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Waiting for Sunrise

Written by William Boyd

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WAITING FOR SUNRISE

WILLIAM BOYD

B L O O M S B U R Y

WAITING FOR
SUNRISE

William Boyd

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For Susan

A thing is true at first light and a lie by noon.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Truly, to tell lies is not honourable; but when the truth entails tremendous ruin, to speak dishonourably is pardonable.

SOPHOCLES

PART ONE

VIENNA, 1913-1914

I. A Young, Almost Conventionally Handsome Man

IT IS A CLEAR and dazzling summer's day in Vienna. You are standing in a skewed pentangle of lemony sunshine at the sharp corner of Augustiner Strasse and Augustinerbastei, across from the opera house, indolently watching the world pass by you, waiting for someone or something to catch and hold your attention, to generate a tremor of interest. There's a curious frisson in the city's atmosphere today, almost spring-like, though spring is long gone, but you recognize that slight vernal restlessness in the people going by, that stirring of potential in the air, that possibility of audacity – though what audacities they might be, here in Vienna, who can say? Still, your eyes are open, you are unusually poised, ready for anything – any crumb, any flung coin – that the world might casually toss your way.

And then you see – to your right – a young man striding out of the Hofgarten park. He is in his late twenties, almost handsome in a conventional way, but your eye is drawn to him because he is hatless, an anomaly in this busy crowd of Viennese folk, all hatted, men and women. And, as this young, almost conventionally handsome man walks purposefully past you, you note his fine brown, breeze-blown hair, his pale grey suit and his highly polished ox-blood shoes. He's of medium height but broad-shouldered with something of a sportsman's build and balance, you register, as he goes by, a couple of paces from you. He's clean-shaven – also unusual in this place, the city of facial hair – and you observe that his coat is well tailored, cut tight at the waist. Folds of an ice-blue silk handkerchief spill easily from his breast pocket. There is something fastidious and deliberate about the way he dresses

himself – just as he’s almost conventionally handsome, so is he also almost a dandy. You decide to follow him for a minute or so, vaguely intrigued and having nothing better to do.

At the entry to Michaeler Platz he stops abruptly, pauses, stares at something stuck to a hoarding and then continues on his way, briskly, as if he’s running slightly late for an appointment. You follow him around the square and into Herrengasse – the slanting sunrays picking out the details on the grand, solid buildings, casting sharp, dark shadows on the caryatids and the friezes, the pediments and the cornices, the balusters and the architraves. He stops at the kiosk selling foreign newspapers and magazines. He chooses *The Graphic* and pays for it, unfolding and opening it to glance at the headlines. Ah, he’s English – how uninteresting – your curiosity is waning. You turn round and wander back towards the pentangular patch of sunlight you abandoned on the corner, hoping some more stimulating possibilities will come your way, leaving the young Englishman to stride on to wherever and whomever he was so intently heading . . .

Lysander Rief paid for his three-day-old *Graphic* (overseas edition), glanced at a headline – ‘Armistice Signed in Bucharest – Second Balkan War Ends’ – and ran his hand unreflectingly through his fine straight hair. His hat! Damn. Where had he left his hat? On the bench – of course – in the Hofgarten where he’d sat for ten minutes staring at a flowerbed in a fearful quandary, wondering agitatedly if he was doing the correct thing, suddenly unsure of himself, of this trip to Vienna and everything it portended. What if it was all a mistake, all vain hope and ultimately pointless? He looked at his wristwatch. Damn, again. He’d be late for his appointment if he went back. He liked that hat, his narrow-brim boater with the maroon silk band, bought in Lockett’s, on Jermyn Street. Someone would have stolen it in an instant, he was sure – another reason not to retrace his steps – and he cursed his distractedness again, setting off once more up Herrengasse. It just

showed you how tense he was, he thought, how preoccupied. To rise up and walk away from a park bench and not automatically set your hat firmly on your head . . . He was clearly more jittery and apprehensive about this meeting than even his obvious, perfectly understandable nervousness would indicate. Calm down, he said to himself, listening to the measured click of the metalled crescents set in the leather heels of his shoes as they struck the stone paving – calm down. This is just the first appointment – you can walk away, go back to London – no one is holding a loaded gun to your head, forcing you.

