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LILLI

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It feels strange for me, two decades a Catholic priest, to admit that I can't forget her. All these years later, the memory of our journey is so vivid. I can still feel the slow jolting of the ancient train as it rumbled through the night toward Madrid. I remember how my eyes ached in the bright sunlight the next morning as we walked out of the Prado. And I hear that question rise out of some dark sadness in her, a question that enlivens and bedevils me still, her unintended gift and curse.

It was August 1960. I was the lone American on a German student bus traveling from Cologne to Barcelona. I got off the bus during a midmorning rest stop in southern France and stretched luxuriously. After three months of hitchhiking and sleeping in youth hostels, I relished small pleasures like a big stretch after a long ride, the warmth of the morning sun on my back, the taste of some bittersweet chocolate I'd saved from Cologne.

"Excuse me?"

At first her voice simply blended with the other pleasant sensations I felt. Then I realized the question was in English and meant for me.

"Yes?" I turned to her. She was tall with dark brown hair that glinted faintly red in the sunlight. Her body looked relaxed, comfortable. Her hands opened to me when she spoke.

"The man sitting next to me has been traveling for days and plans to sleep all the way to Barcelona. I'd like to talk with someone. Would you be willing to change seats with him?"

Though I felt a tinge of excitement, I assumed she was simply being practical, nothing more. Single women in Europe often traveled with men and shared conversation, food, and even tents without romantic involvement. She just wanted to talk, and that was fine with me.

"Sure," I said, extending my hand. "Jim McGann."

Her name was Lilli Geisler. She was a doctoral student in economics at the

University of Munich and had just completed a year at Stanford on a Fulbright scholarship. She was on her way to Malaga to celebrate with friends. As she spoke I marveled at her perfect American English and the elegant precision of her speech. I asked how she'd enjoyed her year in the United States.

"It was wonderful. Stanford was demanding but excellent, with great professors and bright fellow students." She gazed out the window smiling, remembering. "During a break I went to Washington, D.C., with a classmate whose father is an important government official there. . ."

"What's his name?"

She told me. Astonished; I said, "You mean the Supreme Court Justice?"

"That's right," she continued matter-of-factly. "He was busy but very pleasant. He told me about his work and showed me his chambers at the court. Then, on the way back to California, I spent a week on a dude ranch in Arizona, riding horses and learning how to throw a lariat."

"Supreme Court to dude ranch—the whole American panorama."

"Yes," she said, then lowered her voice conspiratorially, "but best of all, while I was in America I discovered peanut butter, which I'm crazy about." I laughed, delighted and surprised by her sense of humor—she had seemed so serious. Then she asked about me.

"Nothing so exciting as your story, I'm afraid. Born and raised in San Francisco, where I still live; I went to school and college in the Bay Area. Currently I'm doing graduate work in Washington, D.C.—but I don't pal around with Supreme Court Justices there."

"What are you studying?"

The simple truth of it was that I was studying to become a priest, but I rarely revealed that in casual conversations—it complicated things, I immediately became a stereotype. Instead, I said, "Philosophy, theology, history." Usually that was sufficient, especially for Europeans, and it was for Lilli. Pragmatic Americans would have asked further, "What will you do with all that?" but Europeans typically felt that studying philosophy, theology, and history needed no further justification.

As the bus rolled through the French countryside, I learned that she had been born in Hamburg before the war and survived the Allied firebombing of that city. "I remember running home terrified, with deafening explosions and bursts of bright light all around me, fires, crumbling buildings. In the morning after a bombing raid, the streets would be eerily quiet at first, then there would be a murmur of low sounds as people came out of their basements and shelters to pick through the wreckage. Our parents tried to shield us from the worst scenes—bodies, parts of bodies, some burnt to a crisp—but it was no use, they were everywhere."

She paused. I thought she wouldn't be able to go on, but she did, her voice softer. "Once, when I was seven, I saw a friend's doll lying in the rubble. I was upset that it was so dirty. I took it home and cleaned it, even scrubbed its face and

washed its dress. Then I took it down the street to my friend's house. I knew she'd be happy to have it back. But her house wasn't there anymore."

The lush green fields of the Rhone Valley eased us past talk of wars. I asked Lilli if she planned to stay in Germany after finishing her doctorate.

"Perhaps," she said, "although at Stanford I met a man, a political science student, and we became 'semi-engaged,' is it a word?"

Annoyed with myself for feeling slightly disappointed, I nodded firmly, "It is now. What does he do? What's he like?"

"He works with poor people in Venezuela. He writes me long letters filled with details about the people's needs and how much there is to do. I admire what he's doing, but sometimes I think he should stop."

