

Translated extract from

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Arno Geiger
We 're Doing Fine

Translated by Isabel Cole

The persecution of the Sudeten Germans is reportedly continuing. The political lull in Hungary should not be mistaken for a carefree summer siesta. Goebbels opens the German Radio Exposition in Berlin, the biggest-ever fair for the broadcasting industry. Ambitions of becoming the world's major broadcasting power. St. Jean de Luz: Ministerial session allegedly held by the Catalan Bolshevik Committee, detailed discussion of the military situation in Catalonia, Nationalist pilots successfully bombarded Spanish Bolshevik positions. Vittorio Mussolini, son of the Duce, on an educational tour of Germany. Heat wave subsides in Austria, back to 30 degrees Celsius in many places with a region of disturbance gradually moving in from the west, 28 degrees and sunny in Vienna, the state has lowered the price of yet another crucial household item: the match. Salzburg: Figaro premieres, Ezio Pinza in his song of defiance, "Non più andrai" (farfallone amoroso, notte e giorno d'intorno girando), when the lights went out in the orchestra and on ...

Richard reads no further; a Steyr convertible is turning into the driveway. The car comes to a halt, crunching gravel, next to Otto's pedal-car. Out steps Crobath, a classmate Richard hasn't seen in years. He's in uniform and has one of those smartly-parted haircuts. And Richard? Hair mussed in the back from sleep and the navy cap, in his shirtsleeves and down-at-heel canvas shoes. Heading toward Crobath, from the warm grass smell into the gravel dust, Richard decides he'll ask Alma to get him new shoes, the same kind, better yet, two pairs.

– I was told I'd find you at home.

Crobath talks through his nose, the proper Viennese way, reminding Richard of how Crobath hired himself out as an ice-skating teacher on the Heumarkt to supplement his meager budget when both of them were in the "Academic Nature Friends". Back then Crobath lagged behind in everything, a vacuous-faced man for whom Richard always felt a slight contempt. Looking at him now, though, Richard has to admit that the man in front of him, in his angularity, radiates more vitality than he, and looks years younger.

Were they on a first-name basis back then?

– I hope I'm not intruding, says Crobath.

– Not at all. What can I do for you, Herr Crobath?

He places his hand appraisingly on the padded shoulder of Crobath's uniform. After a few more pleasantries directed at Alma, Crobath turns back to Richard and asks to speak with him in private.

- Is it something important? Alma asks, arms crossed, obstinate even now.
- It's a minor matter, says Crobath. But it sounds like just the opposite.
- Please make sure we aren't disturbed. Have Frieda bring coffee.

All the while Richard is wondering what prompted the visit, whether it has to do with yesterday's meeting in Ratzersdorf. He eyes Crobath, what on earth is he after. Best to say as little as possible. He wants to make a calm impression. Don't show any signs of insecurity, that's all. But he leads the way into the pergola, where the summer table stands on the veranda side, with flowers on it, no less, too stiff, he moves too stiffly, his shoulders flung back as if he has to demonstrate bearing. The men sit down. Richard expects Crobath to warm up by starting with something unrelated and dredging up a few stories from their university days before getting down to business. But after a few remarks about Otto, whom they've shoed out of the pergola (how the lad resembles Richard, that's what holds a family together) and about a topic of general interest (how fundamentally and favorably the situation has changed over the past few weeks), Crobath gets to the point: it's absurd to bring charges against the security company, considering the circumstances. For as Crobath goes on to say:

- Everyone has to put their shoulder to the wheel.

Before leaving for his business trip Richard had had a lawyer acquaintance request payment of damages by the security company, threatening to sue in the event of further delay. But judging by what Crobath says, the suit has not been filed yet.

– Why absurd? asks Richard: So far the security company has only reacted with various maneuvers, making excuses or not even responding to inquiries. According to the contract, if no agreement can be reached, damages are to be claimed in court within six months' time. This step has now been initiated. I regard this as normal procedure given indications that the security company intends to use all means at its disposal to avoid paying.

Crobath gives Richard a five-minute lecture on major changes that are in the offing, the ongoing mood of euphoria in the city and the unfavorable light that Richard's behavior sheds on his political views.

As Crobath sums up and starts to show signs of starting all over again, announcing that everyone is being asked to make sacrifices, Richard cautiously objects:

- I wouldn't have thought this was a political issue.
- Then you thought wrong, Crobath retorts so coolly that Richard chooses not to venture a response.

