

Lisette Lewin, *Een hart van prikkeldraad*

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(excerpt from 'A Heart of Barbed Wire' pp. 25-39, slightly abridged in consultation with the author.)

I was not in the habit of latching onto a string of girls parading in the late afternoon. Normally I'd go for walks or bike rides on my own across the dunes or along the shore, often in a sulk on account of some comment of my mother's. That I liked being alone suited everybody — I was not popular. But this time I tagged along with some girls from school. They were shrieking with laughter and I pretended to join in. With my blue cardigan knitted by my Gran and my hair hanging loose, I stood out among the dolled-up teenagers: the only one with dark hair and the skinniest — 'thin as a rake,' my mother complained. We came across some boys, one of whom hooted 'Nice bit of stuff there,' and 'What's bitten you, eh?' The latter was meant for me, obviously.

Fate: the drama is not immediately recognisable. A car speeds towards you; you can already feel the impact, but nothing happens. You pedal away on your bike without a care in the world, a motorcycle you didn't see coming knocks you over: a dull thud...the light goes out in your head. Or that time when I, in romantic mood, was so busy scanning the holiday crowds for the hero of my dreams that I failed to spot the figure on the beach who was to have such a dramatic effect on my life.

Suddenly somebody turned up at my side: a boy. 'I saw you on the beach,' he said, in German. '*Du schwimmst wie ein Fisch.*'

He was hardly taller than me, and didn't look like a German tourist. He had short gingery hair, thick and curly. His face was freckled. '*Bist du Deutscher?*' I asked.

Dumb question, I thought to myself. Pretty obvious he was German. But he wasn't, as it turned out.

'Polish,' he declared. 'Warsaw. I went to school in Berlin, though. Fancy an ice cream?'

I walked up with him and glanced round at the others. Nobody seemed to notice.

'My parents lived in Germany for three years,' I told him. 'I was three when they left. My father was doing research into the water supply in the Ruhr district. He's a hydraulic engineer.'

'So that's why you speak such good German,' he said.

'Oh no, I was dumped with my grandparents. They've got a cheese shop, d'you know it? I help out there sometimes; they have a lot of German customers. And we learn German at school. I'm a very fast learner,' I said with pride.

'You're intelligent.'

‘Yes I am!’

At the ice cream parlour my new freckly friend surprised me by not going up to the counter. Instead, he motioned me to one of the little round cafe tables, where we sat down. A waitress came over. He ordered two vanilla coupes.

‘How grand!’ I crowed.

He looked at me. His eyes were big, milky-blue and pink-rimmed, with heavy lids and ginger lashes.

He asked my name.

‘Greetje van der Plas. And you?’

His name was Mandel. He spelled out his surname for me: complicated, with a c and a z in it. I wasn’t listening, so it didn’t register. The coupes were set down before us.

‘Wouldn’t they take let you go to Germany with them?’ he asked.

I spooned up my ice cream and stuck my tongue into the coupe.

‘My mother wasn’t having it. Don’t know why. Wanted to have fun, I suppose. She was only eighteen when I was born. My father’s twenty-two years older than her.’

I licked the coupe clean. ‘Delicious!’

‘How mean to leave a three-year-old behind,’ Mandel said, ‘I’d never do that. The kid would think it’s being punished, without knowing why. You must have been miserable, but you’ve forgotten.’

I was never a crybaby, but now my eyes welled up, much to my own surprise and discomfort. I bit my lip, dabbed away my tears and laughed gaily.

‘What a wonderful dad you’d be!’

‘You’ve no idea how wonderful I am,’ Mandel said. ‘Another ice cream?’

He ordered two more. He must be very rich, I thought, pity he’s a foreigner.

‘When are you going back to Berlin?’ I asked.

‘Not as long as Hitler’s in power. You must have heard how vile the Nazis are.’

‘My father gets very worked up about them,’ I said off-handedly.

We didn’t see much of my father. He always left home early before my mother and I got up, and didn’t get back until after we’d had our supper. He wolfed down the food on his plate without looking at us, ignoring my mother’s carping, then vanished to his room upstairs to read until the early hours. Halfway the evening he came down with the newspaper for a cup of tea.

