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MICHAEL BYERS

Fair Seed-Time

He started in Calais, rolling his scooter off the ferry as the sun came up, not exactly looking forward to the thirteen hours he estimated were ahead of him but eager to see Allabella at the end of his ride. By lunchtime his ass was numb and he was bone-shivered and weary but his heart was alight with the broad gray beauty of Denmark and the warm green fields that seemed to sweep him up and east, up and east. As the afternoon wore on, the powers set about assembling a gappy pile of clouds above the sea, and when Richard at last rolled into Roskilde this had become a vast fortification through which the sun was sending its slanting rays into the stone streets of this little clifftop town.

But no one was there. Roskilde was vacant. In the plaza, the angel in the fountain trickled and spat, but the café was empty and the shops were shuttered, and the stone walls were damp and drying in the sun, as though the town had just been raised from the deep. He had arrived on some day of civic mourning, possibly. Or worse, during his all-day ride something dreadful had happened, a new war had been declared, and the silence was continent-wide, and he was the last to know. But even as he had this thought, there was a general shifting of things, and windows went up and doors opened everywhere around him, and boys and girls spilled into the streets, and men emerged, arm-in-arm, chattering as they passed. He had only been early to the play, it seemed, and caught the stage unoccupied, and now here was everyone, full of joy and with love in their eyes, and his beautiful Allabella was waiting in her house beyond the town.

How strange this was! And what a wonderful mystery!

He followed Allabella's directions through Roskilde and out the other side, down a long road along the cliffs, until he found, standing in the slanting light, an enormous stone house, brown and gabled, buffered with hedges. He turned in at the driveway, tipped his Vespa onto its kickstand, then followed a flagstone path to the huge front door. Everywhere was the washing sound of the waves.

A boy opened the door at his knock. The boy, blond and pale, seemed no older than nine, though in Europe Richard had found it difficult

to judge. Children were always older than they appeared, stunted by postwar rationing. This one wore short pants and a pressed white shirt and was barefoot, his plump feet like little pears on the stone threshold. "You are Richard?" asked the boy.

"Yes."

"For Allabella?"

"Yes."

"Allabella is, mm, hurt."

"Hurt? Hurt how?"

"She hurt. She fall," he said, "and her head is." He gestured, patting his hair. "She is, mm—she fall." Giving up, the boy motioned him inside.

"Her head? Today?"

"Mm, yes, is today."

"How?"

"She swim, mm, and she"—the boy slapped the side of his head with his palm—"she has hit on the beaches. Is a doctor. Come with."

The house was dark. Richard followed the boy's pale figure back, back, through dim hallways, up a short flight of stairs, down a brief corridor where the floor was made of square gray stones, then down another flight of stairs and around a corner. Heavy brown furniture lurked along the walls beneath paintings of fields and houses.

"It is so far," said the boy, apologizing, over his shoulder, leading him on and on.

At last, they reached Allabella, who was in bed, in a bedroom whose windows gave a view of the sea. A doctor was there, elderly in a white coat, just snapping shut his black bag. Beside the bed stood a man, the pale boy's father, the man whose house this was, the man who had taken Allabella in after the war, when she was only six, and orphaned, and had brought her up.

"You are Richard," said Mr. Jens, who matched his pictures, tall, mild, gray-eyed.

"Yes. Pleased to meet you sir. Hello, Ally."

"Richard," she smiled. She did not look hurt.

"What happened?"

"Stupidly, you see, I was swimming, and when I was coming out of the water, I slipped and struck my head." She lifted a hank of her hair to show a sticky dark smudge. "It is stopped bleeding now. I had to do it today, of all the days, when you were on your way."

"She is not too seriously hurt," the doctor said, in British English. "It is lucky she was not there alone, however. Carl was with her."

"Carl saved my life," said Allabella, blinking sweetly at the boy.

"The rocks there is bad," Carl answered.

