

A Faschingsball at the Nansenhaus, February 1956

Rolf took off his worn, olive-brown coat and threw it on top of the overcrowded rack. Father had bought the shabby over-coat at the STEG-outlet in Hannover eight years ago. It was his only warm coat. He had come on foot through the snow. This February had turned into the coldest winter in years.

He hesitated, frowning he took the coat back down again, and gingerly fished a piece of pink cloth from the depth of its pockets. It looked like a brassiere, except it had only one large cup - which he tried to pull over his head. When this proved futile he went to a mirror. He disliked mirrors and only reluctantly used one for shaving. How ridiculous he looked, wrapped in a used bed sheet held together by safety pins. Underneath he only wore a pair of underpants, and his hairy, bare legs stuck out ending in a pair of worn shoes. This costume was supposed to be a Greek toga, it covered one shoulder, the other was left bare.

Once more he attempted to hide his copious brown hair under the dubious headpiece. It had taken him hours to sew it by hand from two pink handkerchiefs, to which he had glued tufts of cotton wool along the edge. Despite all the labor and ingenuity he had invested into this "bald-head", the thing refused to stay, and in a fit of anger he ripped it off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it back into the coat pocket.

How he hated to dress up. It would have been much more to his liking to be in the nude than in this getup, which was supposed to change him into a Greek philosopher for one night. But these were the fifties and streaking had not been invented as yet. The Greek costume had been the only one that meant anything at all to him.

Rolf had fallen in love with Greece on a month-long hike through the Peloponnese with his brother Gerhard: the sun, the heat trapped in the bare rocks, swimming in the blue sea, the cicadas, and the ancient sites had become an imaginary refuge from his drab life as a penny-less student in this cold, dark, northern city.

Woman and Greece had been the two mysteries of this summer. He had met a young, frivolous English girl in Athens, who after an evening on Philopappos Hill in view of the Acropolis had disappeared on a boat to Istanbul with another man. He could not say why woman and Greece appeared to him to be so intimately connected, like a key to each other.

He looked into the mirror again: a Greek philosopher wearing glasses! How ridiculous! He took them off for a moment and found it decidedly more comfortable to look at himself out of focus. But it wouldn't do. He pulled a face at the mirror. What was he doing here in the first place?

It was "Fasching," the annual craze of carnival, when for a month everyone was dancing on a different ball each night: at the Mensa, at the student houses, at the institutes and laboratories of the university.

He was a poor dancer and easily succumbed to melancholy on such occasions, where everyone was "supposed" to be merry. Two Winters ago he had gone to the ball of the chemists and physicists where he had befriended a mysterious "Russian Gretchen" with a big round face, long, blond braids - her own - and a conspicuous gap between her two front

teeth. Incongruously she had been called Edda-Ute. Rolf had pursued innocent Edda-Ute for months. A friend had snatched her away from him. He was too eager with girls, but too complicated and young to deal with them lightly, and it was decidedly not good to fall in love on a Faschings ball.

He had been determined not to tempt fickle fortune again this year, but there had been Herr Bodnarescu, an older, established scientist of Romanian birth with a steady income and a Volkswagen, whom he had met at the library. Generous Bodnarescu had invited him to this bash at the Nansenhaus, an over-built Wilhelminian villa from the beginning of the century, it had belonged to a Jewish Nobel Laureate, who had been driven to America in the fateful summer of 1936. A few years ago it had been bought up by a Swedish philanthropic foundation and been converted into an international, co-ed student house.

He gave himself a push and opened the heavy, carved-oak door to the grand foyer of the place and found himself engulfed in a crowd of costumed revelers gyrating to the sound of a live rock band. With his back to the door, confronted by this madness, he tried to find a passage through the dancing crowd, but before he could make up his mind, he was picked up by a scantily dressed, young woman, who wrapped her arms around him and gave him a peck that left a smudge of lipstick on his cheek. "Herr Rost! Who would have imagined to find you on this ball." She shouted into his ear.

She wore a black eye-mask, and he did not recognize her. She looked him up and down while she steered him onto the dance floor. But he was still too dazed and angry with himself to let go. After a few turns she left him standing in the middle of the floor, danced off with another man, and was soon lost in the crowd. - It was true that he had a poor sense for rhythm, and his legs obeyed him only when he was in an exceptional mood, still he liked to dance. Yet nothing could turn him off faster than a girl who tried to lead him, he needed to feel in full control to enjoy himself.

Frowning he pushed through the bodies to reach a sagging easy chair in one corner, where he let himself fall into its protective shell of cool leather.

