

Beyond a Thousand Bars, No World

A Love in Thoughts Story

for doveheart

by Rodo

THE MAGNOLIAS WERE in full bloom, shedding white petals over the ground below them. “My heart, it looks, and there it finds no tree, nor yet solace, just stone and a city,” Günther thought absent-mindedly as he walked towards his school, a lazy April wind in his hair and a timid summer sun warming his face. The day had started promising, which meant it was likely to end in lightning, rain and school-yard trouble.

The school year began more or less the way Günther expected; Gustav greeted him with a lewd remark about his sister that failed to move him and a few of the other boys joined in with mockery of his interest in poetry that did. Only one boy at the back of the classroom remained suspiciously silent. It took him a few moments to realise why – the boy was new.

He was good-looking, just not exactly Günther’s type with his dark hair and boyish face, and obviously very fascinated by whatever he saw on the other side of the windowpane. It seemed as if he was caught in another world. Günther knew the feeling all too well.

“The new guy,” one of the boys chimed in. “I heard he’s a prole. Guess you won’t be the odd one out any more, Günni!”

Günther just looked at him askance and walked to the desk beside the new guy. He nodded at him before he looked out of the window. Not the chatty sort, then. So Günther took out his book and read a few pages until the teacher entered the room and everyone had to stand up to greet him.

Latin was boring as always, just like history. Günther bravely took notes without paying much attention and hoped it wasn’t going to be important later. When the bell rang he fled the stifling atmosphere

of the factory-like school building. It was spring and unbearably crowded within the uniform corridors with their blank, silent doors.

Günther didn't wake from the daze until he sat down under the chestnut tree in the corner of the yard, bathing in the cool shadow and birdsong that drowned out the noisy students. He still held his book, so he put it in his lap and read while a blackbird danced around his feet. It suddenly chirped and fled, and a deeper shadow obscured what little light flew past the leaves.

Günther looked up wearily and saw the new boy – Paul, the teacher had said – whose eyes were curious and bold while an insecure and nervous smile graced his lips. It seemed eager to please, even.

“Hello,” Paul said, hands in his pockets.

“Hello,” Günther replied and stared at him. He was about to go back to his book when Paul finally found the courage to speak.

“You're reading *Beneath the Wheel*, right? I saw the cover earlier. What do you think about it? I really like the merciless depiction of the meaninglessness of modern education. It's not about learning, and least of all about art, it's all about performing in expected ways. No room for poetry anywhere.”

Günther saw a flicker in Paul's eyes, a telltale sign of interest and enthusiasm. A warm thought ran down his throat, but he couldn't quite catch it. Then his tongue moved before his brain could follow. “I think for me it's Hans and his dilemma: the promising start, the slow decay of his mind and soul, until his inevitable suicide. And it's all just a matter of circumstance and unlucky love.”

Paul sat down next to him, a shoulder brushing against his, warmth hugging his jacket. “Maybe that's the destiny that awaits us all. Maybe it's not age that is our ruin but rather the circumstances.”

They smiled at each other and for the smallest of moments Günther felt they were soulmates, destined to be together until they died. It was exhilarating.

“Once you'll visit me as well,” Günther quoted.

“You won't forget me,” Paul continued.

From that moment on it was poetry and art and friendship. Nothing could come between them; they wrapped themselves around each other, protected one another from the world beyond, which didn't quite understand why words were magic and desire. They stuck together when someone mocked Günther

or when Paul was bullied because of his background. None of these plebes, Günther thought, truly understood that Paul was more intelligent than them. He had something to tell the world and Günther was listening. For the first time he felt like he would be a part of something great.



The tin soldiers lay forgotten on the floor, their tiny muskets pointing nowhere. Günther was elsewhere, somewhere he didn't have to play with boring little soldiers, re-enacting even more boring old battles to please his father. Instead, he was listening to his mother's soft voice, telling stories to his little sister who stared wistfully out of the window. Günther could hardly see her through the crack of the open door, but he was sure she was looking down onto the street. Hilde had never liked sitting still for too long. Not when there were hoops to play with and boys to pick on.

"Hildchen," his mother suddenly said, and Günther jerked his head around just early enough to notice the traitorous stiffening of Hilde's back. She guiltily moved around and bit her lip. Their mother sighed. "Do pay attention."

Hilde nodded hastily, their mother read on and soon Hilde was looking out of the window again. Günther on the other hand let himself be drawn into a world made out of fancy words and heroic ideas. Everything always seemed brighter and more beautiful in his imagination.

A soft, disapproving sigh startled him out of his reverie. He had been so absorbed that he hadn't heard his father approaching until it was too late. Günther sat up guiltily, employing the same motion his sister had moments ago.

"Father," he murmured over his blushing cheeks.

"Günther, what are you doing on the floor spying on your mother and sister?"

