

Sybil Volks
1 Torstrasse
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Heaven on Tick

“Opening Today!” proclaims the hoarding underneath the store’s giant logo, JONASS & CO. The wind plays with the colourful little pennants hanging from the roof. The constant clatter of construction noise that’s been ringing out across the busy junction until just

recently has finally ceased and given way to a low murmurating emanating from behind the department store’s closed shutters.

In the majestic entrance hall tradesmen, decorators and shopgirls dash about on last-minute errands while the owners glide between them somewhat more sedately. Heinrich Grünberg ushers porters laden with boxes and crates through the hall – *the lamps go in this corner; no, not next to the watches for heaven’s sake! – and put the leather goods on the tables in the side wing to the right, please!* He’s busy helping to set up an exhibition stand when a journalist makes a beeline for him, a photographer in his wake. Grünberg swipes the dust from his hands on his trouserlegs before welcoming the press. “You’re too early, gentlemen. Could you come back this evening please?” He flags down a woman in a grey suit: “Frau Kurz, please add these gentlemen’s names to tonight’s guest list.”

At the centre of the hall, Alice Grünberg inspects the podium laden with porcelain and crystal glasses from every angle. She takes a napkin from the hand of a girl with flushed cheeks, folds it into a fan with a few swift, practiced movements and places it on a plate. *There! Much better!* Behind his mother’s back, Harry Grünberg blows the girl a kiss, and her cheeks turn even redder. Harry strolls across the hall, whistling as he goes, and pauses at the corner where the musicians are tuning their instruments. He runs his fingers over the neck of a tuba and is about to lift it to his lips when his father comes running up to him, yelling above the noise: “Off with you! Go on, up to the roof terrace! That’s where the action is!”

Harry winks at the startled tuba player and strolls over to the fridges that have been set up especially for the occasion. Beaming at a young woman wearing a salesgirl’s cap, he takes the bottle out of her hands. “Here, Elsie”, he says as he pops the cork, “They’re all running around daft! Leave them to it!” He fills two glasses to the brim, pulls Elsie behind a pillar and offers her one. He clinks glasses with her, but when he next speaks his voice has lost its confident edge and betrays a tremble that could signal anticipation or anxiety. “Will Vicky be coming too?” he asks.

The monumental building dominates the skyline. As Vicky approaches the Lothringerstrasse junction, she can see its unmistakable silhouette from afar. The Jonass department store is opening today – a warm, windy day in June. The store will be her new workplace; this walk will be her daily walk to the office. It was decent of Herr Grünberg not to sack her – a young stenotypist expecting a child with no man to her name – especially considering Berlin’s unemployment crisis. She’d watched the building grow over the past months, stone by stone and floor by floor, reaching up behind the protective scaffolding amid the clamour and bustle of workmen and machinery. Dropped ceilings, plumbing and wiring were laid like blood vessels within the steel skeleton. And while the building grew, something was growing inside her too – flesh and blood, sinews, tendons and nerves around tiny bones.

Vicky has been looking forward to this day for weeks – the day the Jonass would come alive, the day she'd see Harry again. But her excitement is tinged with worry. *Maybe they won't let me in; maybe I won't meet him after all.* Leaning against the wall of the Nikolai cemetery across from the brand new store, she runs a hand across her swollen belly. Blackbirds are singing in the trees above the gravestones. *Don't give up now, girl, she whispers, you're needed today.* She'd managed to convince Herr Grünberg to allow her to help with the opening ceremony. He was reluctant at first, given her condition. "But Herr Grünberg", she said, "I feel fine and I really want to be there for the opening! I *have* to be there..." She beamed at him as if her life depended on it – and so it did. She had to be at Harry's side tonight. But she couldn't tell Herr Grünberg – of all people – why. He would have slammed the door in her face. The door to the new store, to her workplace, to Harry's family... to Harry.