What was wrong with him? He was supposed to have a good time, yet whenever everybody else was getting merrier by the hour, he would be overcome by a heavy gloom paralyzing his spirits.

The scene was a blur of exotic characters: cowboys, turbaned Indians, a heavily stuffed Egyptian Farouk with a flower pot, fairies from fairy-land and other places, snow-whites, sorcerers, batmen, a young woman wrapped in surgical bandages. . . Nobody wore a bed sheet, he was the only Greek in sight.

Across the dance floor rose the grand staircase to the upper floor of the house, which was normally off-limits to outsiders. And then he saw them. Herr Bodnarescu was descending the stairs with two young women, one on each hand. He felt a pang of jealousy, how could this man on top of his money and his car, be also so lucky as to have two girls. Wasn't one enough? The older of the two he recognized from a weekend excursion into the hills, with another physicist. She had been a quarrelsome person, who had not much to say. The other girl, on Bodnarescu's left, he did not know. He got up and made his way across the floor to meet the trio.

Bodnarescu was beaming when he recognized Rolf. "You must have stripped your bed to make that costume!" said Bodnarescu shaking his hand. "You have turned Greek? Not

surprising after your long visit there. You surely look original and the costume will keep you cool." "Look, Herr Rost," continued Bodnarescu breaking the unwritten rules of Fasching, which decreed that everyone use the first name and the intimate, personal 'Du'. "It's not easy to dance with two girls at the same time, so if they will allow me" - he made a chivalrous bow to his two ladies - "you chose one, and I shall devote myself to the other!"

With a smile Bodnarescu introduced him to the two girls: "Rolf, the last Renaissance Greek!" "This is Gisela, she studies dentistry. The charming lady on my left, however, has asked me not to divulge her identity. She would like to remain the mysterious "Unknown Woman" tonight."

Gisela screwed her eyes coquettishly heavenward and said the obvious: "We already know each other. Very nice too meet you again, Herr Rost." The Unknown Woman smiled at him but said nothing.

So it happened that he, bewildered as he was, did not have to make the delicate decision of choosing between the two girls.

"Have you been upstairs?" The Unknown Woman asked as she waved good-bye to Gisela and Bodnarescu, who were already dancing away into the crowd. Taking him by the hand she said "We can dance later. Do you mind? I am curious to explore the mysterious upstairs." And as they climbed the stairs she continued with smile, "I shall show you your 'Past and Future'." He looked at her. There was nothing mysterious about her, she did not wear a mask, her long, oval face was completely open, there was no malice in her blue eyes. She had a full, expressive mouth, and below her dark-blond, naturally wavy hair, her neck and shoulders were left exposed by a green, sleeveless cotton blouse. He noticed the strap of a brassiere. Her breasts were small, which pleased him. The thought made him scowl, was he really afraid of big-breasted women, as a buxom medical student had once accused him of? She was half a head smaller than he, showing long, well shaped legs below her short skirt as she climbed the stairs ahead of him. He felt her warm, reassuring hand in his and the earlier, hopeless mood began to fade.

A long, dark hallway opened from the second-floor landing. There was nobody in around, everyone was dancing downstairs. Above the door hung a sign with the inscription: "*Labyrinth of Memories, Enter and your life will be changed forever.*"

Apparently this was what she had alluded to. Relieved to have found an explanation he followed her into the dark hall, from where doors opened into dimly lit rooms on both sides.

She allowed him to take her arm. "Have you been in here before?" He asked. "No," she said, "I only saw the sign at the entrance, when we had a brief peek with Bodnarescu."

Arm in arm they wandered into the first room. It was dimly lit and empty save for a diorama in a booth illuminated from the inside: a military backpack, a gun leaning on a leafless tree, from which hung an army coat. Next to the tree was a grave-mound marked by a wooden cross with an old German infantry helmet on top. A sign proclaimed: "*No New German Army! Remember Your Fathers and Brothers.*" She said, "My father and brothers were in the war."

Ten years after the war, a reintroduction of the military draft was hotly debated in Germany. Rolf, an outspoken anti-militarist, was strongly against rearmament, but he felt that this display was out of place at a carnival ball. He did not say anything, had she lost someone in the war? Instead he begged her, "Please tell me your name. It is disconcerting

to follow an unknown woman into a labyrinth of memories."

She shook her head. "Tonight I have many names. Perhaps you will find the one you like. Use your imagination. As strange as it may seem, this tableau does contain a hint to this riddle. Let us go on and look at the other rooms, maybe they will give you more clues."

