

The Woman on the Fifth Floor

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Her earliest memory: Papi holding her above his head and laughing as he tossed her in the air. He'd catch her, pretend to drop her, bring her to his broad chest, and start again. He was such a big man, strong, and she was so high she thought she was the moon looking down on the world and it was her world, there at the castle and she was what, three? Three or four. She could date it if she tried, using the photos. He was home so little in those days of the war, in the sky-blue uniform he designed himself, or the white one. Photographers following him. Shots of the perfect family for the nation to admire.

She once thought she had an even earlier memory, the day of her christening in a cold November with Godfather holding her, but she was a baby, five months, and the memory came from the photos, Godfather next to Mother, Papi half smiling as he looked on. The pictures were in every paper and magazine and you can find them all over the internet now, she is told, not that she'd look. Messages of congratulation flowed to Papi, 628,000 of them from across the globe. Could that be right, so many? Naturally the world took interest, Mutti was first lady of the realm since Godfather was unmarried and Papi Number Two. Mutti was his number two after Carin who died. Mutti was forty-five and Papi was too and had been shot in the leg long ago and sometimes limped and had to take medicine. One paper talked of an immaculate conception or a virgin birth but Papi shut it down. Godfather just laughed, he was always jolly, liked to tickle her, kiss her on the top of her head.

Those were the good years. Then Papi was accused of mistakes, something about the bombing, and Godfather set him to the side. Also something about Russia. Terrible people, those Russians. Not his fault, she was sure, but he was set aside. She was just five and it was good for her because he spent more time at home. Later she pieced it together, a detective story with her as sleuth and victim, but at the time it was like an extended summer, fresh air in the hills, miles away from the war and the smoke of politics. It's true Papi was preoccupied and Mutti was worried, even a child could see that, but when they were together, the three, the holy

family, she was happy. He distracted himself with collecting art. It was for the realm, it would be a national treasure after the war to preserve for all time, when the conquests were completed and the land unified and at peace. In the castle in the hills, between the lakes, it was easy to think in fairytales.

Oh, she knew it wasn't a castle. It was an old hunting lodge Papi expanded but to her it was a fortress for the heart, as ancient as the lakes, eternal as dream. It was built in stone and the interior was decorated like a castle, huge rooms, great fireplaces, coffered ceilings, high open beams in the main hall. Even now in old age in her apartment on the fifth floor in this loud and careless city she can close her eyes and see it entire, the approach, the foyer, Papi's study, the dining room with floral drapes and chandeliers. And her room upstairs, they called it the nursery, with a rocking horse just her size and a dollhouse. And a toy railway with electrics in a barn that Papi made go through the little forest because she was too young. And two pieces of mirror for lakes and a fisherman. Mutti said before the war the Duke of Windsor played with it an entire afternoon. And outside in the real orchard, a miniature Palace of Sans Souci built just for her, fifty meters long, with kitchens and a toy theatre and scene-shifting machinery. Half a million men in the air force gave small donations to pay for it, which showed how they loved Papi. Much later when she visited the real Sans Souci she knew what was in every room before she entered.

A great nation needs grand palaces not toy ones. And great men inside them, that's what Papi said.

The castle is a ruin now.

She's a ruin now.

But pretty. She was always pretty, from the very start. She knew she was special, Godfather said so. Even as a baby she was a star. Newspapers reported when she first walked, her first words (Papi come home), her birthday parties. You could buy glossy postcards of her in every stationers. She remained lovely, slim, blonde, but distant with strangers. She never married, she kept to herself, guarding her memories, preserving them in ice. She was admired by many, approved of few, loved no one except Papi. Mutti she cared for, she had to, Mutti saved her life more than once, they were tied together by the name. Mutti was Emmy Sonnemann before, a famous actress all over the nation, she could be Sonnemann again but she stayed true to her marriage. The name was their only legacy. To move from great wealth, unbounded wealth, the center of all that mattered, to nothing, to poverty amid poverty, to feel it in the flesh, to scratch out bare life in the rubble, that was bitter misery, but she accepted her fate. As Papi's destiny was to be a hero and great leader, hers was to survive, head up through the change.

