

IT WAS A BRIGHT TUESDAY MORNING in the spring of 1962. Dr. Zublinka had no classes on Tuesdays and, though it was only eight o'clock, he already sat at his desk by the window overlooking the river with its baroque bridge and the early traffic on the quayside lined with dusty lindens. Old Bestiary Bridge was so called owing to its five pairs of chimerical statues, one pair every six feet: basilisks, unicorns, sphinxes, centaurs, and griffins.

Zublinka was terrifically pleased with his distinguished new address at the House of the Two Queens. Number Six was a suite of three large rooms plus a kitchen, all with twelve-foot ceilings and plaster cornices. A fanciful story was told in the neighborhood about the two disguised queens who had given the building its name by meeting there under dramatic circumstances in the middle of the eighteenth century. Zublinka thought it more probable that the name derived from the double curved gables that projected from the fourth floor. They looked like a pair of omegas.

Zublinka had moved in on Saturday and spent all of Sunday setting the place up to suit his taste. As he had to be at the University until late on Monday, this was his first opportunity to appreciate his new lair. The last tenant had been a friend of his, the historian Weiler, an expert on the Reformation. That winter, after a bitter fight with the University Rector, Weiler had been officially retired. He and his wife continued living in the city for several months, but both of them had become disgusted with their suddenly empty life and yearned to move back to Weiler's native town where their only daughter was living with her husband, an agronomist. When the son-in-law pulled some strings and found them a small villa, the Weilers departed, but not before arranging that Zublinka should get first crack at their apartment. "This place is a hovel, a real hell-hole, and the neighborhood's beneath you," Weiler had rudely declared on his first visit to Zublinka's old digs.

As the day was warm, Zublinka threw open his window letting in the crackle of a tram, the bouncing of wooden carts, and all the noises made by people who are walking purposively to work. The room faced southeast and morning light flooded in as well. The greenish yellow hills across the

river into which the pre-war villas snuggled invisibly were marred by the ash-colored apartment blocks of socialist suburbia.

Before going to bed the previous night Zublinka had recorded the seed of an idea for a new story and he was looking forward to a whole day of trying to make it grow. This would be the first test of the productive qualities of his new environment. Zublinka unscrewed his fountain pen as a knight unsheathes his sword and set to work by examining the scrawled fragments of the night before. There had been two voices, a man's and a woman's, and some amusing event involving a child and a large animal (he had written "dog? tiger? elephant?"). The point of view was to have been the child's, a little girl at once innocent and curious. "Should perhaps be set at a zoo or in a city park," read the final sentence.

Despite the unimpeachable working conditions, the fine weather, the encouragement of the bustling quayside and the inspiration of the river, Zublinka made hardly any progress. The idea began to disintegrate into random words, bits of dialogue, a few surreal images. He was feeling decidedly irritable when, at ten-thirty, a messenger arrived from the offices of *The New Hyperion*.

The editor of this journal was named Krammel, an energetic, ambitious, prematurely bald intellectual. Everyone liked Krammel; he insisted upon it. His ambitiousness was so ingenuous that it was actually part of his charm. He had so much of it that there was a ready supply to bestow on any person to whom he happened to be speaking. This one would surely have a great career, that one was certain to be promoted, while an appointment was already in the works for a third. Krammel dropped names as he must once have his hair, in great clumps. He was quick-witted and apparently well connected too. There were naturally difficulties from time to time with the authorities, but he always came out of these scrapes with his hide unscathed and a witticism on his lips. The only subject on which he was discreet was politics. He had succeeded in making himself into a sort of cultural entrepreneur, the only one in the city if one did not count Karl Borotov. Even the authorities often called on him to arrange exhibitions, tours, and readings, particularly for visiting luminaries with whom he got on exceptionally well.

Zublinka met Krammel at the Café Magus shortly after the latter took on the editorship of the *Hyperion*, and they had hit it off. Krammel asked if Zublinka, whom he already knew by reputation, had anything of a popular

nature, something suitable for a journal like his. After some misgivings, Zublinka submitted the first story by Hansi Szokoll.

Hansi was one of Zublinka's earliest pseudonymous authors, the Old World ancestor of Elvira Bennet. He imagined Hansi as being about his own age; that is, in her late thirties. Well educated, she had a job as an archivist and wrote unconventional stories, mostly about women. It is not surprising that Zublinka conceived Hansi Szokoll as possessing many of the attributes of Marina and Jalena. For example, she had the former's perspicacity and wit without her neuroses, and the latter's sensitivity and heart, but without Jalena's embarrassing penchant for sentimentality.