‘A fine mess over in Germany, Foxy,’ he growled at my mother as he leafed through the paper. ‘What sort of government have we got, anyway? What are the English up to? Bunch of idiots! Things aren’t looking good.’

After our ice creams Mandel and I went into the village. A small band was playing on the square. People were dancing. Mandel took my hand and pulled me along.

‘I can’t dance,’ I confessed.

‘Of course you can,’ he said, ‘it’s easy.’

And so it was. He held me tight, my lips almost touching his ear. The band played ‘Daisy, Daisy... give me your answer do...’

Mandel sang under his breath: ‘Gretchen... Gretchen...’

I looked around proudly. Did they see that I was dancing? My mother stood in the crowd, decked out in her best shawl and pearl earrings, her hair done up in the latest fashion. A man approached her, pointing to the dance floor. She declined with a winsome wave of the hand. People were always spying on each other, and my pretty, dark-haired mother was the subject of a lot of gossip.

Dancing with a foreigner amounted to adultery in public. My mother wore a sad smile. I wanted to smile back at her. Our eyes met. Her expression clouded, hardened. I was used to that, but now it felt like a slap across my cheek, the same humiliating sting. She had never hit me, but I’d have preferred a slap to this glowering look in response to a smile from me. I gritted my teeth.

Suddenly my eyes blacked out. This was why. Mandel’s hand, which was resting on my back, began to move. Then something happened which felt exactly - forgive the cliché - like a series of electric shocks. Never again did I experience anything like it. His lips were close to mine. Mine were mumbling - something about the ice cream being delicious and the air being mild. His lips mumbled something too, which I didn’t catch. I could tell by his eyes that he felt as confused as I did. He pulled me close. I felt something hard pressing against my thigh. I didn’t realise what it was. The music stopped.

‘Come on,’ said Mandel.

We walked along the seafront towards the dunes in the fading light. A cool breeze signalled the approach of autumn. Now and then our shoulders bumped together. To break the silence, I asked: ‘Are you here with your parents?’

No, he’d been put on the train to The Hague by his parents and sister, after which they’d gone back to his grandparents in Warsaw. Crossing the border had been pretty scary. Mandel himself was now living in ‘Skeveningy’ - he had trouble pronouncing the name of the Dutch seaside town - where his uncle and aunt had opened a boarding house. His uncle used to have a good factory in Potsdam.

How could anyone prefer running a boarding-house to running a factory? Very odd.

Mandel planned to finish high school here. He'd gone for a ride on his bike through the dunes earlier on, ending up in our village by chance.

'I miss my parents a lot,' he said.

I reached round to feel my back from time to time, thinking: that's what he felt, too. He took my arm and led me up to the top of a dune and down again the other side, into a hollow carpeted with marram grass and purple heather. In the middle, at the lowest point, there was a patch of white sand.

Mandel took his jacket off and spread it out on the sand. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and I stole a look at his arms. They were covered in little gingery curls.

We sat down on his jacket. He stroked my hair. I felt like a cat that doesn't want you to stop stroking it. I held my breath. He said: 'How pretty you are.'

I stared in disbelief.

'Me? Pretty?'

'Yes, didn't you know?'

He traced his finger along my cheek.

'You're a beauty. Beautiful eyes, too. You know that, don't you?'

My mother was always nagging me about my appearance, not that I cared much, but I felt unattractive. My eyes were a different matter, though. I could tell from an early age that they got attention. They're grey, with a greenish sheen. Even as a toddler I'd flutter my lashes and give people a wide-eyed stare, and promptly their faces would soften, as if I'd put a spell on them. I often got my way like that. But it had nothing to do with beauty, I thought, more with witchcraft.

I looked at him. His eyes were much darker now.

'Your eyes are lovely!' I said.

'Your ankles are very nice, too,' he replied, fondling them. 'Are your feet cold? Wait, I'll rub them warm.'

Not since I could remember had anyone acted so tenderly towards me. I felt a crippling shyness, and to overcome it I started babbling: 'D'you think my German's good? Because I make lots of mistakes, don't I? My father says German's the language of Goethe and Schiller. He's very keen on Heine. Have you heard of him?'

Mandel responded with a German quote: ''When I think of Germany in the night, I'm jolted from my sleep.' Heinrich Heine wrote that.'