In the second room they were faced with a wall-sized cardboard cutout: an ocean liner with the Statue of Liberty and the skyline of New York behind it. When they got closer, the boat began to rock, and they saw themselves in a cleverly arranged mirror standing on its deck. From a hidden speaker a voice sang a sentimental, popular tune of that year: "*Barbara, Barbara come with me to America!*"

Rolf was baffled. Going to America had been Art's suggestion. Ever since returning from Greece and Turkey Rolf's mind had been looking for more distant destinations. Tibet had been one of his fantasies since childhood: to follow Sven Hedin across the Tibetan Plateau. But how to get there? Last summer he had run into Art, who had broader horizons. Art had suggested the wild idea to apply, with the help of his father, for an American immigration visa, and spend a year at a university there, earn some money, and then go to Tibet and India.

He had caught fire. In a feverish activity Rolf had written postcards to the ten best American universities and eventually been accepted by six, the last offer had turned his head: a scholarship from Harvard. The immigration visa was in the works. Art had lent him the money for the passage on a Dutch boat for July, he would pay him back in Cambridge. Everything was set up, he had only to finish the work on his thesis and pass the Diplom examination in May.

And here he saw himself rocking on a transatlantic steamer arm in arm with this intriguing woman. The ditty was running through its third loop.

He put his arms around her and kissed her and surprised himself by spontaneously saying: "Barbara, Barbara come with me to America - will you?"

He did not explain why, and she did not ask or say anything. His words were left hanging between them.

Yet, neither did she resist his kisses.

With a start he sobered up, what had got into him to propose to this woman whom he had met less than an hour ago? - Perplexed he suddenly understood the seriousness of his question - and of his mind.

His preoccupation with her identity resurfaced, and trying to put himself into a lighter mood he once again made an attempt to guess her name, was it Barbara? But the silly ditty appeared so frivolous, his own sudden preoccupation with her so portentous that he fell silent.

Yet now that he had become conscious of the thought of taking her along, it would not subside again. He looked at her and in the deep recesses of his mind knew that she would be the right companion for him.

He reverted back to his earlier awkwardness with her, and she took him by the arm and led him into the next room. There the tableau was entirely different: A meadow with a circular well surrounded by paper flowers. A recording was playing classical music. She took her arm out of his and sat on the edge of the fountain. An oboe was playing a solo, he was not familiar with the music.

"Come here!" She extended her arms. "Don't you know, this music is the Good Friday Scene

from Parsifal. My name is Kundry, and you are supposed to kiss me! - This is what Wagner's instructions say."

For some reason she looked extraordinarily beautiful to him and as if to take her beauty down to earth, he kissed her hard on the mouth.

Eventually she disengaged herself and asked in a whisper: "Do you know that Kundry in this scene is Parsifal's mother, lover, and death at the same time?" He did not know.

From the tangles of his memory surfaced an image of another meadow and another time, on the last day of the war. Rolf, his parents and three siblings were fleeing from the advancing Soviet troops. He was lying in the grass after a surprise air raid on the fleeing people. The horse-drawn wagon he had been on had been thrown into the ditch by the frantic horses - one of which lay dead beside the him.

A great peace had overcome him then. The screeching planes had disappeared leaving only their distant sound in the blue sky. At that moment he had seen a ravishingly beautiful woman wandering across the meadow towards him. She had worn a long white dress over her slender body and carried a bunch of red poppies in her arm. Somehow ever since he had looked for this woman. This vision had effected his whole life ever since, but he had never understood its meaning.

He shuddered, and she looked at him disconcertedly. "How do you know?" he asked.

She did not answer his question, and said, "For many years I cared for my terminally ill mother. In the years after mother's death my father and I saw every opera that was put on stage in our town. Father loved Wagner, and we saw many of his operas. These nights belong to my happiest memories."

A beguiling smile played around the lips he had just kissed. She continued with a sigh, "Don't you know that death is female? - La Mort?" He felt the floor giving way underneath him and searched for her mouth, as if he were drowning.

In the room across the hall they found a brightly lit scene of a Greek temple in a wild mountain landscape. She looked at him. "This scene I do not understand, do you? I hear that you have been to Greece. Where is this beautiful place?"

"Yes," he said, "I do know it well, it is the temple of Bassai, a very lonely place, high in the mountains of Arcadia, the very center of the Peloponnese."

His brother and he had walked for an entire hot day across rocky ridges and valleys, through prickly oak shrubs, pursued by the fierce dogs of the shepherds to reach this temple. A magnificent view of the Peloponnese and the sea in the distance had been their reward. They had spent a cold night in the temple and had been awakened by a young shepherd's girl with a bowl of fresh sheep milk. Bassai had been the high point of their trip through Greece.