Cars, bicycles and pedestrians pile up on the junction outside the storefront. Crowds of curious onlookers are gathering to witness the opening of Berlin's first credit store, milling around in front of the main entrance. Such a magnificent building is sure to be packed floor to ceiling with treasures, and everyone wants to be the first to see them. There's supposed to be tombola too, and a buffet and music, and a fireworks display after dark! At last Vicky reaches the square in front of the store and makes her way through the excited throng to the staff entrance. She takes the employee elevator up to the management floor where Herr Grünberg will show her to her workplace. Perhaps she'll meet Harry there. The latticed lift gate clangs shut and the cabin jerks her upwards. The child in her belly jumps at the motion and so does her stomach. A wave of nausea sweeps over her. She'll need to pull herself together in Grünberg's presence; she mustn't give herself and Harry away.

Harry is the firm's junior manager and Vicky is just a low-grade clerical employee. In public, he speaks to her using the formal address – *Sie*, never *du*. But when she hears his voice in the corridor or recognizes the sound of his footsteps, her heart skips a beat. And when he looks at her with those lovely grey eyes or she hears his mocking yet affectionate laugh, it hammers so loudly in her chest that she's sure everyone can hear it. It's a miracle Herr Grünberg hasn't smelled a rat long ago, although it's probably inconceivable to him that his son, who hasn't even come of age himself, is already about to be a father.

The lift stops with another jolt, the gate slides open and Gerd Helbig, the floor manager, stumbles in. Vicky and Helbig eye each other, then his gaze fixes on her belly, beads of sweat forming on his brow. Vicky feels the child kicking inside her. "What are you looking so shocked about?" she says, "it's not as if you're the father."

Helbig blushes a deep crimson. The lift shudders to a halt, the gate opens, and they hurry off in opposite directions.

Vicky hesitates for a moment in front of the door to the manager's office, listening for Harry's voice.

"Fräulein Springer!" a shrill voice calls behind her, "Come to the kitchen with me immediately."

Frau Kurz, the personnel manager, thoroughly disapproved of Grünberg's decision to keep Vicky on in the store. She was also against the idea of her helping with the opening festivities, but now that she's here, she may as well pitch in properly. In the kitchen, Vicky grabs a tray laden with canapés and shoves one spread with egg into her mouth right under Frau Kurz's eyes.

“You’ve forgotten your schedule!” she yells, but Vicky is already on her way out of the kitchen; she has a schedule of her own.

As she nears the central concourse, she hears the babble of voices. The main doors have been opened and the crowds let in. In couples and groups, they gaze at the displays and the counters overflowing with objects of desire. There is a banquet table decked with festive porcelain in a filigreed rose motif, Bohemian crystal and glass grapes. A uniformed page stands to attention at each corner of the table, watching over the treasures. Working class families and the unemployed from the Barn Quarter make a bee-line for the sales area, converging on flat-irons and electric trains, cloche hats and French wines. All the things which have become less and less accessible to them in recent years will be available on easy credit terms from tomorrow. You could take them home for a quarter down and pay the rest on tick. The Jonass department store would become Eastern Germany’s leading credit store.

Heinrich Grünberg, master over this realm, is giving a speech. His wife Alice is standing next to him, looking fragile on his arm, and yet so stern. Would she ever accept someone like Vicky as a daughter-in-law? Loudspeakers broadcast Grünberg’s speech to all corners of the store and his last words are drowned in applause. Already the crowd is homing in on the trays bearing the glasses and the delicious snacks.

The bite-sized treats appear even smaller in the huge hand that’s being extended hesitantly towards Vicky – a callused hand, accustomed to hard work. She looks up into the shy face of a man who has come still dressed in his carpenter’s overalls. He must be one of the builders – a select few were invited. Like Vicky, he has watched the building grow over the past months, indeed he must have been involved in helping that process along. His gaze wanders from the ham rolls and the little cubes of cheese garnished with grapes to the curve of her belly under the apron, and he shoots her a quick smile as if he knew she could use all the encouragement she can get. They’ve never met before, yet that smile seems to suggest he knows a thing or two about her, or at least about the ways of the world, though he can’t be much older than her. She grins back and holds out her tray to him again.