'I was named after Greta Garbo, at least, according to my mother. I want to be called Greta when I grow up. Greetje sounds so childish, don't you think? Do you like film stars? My mother

sings French songs sometimes, when she's in a good mood. She's from Belgium. What's your favourite kind of music?

'Mozart.'

'Same as my father. You'd get along fine with him, I think. Shall we go to the cinema in Leiden some time?'

And I prattled away until he stopped my mouth. God Almighty! He was swallowing me whole! I cried out and toppled over on my back, gasping for breath as I felt my old self streaming away. Mortified, I pushed his arm away. What was that thing in the Holy Bible about whore-mongering and uncleanness? "Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience." What we were doing was unclean, no doubt about it. I told him so.

'Unclean? This is how it's supposed to be, when the woman wants to receive the man,' he explained. 'It's lubrication, Nature's way of easing the passage. Which is what makes it beautiful.'

'Oh, is that what it's for?' I whimpered, 'is that what God wants? Oh, oh my God!!'

He let go of me. 'Nature, God, call it whatever you like,' he said.

'But you do believe in God, don't you?!' I asked, startled.

'I do now,' he laughed. He unbuttoned his trousers. 'Go on, try holding it in your hand.'

I didn't dare at first, so I just tapped it gently.

'Why have you only got two balls?' I wanted to know.

'Only two? Everybody has two. At least, all men have two balls. If not, there's something wrong.'

'Oh, I thought they had lots of balls.'

'No they don't. Anyway, I'm perfectly happy with mine,' he laughed. 'Go on then, hold it.'

So I did. After that I couldn't take my hands off its warm, silky resilience. I leaned over to kiss it, put my cheek against it, tug it close.

We became 'one flesh'. I'd heard about the first time being a let-down — such high expectations, and then, was that all? But I had no expectations. It was the only time in my life that it felt like a gift from God.

The sky was clear and starry, with an almost full moon. He raised himself to look into my eyes. My head reeled with thoughts, dreams, visions of the future - with Mandel in the lead role.

He slumped forward and locked his arm round my neck with a groan.

'Mandel!' I cried in dismay.

It was over. I clung to him.

'What are you doing?' I wailed. 'Don't go! Stay with me!'

'You don't want to get pregnant do you?'

‘Oh Lord no!’

It hadn’t occurred to me. For a moment I just lay there, rigid with horror of the disaster that might befall me unless he was careful. I could just see my mother’s face! ‘Mum, I’m going to have a baby!’ Oh, God in Heaven! I threw my arms around my beloved’s neck.

‘You won’t ever leave me will you?’

He stroked my hair.

‘How old are you, anyway?’

‘Fourteen.’

He sat bolt upright.

‘Fourteen?’ He echoed, shocked. ‘I thought you were older. Sixteen or so.’

‘And you? How old are you?’

‘Seventeen. Won’t your parents mind you staying out late?’

‘What time is it, then?’

‘Eleven o’clock.’

Now it was my turn to get a shock. ‘Oh my God! I’ve got to get home!’

On our way back he put his arm round my shoulder. Now and then we stopped to kiss. My gait was different than normal. More graceful. Could it be true that I was beautiful?

Then it all went wrong.

He asked if I’d ever been in love.

‘Oh no!’ I assured him. ‘I never talk to the boys at school. The only boyfriend I’ve ever had was Casper, at Sunday School,’ I giggled. ‘He carried my satchel. What about you? Haven’t you ever been in love?’ I felt a stab in my heart and a strange sense of foreboding.

‘No, no, don’t tell me, better not.’

He took his arm away from my neck.

‘Sunday School?!’ he wondered. ‘Have your folks been baptised, then?’

‘What?’

‘Are they converts? Converted Jews I mean?’

I stopped in my tracks. ‘Huh? I’m not Jewish! Whatever gave you that idea?’

He seemed taken aback. ‘You look Jewish. Your face is very Jewish. And you were the only dark-haired girl in the group.’

‘I told you my mother’s from Belgium,’ I said. ‘She’s Catholic, but I’m not supposed to tell anyone. She goes to confession several times a week. No idea what sins she confesses. But don’t you go telling people, alright? My father doesn’t even know. He never goes to church. I do, though. I’m Protestant,’ I declared. ‘I go to our church on Sundays. You must have seen it, you know, the little white one with a half-dome on top like those skull caps Jews wear.’