He exhaled. ‘It was a fine day in August, 1913,’ he said to himself out loud but in a low voice, just enough to change the subject and readjust his mood. ‘*Es war ein schöner Augusttag des Jahres . . . ah, 1913,*’ he repeated in German, adding the date in English. He had trouble with numbers – long numbers and dates. His German was improving fast but he might ask Herr Barth, his teacher, to do an hour or so on numbers, to try and fix them in his head. ‘*Ein schöner Augusttag –.*’ He saw another defaced poster on the wall, like the one he’d spotted as he’d walked into Michaeler Platz – that was the third he’d seen since setting out from his lodgings this morning. It had been clumsily torn from its hoarding, ripped away from wherever the glue was not strong enough to hold the paper fast. At the first poster – just next to the tram-stop near the room he was renting – his eye had been held by what remained of the body (the head had gone) of the scantily clad maiden it displayed. She was almost naked, cowering, hands pressed to her sizeable breasts, cupping them protectively, a semi-visible filmy swirl of self-supporting veil protecting her modesty at the plump juncture of her thighs. Something about the reality of the drawing was particularly compelling, however stylized the situation she was in (that airborne, handy veil) and he had paused to take a closer look. He had no idea what the context of this image was as everything else had been torn away. However, on the second defaced poster, the end of a scaly, saw-toothed

reptilian tail explained why the nymph or the goddess, or whatever she was, appeared so terrified. And now on the third poster some lettering was left: ‘*PERS* –’ and below that ‘*und*’ and below that, ‘*Eine Oper von Gottlieb Toll* –’.

He thought: ‘*Pers*’ . . . Persephone? An opera about Persephone? Wasn’t she the one dragged off to the underworld and Narcissus – was it? – had to go and fetch her back without looking round? Or was that Euridice? Or something . . . Orpheus? Not for the first time he resented his eccentric and patchwork education. He knew a lot about a few things and very little about a great deal of things. He was taking steps to remedy the situation – reading as widely as he could, writing his poems – but every now and then his ignorance stared him candidly in the face. One of the hazards of his profession, he admitted. And classical myths and references were certainly a bit of a jumble, not to say a prominent hole.

He looked back at the poster. Only the top half of the head had survived the shredding on this one. Arabesques of wind-lashed hair and wide eyes peering over the ragged edge of the horizontal rip as if, Lysander thought, she was staring horrified over the top of a bedsheet. Piecing together the fragments of the three posters in his head to form a notional body of the goddess, Lysander found himself briefly stirred, sexually. A naked woman, young, beautiful, vulnerable, confronted by some squamous, no doubt phallic, monster about to ravish her . . . And no doubt this was the purpose of the posters and no doubt, furthermore, this was what had provoked the prudish bourgeois outrage that had made some good citizen decide to vandalize the display. All very modern – all very Viennese – he supposed.

Lysander strode on, deliberately analysing his mood. Why should this poster depicting the potential ravishment of some mythological woman excite him? Was it natural? Was it, to be more precise, something to do with the pose – the cupped hands both covering and holding the soft breasts, at once coquettish and defensive? He sighed: who could answer these questions anyway?

The human mind was endlessly baffling, complex and perverse. He stopped himself – yes, yes, yes. This was exactly why he had come to Vienna.

He crossed the Schottenring and the wide expanse of the square in front of the huge charcoal bulk of the university building. That's where he should go to find out about Persephone – ask some student specializing in Latin and Greek – but something was nagging at him, however, he couldn't recall a monster taking part in the Persephone story . . . He checked the streets he was passing – almost there. He stopped to let an electric tram go by and turned right down Berggasse and then left on Wasagasse. Number 42.

He swallowed, mouth suddenly dry, thinking: maybe I should just turn about, pack my bags, go home to London and resume my perfectly agreeable life. But, he reminded himself, there would still be the issue of his particular problem, unresolved . . . The main wide doors to the street at number 42 were open and he stepped through into the coach-entryway. There was no sign of a concierge or guardian. A steel-meshed elevator was available to carry him to the second floor but he opted for the stairway. One floor. Two. Wrought-iron banisters, varnished wooden handrail, some sort of speckled granite forming the steps, a dado rail, turf-green tiles below, white distemper above. He concentrated on these details, trying not to think about the dozens – perhaps the hundreds – of people who had preceded him up these stairs.

He reached the landing. Two solid panelled doors with fanlights stood side by side. One said '*Privat*'; the other had a small brass sign above the separate bell, tarnished, needing a polish. 'Dr J. Bensimon.' He counted to three and rang, confirmed suddenly in the rightness of what he was doing, confident in the new, better future he was setting out to secure for himself.

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