She looked, in fact, the same as she ever had. A little of her fire had been dampened, maybe, but what remained was lovely, like a stone still wet from a receding wave. She was dark, with dark eyebrows, long, black shining hair, a full mouth. And even beneath the blanket it was hard to miss her figure. "When I was coming through town," Richard said, "there was nobody out at all, and then all of a sudden everybody just popped out of their houses all at once. As if they were waiting for me."

"They were listening to the football," Mr. Jens said. "It is the tournament, and the Red and White still have a fighting chance. The game finished, I believe, just when you were coming in."

"Did you win?" he asked.

"The match was a draw," said Mr. Jens. "So we have survived to the following round of play."

"We all listened to it here also," Allabella said. "It was very marvelous."

She was not British, nor was she exactly Danish. She was Jewish, like Richard, and she had been born in France. She had survived the war while all the rest of her family had been murdered or died in the legendary Resistance. But she had been young enough, not yet five years old when the war ended, that she more or less viewed that time as having been experienced by another girl. She was acquainted with that girl, but the relations were not intimate. And she had been fortunate, of course, to have ended up here, in Roskilde. So many others had gone to less happy circumstances. When she talked about all this, her expression did not change from its usual beatific calm. Always she seemed to be gently amused by something. At first, Richard had thought it was he—his youth, his innocent cunning. But it was she. Somehow all those killings expressed themselves in this calm.

Her accent was British because Mr. Jens' accent was British, because Mr. Jens had gone to Oxford. He had sent Allabella there, to St. Hilda's. Richard had himself been at Oxford, at Oriel, for the academic year, having graduated from White Plains High at the age of sixteen and a half, the plan being to spend a year at Oxford before returning to begin college in the States, at Columbia if his parents had their way. Then the

first week of classes, he had met Allabella on the street and he stopped caring about all that. When the term ended, he arranged that he would put his Vespa on the ferry and visit her here. Before his departure he had been greatly dismayed to look at a map and understand that he had mistaken Denmark for Belgium and that his ride would be much longer than first thought. But this was typical of him: grand romantic overtures paired with wildly impractical plans.

The hope had been to stay with Allabella for a day or two before departing with her on some further adventure, its nature to be determined. They would go on the scooter. But now this was obviously impossible. She was not to be moved from bed for the time being. "Evidently," she explained, after he was alone with her, "I have received a concussion. Therefore, I am confined to the house. I am not really supposed to do much of anything."

"Nothing at all?"

He slipped a hand under the covers and felt her knee. She was slim below, substantial above.

"Only touching," she sighed.

He let his hand rise up her leg to the warm center. She adjusted herself and allowed his two fingers inside. She accepted this with her constant air of mild, amused incredulity. But she moved her hips against him.

"Oh, that is nice," she whispered.

That he was permitted to do this still filled him with a disbelieving gratitude. She was so very beautiful, so very kind.

He supposed they could make whatever noise they wanted. The house was enormous. And Mr. Jens had given the impression that he wished nothing more than to withdraw and leave them alone. But Richard remained quiet and so did she. When she was done she let out a long breath that she had been holding. He stood and with shaking hands exposed himself to her. She took him in her mouth. He had been thinking of this moment for several days running. He reached down and held one full breast in his hand. Its nipple was hard against the white cotton of the nightgown. He had seen those breasts swinging over him, the nipples decorated with a few curling hairs. Now to see her sweet face below him, and the pale part in her hair, and the obliging manner with which she addressed herself to him, eyebrows

lifted, finished him at once. She accepted a handkerchief from him and delicately spat into it. Her eyes were bright and pleased. "You taste different," she told him.

"Different how?"

She considered. "In the past, it's sometimes bitter. Now it's very sweet. You have been eating sweet things."

"About a million pears and plums." On the long ride through Belgium: cheap and everywhere, in every village he encountered, in wicker baskets, the prices marked in chalk.

"You taste like this." She sank into the pillows, a picture of contentment. "Pears and plums."

His room overlooked the sea as well but from another vantage, in another section of the house. The boy Carl brought him there. It was an austere chamber, white-plastered, low-ceilinged. Flatfooted, he could touch the timber crossbeams. A bed, a bureau, a desk. "The toilet is here. *There*," Carl gestured away, down the hall.

