

Zora del Buono: *Die Marschallin*

Translation by Katy Derbyshire

pp. 312 – 322

*Nova Gorica, Yugoslavia, February 1980*

How did I get this room, you're wondering. I'm a privileged old woman, you're thinking. Every one of your thoughts shows on the tip of your nose. Are those freckles I can spot there? Dandelion with castor oil helps, a decoction, boiled for two hours. I could tell you how I got this room but you don't want to hear it, do you? Alright, you can't hear it either. But even if you could, you wouldn't want to. Just like the others. You all want to know nothing. You profited and you hate nonetheless. Tear pictures off the walls and stomp on them. Smash the heads off busts. In the corridor. Outside in the garden. That's how it's always been, that's how it will be, I can feel it festering already. Did they send you to me? Or did you take pity on me? Whatever, it doesn't bother me, no one jabs as well as you do. You're the only one I need. They took his leg off, the left leg, they say. Even if it was the right leg, they'd still say it was the left one; it's funnier. Funny ha ha, don't you think? Your workmates must have laughed their heads off. The one-legged marshal, cut off on the left. *That old cripple, when's he going to die?* That's the kind of thing they say. Do people notice their own schizophrenia? Longing for his death and then scared of a future without him. He's still alive, though. And he's tough. As tough as I am. The other question is: Who'll die first, him or me? Not that my death has any bearing on the course of world history. Unlike his. You'll get all nostalgic about him, you wait and see. The father of Yugoslavia. You'll all get sentimental! Yes, you too! So: him or me? I'm not bothered when my time comes. I've outlived two sons. The third one lies there unconscious, awake in his mind but motionless, the paralysis eating itself deeper and deeper, soon he won't be able to breathe. My child will suffocate. Why should I want to go on living? Three lost sons. No mother can survive that.

Good thing you can't hear me. I like talking to you, it makes it easier for me. And you don't contradict me. I can't stand backchat. Altercations absolutely, but talking back: no. Pietro was the only one allowed to do that. Such a clever man. And charming! Too charming at times, Sicilian temperament. Like his late father, the women used to flock to him as well: *Don Giuseppe*, they called him. Or if they wanted to act educated: *Monsieur*. A remnant from Palermo. They spoke French in the family there, but only when there

were staff in the room. He brought the *Monsieur* along to Bari, as vain as he was, that powerful Giuseppe, the former king of the island, and discreetly introduced it. Those cocottes loved it, of course, a constant twitter of *Monsieurs* sighed its way around Bari and the old fisher of women enjoyed it. I hardly speak a word of French but I do speak German, with a Viennese twang. And Italian of course. *Tempi passati*. People despise Italian here, understandably enough, but it's a shame. My husband the professor speaks eight languages. Let me count them up for you, Nurse Blatnik: Latin, Greek, Italian, German, Russian, French, medical English and a dash of Slovenian. He forgets who he is. But he still speaks his languages. The brain's a curious thing, the old brain even more so, cuts all sorts of capers. Once it grew, then it shrinks and you know nothing any more. Life is a circle anyway, isn't it? Now I've ended up where I started, oh no, much further down. It's a crying shame, that's what it is. The room may be spacious, with a view of the garden, the karst in the distance. They told me that right away: *the karst in the distance*. Your director, Nurse Blanka, your director gave me a meaningful look through his glasses, the ones with the plain glass that he wears to look important, my youngest had a pair the same, thought they made him look more serious. An ambiguous hint from the director, that was, to see what side I'm on. The karst was partisan country, that was where they hid out, your grandfather too, girl – if he was fighting on the right side. Of course, everyone knows there are a few skeletons left in the karst ravines, perhaps more than a few. Big ideas call for big sacrifices, we all know that. Just think of Franc Kavs from Čezsoča. Did they tell you about him at school? They must have done. A twenty-five-year-old who could have turned the world on its head. A great example for debating moral issues, you understand? In 1938 Mussolini visited Kobarid, you know Kobarid don't you, a little village, it was to be the place where the dictator met his death, Kavs had decided, a place steeped in history, think of the Italians' shameful defeat in the First World War. And then – kaboom! – Mussolini torn to shreds right there of all places. Kavs prepared the assassination precisely, planning to blow himself and Mussolini up with a dynamite belt, at the narrowest point in the village where the Duce would be trapped. And what happens? The boy changes his mind at the last second. Not to save his own life, oh no; because he realizes there would be innocent victims, roadside spectators, curious villagers, marvelling children. So, no dead Mussolini. But would history have taken a different course if Franc Kavs had carried out his genius plan? Would it not have been better to sacrifice himself and a few unfortunate bystanders and rescued millions of other people's lives? Think of the Africans who would have been saved! Without

Mussolini, no Italian imperialism! Sacrifices have to be made, at times. Don't look like that, girl, as if you could hear. I mean, they were fascists back then in the karst! USTASHA! The partisans wiped out fascists, not upstanding folk. They rescued Europe! It was just after the war, for God's sake. Different times.

The director pretended to be enticing me with the view of the karst, enchanting panorama, impressive, unique; but I didn't have a choice. They shunted me off, that's what they did. SHUNTED ME OFF! Excuse me for shouting, but it doesn't bother you anyway, you're just right for me. I'll be doing plenty more shouting. Are you actually deaf, Branka, I mean Nurse Blatnik – oh, what does it matter – or just hard of hearing? Can you hear ANYTHING? I'll have to ask Mila when she comes, if she comes, but she'll come alright. Knows everything, that one does. Never says a word but knows everything. Not the cleverest of my daughters-in-law. Or... maybe she's cleverer than people think. Except we'll never find out. She never says anything, pretty naïve, always has been. She didn't even notice back then that we set her up with our son. Oh yes, girl, that marriage too was contrived by us, or rather: by me. Greco needed a compliant wife, one who let him get away with anything. He showed her what was what from the very first day, took off his wedding ring after the ceremony and asked: *And what do I do with this?* Tied it to the mirror of the caravan he built himself, a proper mobile home in the garden. Mila must have been horrified. I felt his restlessness, always in search of something, always in motion; he wanted to live, live, live. And love, love, love; he met a lot of beautiful women, he takes after his grandfather, although he had a soft spot for upper-class women, unlike his grandfather – goodness me, what common taste old Giuseppe had. Sometimes I think Greco felt his illness setting in even as a young man, at twenty, twenty-two, as a student. He must have sensed something, he studied medicine after all. It started with dizziness, he told me: *Dancing makes me dizzy*. He stopped dancing before he was even married; he tried it once more, the wedding dance with Mila, he swayed so hard she had to prop him up, shocking and embarrassing, people thought he was drunk; we should have noticed something but who thinks of something like that?! He was already in a wheelchair at my youngest's funeral, imagine that, at the age of thirty-five. Mila thinks we pulled one over on her, thinks we knew he was ill and that's why we persuaded him to marry her, a nurse for life, but that's all in her head, poor thing. She never got to cry because he was the sick one and she was healthy. She didn't know he had other women and I kept it to myself, as you can imagine. A mother has to protect her son. Now Mila's the strong one and he's lying as she feeds him, one spoon at a time. A cruel disease. The gods' revenge...

the family curse... we've been punished harshly... You know what, Branka? It's better if I call you by your full name. I'm going to call you Branka Blatnik now, because you deserve respect. No one jabs as well as you do.