Krammel had been pleased by the story and described it gleefully as "a little sensational." He was likewise amused by Zublinka's use of a pseudonym. "It's hardly uncommon," he said, "but that's generally for political reasons." Krammel did not fully understand Zublinka's use of pseudonyms. He might have grasped the semi-independent nature of Hansi Szokoll's existence, but he did not inquire about it, and Zublinka saw no reason to force a complicated explanation on him. It was enough for him that Krammel undertook to keep things to himself—"unless it comes to physical torture," he added with a chuckle.

Hansi Szokoll was duly listed among the contributors to *The New Hyperion* as a thirty-eight-year-old archivist living in the capital.

The messenger, a plump young woman whom Zublinka had seen at a typewriter during his one visit to Krammel's office, was perspiring profusely and out of breath from climbing up the two flights of stairs. Had she not been enamored of Krammel, for whom she would do anything, she might well have been angrier with Zublinka.

"Please sit down," he said.

She flopped into a chair and spoke in a harried, breathless whine. "First I went to the University, of course, because as you can see that's the address on the envelope. They told me you wouldn't be in all day and sent me to your old address and that's where I found out you'd moved. Heaven only knows where the Chief thinks I've gotten to."

"You call him Chief?"

The woman blushed. "Of course," she said.

Zublinka offered her a cup of tea.

"Couldn't think of it," she exclaimed, already back on her feet. "The

Chief said not to wait for an answer. I've got to get back right away. You've no idea how much there is to be done!"

Zublinka waited to be sure that she made it down the stairs safely before opening the envelope. It contained a scribbled note from Krammel and a letter that was a specimen of such exemplary handwriting it reminded Zublinka of his grammar school teacher, the punctilious though rather hard-of-hearing Mrs. Sturmzi.

In his short note Krammel said that the enclosed letter had been received by the *Hyperion* but obviously belonged to Zublinka, who was free to do whatever he liked about it. To Zublinka, Krammel's unaccustomed brevity expressed amusement. The letter itself was addressed to Hansi Szokoll in care of *The New Hyperion*; but the strange thing was that it was also signed by Hansi Szokoll—Hansi Szokoll Baumfeld, to be precise.

The short story that occasioned Mrs. Baumfeld's letter owed its existence to Zublinka's habit of solitary bicycling on weekends. The exercise did him good, but he also accomplished a great deal of thinking while laboring up and down the country roads outside the city. On one such ride the previous October he had been nearly run down by a small automobile driven by a woman. Zublinka was able to stay upright and the woman did not stop to see if she had killed him. He had a glimpse of her profile, which struck him as both determined and distracted, in the awful distended moment when she was abreast of him, a matter of mere inches from his left pedal. As he continued his ride Zublinka began to embroider and imagine, especially about the woman, and by the time he arrived home he had formulated the outline of "The Accident."

The story is presented from the point of view of Frieda, a woman who is married but not with perfect satisfaction. As the story opens she is arguing with her husband, a prosperous railway official. They have gone to spend a weekend at their country house, to which the husband has invited a young colleague and his attractive wife. Frieda half ironically accuses her husband of flirting with the young woman. Ignoring her irony, the husband takes umbrage. He retorts with complaints of his own, not only about Frieda's possessiveness and costly tastes, but also more tellingly—because Frieda is actually not at all possessive and not particularly extravagant—about the way she spoils their four-year-old son. One word leads to another. Frieda rushes out of the house and, without any clear intention, takes the car.

As she careens down a narrow country road, furious at her husband and cursing her marriage, Frieda sideswipes a lone cyclist. The man, a bank employee in his early thirties, is knocked off his bike and tumbles into a ditch. Frieda jams on the brakes, horrified by what she has done.

At first the cyclist is unable to respond to her frantic questions because the breath has been knocked out of him in his fall. Frieda is in a panic and runs down into the ditch. But the cyclist soon recovers and is quite charming about everything. He has received some fairly serious abrasions on his leg, but seems otherwise uninjured. His bicycle, on the other hand, has been twisted like a pretzel.

Frieda insists that he get into her car and allow her to drive him to a clinic, or at least to his home in the city. She herself lifts the bike into the back seat. In the car, the cyclist continues to be gallant and, as they talk, Frieda is overcome by an unprecedented and alarming impulse.

The man confesses to feeling a little dizzy from delayed shock, and Frieda pulls up at an inn. Her only moment of hesitation comes as she is confronted with the registration book and a pen—an old-fashioned one that has to be dipped into an inkwell—but she masters herself and signs them in under the names of her house guests.

