

My Letters to Max

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My Dearest Max,

My beloved husband, sadly we are apart. We barely missed each other on the train platform. I followed the tilt of your black fedora as it moved above the others—so tall! I called, “Max! Max!” but my voice was one among the din of many hoping to bond one last time. My eyes followed the gray and white feather in the band of your hat bobbing like a gull on the sea, lamenting we were destined to travel different paths. I hope now you are as settled as I am and that the time we’re apart moves quickly.

My work consists of sorting clothes by fabric: cotton, wool, flannel, the occasional leather or silk piled into containers the size of horse drawn carts. It’s backbreaking, so I’ll compose letters to pass the time. Today, I remember our first date, when you came and sat in the parlor with mother and me, shy, rubbing your hands together, and gently placing your teacup ever so softly onto the saucer, afraid the thin plate might crack. I thought you too deliberate, slow-witted, no fun—*my God, just put it down!* And when you spoke of your profession, accounting, I wondered if I’d survive this meeting hour my father had arranged with your business partner. Interesting, isn’t it, how fathers want their daughters to marry well? They seek men of means, those who will improve the fathers’ social status while mothers only want men with kind eyes, gentlemen. I thought this as you sat across from me on the edge of the upholstered chair, back straight, nervous, brown eyes averting mine. Had father no sense? Had he not known after seventeen years of living under his roof what type of husband I’d prefer? Certainly, I’m no beauty, but a man whose voice was barely audible and who lacked passion for anything other than figures and balances was his choice? You sensed my agitation and asked—to my surprise—if we might go for a walk. Mother agreed to let us go alone, “Such a beautiful spring day,” she said, “why not?” It was then I saw the smile in your eyes, a deep, soft glow.

As we walked, you spoke of family, your twin toddler nephews who were full of energy, and your brother whose wife was a gentile. “Quite the scandal,” you said, sarcastically.

“She hasn’t converted?”

“No. My brother is more likely to leave the Faith if mother continues to pester him.” You said I should know what I’m getting into if we were to be married, and I paused. “Sorry, Elena, I don’t mean to be presumptuous.”

“Not at all,” I said, thinking you were fair. “Why don’t you call on me another day, and we’ll talk more.”

“Thank you,” you said with a tip of your hat. You didn’t say, “I had a wonderful time” or “It was a pleasure,” no, instead a humble goodbye for the opportunity to talk and meet again. Of course, you smiled, and waited until I was behind the door. Oddly, you stood on the sidewalk for a few moments staring at the house, so as not to forget, possibly? I admired your square shoulders, thin nose, small ears, and round face—maybe Father was wise after all. “You made an impression,” Mother said teasingly, looking through the parlor window. “Otherwise, he’d be gone by now.”

I blushed; I wanted to know more about the tall, quiet man.

So that is how I've spent today, reliving the moment the spark of our life took hold. We'll see what tomorrow brings.

My Dearest Max,

I woke from a pleasant dream: we were ice-skating, hand in hand, before sunset on the night we decided to marry. How we could've been on the same lake since childhood and never met astonished me, my future husband skinning his knees on the same ice or stealing the scarf of a neighborhood girl, all before my eyes. Children laughed and fell; teenagers chased each other and screamed in delight while we glided closer to the bonfire on the shore. With the backs of our woolen parkas warming against the flames you said, "I want to ask Father for your hand. Do you approve?"

"Of course! When?"

"After Hanukah," and I was disappointed in having to wait, to keep the joyful secret for another eight days, but you were right. We'd respectfully observe the Festival of Light as the faithful should, our happiness could wait. My impatience proved to be a gift. With the lighting of each Menorah candle, my excitement grew, and I hopped from bed each day blessed with the thought of our future so near at hand. I listened to the flame of each lit candle, "*May the Lord cause you to flourish / both you and your children,*" and I imagined a boy and a girl: one tall like his father, the other with her daddy's thin nose and my hazel eyes. Father noticed my devotion and commented, "I now see a woman lighting the Menorah. One ready to marry, perhaps?" With a smile he said, "I was right to grant the young man's request to visit."

So, it was you, Max, who'd arranged our first meeting, not Father! I was flattered to be an object of affection, and it was just like you to quietly plan—should I say scheme?—to meet the young girl who walked past your office on errands to the market. No wonder your hands shook, much was invested in a first impression. Father asked, "If Max were to ask for my oldest in marriage, would you be pleased?"

"Oh, yes," I said, overwhelmed with blissful thoughts of a wedding, a honeymoon, of becoming a wife and mother.

