

*Unnerved by the naked flesh of a breast-feeding mother, Marie reels through the café, spills her coffee and stumbles into Jakob – triggering a whole series of stories. Jakob falls in love with Marie and splits up with his girlfriend Sonja, who in turn soon gets together with Gery. She has no idea that Gery was Joe's best friend – Joe, who used to live with Marie until he took his life with a spectacular swan-dive into the Danube. Then a mysterious last will turns up with precise stipulations: it is to be read out in the presence of Gery and Marie in the Prater fairground following an intricately choreographed routine. Margarita Kinstner's stories unfold in layers, one unfurling into the next, the characters brimming with yearning and greed, desperation or sheer apathy. A rondo with destiny, propelled by shattered dreams and lost hopes, set in a city where beauty and the chasms of the psyche live side by side – with Death watching the dancers from the wings...*

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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.

*Translated by Alexandra Georgescu*