Her name is Edda and she wakes to her eightieth birthday on the second of June in this year of 2018. The papers no longer report the celebration. She will stroll to the clock, sit in the square in the pale sun with a pale Rhine wine, wearing a violet wool coat and a matching hat with a brim and a pale grey band. She will be recognized by a few who pass her without acknowledgement. She will consider lunch at a small restaurant and reject the thought. She might collect something from Aldi for later. Usually she eats one meal a day, around four o'clock, for the sake of digestion. Then another walk, also for digestion. In the evening she reads or rereads, history, literature, with a record on the phonograph, Brahms or Wagner or Lale Andersen. The television gives no comfort, American films about American wars: on terror, on drugs, on Muslims, on blacks, on Indians, on Vietnamese, and sometimes on her. She is no longer bothered by the errors, they are so many. Lies rule the earth.

It's true that Godfather lost his mind to obsession. But the world doesn't remember what he accomplished – he and Papi rebuilt a ruined nation. They wanted only to reclaim the past and the lands given us by nature. Godfather stumbled. He was a fanatic but Papi was not, Papi was kind and generous and often helped Jews, especially those Mutti protected, servants, merchants, colleagues from her years in the theatre. She was elegant and kind and always thought of others, even when they were in prison and Edda slept on a checkered blanket on the damp floor. At Mutti's tribunal many people came forward with testimonies, how she saved them and their families, but the Americans had already decided, guilt by marriage. They classified her Group Two, which meant Offenders. She said her only offence was falling in love. She was jailed for a year and banned from the stage for five years. After that no one wanted to cast her.

Edda hates Americans. They took everything, all the paintings and sculptures, all the furniture, all Mutti's jewels, they said it all been stolen but that's not true, Papi paid for it or was given it by a grateful people. They wouldn't give back the money he'd spent. They said the works had to be returned to the rightful owners but she has doubts. They even took the things he'd owned before the war and some of Mutti's she'd had before marriage. Then Edda's own countrymen took her own painting, given to her when she was christened, the marvelous Madonna and Child by Lucas Cranach that hung in Mutti's bedroom in the castle, a gift from the mayor. She couldn't let that go, she went to court a number of times. She needed money but she'd never sell it, she wanted to look at it for the rest of her life, her treasure, but she lost each case. The judges, who were installed by the Americans, said the mayor had no right to give it to her, it belonged to the city. What good could it do a city? She refuses to go there to see it, she will stay where she is, an old woman climbing stairs.

That she was intelligent was apparent from the start, everyone said so, natural intelligence inherited from her father. First Mutti taught her after the war, multiplication, reading, and when she went to school she got top marks. She studied hard, she passed everything. She wrote her graduation essay on forgetting, a subject dear to her. She trained as a medical technician and worked in a hospital, she had to earn a living and she helped the sick. Later she assisted a cataract surgeon, even more help to people, letting them see again. She never took an interest in politics, she wouldn't speak to the press. She wished that Papi had not been in politics or the military, then they could have stayed together. If only he'd made chocolates like her Oma, her mother's father who owned a chocolate factory. She loves the smell of chocolate but won't eat it. She is careful of her health.

She will not write a book. She's been asked but she has no time and no inclination. She read her mother's autobiography and was ashamed to see the details of their disgrace. *On My Husband's Side*, it was called. Mutti had to make money somehow, it was for Edda after all, but she should not have told such tales in public. Mutti wrote well and placed blame where it belonged, but even a daughter could see the book was self-serving. It was the more shocking because her mother never talked about the past – it was all behind them except the name. So Edda relied only on her memories and in them Papi was always kind. And Godfather, he brought her the licorice sweets she adored, carried in his pockets just for her. He even came to her sixth birthday, the second of June 1944, with presents, when he was busy elsewhere.

Papi was never fanatical, his eyes were always calm, even when in trouble. The worst came in the last days of the war, Russian tanks running below their sanctuary in the Alps, when Papi offered to negotiate an armistice. It snowed at the end of April. He could have done it, he could have made an honorable peace, but Godfather went entirely mad and ordered them shot, the holy family, his own godchild. The Protection Squad arrived with their silly titles, Under Storm Leader, Over Storm Command Leader, like a club for ten-year-old boys, Papi said. They arrested them, put them in the cold cellar, then the bombs fell and they were left for two days without food or water, but even those men wouldn't kill Papi. The telephone and telegraph were down and news came by radio that Godfather had shot himself instead of them and the bombs stopped.