The dark wooden boards of the floor felt cool under his fingertips. "I wasn't spying," he protested. "I was just listening to mama telling a story."

Günther knew before he spoke that this was the wrong answer, but his pride got in the way of common sense. He was *not* spying, least of all on his boring sister. Unfortunately his boring sister had heard his

voice and came running, cheeks flushed, surely eager to witness his humiliation.

But he was wrong. Hilde, apparently so bored she would do anything to get out of the house, instead bombarded their father with question after question.

“Are you busy? Can I go out? Can I go to the park, papa? Please,” she begged.

Their mother had joined their father in sharing a look that spoke of disappointment and exasperation.

“Very well,” their father finally said. “But Günther will go with you and make sure nothing happens, right Günther?”

Günther suppressed a sigh and nodded. At least he would avoid another lecture on what it means to grow up and to become a man. And so he walked past his parents and down the stairs, although he was less enthusiastic about it than Hilde. She dashed past him and beamed up at him, already wearing her boots, when he jumped down the last couple of stairs. Her undone laces and beaming smile taunted him.

They were halfway to the park until Günther finally forgot that he'd embarrassed himself in front of his parents. Again. Hilde ran ahead with her hoop and greeted the neighbour's dog and the servant walking it. The fluffy white thing loved being scratched between the ears and chasing after hoops almost as much as it disliked Günther.

“Come on, Günther!” Hilde cried after the servant had liberated the dog from Hilde's iron grasp.

Despite himself he had to smile. The park was green and cool with the nearing autumn ahead of them.

“Don't take it so hard,” Hilde said out of nowhere. “Papa doesn't mean to treat us both like that. At least somebody likes mama's boring stories. Maybe he'll let me play with your toy soldiers. It must be boring all on your own.”

As fast as he could Günther picked up a fallen stick and poked her in the side.

“Aua!” Hilde squeaked. Her retaliation escalated into a full blown swordstick fight.



Paul had been behaving strangely all day, looking away when Günther looked at him and tearing bits of paper into even smaller bits until they almost disappeared. He did still speak to Günther and he was

friendly when spoken to, but also distracted and silent to the point of living in a different world. Günther meanwhile just sighed, glanced at him when he wasn't looking and cursed himself for telling Paul.

"I've never been in love with a girl," he had said when Paul asked him. "I've been in love with boys, though." He had added it after a pause because he really did understand what Paul went through with Liesel. A one-sided crush was a one-sided crush.

Günther should have known that Paul wouldn't take it in stride as he had other things. Until that confession he had probably thought there was nothing to the jokes of the other boys. And now he had ruined the best friendship of his life. Well done, Günther. He sighed again and tried to pay attention to the teacher for a change.

To his surprise, Paul decided not to keep him at a distance after school. Instead he followed Günther home. He was silent, still nervous, but by his side.

"You're not in love with me, right?" he finally blurted out on the front steps.

Günther stared at him as if he had lost his head. "No, Paul. I'm not in love with you. You're my best friend. Believe me, if I had a crush on you, you would have noticed."

Paul flushed, whether due to excitement or embarrassment Günther didn't know, and followed him up to his room without asking if he was welcome. In fact, he didn't say another word. He just sat on the bed, looking at everything but Günther, patiently resisting every attempt to initiate a conversation. After a while, Günther gave up and feigned an interest in the ladybug that crawled up and down the window sill as if it didn't know where it wanted to go and had forgotten about its wings. It was as if a thought was trapped inside Paul's skull and couldn't find its way to his tongue, Günther decided.

"What's it like?" Paul finally asked, his cheeks flushing as he noticed that he startled Günther.

"Not much different from being in love with a woman, I expect." Günther drawled, eyebrows raised.

"No. I mean ... what's it like to do that with a guy?"

"Not that I have much to compare it to, but I would say it feels like doing it with a guy. It depends upon the guy, of course." He smirked.

Paul was red as a beet and Günther just couldn't help feeling a little amused. On the other hand, it was obvious that something was still nagging at Paul's nerves. "Why the interrogation?"

If it had been possible for Paul to flush deeper, he would have. As it was, he opened his mouth and gawped at Günther.

“I’m just curious,” he finally admitted.

“If you are, why don’t you try it and find out for yourself?” Günther frowned.

Paul blinked. “What?” he sputtered, his usual eloquence completely forgotten.

Günther shrugged. “I’m just saying. I know a few guys.”

Paul’s eyes became adorably round and he had apparently lost the ability to speak, so Günther went down to the kitchen and the cellar and fetched two bottles of wine and glasses. Then he trudged back upstairs. Paul accepted the bottle with a grateful nod, but he didn’t bother with a glass. Instead he drank from the bottle, took huge gulps and it didn’t take long until he was smashed. Günther tried to match his pace, without success.