Soon afterwards, when all the rolls and grapes have been polished off and Vicky has stacked her tray with the others on the waiting pile, Elsie turns up. Her blonde curls frame her face like a halo, lending her a deceptive air of innocence that’s taken in more than one man in its time. “Frau Kurz says we’re to go to the tombola and play at being good luck fairies,” she tells Vicky with a conspiratorial grin. “But modern good luck fairies are fully paid-up members of the Fairy Union, aren’t they? That means they deserve a proper break before they head off back to heaven.” She pulls Vicky towards the lift. “Let’s go right to the top!”

The ascending lift brings back Vicky’s nausea. Will the view from up there really be as intoxicating as Harry said it was? Vicky and Elsie stand at the rooftop terrace balustrade, their arms around each others’ shoulders, looking out across the roofs of the endless city. The afternoon sunlight glances off the cupola of the cathedral’s dome, reflects from the windows of the glass facades on Alexanderplatz and bathes the construction cranes and church spires in a golden glaze.

“Am I giddy with height or happiness, I wonder?” Elsie says, gazing into the distance. Vicky doesn’t reply. She hasn’t exchanged a single word with Harry all afternoon; she hasn’t even managed to get near him.

A few hours later, with dusk already beginning to creep in, Vicky is up at the rooftop terrace restaurant arranging flowers in vases. The tables for the invited guests are draped with white damask tablecloths and set with silver cutlery. The glass doors that give out onto the terrace are standing open. The low murmur of conversation blends into the background music of the dance band as it plays a waltz. Vicky is lighting the candles when the music switches to a ragtime beat, and as the trumpet plays a drawn-out note, the match drops from her hand; she freezes, watching its burning tip etch a black hole into the white tablecloth.

The evening sky has turned crimson. She walks among the guests, smiling as she hands out glasses, although she's beginning to feel the weight of the tray. And then the first bars of a song catch her unawares – Harry's favourite! Vicky's heart skips a beat, she feels it tripping itself up to follow the rhythm of the music they danced to that first time. The shimmy shook you right through from head to toe, and the name of the dance became her nickname for Harry whenever they were alone. The catchy tune, the daft lyrics – *Yes, We Have No Bananas* of all things! – said so much about his boyish nature. It all started with that first dance, and the shimmying feeling hadn't stopped when the music died away. Where is he? She wants to dance with him now, this very second.

A hand reaches towards her, and it takes her a moment to realize that the man in the smoking jacket is waiting for her to serve him a glass of wine. As she passes it to him with a smile, a searing pain cuts into her lower abdomen. The glass spins from her hand and she sees it fall through the air in slow motion, watches it shatter on the stones of the roof terrace. She turns to walk away, leaving the startled guest standing there, his hand still extended. *Harry. I've got to find him.* That's all she can think of as she gropes her way through the crowd. *I'm dying. Harry. I have to find you.*

In agony, she staggers around for what seems like an eternity, until at last she spots him. He's standing next to his father, who is shaking hands with the mayor, surrounded by people. She looks at him, her gaze filled with dread, yearning and simple need. *I'm dying, Harry. You have to help me.* For a split second their eyes meet, but Harry looks straight through her as though she were a stranger. She turns from him and seeks refuge in the seclusion of the department store's interior.

The clamour of voices and laughter roars in her ears; the odour of food and the perspiration of the massed crowds leaking through the veneer of perfume and cologne bring back the nausea she felt earlier. Vicky retreats further and further into the store's dark and deserted interior. She can hear the music playing upstairs. That's where the action is now. The lower floors are empty, the sales halls locked and patrolled by guards. She can only make out indistinct outlines as she gropes her way along the wall, looking for a bolthole, a secret place, somewhere safe from prying eyes. Every step is such an incredible effort, and then the next wave of agony washes over her...