"Thanks. This is terrific."

"You have hungry?"

He could always eat. But he did not want to impose. "It's a little late," he suggested.

Carl shrugged, unbothered. "We will of course anyway have a supper."

His suit was much the worse for wear for the hours on the Vespa. And when he retrieved his spare shirt from the grip, he remembered that it had not been dry when he had packed it the night before. Now it was a riot of wrinkles. He had no means of ironing it. But his current shirt was smelly and gray. In the dim little washroom, he flattened his hair and gave himself a skeptical once-over. Then he rubbed the bar of soap, dry, over the armpits of his shirt, hoping this would mask some of the stink. He went down to dinner in this unhappy state.

He followed his nose to a dining room where a great table was set for three beneath a looming chandelier. One entered this room from a staircase above, passing on the way down the portraits of what were surely the ancestral Jenses. Here reproduced were Mr. Jens' gray eyes and his air of committed neutrality. No one was at the table. Then through a doorway Richard spied a fireplace and a pair of long velvet sofas. Mr. Jens was here, with a book and a drink.

“I should say, Mr. Jens, thank you for hosting me. I’m grateful for your hospitality. I’m very pleased to see Allabella again.”

Jens rose now and struck a tiny silver bell. With it appeared a smile, half tolerant and half something that eluded Richard. “Allabella’s friends are always welcome here,” he said.

The third at dinner was neither Allabella nor Carl but the doctor, Dr. Haarpst. Dr. Haarpst had been out walking the cliff and the color was high in his cheeks. His hair was gray and wiry. There was quite a bit of it, considering that the man had to be in his seventies at least. From the cliff a staircase went down to the beach. Allabella had struck her head just at the bottom of the stairs. This had been another piece of luck, because walking on the beach was a labor. The stones were each about the size of an egg and rolled in such a way to trap your ankles. The going was hard. It was Dr. Haarpst’s opinion that she should not be allowed to walk there. “But she has always loved the water,” Jens said, mildly, lifting his shoulders and turning up his palms in fond surrender. It was a gesture Richard recognized from his own mother, and for the first time, it occurred to him that Jens might also be a Jew.

They were speaking in English out of courtesy to Richard. So he felt it polite to say little, so as to end dinner quickly, and thereby relieve them of this burden. But he did not wish to appear rude. They were eating some kind of clear soup, which was followed by a piece of beef, under a sauce.

They asked about Oxford. He had taken three tutorials: Chaucer and Others, Philosophy Between the Wars, and Modern Problems in Sociology.

No sciences?

No.

“Do you wish to be a writer, a scholar?”

“No.”

“What do you wish to be?” Haarpst inquired.

He had literally no ambitions beyond being with Allabella as much as he could. He had almost no French, but she had tutored him patiently in the verb forms, delighting in his simple errors. Before Oxford his ambitions had been even more unformed. At most he had thought about how fun it would be to be some kind of big shot, somebody who could fly his own plane around, for example, and impress people. But

he would want to do it in an offhand way. For example, one night he might drive his unsuspecting date to the airfield. There his plane would be waiting. He would go through the important business of talking on the radio with the control tower while she looked on. Only when they were in the air would he tell her where they were going. But the thing about Allabella was that nothing would impress her, after the life she had already lived. She was beyond all that already.

“Possibly a doctor,” he told the doctor.

Haarpst leaned back, pleased with the answer. “Ahh,” the man sighed, and jabbed the tines of his fork in Richard’s direction, “this is fine. And who is your family? What are their occupations? Doctors as well?”

His father was hard to explain. He was a photographer, although this was not exactly how he made his living. He had traveled with Margaret Mead and taken photographs on her behalf. This was a fact that Richard mentioned in the way he had learned to do at Oxford, in a casual fashion. He decided not to add that his father sometimes also taught sociology as an adjunct at Columbia. His specialty was the dynamics of medium-sized groups, as in boardrooms and other business meetings. Modern Problems in Sociology had been his father’s idea.