Richard pricks up his ears at the faint sound of sandaled feet approaching across the lawn behind him. It's Frieda, bringing the coffee and a bowl of blackberries. Frieda leans over

Richard's shoulder to move the vase of flowers, and Richard thinks he feels the yielding pressure of her breasts, intentional, he assumes, maybe to remind him of last night. Her body leaning to the side, Frieda distributes cups and bowls with a gentle languor in her movements that Richard feels is also meant for him. He smells the familiar perfumed body; it gives off a stronger scent than the blackberries on the table. Crobath also fixes his eyes on the girl, and it occurs to Richard that Frieda is wearing some of the faded lingerie that is the indirect subject of the conversation. Alma brought the pertinent articles home with her with a view to presenting them as evidence in the event of a legal dispute.

As Frieda pours the coffee, Richard calls to mind the sequence of events: That German troops marched into Austria on the 12th and 13th of March, Saturday and Sunday, and that the abundant sunlight on those days ruined the amply-stocked window display in Alma's parents' lingerie shop, which Alma manages. An employee of the security company had chosen to wave flags at the western entrance to the city and celebrate his new nationality rather than performing his work properly.

He says:

– You can't get around the fact that the watchman wasn't at his post.

And Crobath:

– Can he be blamed for grasping the significance of the historical moment, as would be expected of anyone, incidentally?

For a moment Richard gazes after Frieda as she unhurriedly moves away, then slantwise back at Crobath. He does not feel obliged to follow his tortuous logic.

– Hopefully that doesn't imply the right to neglect his duties. And even if it does: the security company should recompense the man's sense of history and cover the damages for decency's sake.

Alma had renewed the security company's contract last year only after much hesitation and long discussions. There had been repeated incidents of negligence, and the damages had not been paid for. The inspector justified the higher price for his company's services comparative to the other offers by arguing that in the event of damage they would be dealing with a company that had unlimited liability and could be held liable in a practical sense. Said inspector, a Herr Boldog, was aware of the glitches in the past, and solemnly promised that nothing of the kind would happen again and that they could turn to him if necessary. They had taken him at his word.

The watchman's negligence was duly reported, along with the fact that summer-like sunshine had prevailed on the days in question, which, given the newspaper reports and the

newsreels, not even the security company ventures to dispute. However, in its very first reaction the company claimed that the mid-March sunlight lacked the strength to cause the damages claimed. As if the gentlemen weren't aware that for certain merchandise fifteen minutes of sunlight is enough to spoil the colors. And it doesn't matter how faded the merchandise is, on the books the loss is the same. All these arguments were brought forward repeatedly; however, the disputed questions were decided to Alma's disadvantage by an expert from the security company, i.e., the interested party. No independent opinions were sought, it would be too expensive, as they were led to believe, and for nearly half a year now time has simply passed.

But at least Richard knows that the explanations he has to offer carry no weight against Crobath's political arguments, even if he's right a hundred times over: for Crobath it's sheer stupidity, immaterial.

Richard's Adam's apple moves emptily. He says:

– What's to be done about the damages?

– May I? Crobath asks with a nod. He stretches his arm out for the brass ashtray and lights a cigarette.

– Think of the advantages you'll have, the competition that's eliminated, the demand growing in leaps and bounds with all the additional men in the city and the money coming into circulation. You'd be amazed to hear how many things are possible now, things you wouldn't have dreamed of a few weeks ago. How fast the future is being built.

– No one talks about the future with anything but enthusiasm these days.

– And rightly so, I'm telling you.

The two men lock eyes. Two long seconds later Richard buries his chin behind his collar, uneasily mulling over Crobath's words, and recalls, without knowing why, that in starting a family he had meant to start the time in which changes would hardly ever happen anymore. A quick look back: the bottom line is sobering. Unrest and coups all his unpredictable life, every five years a new regime and form of government, new money, new street names, new salutations. Constant chaos. Since his childhood calmer stretches have not just been rare, they haven't existed, and he can't say where he'd turn back the clock to, if he could, it's all such a muddle.

He hears Crobath say:

– Forget about the lingerie.

Forget about the lingerie, painlessly, the way water sometimes forgets to freeze. Can time, too, forget to pass?

For a moment Richard sees the framework of the world like a lean person's bones. He feels how senseless, how impossible everything is and how he'll have to die some day. A thought like a splinter in the skull.

What depresses him the most is that he won't die as an Austrian.

– If I understand you correctly, I'm supposed to set my own interests aside in view of the future you and your colleagues are working toward.

– You could also choose to correct your views. You're a talented man. Considering your gifts, you'd have good reason to do so.

– Good reasons are easy to find for most everything at the moment, says Richard.

Crobath clears his throat, moves his chair closer to the table and helps himself to the blackberries.

– It won't be so easy to find a building with all four sides facing south.

The grass grows, the shutters fade, the roof tiles on the windward side turn scabby.