The next thing she knows, someone slaps her twice. Once on each cheek, back and forth. A hoarse, unfamiliar voice: "Wake up, girl! Wake up!" Smoke stings Vicky's eyes, and when she opens them she finds herself gazing closely into a haggard face clouded in a haze of cigarette smoke. "There's a good girl!" The old woman is ugly, Vicky thinks, but she must be a good witch. Her voice is soothing and the hand that grips her wrist is pleasantly cool to the touch. Vicky leans her head against rough, scratchy cloth; a sack with a label. *Deutsche Reichspost*, she reads. What is she doing in the post room? None of it makes any sense to her, and she's on the point of closing her eyes again when the witch pulls her into a sitting position. Vicky feels herself being buffeted about like a nutshell on high seas, with only the old crone's cool hands and gruff voice to

guide her through the storm. She can't imagine coming out to a safe haven, yet underlying her internal turmoil there's a cold, hard core of determination.

At some point someone else is in the room too. She feels a second pair of hands on her shoulders, holding her head. Strong hands, strong and warm. A low, quiet voice speaks to her, and when her whimpers and groans finally fall quiet, the silence is shattered by a piercing scream, intermingled with a crackling sound like gunfire coming from beyond the narrow embrasures high above her.

"What's that?" Vicky asks, dazed, "Is there a war?"

"Don't be silly", the witch blows smoke from her nostrils. "It's a baby."

Outside the window, glistening showers of red and green are falling down through the night sky.

"Fireworks", the man says. He has his back to her and she's dimly aware he's wearing a carpenter's overall. "The child must be a princess."

"Scissors and thread," the woman snaps.

He rummages around in the drawers and passes both items to her without looking in Vicky's direction. The woman cuts through the umbilical cord and whisks the child onto a set of parcel scales. "2850 grammes," she proclaims.

"It's a girl," says the carpenter, as the old woman lays the warm, damp bundle on Vicky's breast.

"Perhaps the father is an English lord", she says, lighting another cigarette with hands still covered in blood. "Or a jazz musician." She pronounces it *shazz*. "So, where is he now then, your Mr Shimmy?"

"Elsa," says Vicky, taking the bundle in her arms. "Her name will be Elsa."

Vicky and Elsie lean over the cradle from opposite sides. Tenderly, Elsie smooths the blanket down over the sleeping baby.

"Make sure you take good care of my godchild," she says, kissing Vicky's cheek before setting off. "And that goes for you too. You need to get your strength back."

"I can fill myself up for weeks on all the stuff you've brought. And the little one as well." Vicky pats her belly, but when she laughs she still sounds exhausted. "I don't know how we'd have managed without you, Elsie. I hope I can return the favour one day. Wouldn't you just love a couple of illegitimate kids? Anyone special in the firing line for fatherhood?"

"No I would not! And no one, to your second question." Elsie throws a high dance kick and grabs her toes with her fingers. "If there's anything I want to get, it's a job as one of Charell's chorus girls."

Vicky sighs. "Chorus girl? Fat chance now! I can't even bend over without screaming in agony." The doorbell rings as she's speaking and she gives a start. "So soon...? But he..."

Elsie makes her way to the door. "Time to go," she says.

Elsie almost collides with Harry on the narrow staircase, made even narrower by the huge parcel he is carrying. They stand face to face in the dark corridor for a moment, neither of them able to move, staring at each other across the package. Then Harry puts it down on the steps and presses his back against the wall. Elsie steps over the parcel. Before turning the corner at the top of the staircase, she rounds on Harry: "You're a swine!" she hisses.

Harry works up a sweat as he struggles up the stairs with his bulky parcel. Any minute now he'll see her for the first time. *My daughter*, he tells himself, but he still finds it hard to believe. He almost hopes he'll find Vicky on her own in the tiny apartment, just like it used to be. It must have been a bad dream, surely. A nightmare apparition. Any minute now he'll be holding her in his arms. His vivacious Vicky, slim and supple like the day he met her.

There she is, standing in front of him in the open doorway. In the aftermath of pregnancy, she appears thinner than ever. She is pale and her eyes are rimmed with dark circles of exhaustion and filled with fear as she fixes her gaze on him.

"Vicky. Sweetheart!" Harry puts down the parcel and leaps up the remaining stairs. He reaches out for her, but she takes a step back from him.

"Come in," she says.