At home with her shopping, she breathes heavily on the stairs. At her door she suddenly remembers the lion cubs they raised at the castle. She was allowed to lead one outside but he growled and she was afraid. When he got to be twelve months they gave him to the zoo.

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The war is finished, Eddalein, Mutti said.

Did we win, Edda asked.

No, Mutti said, we lost.

I am very cross! Edda said, and stamped her foot.

She would have no party for her seventh birthday.

Godfather would not bring licorice.

The Protection Squad was in shock.

The holy family was free to go.

The lion's name was Mucki.

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Papi said he'd speak only to General Eisenhower, who was a great man even though American. Papi took them all in cars through the snow, aunts and nieces and maids. The Americans stopped them and confiscated the paintings. They found the Vermeer wrapped around a piece of stovepipe. Papi loved that Vermeer and paid a lot for it. General Stack saluted but General Eisenhower was not available. They were moved somewhere. Papi was driven away on the seventh of May in the back seat of a jeep. She thought his hands were bound. She would not see him for a year and a half.

The rest were taken to one of their own houses but the Americans had emptied it. They slept on mattresses on the floor without light. They had to beg food. Edda does not wish to think about it. Sometime later Mutti was in prison and Edda joined her two months after that. Little to eat, cold, sick, Edda does not wish to think about it. Finally they were released and allowed to send one letter a month to Papi, twenty-five words only. Fortunately words in her language can be compounded. It was February 1946, a winter so cold people froze to death in their beds. No coal, the Russians took it all, there was no place to go, too many people, every spare room filled with refugees, DPs from the east, and American journalists. Emmy gave an interview to one called Peggy who in exchange arranged for them to live in a woodsman's hut in the forest. Mutti and Eddalein were Hänsel and Gretel.

Papi's trial went on for months. He was shown films of the concentration camps and said they had to have been faked. You're the fake, the prosecutor said, you're the fake. Edda doesn't know what that means. My father was never a fanatic, she repeats.

In his cell he had a photo of her. She'd written on the back, Dear Papi, come back to me soon, I want to see you. She was lost when she lost him, his large dark-blue eyes. She looked like him, people said so, and she sees it in the mirror, even now through the wrinkles.

Her mother died at age eighty but Edda will not die today.

They were waiting for judgment at the house of his defense counsel. Mutti visited Papi every day for two weeks, half an hour, except Sundays when it wasn't allowed. She didn't want to bring Edda but Papi insisted and what could she say. It was a shock to see him, he'd lost so much weight. They put him on a diet and forced him to drop twenty-seven kilos. She read somewhere they were afraid he'd break the hanging noose, which was a cruel thing to say. They said it took two soldiers to lift him out of the car when he arrived for the trial, but the Americans always lied. It's true he did like his dinner. Later she heard that he'd been addicted to morphine for decades, since the time he'd been shot in the leg, and they denied him that, even though he had a suitcase filled with codeine tablets when he was arrested. She doesn't believe he took forty a day, it couldn't be right. But surely it was hard for him, the highest official in the nation despite what Godfather wrote in his last will, taking on responsibility for the others at the trial, even when they didn't want it he still did it, he knew his destiny was to help.

He was behind bars and a glass panel, an American soldier in a white helmet behind him who never looked at her. Two more white helmets on her side. Edda stood on a chair to see him better. She recited a poem – I dream I am a child again, and I shake my greying head – she remembers it still. He wept. Mutti told her not to cry but it was Papi who cried. She didn't understand. She noticed his hand was chained to the soldier's.

They were told to leave, all the families had to leave, and they went back to the forest. Mutti read her the old stories again, the dark shadows of the woods, the children in the oven. The next day the sentences were announced on the radio. Papi asked to be shot like a soldier but they said no. Now Edda cried without stopping. Mutti said he wouldn't be hanged like a criminal, he'd probably be exiled to an island. Edda was enchanted with the thought of visiting him on an island and stopped crying.

