleep at the library over his books.

Two days before the examination he sought the help of good Dr. Eggeling, who after listening to Rolf for fifteen minutes prescribed two little, white pills which he should take an hour before the examination. "It will raise you mind to new heights of understanding!" mocked Eggeling.

Instead of calling an end to the mechanical, fruitless attempts at memorizing facts and formulae, instead of taking a break and let the material sink in, Rolf worked until late the night before the orals - to quiet his conscience.

Next day he put on his only suit, a shirt and a tie, as was expected of him, had lunch at the "Taverna", the "better" adjunct to the student cafeteria and then swallowed the pills.

The Aula, the place where the orals would take place, was across the street. He found himself among a large crowd of candidates, who were called in one by one. He stood by a window and waited, and slowly the pills began to work. His head started to hum as if filled with a swarm of bees, then his heart began to beat furiously. He counted his pulse, it had reached a frightening 120 beats per minute. It was horrible, he was already nervous enough.

Then he noticed that his hands had begun to tremble. What in God's name had Eggeling given him? - It later turned out to have been Exedrin. -

There was nothing he could do now. The last judgment had to happen and pass over him on its own accord, he would have to rely on whatever luck was left to him.

The first two orals, chemistry and mathematics passed without any major drama. He received passing grades, but they were only minor subjects. To this day Rolf cannot remember what happened in theoretical physics, all he knows was that he received a B. But then came his last oral, his major field where he had done so well two years ago, experimental physics. He was to be examined by Prof. Flammersfeld.

Flammersfeld was a revoltingly vain bachelor of some fifty years, a stickler whom

Rolf had carefully avoided in the past. At first everything went all right, despite the noise the swarm of bees was making in his head. But towards the end of the allotted hour Flammersfeld dug into Maxwell's laws of electrodynamics, a set of nine general equations that describes all electrical phenomena. He was not content with a fuzzy, general description of their function, he insisted that Rolf write them down for him in their proper sequence. That was the end. Rolf could not reproduce any of them exactly, no matter how hard he pried into his memory. And the desperate memory search completely blocked his ability to think independently, trying to recover them logically. He should have argued that one does not memorize this kind of abstract nonsense, one looks it up in a collection of formulae. But by this time, Flammersfeld had become so furiously indignant, that such a remark would have made things only worse.

Finally the professor shouted at him, "Herr Gross, it is an absolute outrage to appear so poorly prepared for your diplom examination. I shall throw you out!" Rolf's racing heart stopped, the blood left his head and the room turned black before his eyes - and then the man continued, "You will come back in six months and be better prepared." He made the necessary notations in his papers, signed them, and waved his left hand to indicate that the candidate was dismissed.

The rope had snapped at its least expected point.

Rolf could only think, "Thank God, that I am going to America, otherwise my career in Göttingen would now be over."

Barbara was waiting for him with an expectant, tense face, and he had to plunge her into the first great disillusionment of their young love. His heart and mind was too numb to cry. Seeing his despair she smiled at him encouragingly.

After the first shock was over, Barbara suggested that they should call her father - no, on second thought, she would do that for him. - They went to the post office and placed a call to their neighbors in Braunschweig. Her parents had no telephone. On hearing about the lost battle, the old officer was more composed than they were, and after listening to the details of the final verdict, suggested that they would have the engagement anyway, and that he would quickly have new announcements printed - eliminating the "dipl. phys.".

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