"What do you think he should do?"

She gave me a look of mock weariness. "Ah, you don't understand any more than he does." She paused. "Marry me, of course."

"But of course!" I laughed. "You'll have to forgive me. We Americans always think of work. Europeans know it's love that matters."

As a seminarian, I was usually formal, even somewhat distant, in my relationships with women, but I felt relaxed with her. We were on a bus surrounded by people we didn't know, people who didn't know us; I was going home, she was going to a beach in southern Spain; she was in love with an American in Venezuela, I was celibate and preparing to become a priest. Everything was in its place, and safe.



When we reached Barcelona in the early evening, Lilli asked where I was going from there. I said, "To Madrid tomorrow by train, then to Lisbon and back to the U.S."

She brushed back her hair with her hand. "May I go with you to Madrid?" she asked, a hopeful expression on her face. "I could fly to Malaga from there."

I hesitated for a second. I wanted her to come, but I didn't. "I'd be delighted, but I'm taking a third-class train. It was all I could afford at the end of my trip."

"That's okay," she smiled. "If I could survive the war, I can survive a third-class Spanish train. I enjoy talking with you."

"Likewise. Let's do it, then!" I said with more enthusiasm than I felt, hoping she wouldn't notice. *Where is this going?* I asked myself. I watched the sway of her body as she walked through the bus station to call the airline and her friends. It was hot and crowded in the station. People bustled back and forth carrying worn suitcases and rope bags. Three months of concentrating on German, French, and Italian made me suddenly tired of foreign languages. I couldn't understand the babble of Spanish around me and resented Spaniards speaking it. In the mess of sounds in the station, I was startled to hear myself murmur her name, "Lilli, Lilli," as if testing it, puzzling over it, touching it on every side like a curious child.

"It's done," she said, returning. "I changed my plane reservation and left word for my friends when I'd arrive. You look hungry."

"Starved."

"Let's get a hotel and clean up and find a restaurant," she said.

Let's get a hotel. So calm, pragmatic, German. But she can't mean sleeping together, I thought, she's "semi-engaged." Still, I was apprehensive. Again I asked myself, *Where is this going?*

The hotel desk clerk was even more confused. A Spaniard about our age—Lilli and I were both twenty-three—and with limited English, he couldn't comprehend her request for two rooms, thinking she meant a double bed. Why two rooms? Puzzled, he looked from her to me. I was no help, I said nothing. But Lilli was patient, efficient, and firm, like a travel agent straightening out a mix-up. We got two rooms. I went to my room feeling a strange mixture of relief and disappointment.

Later that night, after we shared a cheap but delicious paella at a nearby restaurant, I stood on my room's small balcony gazing down at the inner courtyard, then became aware that Lilli was standing on her balcony only a few rooms away. Silently we gave each other a goodnight wave. I went back into my room, chuckling at the memory of the desk clerk, who at one point in the two-rooms discussion looked at me as if to say, "Man, are you crazy?" Maybe so, I thought, maybe so.



The next morning our train pulled out on schedule but shrieked to a stop only forty minutes out of Barcelona and thereafter stopped at nearly every town on the way to Madrid. When I purchased my ticket in Cologne, thankful for the low fare, it hadn't occurred to me to study departure and arrival times or to wonder how it could take a train twenty-two hours to travel three hundred miles. Every stop became an elaborate ritual of loading and unloading, shouts, jokes, arguments, tears, suitcases and packages handed in and out of windows, large women in black shawls hugging children, and vendors running up and down the platform calling out in Spanish and English, "Cigarettes! Chocolates!"

We were in a compartment with wooden seats and no cushions. The other passengers in the compartment, working-class Spaniards, were clearly intrigued by our presence—few Americans or Germans took third-class Spanish trains. In the early afternoon, opening their lunch baskets and seeing that we hadn't thought to bring any food, our companions insisted that we share their sausages, bread, tomatoes, and olives. One of the men taught us how to drink wine from a leather bota bag as the others laughed and applauded. I had a pack of Lucky Strikes and offered it around after the meal. The men smoked them as if savoring fine cigars with brandy in a drawing room.

"Their lives are real," Lilli said, watching. "When I was eighteen, a girlfriend

and I went to Israel and spent the summer in a kibbutz. I felt close to the settlers because they faced possible attacks every day, so everything was precious: every meal, every dance, every step walking back from work in the fields. They knew life because they knew death. It was the same in Hamburg."