He picks up the parcel from the landing, follows her into the flat and pulls the door closed behind him.

Vicky waits in silence. It's up to him to find the right words now. *Where is she?* he'll have to ask – as if he couldn't stand to wait another second to meet his child. Where is she, my sweet girl, my little dove, my darling?

"How are you feeling?" He looks at Vicky with a mixture of concern and affection.

A few awkward seconds tick by before she meets his question with a dismissive shrug. "Me? I'm fine," she says, then stands silent again, her posture stiff and reserved. He wants to hold her, touch her; reassure himself that her hair feels the way it did in his dreams during the endless weeks without her. Will those chestnut curls still smell the same when he buries his face in them? So often he tried to remember her scent, but he was never able to. After all he couldn't visit her in the weeks following the premature birth, when she was lying in hospital with the infant. Everyone would have assumed he was the child's father... and rightly so, for God's sake!

Vicky turns from him abruptly and goes through to her bed-sitting room. Harry follows her, but stops dead when he notices the cradle standing next to her bed. Then he hears a quiet whimpering and edges slowly towards the sound. The first glimpse he gets of his daughter is a small red fist waving above the edge of the sky-blue cradle. He leans over the little bed. The child is lying there with her eyes shut tight. Harry has no idea what he was expecting, but it was certainly not such incredibly delicate eyelids, this tiny upturned nose, the pink and hairless head. He kneels down next to the cradle, rests his arms on the edge, his chin on his

hands, and just stares down at the child.

After a while Vicky crouches down next to him. Then she whispers into the silence: “She almost died”.

Harry is astonished at the sense of tragedy, the disconsolate resonance of the simple statement – considering how they’d cried when Vicky’s pregnancy was confirmed, how they’d wept tears of desperation when hot mulled wine and jumping from high stairs hadn’t taken care of the problem. And now here she is, quaking at the very idea of losing the child. He puts his arm around Vicky and says: “But she’s alive! Just look at her!”

At that point the little girl opens her eyes, takes one look at her father and lets out a deafening scream. Harry winces, but Vicky just laughs. “That’s exactly how she greeted me. And the rest of the world, for that matter. Take it as a sign of affection.”

“I’ll take it as a sign that the little maggot will grow up to be a fat and fabulously wealthy opera singer!” Harry starts to sing quietly, the first line of a popular song: “*Pardon me, Miss, I think we’ve met before. Remember my kiss, from golden days of yore...*” and Elsa’s yells fall silent. Instead, she starts to chuckle and Harry lifts her out of the cradle into his arms and leaps to his feet: “Yes! A musical child! That’s the ultimate proof she’s my daughter!”

When Elsa starts to cry again, Vicky takes her from him, sits down on the bed and gently rocks her to and fro. “Who else, silly? Did you think it was goggle-eyed old Helbig?”

Harry drops down on the bed beside her. “God no, not him, that’s for sure! She’d have been born with bulging watery blue eyes and glasses like this.” His fingers form circles in front of his eyes, pantomiming a pair of milk-bottle lenses. They both laugh, but suddenly Harry’s voice takes on an anxious edge. “By the way, who did you put down on the register as the father?”

“You, of course. You know it’s not like me to tell a lie.” Harry looks at her, appalled, and Vicky’s eyes narrow, darkening to an almost venomous shade of green. “No, don’t worry. It’s a shame for her, but the father is a Mr Anonymous.”

Harry looks blank. “Elsa’s father...” he says. “Why Elsa? We’d agreed to call the child Josephine if it was a girl. After Josephine Baker.” Vicky shakes her head. “Or Anita, after Anita Berber,” Harry tries again.

“Is that so?” Vicky stands and starts to pace the room, holding the child on her arm. “So where were we when she was born, then? Where was Mr Anonymous then? And where was he when she was lying at death’s door in the hospital? Did he come with the mother to the doctor, and did he set up a cradle in her nursery? No. Elsie did all that for me. My friend Elsie. That’s why she’s called Elsa now.”

“Elsie? She called me a swine just now! Right outside your door!”