Not long after, we planned a small ceremony for the spring and found a third floor apartment near the park. "Many stairs," Father said, "better for you to visit me."

He was right, the stairs were a chore and it led to our first disagreement. You insisted after the miscarriage that we look for another apartment, but I said no. "Elena, I can't expect you to use these stairs, be reasonable."

"Did you not think this might happen when we agreed to rent it?" I said sourly, disappointed in myself. I intended to climb the steps until my water broke if need be to prove I was a capable wife and woman.

Later, upon returning from work you said, "Elena, this place will not do. Tomorrow, I'll find another."

I didn't respond, instead I let tears fall. I said, finally, "I'm not ready to leave," and you understood. With your arms around me, I heard, "There'll be plenty of little ones. You'll see," amid the lilting chatter of children playing below in the alley.

In time, I understood the infant was your loss, too, and I'd been selfish. I was then more considerate of your feelings. I said, "How could I expect my mother to help with a child while we live atop a mountain?" and you smiled, visibly relieved. Max, I'm sorry I was sullen and left you to flounder in your grief. It's my greatest regret, My Love: I was selfish. You were kind and patient and your practical wanting of a new apartment masked the pain I should've seen and felt. You grieved for me and for our child, and you did so alone. I promise that'll never happen when we're together again. Of course, I know little of the outside world or of our army's success, but I hope. I pray God keeps you safe.

I admit I grow weary as the workday grinds on, but I think of your brave service and understand I must push on and do my part, as well.

My Dearest Max,

Today, as I sorted, I found a brochure for a hotel in Zakopana, not far from where we honeymooned. I laughed then when you tasted the salty Oscypek cheese for the first time. I held you closely as we sat by Lake Morskie Oko, the blue of its cold water a testament to God's magnificence. We spent our first evening as husband and wife watching the sun gently slide behind the Tatry Mountains, the stillness of the air around us alive with anticipation of our wedded night together. The room's pine board floors and walls cast a soft, clean scent, and the white sheets were crisp, fresh. We undressed in the moonlight, then slid into bed with cold feet. You were hesitant to begin, only caressing my cheek with a finger. I wondered, "Was it my face that won your heart?"

"No. It was the mystery. Who was that girl who passed by on the same day at the same time?"

"How romantic," I said, teasingly. "I should've known that punctuality was a seduction for accountants."

"And figures," you said, sliding a warm hand to my hip. We kissed, my skin responding to the smoothness of touch, the warmth of lips on my neck. Gently, you slid on top of me, and I accepted you. All the time we'd invested came to this moment, our becoming one, a family. Later, as we lay together, I was relieved to think the man I knew in public was the same in private. I was aware of the veil some men hid behind, the true self only known in private, and I admit I was a bit nervous, but now I was content. I'd trusted in you, Max: I was safe in your arms, within our small inn nestled at the foot of the glorious mountains towering over us, protecting us.

My Dearest Max,

I can't sleep. While everyone in the barrack dreams, my fatigue won't let me rest. Instead, I lay on the floor staring through the cracks in the wood slats, watching the stars that call to me. They stand alone, clear and strong in the darkness, sirens to Eternity and my soul's rest. Is it wrong to wish my heart would still, for the ache in my limbs to float away? Would God finally admit I've witnessed enough pain to enter Heaven? He asks so much of me to handle the clothes of our brothers and sisters, the clothes of children and babies who've perished in the gas

chambers. Just today, a baby's small rattle fell from the worn pocket of a black woolen coat and time stopped. Its round, pink orb tinkled as it rolled to my feet. I was unsure if my eyes deceived me, was I dreaming? I no longer know what is real. Clothes pass through my hands as their lives pass from this earth—am I not as guilty as the Nazis who perpetuate this horrible vanity? I, who gives the coin and jewelry from the pockets of the murdered to the Germans, commit a sin against my fellow man. Max, this grieves me greatly, but you would be proud to know I've atoned for my sin by giving my ration of bread to a young woman, Natalie, who shares my wooden bunk. I've taken the vow of poverty so I may enter Heaven. It's comforting to lie here now, as my letters to you swirl round and round in my mind. Isn't it interesting how time and toil have condensed our life together into exquisite moments: the smile in your eyes, the feel of your strong hands holding mine, or your footsteps on the stairs? I have the child's rattle, too, tucked under my tattered shirt. Let the guards find me with it tomorrow: "*LORD...I look in triumph upon my enemies.*"

I feel the sleep of the ages upon me now Max and before I close my eyes, I promise to find you again, my shy, tall man who called upon me and humbly offered his love.