

Early that morning Frau Wanderey informed me that Peter had phoned. As it was Saturday, he was coming to Hamburg in the evening to spend the weekend. I was somewhat surprised but had accepted Frau Wanderey's invitation to meet Peter. At around eight o'clock in the evening I waited for the knock on the door that would tell me I could go to Frau Wanderey's room and greet Peter. I had also promised my friend Prabhakar I'd attend the farewell party being held at his flat at nine. A colleague of ours, a professor, was leaving for India.

Frau Wanderey was my landlady. I had moved into this room about six months ago. I was lucky, for finding a modestly priced room close to the University was rather difficult. Frau Wanderey's three-bedroom apartment was on the fourth floor in a brick building built soon after the War. In spite of the urban encroachment on the district, the neighbourhood was still relatively quiet and peaceful. There was always some traffic from the small shopping centre adjoining the east side of the building. But the west end, where Frau Wanderey's flat was, faced a wide open green park with a solitary church at the end of it.

I often found Frau Wanderey sitting in her reclining chair beside the window, intently gazing at the greenery of the park - the only relief from the otherwise overcast grey Hamburg sky. In spite of her age, she looked after the whole apartment without any help. She always bristled with energy. Even though she had long retired, she still put in three to four hours twice a week as a bookkeeper in the office where she used to work. In addition to her part-time job, she had an income from her old age pension as well as some compensation payments as a war widow. I don't think she was ever

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short of money. It seemed to me she'd taken in a tenant only to keep her company.

There is an intrinsic relationship between loneliness and ageing. At some point in one's life that zestful sparkle of youth suddenly starts to wane. Friends and relations, having succumbed either to their preoccupations or to the inevitable start thinning out, and, without your

knowledge, loneliness sneaks up on you. I often noticed such loneliness in Frau Wanderey's eyes. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to describe her as a sad person. On the contrary, her heavily wrinkled face exaggerated both the lows and highs of her moods. There was a radiance in her open face which drew you to her.

On weekends she would often invite me for afternoon tea. She would ask me about Gandhi and the Indian independence movement, about my parents, my brothers and sisters in India, and then, out of no where, the subject of Peter would creep into the conversation and dominate it the entire evening. It seemed Peter, whom I had not even met, was some invisible centre of Frau Wanderey's



life. Both of her husbands had been killed. The first died in the First World War. She was very young then, and falling in love with handsome Prussian soldiers was fashionable. Herr Wanderey had lost her second husband in Hitler's war. She had a son from the second marriage.

Peter was born after Herr Wanderey's death. She often told me that. But when she saw me puzzled, unable to tally the years and months of her life-history, she would smilingly look at my perplexed face.

"So Herr Gupta, you think I am making up all this?"

To avoid answering I would change the subject.

She would then pull out an old photo-album from under the coffee table. The album, in a blue-denim jacket, had the word "Peter" embroidered on it in colourful threads. Inside, the faded sepia-toned photographs, stuck on black construction paper with silver corners, were a chronicle of Frau Wanderey's past. It must have been more difficult, I'd imagine, for ordinary people to cherish the memories of their loved ones prior to the invention of the camera. Photographs, instant snapshots of our existence in this otherwise fast-changing world, haven't begun showing any signs of losing their relevance yet. The family photo-album still continues to fascinate us, re-affirming our participation in this mysterious, irreversible cycle of life.

"I took this picture myself. Peter was only five years old. You know Kiel's *Fruehling's Fest*? We had great fun there." I saw a young golden-haired boy holding two helium-filled balloons and a stick of candy floss. Then, pointing to another photograph, she would say, "These are all his friends - the neighbourhood boys in front of our house, soon after the War."

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"And see this picture, here he is with the school soccer team."

In a group of ten to twelve boys, a lanky, weak-looking boy in shorts and T-shirt held a football under his arm.

Peter's latest photograph was always on Frau Wanderey's dresser. She told me that the picture of them together was taken years ago when



Peter was still living at home. In the photo, a cheerful and rather young looking Frau Wanderey stood next to Peter, who was taller than in his earlier photographs

Grinning through her wrinkles like most mothers, she would self-

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assuredly remark, "He looks exactly like his father."

Having heard so much praise of Peter, it was natural that I should be curious about him. Frau Wanderey had told me that Peter worked in a cabinet-making factory in Luebeck, sixty kilometres away. Why, I wondered, would the subject of such praise not visit his mother? Peter would then appear to me a mere figment of Frau Wanderey's imagination. I was beginning to develop a theory of my own on the subject. My feeling was that Peter was long dead, and those photographs were mementoes which Frau Wanderey must be clinging to in order to cherish past memories.