“And if you’d been her sweetheart and treated her the way you treated me, that’s what I’d have called you too!” Vicky snaps.

Harry’s expression brightens. “Well, aren’t I the lucky one? I’m not your best friend’s sweetheart, I’m yours,

and I'm a long way from being a swine, too!" His voice is sweet, persuasive. He dips out of the room and comes right back, buckling under the weight of the huge parcel.

"What's that, for God's sake?" Vicky eyes the pink ribbon tied around the bulky package.

"You have to guess!"

"A pram?" Harry shakes his head. "Rocking horse?" Another shake. "Dolls house?"

"You'll never get it. Not in a million years! Never-ever!" He ushers her into the kitchen. "Right, shut your eyes. No peeking."

Vicky hears rustling and banging, then music pours out from the bed-sitting room.

Yes, we have no bananas

We have no bananas today!

Vicky's eyes fill with tears. It's incredible, totally beyond belief. What a foolish, immature boy! What a lunatic! A gramophone? And a whole stack of records too! Is this Harry's idea of a new-born baby's priorities? She really doesn't know what to lash out at first – Harry's grinning face or the record spinning and shimmying on the turntable. Harry takes Vicky's arm, pulls her through to the cramped bed-sitting room and starts swaying to the music with her and the slumbering Elsa. Spinning them in a slow circle and looking as smug as if he'd just single-handedly created the entire scene: the woman, the child, the gramophone, bananas and everything else under the sun. Vicky slips out of Harry's embrace, sets the baby back down in the cradle and covers her. Then she walks over to the gramophone, switches it off and takes the record from the turntable. Harry looks dejected, like a little boy when the decorations come down from the Christmas tree; or in his case when the flames on the Chanuka menorah are snuffed out for another year.

"I'm not up to doing the shimmy just yet," Vicky says, and puts on another record. Slower and filled with yearning: *Irgendwo auf der Welt*, a wistful folksong about happiness, a little corner of happiness, hidden somewhere in the world.

They dance slowly, their cheeks together, until a vicious cramp clutches at her belly. She lets go of Harry, runs out the door to the toilet halfway down the stairs. Sitting there, she feels the hot blood gushing out of her. After what seems like an eternity, the surge finally peters out and Vicky puts a fresh wad of cotton wool in place and flushes the old one away. When she emerges from the toilet, Harry is standing at the door of the apartment. His elation has turned to concern.

"What's wrong? How are you feeling?" he asks, and this time he has no trouble finding the right words.

They lie on the bed, fully dressed, holding each other tight. Harry wants to kiss her, but all he manages is a sob, and soon Vicky is crying too. Eventually Harry takes a corner of the blanket and dries both their tears. Maybe this fatherhood business isn't so bad after all, he thinks. Lying beside your wife, with your child slumbering peacefully next to you... He bends over Vicky, bringing his face to her lips. He is about to kiss her when a murderous scream rings out from the cradle next to the bed. Vicky gives a start and their heads clash

together.

“Ouch!” Harry shrieks, but Vicky ignores him and concentrates all her attention and sympathy on the squalling little bundle.

Vicky tucks little Elsa in the pram. The baby has already reached the stage where she'll cram anything within reach into her mouth, only to spit it out again and clutch it in her sticky grasp before hurling it away with a whoop of glee. It's high time she was introduced to her place of birth, her mother's workplace, and her unsuspecting grandfather. Time to go to the Jonass! Vicky pulls a bonnet over Elsa's head to protect her from the chill winds of autumn and gives her one last appraising look. Is there any likeness to Harry that could give the game away? Is there really no family resemblance that could point probing glances his way? Yes. Elsie has assured her of that as well. Elsa doesn't take after either of them. She just looks like Elsa.