I said nothing, thinking of the millions of German civilians and Jews killed in the war. She looked at me as if searching my face for something. "You are a gentle man," she said. "It's how you speak, but more how you listen." She let her hand rest on mine. One of the Spanish women smiled at us, and I smiled back at her.

In the late afternoon and evening, we stood together in the passageway outside the compartment, our arms resting on the half-open windows, talking loudly over the noise of the train. My earlier concerns about taking this trip with her were gone. The old train itself, its hoots and roars, the fixity of its path, the frequency of its stops, the crowded conditions of its compartments, gave structure to our relationship and brought us close comfortably. For hours we discussed our courses and professors, German architecture, peace marches in England, the Kennedys, J. D. Salinger, bicycle racing. Talking, we moved together like mountain climbers, reaching and resting. Finally, late in the evening, we stopped, exhausted by our conversational marathon. Lilli smiled at me. "We talk well."

"We do," I said.

The others in our compartment were already asleep. I took a sweater out of my pack and folded it into a pillow for her. She curled up against me and went to sleep. I sat up, not wanting to sleep, wanting to watch over her, wanting to smell the freshness of her hair. In the darkness I listened to the soft clicking and clacking of the train wheels on the tracks. I felt the cool night air seep in through the window frames and watched the slumber of the Spaniards who had given us bread and wine.



At about three in the morning, Lilli woke up. "Jim?"

"Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Have you been sleeping?"

"No."

"I hope you can sleep," she said drowsily, nestling back into me.



After arriving, we cleaned up in the Madrid railroad station. Because of the filth and stench of the train's lavatories, visits there had been as brief as possible. In the station lavatory, I shaved, removed my shirt, took a hitchhiker's half-bath with paper towels and cold water, put on a clean shirt, and went back outside.

Lilli appeared several minutes later. She had changed into a yellow dress

and looked refreshed and lovely. She smiled. "I have never been on a worse train or had a nicer trip."

We had three hours before her plane to Malaga and my train to Lisbon were scheduled to leave. I suggested visiting the Prado, which was only a short distance from the train station. On the way we had a quick breakfast of rolls and strong black coffee at a street stand.

Inside the museum I felt strangely restless. During my earlier stay in Madrid, I had spent hours in the Prado, entranced by the paradoxical but powerful mix of asceticism and sensuality in the paintings of El Greco, Goya, and Velásquez, but now I couldn't concentrate on the paintings, I couldn't take my eyes off Lilli. Moving from room to room behind her, I watched her study the paintings. In the respectful stillness of the museum, I felt minutes ticking away. Every moment was precious, she had said, talking about life in the kibbutz. After only half an hour, I suggested that we leave. She nodded, not asking why.

As we walked out of the Prado, glare from the white stone steps enveloped us. My eyes, sleepless from the night before, ached in the bright sunlight. We entered the nearby Retiro Park and found a bench in the shade. Lilli sat down and smoothed her dress on her legs. The trees and the grass were luxuriantly, fiercely green. Fifty feet away, two small children played while their mother watched.

I sat on the bench for a minute, then leaned down and began drawing in the dirt with my forefinger—tic-tac-toe boxes with X's and O's, interlacing curls and waves, the initial "J" and the initial "L" back-to-back, two bent lines going in opposite directions. I brushed away the dirt drawings, stood up, walked several steps along the path, studied the children at play, then walked back to the bench. Lilli was watching me. I sat down beside her and said, "I want to tell you something."

She waited, silent, the expression on her face calm and trusting. I drew a breath. "I'm studying to become a priest."

She looked confused, as if her English had suddenly failed her.

"*Ich bin Student in einem Priester-seminar,*" I repeated.

She stared at me. I'll never forget that look. It was as if a vast gulf had opened between us. Frantically I thought, *What is it? What just happened? She looks in pain.*

"Oh why?" she asked, her voice emerging from the silence. She shook her head slowly, sadly. "Why be a priest?"

I stared back at her, momentarily struck dumb by the simplicity and force of her question. Then, out of the fullness of my vocation, I began to answer, looking away. I told her about the decision I had made six years earlier, about my desire to dedicate my life to God, about how as a priest I could touch people's lives in a special way, about priests who were sources of inspiration and help to hundreds, even thousands, of people. I told her of people in my life I especially loved, including a girl I had left when I entered the seminary. I ended, "And these experiences—loving and being loved by these people—all these experiences have opened me to God's love and will make me a better priest."

Caught up in the sincerity and strength of my answer, I turned to look at her. She had put her sunglasses on. Tears streamed down her face, but she made no attempt to brush them away.

Shortly after, she left for the airport and I returned to the train station. I never saw her again.