Mutti's back was bad and she had to lie down.

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Papi swallowed a cyanide capsule a few hours before the hanging. So the sentence was not carried out. No one could explain how he got the capsule – the cell was searched every day. I know, Edda said to her mother, an angel came through the walls of the prison to give him the poison.

There would be no island.

For years Mutti wrote him a letter every day after his death. She seemed to expect a reply.

After Mutti died Edda burned them all.

The lion's name was Mucki.

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She sleeps poorly now and will go to bed late. For her birthday dinner she has a pork chop with sweet red cabbage. Cabbage gives her indigestion but she loves it. She takes another glass of wine, since it is a celebration. She bought a small cake and sets a candle in it. It is still bright outside so she closes the curtains and watches it burn down, drops of wax melting the icing until the cake swallows the flame.

She has a few friends but tonight she prefers to be alone. The record: she thought of *Die Meistersinger* because it's jolly but in the end puts on the Andrews Sisters, an American wartime 78 that belonged to her father. She doesn't know how he got it and is too old to bother about the paradox. Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy, she says aloud, though she's not sure what that means. The book: *My Century* by Günter Grass, which she admires for its whimsy. It was her century too, the twentieth, the worst so far someone wrote, her own blood staining it indelibly. At his trial Papi said in fifty or sixty years there would be statues of him all over the land. That hasn't happened; she knows it will not happen.

After half an hour she sets down the book and pulls the album from the shelf. Pictures of the holy family, letters praising Papi, last letters from Papi, a picture of the nursery in the castle with the rocking horse. He ordered the place blown up as they drove away. Leave nothing for the enemy, he said, rule of war. Her childhood mixed with the stone dust.

She realizes her dead outnumber her living.

She had a boyfriend for five years but wouldn't marry him. He was a journalist who knew everybody from the old days and was charming to Edda. He bought Papi's yacht *Carin II* and together they held soirées on the boat with some of Papi's former colleagues, politicians and officials. Some had been in prison, Over Group Leader Wolff and Major General Mohnke, the boyfriend always called them by their ranks. She knew he was using her, borrowing her past, but she loved the talk, the stories of her father. In the air force his nickname was the Iron Man. It sends a shiver down her thighs.

She would accept gifts in his honor. When she was in school a local company gave her a motorcycle. Travelling in Spain and Portugal she was feted. Winifred Wagner gave her tickets each year to Bayreuth. She savored the music and the show, the dressing up, the respect.

She closes the album, which is worn at the edges. Perhaps she could fix that? These pictures must be preserved. She rises to search for tape when her heart jumps and she remembers learning of the photos the Americans took of the condemned after they were hanged. They put her father with them. Each man on a stretcher, a placard identifying the corpse by name on the chest. She heard one of Papi's eyes is open in the picture but she has refused to

look at it all these years. They sent the bodies in secret to a crematorium on the outskirts of this same city and in the middle of night they dumped the ashes, mixed together, all eleven of them including Papi, in a muddy gutter in an unknown alley in the rain. Obliterating them from history. Victor's justice.

The music has ended but she sits dozing in the chair in the half-light. The needle skips at the end of the record, schur-rum, schur-rum. Sometimes Papi comes to her, always at a distance as if through the side window of a moving car, though there is no car. He speaks to her but she can't hear him, his lips move without sound. Sometimes Godfather presents her with licorice from his pocket and says, For the little princess of the empire. That she hears clearly.

Mutti never comes, which is just as well.

Tonight there is an unusual visitor. He's not new but he calls rarely. He settles in an armchair opposite, dressed in an elegant dark wool suit with a red scarf, even though this June is warm. A tall man. She recognizes him from photos she saw in articles about his arrest long ago. She finds it hard to pronounce his Dutch name. Say it again, she asks.

I am van Meegeren. Call me Han. A friend of your father's.

No, she says, not a friend. I know who you are, a traitor, a fraudster. You cheated him of millions of marks.

He paid it willingly. I gave him what he wanted and he never knew the difference. He died thinking he owned a lost Vermeer. Number One had two Vermeers so Number Two had to catch up.