There was more to the picture they were facing, it had been made from one of his photographs. A few months ago he had shown his slides from the hike through Greece at the House, and someone had asked him for a copy of this picture, and now here it was.

They found a bench in the room where he held her in his arms. She never got lost in his kisses. She returned them with pleasure, but never clung to him breathlessly. Her mind was free, her body quiet. She gave herself to him with a serenity he had not experienced before.

Suddenly she got up. He saw her walk light-footed away and vanish behind the temple. When she reappeared she wore a flowing, peach-colored cotton dress, a beautiful,

intricate gold necklace around her neck, very erect, triumphant, a mysterious smile on her face.

She asked, "Now, do you know my name?" and sensing his eyes following the flow of her movements, she continued teasingly, "I am Artemis, the Virgin Goddess who protects the beasts and seduces young men into her embrace to sacrifice them." In a flash he thought he knew her name, but lost this vision of their future again.

Once more he did not understand what he had just seen. In a low voice, still dazed, he protested in real time, "But the temple in Bassai is dedicated to Apollo," only to realize that Artemis was Apollo's twin-sister. There were indications that the site at Bassai had originally been sacred to Artemis and Aphrodite. But she knew nothing of these deeper secrets of the Greek myths.

She took him by the hand and led him into the last room. "Beatrice," he laughed, "where are thou leading me?" It contained a life-sized montage of Botticelli's Birth of Venus. A couple of comfortably worn, old leather chairs stood in one corner.

She looked at him with an beguiling smile, "Sit in this chair and don't move. I will return to you soon. Trust me." He felt her touch him lightly and walk away.

At this moment the lights went out.

When suddenly the light came on again, he saw her standing in the sea shell in the pose of Aphrodite. She was nude. Her open hair fell down to below her well shaped breasts. Transported he made a move to get up, but once more the light went out and the apparition vanished.

His head spinning and all his senses aroused he felt her approaching him. She sat in his lap. Gingerly he felt for her breasts and found that she was back in her green shift and skirt. Without a word she abandoned herself to his kisses, her tongue searching for his.

He implored her to go to her place with him and make love. But she shook her head. "Please, Rolf, give me some time. Let us come together, when both of us will know it to be right." And to divert him continued, "You have not solved the riddle of the Sphinx, you haven't guessed my name yet!"

It was the first time she had used his name, and she had said it with such a quiet warmth that he felt reassured and calmed. Very much herself once more she rose and pulled him up from the chair. "Let us go downstairs and dance for a while. I love to dance." Not wanting to let her go, he put his arms around her. "What is your name? Please tell me, so I can have the pleasure to call you as dearly as you just called me."

"But, dear man," she said, "by now it's easy. I am the protectorates of beasts, of gunners, miners, and physicists. I help the dying. I am Barbara, the Byzantine Saint from Nicea in Asia Minor. You have been there. Didn't you come across her traces?"

Embarrassed, he had indeed been there, he let his head hang. Now it all made sense: the military implements in the first room, the ditty about America, Kundry, and Bassai. Only this last vision he still could not place. He kissed her and repeated, "Oh, Barbara, Barbara come with me to America. Will you? Please, because that is where I am going in a few months."

In his serious way he had now truly asked her to marry him, and she did understand, but she only smiled enigmatically and remained silent. He would have to wait another three weeks for her answer.

"Oh," she suddenly said startled, "I have lost my house key." Together they searched

in the darkness of the last room. He told her the story of Hodja Nasreddin looking for his lost key in the night: Nasreddin was searching the ground under a streetlight when a neighbor walked by. The neighbor asked where he had lost the key. "Trying to open the door of my house." "Why," asked the surprised neighbor, "are you looking here under the streetlight?" "Oh," said Nasreddin, "because there is a light here . . ." Rolf explained that this was a koan, a Sufi-riddle.

They found the key in the creases of the leather chair. To his amazement, Barbara, who had never heard of Sufis, intuitively solved the koan in a unique way: She pulled a five-mark piece from her skirt and handed it to him together with her key, "Take both and put them into your pocket. What am I to do, if I lost either one. This money is all I have for this weekend."

Shaking his head he pocketed the coin and the key. He did not realize then that she had, with this gesture, also answered his earlier question: she was offering him a substantial token of her trust and faith.