They do not bother with the dinner offered by the innkeeper but go straight up to their room, which is spacious and features a large feather bed. Frieda begs the man not to tell her his name and he readily agrees. She then asks him to undress and tenderly bathes his wounds.

The following morning, Frieda drives the man, who has enough understanding not to ask to see her again or even her name, back into the city and then returns to her country house where she arrives just after lunch. She is wildly happy to see her little boy and embraces him so excessively that he begins to cry. The guests have departed. Her husband comes into the living room looking wretched just as the child bursts into tears. He too is moved. His face expresses worry and contrition. “Frieda,” he begins, but she interrupts him. “Don’t worry, dear. Everything’s all right now.”

Zublinka’s original idea had amounted to little more than an erotic fantasy about the woman with the intent profile who had nearly run him down. However, when he began to consider the story as Hansi would conceive it, its theme changed, and so did the nature of the fantasy. No doubt only the perverse goblin of contradiction could be behind the notion of a marriage rescued by infidelity.

Zublinka realized two things at once about Mrs. Baumfeld's letter. First, he saw that he had assumed a certain responsibility due to his choice of a pseudonym which, innocent in itself, had unpleasant consequences for a real woman; second, that this woman's letter was itself a text of some complexity.

Dear Miss Szokoll:

I hardly know why I am writing this letter. Let me begin by simply telling you what has happened to me since the publication of your story "The Accident."

For better or worse, a colleague of my husband's is a subscriber to *The New Hyperion*. Upon reading your story, he gave the issue to my husband. With your imaginative abilities you will be able to picture how my husband's suspicions could be aroused by such a story signed with his wife's own name. He has accused me of being its author and has all but suggested I took its plot from personal experience.

What is nearly as distressing is that a local official has been to visit me privately. Perhaps he did so at the suggestion of my husband, I don't know. This official has discreetly put it to me that *my* story could be seen as conveying a veiled subversive message, that people might interpret it as suggesting seduction by non-official sources of power (the cyclist, presumably) could be liberating. In short, he said that the story appeared counter-revolutionary as well as being morally repugnant. I believe he called it "a piece of bourgeois self-indulgence." He wished me to know that, while no action would be taken against me at the present time, I should be careful in the future. As I said, it is possible he was put up to this by my husband, who is himself a government official and could easily have arranged such a charade. Of course I vehemently denied writing the story, but I do not feel assured that my husband believes me, or the official either.

To be fair, not every consequence of our common name has been so dire. Copies of the story have circulated among many women I know and, like my husband, several have assumed me

to be its author. Most merely laugh at my denials. You will be gratified, I suspect, to learn that they all loved "The Accident." They understand it because, evidently, you have understood them. I have been congratulated by many of these women who labor under the same misunderstanding as my husband.

I do not know exactly what it is I want of you, but frankly writing this letter has been a relief to me. Despite the trouble it has caused me, I too liked your story very much and, perhaps owing to the coincidence of our names, feel an affinity for its true author. Perhaps we are even related.

Sincerely yours,
Hansi Szokoll Baumfeld (Mrs.)

Zublinka did not have only a single response to this letter, nor during the following days did his feelings about it develop logically or progressively, as from amusement to hysteria, say, or curiosity to obsession. As early as Tuesday evening he wondered whether the letter might be a practical joke of Krammel's. On Wednesday afternoon he felt oppressed by a sense of having done a serious wrong to another human being—quite a decent one too, judging by her diction and handwriting. On Thursday night he was defending himself with the reflection that Mrs. Baumfeld's relations to her spouse had to have been strained well before he read "The Accident." He also wondered just how high an official Mr. Baumfeld might be and in what ministry, since he was capable of issuing orders to organs of the secret police. Quite naturally, Zublinka was anxious about whether he had anything to fear from the willfully absurd hermeneutics of State Security.

When he ran into Krammel at a concert on Friday night Zublinka watched him closely for the tiniest smirk or telltale allusion, but there was nothing of the sort. Krammel jovially chided Zublinka for giving his secretary the run-around then begged for the name of anyone who could produce a straightforward essay on Structuralism in three thousand words or less.

It was on Saturday morning that Zublinka, more out of idleness than deliberation, finally decided to draft a reply to Hansi Baumfeld's letter.

This decision necessitated a few others. Should he respond as Zublinka or Hansi Szokoll? Should he compose the sort of letter the woman could

triumphantly present to her husband or something more intimate? He pulled out Mrs. Baumfeld's letter and examined it once again. Just as he did on his first reading, he felt that there was something in it that called for a more than matter-of-fact reply, should there be one. Nothing simpler than for her to have requested an exculpatory document, duly notarized, if that was what she really wanted. Her letter certainly made no secret of her distress, but its conclusion suggested something quite different, namely the affinity Mrs. Baumfeld felt for the author of "The Accident."