Leave Godfather out of it.

He was already corrupt, your papa, stealing anything everywhere, driving your people to starvation and disgrace. What does it matter if I painted it instead of an earlier Dutchman? They would have taken the picture from him anyway, whether it was original or fake.

Papi had a good eye. I don't understand how you fooled him.

I could have fooled him with a Michelangelo. Your father was a deluded man who bought and stole on the advice of lackeys. Tons of statues and pictures and gems and jewels and gold cups.

It was for the nation, she says.

It was for him. He was preparing for life after the war – he needed quantity. He knew you would lose and he was digging an escape route, like the rest of us. I bought houses in Amsterdam, he collected Old Masters. Any sane person could see that fighting on three land fronts and in the air was madness. Against the two largest industrial powers on earth, double, triple madness.

You're an expert on the art of war?

Don't change the subject.

Papi was not deluded.

You've lived this long and can think that? Everyone is deluded – desire is the great tempter. Satan is within, we see what we want to see. I didn't copy Vermeer. My genius was to imagine what Vermeer might have painted had he done religious subjects, then I sentimentalized. They were all sentimentalists, your father's colleagues, it was easy to intrigue them. They'd kill thousands of Jews and an hour later cry over the death of a puppy.

Papi didn't kill Jews.

It's true he didn't pull the trigger.

He did think the picture was beautiful, she says. She has trouble understanding his accent and as he changes it she realizes he is capable of disguises.

Of course it's beautiful. It made him weep, the pathos of it, the forgiveness on the face of Jesus, the timid sorrow and faint hope on the profile of the woman caught in adultery. He got his money's worth.

You got his money's worth. It's still a fake.

And Han van Meegeren says, A magnificent fake. So magnificent it convinced the experts.

Still, so much money. She thinks what that money would have meant as she was growing up, how easy life would have been for Mutti.

One million six hundred fifty thousand guilder, he says, that's what I got. The higher the price the more the buyer believes. Your father understood that. His empire was all show. It was a stage set, canvas and frames designed to be taken down and broken up. It could never have lasted, even without the war. To your Godfather the war too was a show. Deadly, but a show. Blam, blam, boom, boom, everybody falls, then what? He had no hope of sustaining his conquests. He made too much of the world hate him. They were all shams, making reality out of wet dreams. Leaders impersonating leaders. To be honest, and I hope I don't hurt your feelings, your father was not much good at impersonating himself. Your Godfather was much better, perhaps the best ever.

She wakes with a start. Schur-rum, schur-rum. She moves the needle from the record and switches off the machine. The clock on the mantle says half-past two. She feels slightly nauseous. The cabbage or the dream? In bed she returns to Günter Grass, another postwar leftist with an ambiguous past, she thinks, this one in the armed Protection Squad. She puts aside the memory of how close she came to execution in 1945, one bullet away. In Grass's book she is at

1983. Which makes her think again of Gert, the boyfriend. She'd left him by then because she saw what he was up to.

She turns out the light but sleep evades her, sneaking around the corners of her mind. She sees his face around one of those corners, this Gert, who sold Godfather's diaries to a magazine for ten million marks, much more than Papi paid for the Vermeer. Of course they were fakes – Godfather wrote one book when he was young but didn't keep a diary, she knew that for sure. Or did she? Mutti said she was never allowed to meet his girlfriend, so how could Edda be certain about the diaries. But Gert was clever, hired a handwriting forger, and they managed to fool some historians, even a famous British one, and she admits that people will believe ridiculous things, even impossible things. Longings they didn't know they had. The ordinary is so tedious, the world so common, give us fairy tales and gold, castles and kings.

In the dark she holds the book at 1983. She was forty-five, still young enough to marry, and children, well, she didn't want to pass herself on, she was too solitary, too proud to share her life. She lays the open book on her chest. Her diminished breasts barely resist and she feels the weight as she breathes in and out. Breath, what a thing, she thinks, we take it without knowing, the body makes us. Take a deep breath and hold it for a minute, two minutes if you can, and the body will take over and exhale. She knows from her medical training you don't die of lack of oxygen but excess of carbon dioxide. Letting go. Would she ever take a cyanide capsule, even to escape the hangman? She hasn't the courage.