“And your mother?”

“She teaches teachers. She trains them, I mean. Elementary school teachers.”

It was all very dull, really.

What he really had to offer was something he could not ever manage to talk about, something that would, he suspected, disappear the moment he tried. He did not even really like to think about it. It was a kind of secret interior glory, a humming sensitivity to the glamour of unrealized possibility. He was like the town of Roskilde, empty and silent before everyone came bursting through their doors. But even stating it to himself like this risked making it all vanish.

Jens offered another cryptic smile.

Richard shifted on his sore rear end. He would have enjoyed a bath or a swim, but neither one was in the cards.

After dinner a maid took away the dishes. Richard was dismissed to his room. Carl was nowhere in evidence. The house was very dark and silent. The sea made its washing sound beneath the cliff, out of sight. A moon hung over it, sending a lane of silver to the horizon.

After some hesitant exploration up and down the corridors, he came to what he was sure was Allabella's door. He knocked once and entered. The room was cool and full of pale moonlight. Allabella was a shape beneath the white cloud of quilts and blankets. There was a water glass and an eyedropper on the nightstand. She had been given some medicine to help her sleep. Still she shifted aside when he toed off his shoes and shucked his pants and slipped into bed behind her. She was a warm set of curves under his hand. Her skin was moist and hot.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, through a daze.

"It's just me," he answered.

She made no answer. He had a tremendous hardon and worked her nightgown up around her narrow hips. He retrieved a rubber from his trousers pocket and dressed himself. Then he rolled her onto her stomach and worked her knees apart. She was not wet so he applied spit to his fingers and then to her. Then he pushed himself inside. She made some noise of surprise and maybe interest. He had traveled all this way and this was what he had come for, among other things. Her pure beauty, her gentle ways. In the moonlight her narrow behind showed itself. Her breasts against the mattress. She reached up and cupped them. Then she put a hand between her legs to help herself along.

"Oh, whoever you are," she said, "am I awake?"

"Yes," he groaned.

"I am not even *awake*," she said, with a wondering in her voice. And then she was fluttering around him, pulling on his cock with her insides. He came with a leaping jolt.

He would marry this girl. He would take her home to White Plains, take her to college with him, Allabella Jens. There in the moonlit room nothing else seemed possible.

Breakfast was served in a small bright alcove off the kitchen. Allabella was feeling well enough to appear, drifting prettily into view with her hair newly washed. She wore a yellow dress that set off her dark features. He had changed into his wrinkled shirt and second tie. Seeing her across the table from him set off a chiming pleasure in his chest.

Mr. Jens was nowhere to be seen: out at one of his other properties, Allabella guessed. There were several in the area, all family houses

that, after one thing and another, had fallen to him. Little Carl could be heard tromping through the halls in search of something he had mislaid, calling out in Danish.

“His soldiers,” she explained. “He thinks they travel themselves, during the night. He thinks it, so he puts them around in places, then makes himself forget where they are.”

Mrs. Jens had died giving birth to Carl. Allabella had told him this at Oxford. Mrs. Jens was to be seen in one of the portraits in the dining room, which they visited after breakfast. She was a mild-looking blonde in a gold sheath dress. One hand was placed on a piano and the other was held out, palm up. “She was a singer,” Allabella said. “She made three records. Would you like to hear them?”

“Why not?”

There was a ceremony involved in playing the dead Mrs. Jens’ songs. The records were stored in a locked cabinet in the room where he had found Mr. Jens the night before. The key to the cabinet was kept in a glass dish on a small round marble table. Once taken from its paper sleeve a record was examined carefully for scratches, then placed on the turntable, the needle lowered with gingerly care. And then it was necessary to seat oneself on the green horsehair sofa, where one listened to all music in that house.

Mrs. Jens had a pleasant contralto. She was singing something in Danish. “This song is called ‘The Tree in the Forest,’” said Allabella. “It says, Here is a pretty hill, a more prettier hill I have never seen. And here is a pretty tree on the hill, a more prettier tree I have never seen. And the tree on the hill stands deep in the forest.”