During the short walk from Mendelssohnstrasse to Lothringerstrasse Vicky finds herself thinking about her cousin in Lübbenau, whose husband suspected her of cheating on him. Right up to the child's birth he kept telling her he wasn't about to shell out for another man's bastard. But the minute he set eyes on his son, he changed his tune. The little chap was his spitting image. Vicky picks up a chestnut that has dropped to the pavement from a tree bordering the wall of the Nikolai cemetery. She rubs it with the sleeve of her coat until it's bright and shiny, then passes it to Elsa, who raises it to her mouth in delight. “Oh well, tough luck on the both of us, sweetie. If it was the same with you, your father wouldn't have the option of disowning you.” All of a sudden Vicky feels like an orphan herself, taking another orphan for a walk. Her father had fallen in the Great War when she was still at primary school, and her mother and brother had all but washed their hands of her when she left home and moved to the bedlam of Berlin, to an area “riddled with Jews and communists.” Her pregnancy was a “disgrace”, and the remaining ties had been severed after the “little bastard” had been born. Vicky wipes the tears from her eyes and lobs a handful of chestnuts, still in their prickly skins, back over the cemetery wall.

As always, the sight of the huge, rounded building at the junction of Prenzlauer Allee and Torstrasse lifts her spirits. The Jonass department store really is a little palace – the palace where her daughter was born. What was it the carpenter had said as Elsa came into the world to the sound of fireworks raining down from heaven? “She must be a princess”. Vicky stops abruptly, and the jerk sets Elsa off howling. *Shimmy*, the old woman had said. Harry's nickname. But what if she hadn't just shouted out his nickname? What if the carpenter knew more than he should? What was he doing up there in the post room anyway? She racks her brains trying to recall what went on that night, but the time between her retreat into the store's gloomy interior and Elsa's first scream remains shadowy and full of blanks. Perhaps he knows the Grünberg family and has put two and two together by now... he could even blackmail Harry! But she doesn't really think he'd be capable of that. His touch was so comforting and his voice was so soothing when she needed it most. Still, she has to find him and find out what he knows.

As she makes her way into the Jonass with Elsa in her arms, Vicky is still wondering how on earth to go about finding one particular carpenter in a city the size of Berlin. The baby is wriggling in her arms, completely beside herself with excitement at all the bustle, the colours and smells. Elsa waves cheerfully at everyone within reach, including Frau Kurz, who they bump into in the hallway by the offices. But she looks right through them and rushes off, heels clicking. Vicky pauses in front of the door to Heinrich Grünberg's office. Her boss asked her to drop by with the child. If he only knew whose child it is, and where she was born! She

summons up all the courage she can muster and knocks on the door...

Elsa gawps at the grey-haired man in the dark suit. Then, before Vicky has a chance to stop her, she makes a grab for Heinrich Grünberg's moustache and gives it a tug. Grünberg gently prises Elsa's grasp from his whiskers.

"That's exactly what our Harry used to do. My beard was his favourite toy until he got his first steam engine."

A loud giggle from behind her takes Vicky by surprise, and then Gertrude Grünberg runs up to her father. "Can I have a go too?" She yanks at both ends of his handlebar moustache, and his mouth twists into a grimace of pain. He slaps his daughters hand away affectionately and shows her the door.

Vicky and Heinrich Grünberg exchange small talk for a while, then he looks at his watch. "I'm afraid I'll have to bring this meeting to a close, Miss Elsa." He shakes Vicky's hand. "And as for you, Miss Vicky, the Jonass needs you back for the Christmas rush at the very latest." Then he gives Elsa a penetrating look before adding: "It's none of my business, strictly speaking, but I think you ought to make that idle ne'er-do-well of a father provide her with an honest name".

On the way down, the lift stops with its usual jolt, the gate rattles open and Gerd Helbig walks in. He stares at the child in her arms as if it were some kind of apparition.

"You can keep on staring till the cows come home", Vicky says, "she'll never look a thing like you."

That evening, Vicky is waiting to meet Harry at the door of her apartment. "Your father says you should marry me," she tells him.

"He says *what?*" Harry clutches at the door frame. Vicky has never seen him look quite so appalled. She tells him all about their visit to his father's office. "For heaven's sake, at least wait till I've turned eighteen. Unless you actually want old man Grünberg to sign the certificate on my behalf!"

Vicky steps back to let him in. "Okay, next year then. In the meantime we may as well get engaged. Or is that forbidden too, if the man is underage?"