She's convinced Gert wouldn't either. After his prison sentence, four and half years, the newshounds barked up his past and found he'd worked for the Stasi. He played both sides, her in the middle. How does a man who – but she drops the question. Too many contradictions, too many absurdities. She read Kafka in school, Jew writers were allowed after the war, she knows the road leads nowhere. The meaning of life is that it ends, Kafka said, somebody told her. We just walk on and make the same mistakes. And usually, again.

She made many. But she was faithful to one idea: she would never condemn Papi because to her he was love itself. She's an intelligent woman, she knows terrible things were done, she's said so more than once, but not to her, not by him. One of the books about her was called *Because You Bear My Name*. It said they were all tarnished, all the children of the high officials of the realm, stained by name. To her that's wrong; her name is a badge she wears on her coat. Would she like to forget like so many of her compatriots did?

Han van Meegeren says, I see you're coming round to my view.

About what?

The fake that's worth more than the real.

I thought you'd gone, she says.

She reaches for the light but he says, Please leave it off, I think better in the dark. He's sitting on the edge of her bed. In the faint glow through the curtains his face looks unraveled, skin boned down to the barest of covering, gashes on either side of his mouth, eyes sunken. He is dead, after all. You're dead, she says.

Yet here I am.

You were in prison like Papi.

A sentence of one year that I never served. I was already sick. They put me in a guarded hospital ward and I lived only a year longer than your father. It could have been worse – they could have hanged me.

You were not important enough.

In the Netherlands trading with the enemy was treason. They had evidence, my letters to your Godfather, bills of sale to enemy officers during the war, piles of guilders and pounds. I owned fifty-seven properties in Amsterdam alone.

Would you have taken a suicide pill like Papi?

It didn't come up. The world loves a con. When it got out that I'd cheated him, and I made sure it got out, I became a national hero. I was more popular than anybody. I was the man who swindled the Reichsmarschall. They forgot about collaborating with the enemy and charged me with forgery instead. But to clear me of treason I had to prove the Vermeers I sold were not originals.

How could you do that?

By painting a new one in public. How else does a forger show he's a forger? It was a big canvas, a masterpiece. The subject was Jesus debating the rabbis. Were they called rabbis then? I titled it *Christ in the Temple*. Clever, don't you think? To use a story about Jesus to demonstrate I was a counterfeiter.

Edda is not sure this is a dream. She sits up and the book slides off her chest to the floor. Of course it's a dream, she says out loud. Her visitor is gone, she hopes for good. She detests cheating and deception. Despite what the Dutchman says, she knows Papi was an honest man. All the hatred he endured at the end! And they never returned his property. The Americans even stole his Imperial Marshal's baton, the beautiful one in elephant ivory set with platinum and diamonds. They put it on display at their military academy in West Point, a shocking humiliation. At least he never learned his beloved Vermeer was a fake, at least he was spared that indignity.

She gets out of bed and puts on her blue dressing gown against the chill. To the mirror she recites, I dream I am a child again, and I shake my greying head. It made Papi cry. She shakes her head and looks away. At the window she sees a hint of light in the sky in this city she has come to love, Munich, where Godfather's struggle began and Papi was shot in the leg in the beerhall coup. So long ago, almost a century. She straightens the bed and takes her pills with a sip of water. Perhaps Papi's ashes were dumped in an alley near here, who's to say? She wonders how long it will be before her ashes join his. In a manner of speaking. Part of her would happily abandon the world that was so harsh to her. But her body breathes on its own, schur-rum, schur-rum. One thing is definite, she wouldn't want to live it again.

The sky is pink now over the apartment buildings around her. Perhaps the day will be fine and she'll walk to the clock. She needs to get out. The residue of the Dutchman is fouling the air.

She picks up Grass's book from the floor. *Mein Jahrhundert*.

Ein tausendjähriges Reich, they said. Hardly, didn't get near a thousand years. Gone after only a dozen, Papi's regime, the great nation, the Third Empire. But it's remembered, certainly it's remembered. It might be remembered for a thousand years.

Not what Godfather had in mind, but still.