

Vienna

“C’mon now, Sweetie, don’t you think it’s time we start making those babies we’ve been talking about?”

“Jan, if we don’t go to Europe now before we get bogged down with kids and a mortgage, we’ll always regret it.”

“And, pray tell me, just where will the money come from for this adventure?”

“What about the \$2000 in the bank?”

“Don’t you even think about it!”

“The trip could cost only a fraction of that if we stayed in camp sites.”

Jan frowned as with exacting movements she straightened up the day’s *New York Times* sprawled on the cobbler’s bench, now coffee table. “Bob, you promised not to touch that savings.”

“Yes, but we won’t need that down payment for at least a couple of years.”

“And where do we put our little Junior in the meantime?”

“What about the big closet at the front end of the hall?”

“A closet? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“It’s twice the size of our bathroom where we can’t even close the door without turning sideways. That closet’s big enough for a crib, even a playpen. Even has a window”

“True. But first you’ll have to get rid of those stacks of *New Republics* and *New Yorkers*.”

“No problem. With a baby crying all the time, my reading days will be over.”

“Oh, Bob, be reasonable!”

Sweeping her up in his arms, he started the “Twa, da, da da—dum, ta-dum, ta-dum,” of the *Blue Danube*, twirling her around the living room rag rug. “Can’t you just see us waltzing to those Viennese violins?”

Jan had to laugh at that. “Listen, Bob, I don’t want to get near any Germans after what they did to the Jews.”

“Honey, that was 15 years ago.”

“I’ll bet we’ll see some of them still sporting swastikas.”

“Wanna’ bet?” Bob asked.

“How much?”

“Say, one of Uno’s deep dish pizzas.”

“Deal.”

“Aha, my dear Jan, that means we’ll have to go to Germany to see who wins.”

“No. If we’re going to Europe, let’s make it Italy. All that Renaissance art, high fashion, classic cuisine!”

“Then how will I get to show off my graduate school language requirement?”

“The test in Vienna will be whether you can speak it, *dummen Mann*, not whether you can read it.”

“Prego, viva Italia!” Bob’s eyes were dancing now, knowing he was in the lead. “We’ll stage the conception under the gaze of one of those immaculate Virgins.”

“And then maybe I’ll have a chance at a brown-eyed baby,” Jan teased.

“Not with me as the father, we won’t.”

“From what I’ve heard of Italian men . . .” Jan said as she darted out of Bob’s grasp and ran off to the bedroom. He chased her down the long hall of their Chicago “Pullman” apartment, kicking off his loafers as he went.

She found him with his coffee the next morning poring over the paperback, *Europe on a Dollar a Day*.

And that is how they found themselves at the American Embassy Fourth of July party in Vienna in 1960. The hors d’ oeuvres were distinctly American—shrimp with cocktail sauce, hot water chestnuts

wrapped in bacon, potato chips with clam dip, deviled eggs. They'd been at the campsite long enough to appreciate a dress-up party where they could speak English. They pretended to be staying at a ritzy hotel.

The next night they decided they could splurge on dinner at a restaurant. They chose a small, cozy family place with scenes of formally dressed waltzing couples shown in black silhouettes along the walls. After ordering Wiener schnitzel and red cabbage, Bob started for the men's room. He'd only gone a few steps when a short man started screaming and beating Bob about the head with his cane. That wiry stranger was stronger than he looked, and within a few seconds Bob was bleeding from his temple. Then the man lunged into Bob forcing him backwards tipping over a laden table. After the clatter of crockery, came the solid thud of Bob's head on the floor

Not until she was sitting on the green plastic upholstery in the family waiting room at the hospital, did Jan try to figure out why she hadn't screamed or run to Bob's side when he was being attacked. Instead, she remembered, she had sat frantically looking up the word for policeman in her Berlitz phrase book. How stupid of her! She was useless in the face of emergencies—and why had she and all the people in the restaurant just watched that madman step over Bob's body and escape out the front door? Would he ever be caught? Did anyone ever

call whatever it is the police are called in this crazy country? That idiot should be locked up forever. Bob could be dead.

Even as she had heard the siren of the ambulance, she remembered she was just standing there staring at the swirl of Bob's blood pooling on the dark wooden floor. Because she was not allowed to ride in the ambulance, she had to negotiate a cab—not easy when she didn't even know the word for hospital. By the time she looked it up, Bob's ambulance was just a wail in the distance.

Because she didn't know how to say "Emergency Entrance," the driver let her off in front of the hospital, and she had to somehow find her way to where Bob was with gestures, showing Bob's name on the back of the paper menu she carried from the restaurant, and pleading in English to officious types who staff hospitals the world over. Her plaintive "*Sprechen Sie Englisch?*" netted her not even a sympathetic smile.

"Frau Goodman?" came the crisp voice under a starched white cap.

"That's me," Jan said, reaching for her heavy leather handbag. She added her own clicks on the floor to those of the nurse as she followed her into the room where Bob lay sleeping.

"She ran to his side and took hold of his shoulders. "Hey, Sweetie, it's me." Before she could kiss him, the nurse pulled her away, blasting

a barrage of guttural German into her ears. She understood “*Nein*,” but the rest could only be translated by the person who lay motionless on that bed. The nurse continued to scold even as she steered Jan’s shoulders to a chair at the end of the bed. Her gestures made it clear to Jan that she was to get no closer to her hapless husband.