"Well, in for a penny, in for a pound," thought Zublinka and resolved to answer as Hansi who was and always would be the true author of the story. The reply he drafted was apologetic and circumspect, but he also tried to convey a certain solidarity with Mrs. Baumfeld.

It may be true that we are related, as you suggest, though more by temperament than by blood, I think.

Zublinka had some fun with the notion that "The Accident" could be "a piece of bourgeois self-indulgence" or a case of political encrytion.

But there is another kind of politics, not, I would say, readily recognized by male police officials, and possibly my story is guilty of touching on a few of its issues.

He closed by thanking Mrs. Baumfeld for her letter, which he—or rather Hansi Szokoll—chose to take as an encouragement to continue writing. He would have enjoyed adding some well chosen words about her husband and a few more in praise of her handwriting, but checked himself.

Zublinka typed up the letter and copied the return address from Mrs. Baumfeld's envelope onto his own. The whole process was nearly effortless; but, like Frieda, he had a moment's hesitation over signing an alias. It made him feel queasy.

A week after posting this letter, Zublinka found in his mail slot at the University a message informing him that the editor of *The New Hyperion* had called to say that he had received another letter for him, but could hardly be expected to spare his secretary this time. The call had been taken by the chairman of Zublinka's department; for it was one of his perquisites that he had the only office fitted with a telephone. Of course, the poor fellow loathed them.

Zublinka stopped by the office of the *Hyperion* on the way home. Though Krammel himself was not there, his secretary, more frazzled than ever, was. It took her five full minutes of hectic searching to locate Zublinka's letter in the welter of paper atop her chief's desk and three bookcases.

This time the letter was quite brief. Hansi Baumfeld asked for a meeting or, more precisely, announced one.

I will be in the lounge at East Station at one o'clock next Tuesday.
I am very hopeful of meeting you there. If this should be impossible, please do not disturb yourself. I shall be wearing a white dress and a broad-brimmed hat.

The note was signed, "Very much yours, the other Hansi Szokoll."

Zublinka did not fail to take note of the absence of Hansi's married name.

So many incidents in life are due to timing. Had the day appointed not been Tuesday, Zublinka would probably not have shown up. Even as it was, he had no shortage of misgivings and three full days to mull them over. Would it all turn out a joke, with either some middle-aged housewife or Krammel holding their sides? Would he be disbelieved by one Hansi on the lookout for another? Could it be said he was acting out of any respectable motive at all if he showed up, or failed to do so? Had he only compounded his original imposture, an unintentional crime, by answering Mrs. Baumfeld's letter, encouraging who knows what sympathies or indignation?

Nevertheless, he went on Tuesday. He even dressed up for the occasion to the extent of putting on his one blue suit—the lecture suit, as he called it.

An Aristotelian observer of the situation would point out that Zublinka's having no classes on Tuesdays might be the necessary condition, but was not sufficient in itself to get him to East Station at one o'clock in his lecture suit. In fact, by that morning he also had ethical and aesthetic motives. Ethically, Zublinka felt bound to reveal himself, not in general, but to Hansi Baumfeld, as she was the only person whom his concealment could be said to have injured and the sole individual to whom it might actually matter. To reveal himself to her would also be to take his punishment which, in her case, he had surely merited. The invention of Hansi Szokoll was an aesthetic concealment through and through, and ethically it could

not be justified. Now he would pay the piper. But here too the spirit of contradiction held sway; for Zublinka, even while making amends for his aesthetic concealment, would also be satisfying an aesthetic interest; that is, his curiosity about the lady with the coincidental name and the perfect handwriting. Whose motives are unmixed?

East Station was the least used of the city's three terminals. It was not a busy place at one o'clock on any weekday, though because Tuesday turned out to be rainy, a handful of porters and proprietors of pushcarts who would normally be out on the street on a spring day had taken refuge inside. Even so, the station was strangely quiet. It had the look of a temple already abandoned and about to fall into ruins. Scores of black flies, also not eager to be rained on, flitted aimlessly about the dim and cavernous waiting room.

Zublinka took off his raincoat and hat as soon as he came through the heavy outer door, ignoring the half-hearted gestures of a couple of porters. The big railway clock near the ceiling indicated one o'clock precisely. Zublinka used to say that in his case punctuality was more a vice than a virtue.

He headed straight for the glassed-in restaurant that took up half of one side of the terminal, supposing it must be what Mrs. Baumfeld had meant by the lounge. He half expected to see Krammel and his adoring secretary curled up in a booth, waiting to greet him with mockery and a bottle of domestic champagne.