– But should your wife at least feel the need to move the business to a corner shop, that could be arranged without much trouble. When it comes to Aryanization, no one even cares about appearances anymore.

Richard seeks a response in the required rapidity that commits him to nothing and still sounds vaguely interested. He says:

– That would mean one more display window –.

He scratches something hard from the tabletop, mechanically lifts it to his mouth. Too late it occurs to him that it could be fly droppings. He clenches his teeth, reaches jerkily for the coffee cup and washes it down with a big swallow. He can't help himself, his worries are starting to get the better of him.

From the house the measured tones of Alma's flute, spreading singly or densely grouped in the yellow-green light. Plus the clicking of the swing chains and the creaking of the pear tree under Otto's weight as he swings through the air.

While Crobath starts talking about the future again, raising his chin and rhapsodizing about how feats are being performed, Richard leans back as if that gave him a better perspective for thinking things over. He thinks over his *good reasons*, he tries to square Crobath's arguments with his dilemma in the hopes of finding a solution: inasmuch as there's little hope that the coups will keep up their pernicious regularity and that Crobath's party comrades will only be around for a few weeks, it's advisable to be on good terms with the new masters, that's only natural. He, Dr. Richard Sterk, is not one to rise above the times he lives in, he feels he's earned a bit of peace and quiet.

As if in step with Richard's thoughts (like a march, step by step) Crobath also appeals to Richard to be reasonable, not to make a scene, not to create problems for himself.

- You'd be advised not to take a cavalier attitude.
- I certainly won't.
- That's very sensible.

But Richard still isn't sure, he never has a feel for these things. He'd give anything to discuss it with Alma. If only you could find the right tack. If only you knew what direction things are taking, what's going to happen. It's not easy to be forced to assess reality and make your commitments even when the circumstances you'd like aren't part of the deal.

Crobath warns:

- Otherwise there'll be a rude awakening one day, and I don't mean maybe.
- Fine, I'll take that to heart, Richard concedes in as normal a tone as he can muster.

But in the same breath he knows he'll be damned if he does. The intimacies with the nanny have taken him to his limits as far as impropriety is concerned. If he gave in to this temptation too. If the consolation were the new vogue for brothels and the corresponding vogue for lingerie shops. Then he might as well dig a hole in the garden, fill it with water and wallow in the muck in front of all the world. He's had enough. If only the invasion had taken place two weeks earlier, he tells himself, he never would have gone near the nanny, that much is certain. He has no gift for disorderliness, and he's not going to develop the gift, not him, he admits that. As quickly as possible he must end what he never should have started.

He even has a rough idea how he'll proceed: no matter what the security company finally makes up its mind to do (but it'll have to make up its mind, even if it's by producing expert testimony that the sun wasn't actually shining on the days in question): he will pull his money out of the business and have it removed from the register of companies. Dr. Kranz from the District Commercial Court owes him a favor, so Richard can count on wrapping things up quickly. If he had to guess, Alma won't be happy to hear the news, but Alma's mother is constantly tied up taking care of her husband, which also makes the management of Alma's time an ongoing nightmare. Whereas if Alma were to stay at home now, the nanny could be dispensed with. That would suit Richard perfectly. The pants are pulled up again in no time. And the whole thing will be a lesson for him.

He breathes deeply. The notion that things could quiet down again, at home at least, already seems more reality than thought, and it makes him feel strong for a moment. Crobath drinks the last swallow of his coffee. Richard is about to refill his cup, but Crobath holds his hand over the cup and demurs, saying he ought to be going. Crobath glances across the

garden; Richard follows his glance. The dark cherry tree, behind it a prolific pear tree from which the swing now hangs motionless amidst yellow flecks of sun. Then the wall to the neighbors who are going to London.

On second glance Richard realizes that Crobath's attention is focused on Otto. The boy is strutting along the top of the wall, God knows how he got up there again. Seeing that the men are watching him, Otto calls:

– They've covered the lawn with carpets!

Otto's widely-spaced eyes, inherited from his mother, peer back at the neighbors, then he turns back and calls:

– There are curtains hanging in the trees, and carpets too!

He smiles over at them.

Richard calls back:

– Make sure the carpet-beater doesn't get put to work on you.

Otto patters on along the top of the wall, glancing to both sides, an outpost of what Crobath calls the future. For Otto and Ingrid normality will include things Richard will never want to accept. Ingrid won't know anything else, one day her father will seem to her like an old, disappointed man who finds the golden age in the snows of yesteryear, just as Richard's father found the Galician battlefields in the foot of his amputated leg.

– Your boy looks happy, says Crobath.

Then, abruptly, after a pause:

– Keep an eye on him.