Harry goes through to the bed-sitting room and starts sifting through the stack of records by the gramophone.

"Father wants a well-heeled daughter-in-law and Mother won't be happy unless she's Jewish. We'd have our work cut out!" He pulls his wallet out of his pocket and gives Vicky a few notes. "An advance from your future father-in-law."

She bites her lip and takes the money. Bringing up a child costs money, after all.

The identity of the unknown carpenter keeps preying on Vicky's mind; one day everyone else is in a meeting and she finds herself alone in Grünberg's office. Flicking through the names on the personnel files, she just hopes no one comes back early. She had typed and filed the building records herself – there's got to be a list of all the carpenters somewhere, surely. At long last she finds it, and there, next to three of the names, are

the words *Invite to party* in Grünberg's handwriting.

Is that the sound of voices in the corridor outside? She crams the files back where she found them and dashes out of the office. There wasn't enough time to write down the three names, so she mumbles them over and over like a mantra on her way home.

Paul Kopinski, Ferdinand Voigt, Wilhelm Glaser.

Paul Kopinski... Ferdinand Voigt... Wilhelm Glaser.

Kopinski...

Voigt...

Glaser...

Wilhelm Glaser is the last one she tries. She has dug out their addresses and written them a letter each saying she lost something of great personal value during the Jonass opening ceremony and has reason to believe that it may have inadvertently fallen into their possession. She asked them to reply to a box number and guaranteed a finder's fee. There'd been no reply whatsoever from Kopinski; Voigt wrote to say that though he hadn't found anything, they could perhaps find out more about each other if she happened to be young and pretty. Glaser had written back suggesting a time and place for a meeting, and that's where she was heading now.

She recognises him instantly; *Wilhelm Glaser*, she thinks to herself, so *that's who you are*. Shaking his hand, it all comes back to her; she remembers how warm and strong those hands were as he helped her through her ordeal, she recalls that soft and reassuring voice. The memory is so tangible that it sends the blood rushing to her face when she thinks of the circumstances of their last encounter. She'd like nothing better than to turn around and run from the café. She can tell from his expression that Glaser recognized her straight away too, but before she can react he reaches for her coat and holds out a chair for her in a gesture of courtesy that appears utterly free of judgement. *Accidents will happen*, his demeanour suggests. *That doesn't stop you from being a lady. And anyway, I didn't see a thing*. They sit down. "How can I help you, Fraulein?" he asks, holding her gaze over the rim of his coffee cup.

Her reaction horrifies her. She tries to speak, but bursts into tears instead.

An hour or so later, Vicky's tears have dried. She's told Glaser much more about herself and Elsa than she had ever intended to. Without going into detail, she has implied that Elsa's father had to remain anonymous for very good reasons, and Glaser in turn has made it clear that he knew nothing about it and it was none of his concern anyway. As he speaks, he gives her a conspiratorial wink, and she's as good as certain that whatever it is he knows, he won't give her away.

But he saves the best thing, the real miracle, until the very end, when the torrent of her words has finally dried up. Then he tells her how he had been about to leave the soiree and go back home to his wife when he found himself passing the mailroom. The old woman with the nicotine-stained teeth had taken him for the baby's father and cast him in the role of assistant midwife without further ado. But to cap it all, he had



actually become a father himself that night too! He came home to find his wife had given birth to a son – at the very same time Vicky gave birth to Elsa!

That's enough to set Vicky off crying again, this time for sheer joy. She wants to go and see little Bernard with Elsa there and then. It's almost as if the coincidence of their birth has made them brother and sister! Wilhelm Glaser appears quite taken with the idea, but he demurs, telling her his wife hasn't fully recovered yet and needs a bit more rest. But he promises Vicky they'll get together soon – he'd often wondered what had become of the little girl and is so glad that they're both well. Then he asks her if she has found whatever it was she lost on the opening night.

“I found something that's just so much better!” she cries. “A brother for Elsa and a family for us both!”

pp. 20 – 38

English sample translation by Ruth Feuchtwanger