Zublinka did not go into the restaurant. It was unnecessary, as he could see without doing so that among the few patrons was no Krammel, but also no lady dressed in any shade of white or wearing a hat with a brim of any appreciable breadth. Puzzled, he decided his best course would be to wait five minutes or so and, to avoid committing himself and having to cope with a waiter, to sit out in the waiting room rather than the restaurant. He bought a newspaper and took a seat on a bench commanding a clear view.

At five past the hour a bored voice crackled through the loudspeaker announcing the arrival of the twelve fifty-five from Kitternitz. Zublinka soon heard the noise of the train and fixed his eye on the arch separating the waiting area from the tracks. About a dozen passengers straggled in. Among the very first, looking frustrated and walking rapidly, was a woman of about thirty-five in a long white dress and the sort of hat he had

imagined was worn only on the Côte d'Azur. She was not in the least overweight.

Zublinka was amused to see that the woman stopped just outside the restaurant and looked over the customers, just as he had. He sighed, laid down his newspaper, and got on his feet. As he approached her, she looked up at the clock.

"Mrs. Baumfeld?"

Zublinka had more than once observed that certain women, particularly those who because of their clothes, make-up, and good looks would normally be intimidating, appear to their best advantage when surprised. Perhaps this was because Zublinka was gallant enough to be made tender by any vision of feminine vulnerability or because of the subtraction of his own timidity. Whatever the reason, Mrs. Baumfeld struck him in that instant when her neck was still stretched upward but her face had bent toward him with wide eyes as a handsome woman.

She did not say a word; her surprise seemed to turn into something like fright. For a second Zublinka considered pretending that he had been sent by Hansi Szokoll to apologize for her inability to keep the appointment and thereby put an end to the awkward situation on the spot.

"It's you?" Her voice was rather deep.

"I'm afraid so. Yes."

It is difficult to say how much of what happened next may have influenced subsequent events. Mrs. Baumfeld took a step backwards, staggered, and Zublinka, dropping his raincoat and hat, caught her by the elbow. He released her at once and bent down.

"But why?" she asked, as Zublinka rose from retrieving his coat and hat.

"Why did I choose your name? I hope you will believe me when I say that I did not choose your name. It was," Zublinka paused over his unintended and misplaced pun, "purely an accident."

She blushed and shook her head. "No. Why did you sign your letter that way?"

Zublinka looked penitently in the direction of his shoes. "Perhaps that was a mistake." He looked up and smiled. "But it was to Hansi you wrote."

The woman frowned. "Sophistry. I wrote to the author of the story."

"But the author *is* Hansi."

She raised an eyebrow. "Then—?"

“Well, and I suppose I am the author as well. I held the pen. What can I say? I am here to apologize to you in person. To try to explain. Are you at all hungry?”

As Mrs. Baumfeld did admit to an appetite, Zublinka, relieved to have changed the subject so easily, suggested a restaurant with better fare than the terminal.

“But it’s raining.”

“I know a fairly good place hardly a block away.”

With a quick glance around the almost empty station, Mrs. Baumfeld agreed.

Over schnitzel and beer Zublinka exerted himself to explain his relation to Hansi Szokoll.

Mrs. Baumfeld listened to him with the same wide-eyed look he had admired at the station. To his surprise, she did not pose a single question, though one or two might have helped.

“Are you done?” she asked when he had exhausted himself.

“Yes.”

“It’s astonishing, really; the story is so much a *woman’s*. I wouldn’t have thought a man—”

“But why not?”

“I *felt* for Frieda.”

Zublinka could not help smiling. His authorial vanity was gratified, notwithstanding all he had just said about who was the true author of “The Accident.”

Once again, Mrs. Baumfeld looked about nervously.

“But surely you are happier in your marriage than Frieda?”

“That’s just it,” she said with sudden passion. Her eyes, still wide, grew bright. “I believed I was.”

“But the story is about how a marriage is saved.”

She laughed but, despite her retort, not at all bitterly. On the contrary, she seemed to have suddenly become light-hearted. “So *that’s* what you think it means? There you show yourself to be a man after all. Perhaps I understand Hansi better than you do!”

Zublinka was about to reply when she leaned toward him and whispered, “You haven’t told me *your* name. No, please don’t.” He was dumbfounded. She had put her hand on his.

The hotel Zublinka chose was not so romantic as a country inn; he lacked any visible abrasions, and they did not stay the night but only a few hours. Nevertheless, after refusing an early supper, Mrs. Baumfeld boarded the evening train for Kitternitz and, keeping her thoughts to herself, returned to her family.