Richard is unsure what to make of that or what to reply. And so he says nothing.

Crobath gets up. On the way to the car he thanks Richard for taking the time, nice to see you again, all the best to your wife, Heil Hitler.

Before Richard can come up with an suitable parting phrase, Crobath drives off. Slowly exhaling, Richard waits until the Steyr leans into the curve, onto the street, then stands there uneasily, indecisively, with arms akimbo, starring at the empty gate where the grey of exhaust fogs the air for seconds longer. After a while Richard turns away from the front yard and gazes across the tranquil expanse of the garden. Not a soul. Otto seems to have wisely abandoned the wall, or he's now strolling along the section behind the house.

Richard calls the boy's name.

No reply.

Otto is a snotty-nosed brat and always has been, in Richard's opinion. For some time he's had a certain interest in the question of whether it's good for the children not having

Alma home half the time, and the more he thinks about it, the more it makes sense to get rid of the business. He's not likely to lose his job, no, and even if he does, no, though he wouldn't put it past them, oh sure, he wouldn't put anything past them. Fortunately he's a wealthy man, and once this affair is over and done with he can keep a low profile, no problem. Not to brag, but what he doesn't know about the electricity industry isn't worth knowing. A talented man, even Crobath said so. Keep a low profile. He'll justify himself to Alma with the pressure he's being put under, that strikes him as a perfectly adequate explanation. And then: farewell to the shop, away with the uncertainties of business life, no more disputes with the suppliers about the thickness of the paper used for the shopping bags that don't hold or with the window dresser who disrupts the peak shopping hours rather than coming early in the morning as arranged and spoils the day's receipts as well as charging a fee.

They won't even kick off the fall season (if that's still possible), and whatever is left after a hasty clearance sale could discreetly be donated to the representatives of the Lower Austrian Farmers' Association, perhaps in place of the money he'd promised in Ratzersdorf, then the families of the arrested cadres would actually be in Richard's debt. He'd fire the nanny (oh yes); to make up for it he'd have to raise Alma's housekeeping money and her half-yearly clothing allowance. At the same time, he'd ask whether Dr. Löwy would be willing to sell the beehives separately from the rest of the property. That way Alma could revive her father's hobby horse, she'd be in seventh heaven. That's how Richard sees it, anyway.

Ingrid toddles down the four steps to the veranda, let out of the house now that Crobath is gone. She looks at her father wide-eyed, with the attentiveness of a child, and the cat comes and rubs up against Ingrid's left leg. After a while Ingrid bends down, repeating the cat's name and trying to pick it up by the front legs, but only makes the cat stretch until it is nearly as tall as the child, a skinny, elongated body maintaining contact to the ground with two thin hind legs.

Perhaps Richard will feel solid ground under his feet again soon. Soon, perhaps, a constellation will emerge from the waiting room of possibilities, one that better suits Richard's desires and talents than *this here*. To him this hope seems linked to the thought of the constantly changing political situation (he may be making the biggest mistake of his life), but also with the thought of the lingerie business and of Frieda. It's clear to him that the world will go on changing, more, less. And though on the whole it seems implausible that the circumstances he wishes should start at this particular moment and in this way, he himself will remain as he is, waiting for a chance correspondence with an as-yet uncertain future.

Should, could, ought.

He listens to the sounds beyond his garden wall. Far away the sounds of an evening brass band can be heard, as they are almost daily, horns, trombones and double basses. In the pauses come the dully echoing reports from the shooting range. For a moment Richard thinks of Frieda and the fact that soon the girl will lie alone again more often in the dark room where she smells the duck ponds of her home town in the old wallpaper. Already Richard feels a slight nostalgia for the sheets, slightly rough and no longer entirely white, in Frieda's room where he slept as a child. But a moment later these things are newly sorted away: memories for later on, life phases of remarkable incompetence which, fortunately enough, will already cease to belong to him tomorrow.

Whooping like an Indian, Otto comes around the corner, heads for Ingrid and the cat and dances around them menacingly. The cat frees itself from Ingrid's hands and bounds away. Ingrid purses her lips threateningly and knits her brows the way Alma often does. Otto goes on whooping and dancing.

– Otto, stop, that's enough, Richard snaps.

He waves the boy over to him and boxes his ears.

He's convinced it can't hurt Otto to discipline himself a bit too.

– You have no business up there on the wall, and put your pedal car back where it belongs.

A few bees dawdle along.

Flecks of sun wander.

Heavy flowers sway.

The smell of carpet cleaner fills the air.

The guardian angel waits absolutely motionless.

The wind slowly blows the color out of things.

An itty-bitsy spider.

How long ago will this be one day?

Richard assumes he'll remember.