



We Who Decide
Henry Johnston

1 Arrival

Last night I dreamt my old maths tutor, Frau Sonke, scraped her crimson fingernails across the blackboard as a prelude to a smack with a cane across my knuckles. I woke from a tipsy sleep and hurled the feather pillow onto the cabin floor. Then, touching knees to chin, I slipped into a fitful doze on a fearful sea.

The crisp air of the Great Australian Bight had changed during the evening's champagne, dancing and inconclusive chess tournament. But now, enveloped in a humid fug, I play an unsettling game of 'What if?'

An orange glow fills the cabin's porthole, framing a perfect circle around the sun rising from the Tasman Sea. A toneless scrape reminds me of the opening bars of Strauss's *Einleitung, oder Sonnenaufgang*¹ performed by the Vienna Court Opera. I whisper, 'Speak English', though still it ties my tongue. Stylised handshakes and exaggerated eye rolls, à la Josephine Baker, grant me a moment to find the correct word. Men seem to adore these cutesy-tootsie flutters, but women see through my strategy. As for my assistant Leo Hubler, the contradictions of English syntax are difficult, and I scold him whenever he speaks German.

I wash my feet and legs beneath a tepid trickle of brackish water in the cramped shower recess and splash the last of my *Kölnisch Wasse*² across my torso and neck.

The breakfast xylophone chimes a greeting to the hungry. Coffee and dry crackers, a slice of fruit, a boiled egg perhaps, but thoughts of food set the stomach butterflies aflutter. No matter.

¹ Also *Sprach Zarathustra*

² cologne

The liner is due to dock by six this evening and by then someone or something will dislodge my fear of the unknown.

A stroll might settle nerves, but my fellow travellers have snared vantage points on the railings and stare westward at the haze-shrouded horizon. In the Port of Fremantle, my mental images of Australia proved unrealistic, but, with journey's end imminent, the terrors that prompted my flight from Europe roil as pixilated pictures. The dazzling Australian sky seems to drain the colour from my memories.

Leo knocks a rapid coded triplet.

'It's open.'

*'Weißt du, was zum Teufel dieses Summen ist?'*³

'English, Leo! How many times must I tell you, and no, I don't know what this buzz is, but it's driving me insane!'

'I thought deaf I am going,' Leo says.

'I am going deaf,' I reply, emphasising each word.

'Pardon?'

'Never mind, I'll ask someone. There's bound to be an answer.'

Leo's presence is reassuring, but my recollection of our final tense meeting in Papa's office to plan our escape is indistinct. And though today marks the climax of events which brought us to this point of latitude and longitude, I realise I cannot recall the features of my father's face.

A needle-sharp sun prickles the back of my neck. I return to the cabin for my pillbox hat, scarf and sunglasses before walking to the dining compartment. Waiters preen. I tap twice on the white linen tablecloth for a double measure of black coffee. Leo piles cheese and smoked meat atop two hot bread rolls. I crumble a dried cracker and mix the debris into yellow yolk. A pinch of pepper, a touch of Tabasco and a tap for more hot black coffee signals the magnitude of my hangover.

A purser pushes back two heavy swing doors.

'Good morning, Miss Lieder.'

³ Do you know what the hell this buzz is?

‘Excuse me, Herr Purser. May we speak?’

Leo excuses himself and returns to the buffet table for more delicacies.

‘Call me John.’

‘Thank you, John – and you may call me Susan. Can you tell me please the cause of the hum which fills the air above our ship?’

John sits opposite and calls for tea.

‘You’ll get used to it and after a while you won’t notice them,’ he says, counting three spoons of sugar into the hot, black liquid.

‘Them? Who are they, please?’

‘Cicadas.’

I decline his offer of an unfiltered cigarette and rummage for the word *s’cardas*, but all I can manage is a vague recollection of a similar tone I heard during a summer holiday in the Greek village Faros, on Ikaria.

‘Insects, Miss Lieder.’ John ashes into a clean tray and blows at the steam coiling from the sweetened beverage. ‘Like grasshoppers, but different. You must have them in Europe. The noise tapers off as the sun gets higher, but these buggers are Green Grocers, the loudest insect on earth. There are hundreds of species. Let me think.’ He counts on his fingers. ‘There’s the Brown Baker and the Cherry Nose, the Yellow Monday and the Red Eye, the Whisky Drinker and the Double Drummer and the Black Prince, and lots more.’

‘But to hear the sound this far out to sea!’

‘We are closer to the shore than it appears. The heat haze makes the land seem a long way off, but we are making good time and scheduled to sail through the Heads about noon or one o’clock.’

‘I’d better go. Might see you at lunch,’ John says and, after a slurp of tea and leaving behind the ground-out remnants of a cigarette stub, he disappears back behind the swinging doors.

‘So?’ Leo asks between bites of poached egg and cornichon.

‘Zikaden. Millionen von ihnen.’⁴

‘Oh, Ich verstehe.’⁵ Leo throws the stub of the uneaten pickle onto his plate.

‘I have no appetite after this news,’ he says, leaning the chair backward onto its rear two legs.

‘All will be well, Leo. Trust me. We have discussed this a hundred times. Ashton Frost is meeting us, and we stay with him until my contract begins. He is bound to have a post for you. When I am settled, we will work together and continue as though nothing happened.’

But despite a welter of correspondence, and during my London meeting, I didn’t mention a personal assistant. And while Ashton Frost lobbied contacts in Australia House to smooth the way for my engagement, other than outbound travel documents, I did not arrange similar for Leo. Instead, I passed three excruciating hours with the forger Wolfson in an upstairs garret of a shop in Stamford Hill. Papa warned me of his Roman hands and Russian fingers but forgot to mention his overpowering halitosis. Nevertheless, I paid him a fortune for my new birth certificate, citing my surname as *Lieder*. Wolfson settled on Gibraltar as my British Overseas Territories locale of birth and used church records for the date and the name of the priest who sanctified my baptism. Leo’s Czech identity papers were also flawless, or so it seemed.

‘Be calm, dear Leo.’

A pilot comes aboard, as a fleet of working vessels pass close by. Vertical smoke plumes attest a hot, windless morning.

Stern-faced porters clatter about the decks preparing for docking. All vestiges of familiarity nurtured during the six-week voyage vanish. Apart from families, those not affiliated with the ship experience emotions from excitement to loneliness.

The buzzing disguises the sound of waves crashing against

⁴ Cicadas. Millions of them.

⁵ Oh, I see.

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