Carl had come to the door, his arms full of soldiers, listening.

Afterward, she led him to the top of the stairs at the edge of the cliff. The morning was cool but the sun was pleasant. Behind them the huge house loomed. A buffeting wind moved up from the water and took the words from their mouths. “I cannot go further!” she exclaimed. “This is forbidden for me to go down!”

“Not if I’m with you!” he said.

“Yes, I think so!” Little strands of her perfect hair caught in her mouth and she hooked them out.

“You’re my pretty tree on the hill!” he shouted. “A prettier tree I have never seen!”

She blinked, seeming not to have heard him. "We can go down a little way only!" she amended.

The stairs were steady, the supports drilled somehow into the rock of the cliff face. At a landing halfway down she halted. The wind was less here but the hem of her dress swirled around her thighs. He reached for her again, his hand on her hip under her skirt. The sea behind her was gray and clean, breaking in an endless series of waves on the stones of the black beach. The feel of her flesh under his hand, the readiness to be touched, the sympathy in her green eyes, the charming extra tab of flesh at the apex of her top lip, her humor and intelligence. How she had yielded to him. "What would you say to getting married?" he shouted.

"But Richard!" she replied, with a laughing smile, "I am marrying Mr. Jens, of course!"

"Oh, but *no!*" he cried, recoiling at the offense of it. "He's your *father!*"

She shook her head, untroubled. "No, he is only my guardian!"

"Did he *ask* you?"

"Yes of course!"

"Did you say *yes?*"

She nodded, a little blind in the wind. "Yes, Richard!"

"*Why?*"

She put his hand on the front of her panties now. They were damp with her excitement. "He is wonderful! And it means I will never have to leave this place!"

It was never in his nature to hurt anyone. But he could sometimes be unkind. He turned her around and had her that way, leaning her over the railing, thrusting into her carelessly. He had brought his rubbers even here. When he finished, he descended to the water, where she was forbidden to follow. He undressed to his underwear and breasted the freezing waves. He remained there as long as he could. He was an expert swimmer and before long he warmed and beat his way back and forth along the stony beach, putting his powers on full display. When he finally crawled out on the perilous rocks, she was gone and he found his clothes had been removed. He climbed the long stairway in his dripping underwear and padded across the cropped lawn to the house. A towel had been left by the door. He wrapped himself in it and

mounted to his room. His things were packed and his clothes laid out, somehow already pressed and cleaned, his white shirt stiff and perfect as an envelope.

He expected to be dismissed without a word. But she was there at the door when he came down. She was unbearably sexy. He could never live without her, though now he also wanted nothing to do with her. Her dark eyebrows, her hair in a canary-yellow headband. She was barefoot. “Goodbye, Richard,” she said, and went up on her tiptoes to kiss him. “It was fine to see you again. You are a very nice boy.”

“I’m not a boy,” he said.

At the time, he would have said his capacity for love was boundless. That he was generous with his heart, and that she had broken it. His capacity to be hurt was also boundless, he would have also said. When he passed back through Roskilde around noon it had become just another town, men in shirtsleeves and women going to market, and there was nothing out of the ordinary anywhere in the light of the day or in anything, himself included. And in this, it seemed he knew the fallen world. Of course, in its own way, this is a glorious feeling too, the sort that you can blanket yourself in and carry along for a while.

Even today he will tell this story on himself, or most of it, at least. Sometimes for laughs. But sometimes not. So something in this episode has stayed with him. That house, that sea, that no doubt troubled girl in the bed. The sudden disgust, the humiliation. His grievous misunderstanding, his presumption. But something else too, something he has yet to identify exactly. Some memory of broken radiance, or vanished glory, collapsed possibility—all proof of something, maybe just proof of the existence of that old version of himself. Though for him, too, by now, it is all like something that happened a long time ago, to a boy of his distant acquaintance.

He did, at any rate, become a doctor.