Mandel leaned his head against mine.

I kissed him. ‘There used be an Israelite living here,’ I told him. ‘Moses Meijer, a scrap metal dealer. When my father was a boy he’d go and light his lamp on Friday afternoons, for some pocket money. That’s when the Sabbath starts, and they’re not allowed to do anything on the Sabbath. Meijer would be sitting there surrounded by his scrap metal, reading the Thora. That’s what they call the Old Testament. Nothing special about reading the Bible, of course, but Meijer was always going off on a tangent about all the wise stuff in there. My father was quite impressed. He says Jews are called “the people of the book”.’

‘It’s true,’ said Mandel.

‘Well, not to my knowledge,’ I said airily. ‘Wait till you see them at the start of the season, when our boarding houses fill up with those noisy, pushy folk in their posh clothes and all their fat children. The people of the book?! Whenever there’s some rude woman in the shop jumping the queue and clamouring for things we don’t even sell, you can be sure she’s a Jewess!’

I pointed to a scattering of litter in the verge. ‘Souvenirs left by Jews,’ I said.

A chill wind had come up, and I was shivering. But Mandel didn’t put his arm around me. I thought I’d better show him I was no ignoramus.

‘The Jews crucified Jesus,’ I said solemnly.

I had quite a reputation at school for learning by rote, and I could rattle off whole passages from the children’s Bible.

‘Israel was like a reed broken by the storm,’ I chanted, ‘now the Messiah will come, Hosanna! He’s come! He’s come! Hosanna in the highest!’

That bit always brought tears to my eyes. Now, too.

Mandel laughed scornfully. He had a lot to learn, obviously. I’d set him right, no problem.

‘But the Jews dismissed the word of God,’ I went on cheerily. ‘They crucified Jesus at Golgotha. D’you know what that means? The place of skulls. There was a great crowd of Jews with the rabbis in front, hurling insults. They spat on his naked body. “Ha, let him save himself if he can,” they jeered. And Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”... and then Jesus...’

‘But Jesus himself was a Jew,’ Mandel broke in.

‘So what if he was a bit Jewish!’ I went on, ‘saint Paul was of Jewish descent, too. But he converted. He went to the desert and Jesus appeared to him in a dazzling light, saying. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”. It’s in the Bible.’

What was that all about, I wondered briefly, hoping Mandel wouldn’t ask. I glanced sideways. Was he listening? He looked grim. Oh, I loved him so! My throat tightened.

‘D’you know why Paul was stoned by the Jews? Because of circumcision! That’s why the heathens refused to believe in the only true God, you see. Circumcision is very painful. But then Paul told them not to take it literally, because the true faith lies in the circumcision of the heart. Don’t you believe me?’ I asked, confident of his approval, almost embarrassed by how impressed he must be. Not only was I beautiful, I was intelligent too. He’d said so himself. But now he’d gone all quiet. Had I said something wrong?

‘What’s happening to the Jews is their own fault,’ I stated firmly. ‘Because when Pilate washed his hands in innocence the Jews said “let his blood come over us and over our children.” Just shows: they were cursing themselves and their offspring.’

I glanced aside again. Did he understand what I’d been saying? I’d been quoting the Bible in Dutch, after all, and the rest of my talk was garbled German. Did that annoy him?

‘Do you follow me?’ I asked.

Still no response. At a loss, probably. As we returned to the village I saw shadowy figures with torches on the beach and the dunes. A search party? I felt a rush of fear. What would happen when I got home? Perhaps Mandel could whisk me away there and then. In a couple of years I’d be old enough to marry.

I tugged at his arm. ‘Say something!’

He pushed me away. My heart sank.

He stopped at a corner. He shook my hand.

‘My bike’s here.’

In the street light I could see his face clearly at last. He looked completely blank, glassy-eyed, like the blind beggar by the church on Sundays.

‘Go away now, go!’ he said.

I set off down the road, deserted by now.

I turned round for a last look. He called out, what it was didn’t sink in until later. His voice was high and shrill. ‘But you liked it, didn’t you?! You liked my *beschnittenen Schwanz!*’

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