While leafing through the album, Frau Wanderey would often drift away in her thoughts, completely forgetting that I was sitting beside her. These lapses into oblivion would make me think of a mind in slow decay. Life would then appear to be a long passage in which momentary happiness in old age could only be experienced by clinging to some fading memories of the past. It seemed that in spite of the slow ticking of the clock, life for the elderly must pass by quickly.

That morning when she came to inform me of Peter's visit, I had at first wondered whether to believe her or not. I was tempted to treat the whole thing as a part of her senile eccentricity. But, seeing an unusual gleam in her eyes, it was difficult for me to deny Peter's existence.

It was getting quite late and I had to leave for Prabhakar's place. I approached Frau Wanderey's room. I was struck by the freshness of the room - new curtains, freshly washed bed sheets and pillow covers. Even the windowpanes were glimmering in the sparkling fluorescent light. The room looked bright and inviting. She was seated on the sofa wearing a new

pink floral dress. With the dark shawl draped over her dress, she looked prettier than usual. When she realised that I was examining her intently, she blushed for a moment.

Apologising, I explained that I had to be at a friend's party at nine, and I could not wait any longer. She was in very good spirits. "Aah, Herr Gupta. *Doch!* You should not have waited so long, you will see Peter in the morning."

As I was leaving, I suggested she insist that Peter take her to some excellent restaurant to mark the special occasion. My remark made her wrinkled face glow.

It was three in the morning when I returned from Prabhakar's party. I thought Frau Wanderey must have enjoyed her evening with Peter. She must have asked Peter to take her to the *Staatoper*. She would have loved strolling around Alster Lake. After the opera, with her hands around Peter's arms, she would have walked along the Alster promenade. Since they had probably returned late, I did not think it polite to ring the door-bell. I let myself in with my own keys. Entering the hall, I saw through the partly opened door that the lights were still on. I thought, perhaps, mother and son were engrossed in conversation, but it was quiet. There was something ominous about the stillness of that early morning hour. An eerie feeling made me rush towards the door of her room.

Frau Wanderey, her mouth half-opened, neck sagging on her chest, was still sitting on the sofa. It seemed she would fall down any moment. I touched her nervously. She was cold. As the windows had been left open, the room was freezing. I ran to close the shutters and quickly turned the electric stove on to its full heat. Then from my room, brought a bottle of

brandy, and poured a couple of spoonfuls of the drink down her throat. Startled, she woke up coughing. She was tired and seemed reluctant to talk. I put some cushions under her head and covered her with two blankets. She fell asleep instantly. The room looked the way it had earlier. Frau Wanderey had been sitting in the same spot just the way I'd seen her before I left for the party. Obviously, Peter had not come.

Next morning, I woke up late. A lazy sunshine had drifted into the room. Putting on my robe, I went into the kitchen to prepare my breakfast. She was sitting in her



chair beside the window, gazing outside. Usually around that time she would be at the Sunday morning mass. Seeing me, she turned away from the window. A reluctant smile broke across her lips, not knowing what to say about the previous night.

"Herr Gupta."

"Yes, Frau Wanderey."

"Sorry for being a nuisance last night."

"It's alright."

There was helplessness in her smile.

"Peter did not come last evening."

Wanting to console her, I groped for words. I hesitated, and then found myself awkwardly making an excuse for Peter.

"Frau Wanderey, young people are usually independent. You cannot hold them forever..."

Pressing her kneecaps, Frau Wanderey stood up.

"*Ya Herr Gupta, you are right.*" She sighed, "*Er ist kein kind mehr.* He is a young man."

"He telephoned this morning to say he was sorry. He was in Berlin with Jenny for the weekend. He wanted to come next week, but must put in overtime at the factory." She paused. "He can only come the following Sunday."

I nodded, expecting her to suggest, as she usually did, that I meet Peter. But this time, she did not say anything. Instead, I noted a blank look in her eyes. She seemed to have lost interest in everything around her. She mumbled, "...Always the girlfriends first," as if she was talking to the wall, "when they get married it's their wives ... then, it's their wives mothers they must visit first. I have seen it all before."

We stood silently. I could sense an aching emptiness rising inside me. Suddenly, in the distance the church bells had begun to ring calling parishioners for the mass. Before I could say something, Frau Wanderey had risen to put on her grey overcoat to leave. The outside door opened and closed, the sound of her footsteps descending on the stairs gradually faded away. □

Balwant Bhaneja's short fiction has been published in India and Canada, including MANUSHI. Recently, his radio adaptation of Ajit Dalvi's play *Mahatma versus Gandhi* and the English translation of Vijay Tendulkar's *Cyclewallah* were broadcast by the BBC World Service.