They went downstairs and dived unto the crowded dance floor. Self-consciously he told her that he was a poor dancer. She put him at ease, instead of leading him, she let go of him whenever he could not follow her keen sense of rhythm. He was truly grateful for this freedom. He liked to dance - in his own style and mood. With closed his eyes he drifted with the music, moving in great loops away from her and back again. Each time he took her in his arms once more, it was like finding her anew.

But after one of his circles, she was gone. A cold shock went through him, when he discovered her in the arms of another man, an older colleague whom he vaguely knew from the laboratory. Unconcerned, she waved at him. "I will be back. Please, let me go for a while. Uli is such a fantastic samba dancer, I could not resist the temptation."

He could see that Uli was an excellent dancer. Soon they had vanished in the crowd. He was deflated: how precarious his new-found happiness was. For a while he danced by himself, then asked a woman standing alone at the periphery. But it was not the same, they could not get together, and she only served to exacerbate his loss.

He gave up. Barbara was nowhere to be seen. He went back upstairs to find a quiet place to think of what had happened to him. He went from room to room where all the magic had taken place so recently, but the sets looked trivial and corny. They were just cardboard cutouts, how could they have moved him so profoundly? Finally he sank into the leather chair in front of the Botticelli. He closed his eyes and tried to bring back the vision that he had seen of her.

Instead a series of vivid images appeared before his eyes, scenes that were unknown to him, that had no relation to his memories of the past. They were on a beautiful, secluded beach, Barbara and he: a cove surrounded by rocks in brilliant sunshine; somewhere in Greece. They were both in the nude. How beautiful she looked in the southern light; the color of their sun-drenched skins was in perfect harmony with the brown and burnt sienna of the rocks and the intense blue of the sea and sky. Barbara was standing like Botticelli's Venus in the water, beckoning to him. As he approached her gingerly, she backed deeper into the warm, transparent sea. When he reached her, she slung her legs around his waist, and made love to him, slowly, floating on the coming and going of the waves. . .

My God, he thought, this cannot go on. He got up and felt her key and money in his pocket: You will see her again, he told himself, she cannot go home without you. But this

thought offered no consolation. Where was she?

He suddenly realized that he was famished. He looked at his watch, it was two in the morning. Somewhere there must be something to eat. He went downstairs and found a counter where they served soup and hot dogs with mustard. He bought himself a bowl and two of the sausages, and just then Barbara reappeared with Uli in tow. "Here you are, eating!" she said cheerfully, as if nothing had happened. "I am as hungry as you, but you have all my money."

It turned out that Barbara and Uli had previously met at another dance. Uli, the perfect gentleman, got up and returned with a bowl of soup for her and a sausage for himself. The three sat together for a while talking. Rolf told himself that Uli would be no threat to his new-found love as long as he kept his own head clear and did not suspect Barbara. Seeing that he was the odd man out, Uli soon excused himself and left.

Yet when they were alone again, Rolf reproached her for abandoning him so unceremoniously. Her face clouded over, and she became serious, "My dear Rolf, how could you doubt my promise that I would return to you?" "Well," he protested, "it was not that I doubted you, but how can you split yourself between two men? You have become very special to me, I find it difficult to share you with another man."

"Look," she said, "maybe women are different from men. You challenge a large part of me, and I accommodate myself to you. But there are other parts of me which you cannot reach, but other men can. I cannot imagine to live with only one man forever. I would wither like a flower. To be with you I will need all my strength, and this strength may occasionally come from encounters with other men. Please consider that I will always need my freedom to chose, to temporally leave you, or to love another man if necessary. This has nothing to do with being unfaithful. I promise that I will always come back to you richer, stronger, and with a deeper understanding of our relationship."

He was aghast. She had succeeded in turning all his cherished concepts of the relationship between a man and a woman upside down. He felt that after the euphoria of the earlier evening with her, he had fallen into a dark pit. There was, however, a small light at the end of the tunnel, and it was not fueled by simple infatuation, but by the still tenuous yet clear sensation that he had met his ultimate challenge.

His mind was too confused to let him cut through his tangled emotions, yet he understood that if he was serious about her, he would have no choice but to accept her condition and insight.

Rolf spontaneously took her hand and kissed it realizing in a flash of surprise, that until then he had kissed the hand of a woman only when he was about to desert her, maybe as a formal expression of his continuing regard for her - the adventure with Barbara was, however, just beginning.

At four in the morning he walked her home through the bitter cold. The ice in the frozen river banged like cannon shots, when they crossed the bridge near her house.

He found that she rented a room ten minutes from where he and his brother lived. He still did not know her full name, but he knew that he would not let go of her, that she would come with him to America.

Pacific Palisades, 1996 and June 2011