When the nurse left, her sobbing began. She didn’t want to come to this strange country in the first place. Here she was in a part of the world where arrogant Aryans goose-stepped their way across Europe, where six million Jews were killed, mostly gassed because it was cheaper that way, and now where they were standing by doing nothing but let Bob lie here and die. When she ran out of Kleenex, she went to Bob’s bedside table for a fresh supply. Then she moved her chair around to the side of the bed and took one of Bob’s limp hands into hers. She leaned over and laid her cheek on it sighing to slake her sobs.

She had no idea how long she had stayed that way, but she awoke with a start to the sound of German in the room. Straightening up to rid her back of its crick, she pleaded to the two men she presumed were doctors, “*Bitte, sprechen Sie Englisch.*” They shook their heads in unison; then one of them looked right at her and spoke very slowly. Since the language was still German, a tongue by now detestable to her, Bob’s plight was still a mystery no matter how deliberately or loudly the doctor presented his diagnosis.

Jan spent a restless night in that uncomfortable chair, leaving only long enough to get a sandwich at the automat and buy a toothbrush and toothpaste at the pharmacy. The only way she could pay was to throw out all her coins on the counter and let the clerk pick out the amount needed. If he cheated her, she would never know. So far all this Austria had done was to cheat her!

The next morning as she was stretching out her back, a new nurse came in and took Bob's blood pressure and temp. Jan didn't like the way she frowned and shook her head as she said something unintelligible to her.

She took both of Bob's hands in hers and pleaded. "Please, please, Darling, wake up. Look at me." As she kissed his unresponsive lips, he opened his eyes and stared at her bewilderedly.

"Where am I? " He struggled to get onto his elbows.

"Don't move, Sweetheart. You're in a hospital here in Vienna. Remember that crazed idiot who knocked you down in that little restaurant on *Straus Straße*?"

"How could I forget?"

Jan filled him in on all that had happened since the fall, and then she ran out to the nurses' station to tell someone that Bob was awake. She closed her eyes and laid her cheek on the back of her stretched out hands, palms together, then jerked up her head, opened her eyes wide

and pointed down the hall to Bob's room. After three of these demonstrations, she had the distinct impression that the heavy nurse behind the counter had decided she was a lunatic. Jan kept saying "*Bitte, bitte*" and nodding her head down toward Bob's room, but that didn't change the nurse's impassive stance. Jan gave up and went back to Bob.

It was at least an hour before a new doctor arrived. Bob asked him a lot of questions in painstakingly halting German, and this doctor actually sat down and talked with him. Although Jan couldn't understand anything that was said, when she heard Bob chuckle and the doctor say Chicago and "boom, boom" gesturing with his hands pointed like guns, she knew that Bob and she were on their way out of the woods.

What he learned was that he had a concussion and would have to stay in the hospital at least a week. Jan went out to the pay phone in front of the hospital and called the U.S. Embassy to find out what to tell Bob's dad about how to wire money for the hospital stay to a bank in Vienna. She had to explain a lot more to Bob's dad about the accident than she wanted to, but she assured him they were both now out of harm's way—even though she felt anything but assured herself.

How right she was! The night of Bob's release, they took the bus back to the campground where she had spent a week of lonely nights in the tent. To her horror, next to the men's shower after Bob had gone in,

she saw the maniac who struck Bob down stalking. She was terrified! She shouted through the door. “Bob, Bob, are you in there? Don’t come out. Your attacker is here.” As she ran to the camp *Verwalter* office, the crazed fanatic followed. Thank goodness, the administrator spoke some English. After she told him what was happening and pointed to the man outside the office, the administrator went outside and ordered the crazy stalker to leave the premises.

Afraid to spend the night in the tent, they broke camp, packed up their things, and took the bus downtown to check into a hotel. When they got to their room, they both let out a sigh of relief.

“Bob, do you think he saw us check into this hotel?”

“Possible. That’s why I had that long talk with the concierge downstairs.”

“And that’s why I double locked our door.” Then Bob pushed a heavy chair to the door and tilted it to act as a further barrier.

“What possessed that weasel-face to attack you, Bob? Why was he yelling at you at that restaurant?”

“He mistook me for SS officer at Auschwitz where he was imprisoned until the end of the war.”

“What was he saying as he lit into you?”

“That I was evil, that I had starved him, tortured him, and wanted him dead. There was no way I could tell him who I really was.”

“You poor Darling! How frightened I was and I still am.” Jan craned her neck sideways and looked him up and down. “You do look pretty menacing though, come to think of it.”

Bob straightened, “Thanks. Glad to know that.” He clicked his heels and raised his right arm out straight at 45 degrees. “Heil!”

Jan started to giggle. “Here I was all worried that we would have trouble here because of the Nazis. Instead, it was one of Hitler’s unlucky victims who threatened us.”

“No wonder those Germans in the restaurant didn’t want to go after him.”

“Honey, they should have. You could have been killed!”

“And put him behind bars again? No, they couldn’t do that. Not after what he’d gone through.” Jan let out a long sigh.

The next day, as the train chugged away from the Vienna station, below their open compartment window and into their nightmares, wailed the mouth of the death camp.