He didn’t even notice when Paul suddenly stopped drinking and stared at him. So the hand on his cheek, turning his head, surprised him, as did the serene look in Paul’s eyes. It seemed natural for Günther to lean forward and kiss those wine-coated lips. They felt warm and nice and Paul slowly kissed him back. Their tongues brushed against each other, but then Paul broke the kiss. However, he did not jerk away. Günther didn’t mind, precisely. It was lovely, but not the liquid lust that he was used to.

“That was nice,” Paul said, echoing Günther’s sentiment.

Günther nodded, feeling strangely out of breath.

“But not really what kissing a girl feels like.” Paul’s eyelids became noticeably heavy and his head dropped on Günther’s shoulder.

“Kissing guys I’m actually interested in is much more fun, I assure you.”

Paul nodded, but he fell asleep halfway through it, his head on Günther’s shoulder. Günther felt trapped somewhere between relief and disappointment. Oh how he wished he loved Paul like a lover, not a friend. It would make life so much easier. “None to the other exists: Each stands alone.”



The Moka Efti was everything Günther's parents disapproved of, probably with good reason. It was full of women who wore short dresses and too much make-up. The men were less well dressed and an odd bunch – artists, rakes and bold teenagers like him, barely old enough to roam the city on their own. Zipfer grinned as he saw Günther's eyes widen.

"I knew you'd like it, beautiful," he said.

Günther didn't like it; he loved it. Most of all he loved that the men and boys there were like him. And all of them, without exception, knew Zipfer, who loved having them around. Although Günther doubted anyone liked being around him. The man was greasy and had a cruel streak that everyone was weary of. He had money and influence enough to afford it. And if you were nice enough, he could get you whatever you wanted. Günther had been *very* nice to him.

"This is Günther," Zipfer introduced him to the group sitting around one of the tables. Günther felt at home the minute he sat down and started talking to them. Django played music and refused to tell anyone what his real name was. Korre was dreamy and had an incredibly beautiful mouth that he rarely opened. Piet claimed his father was a Frenchman who had walked out on his mother before he was born. He had the same sense of humour Günther did and together they mocked the guests at the other tables. The gramophone played jazz.

"Try it," Korre told Günther and handed him a small glass full of clear liquid. Günther did, and it tasted as if he had swallowed paint thinner. He couldn't control the sputtering that coated everything within a metre in a fine coat of sprayed alcohol. The remaining mist hung over the table for seconds, in which everyone was too surprised to utter a word. Then they broke out into laughter.

"Very funny," remarked Django while he dried off his face with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"It is," a voice chuckled from behind him. Günther suddenly felt exposed and a shiver ran down his spine. Zipfer's face lit up and he gestured wildly for the man to join them. Günther was smitten with him the moment he laid eyes on Hans. His easy smile, blond hair and broad shoulders were enchanting.

Zipfer introduced Hans as the apprentice of the cook and a "special friend". The Adonis of a man sat down next to Günther, between him and Piet, and they talked – for hours, it seemed – about everything and nothing. Günther couldn't remember about what afterwards, but it was inconsequential anyway.

It was all about the voice that stroked his skin, the warm hands and fluid gestures, the nonchalant demeanour and the eyes that never left his.

They left the Moka Efti late, when it was dark and cold outside, and many customers had already crept back to their dreary lives. Not Günther, though. He and Hans laughed and bumped into each other, the alcohol in their blood keeping them warm. Two streets from the café Hans suddenly giggled and grabbed his hand. Before his tired and intoxicated brain could make sense of what was happening, he was pressed against a wall and kissed like he had never expected it to be. Hans tasted like him, like cigarettes and alcohol, but Günther didn't care. Not one bit. He kissed him back with all the passion he could muster, pulling Hans close by his coat.

When they finally broke apart, Günther felt even more dizzy and flushed. Hans pressed a last mischievous kiss to the corner of his mouth before he disappeared beyond the flickering street lights.

For a while they were almost inseparable. They shared the same ideals, laughed about the same things and above all Günther finally felt the sexual attraction that the relationship between him and Paul lacked. Hans' relatively uneducated attitude towards life made him feel alive and happy by association, carefree even. His family and school, of course, had a habit of reminding him that it was nothing but an illusion. He enjoyed its traces in his heart anyway.

One day he took Hans home, knowing that Hilde was out with friends and his parents on a trip to the Baltic Sea. They lay on Günther's bed, kissed and caressed each other, sometimes lazily, as if they had all the time in the world, sometimes urgently, craving release. When they lay in each other's arms afterwards Günther buried his head in Hans' shoulder and felt really, truly happy and content for the first time in as long as he remembered. He drew imaginary figures on Hans' chest with his fingers and sighed softly. Love was amazing.

It was then that he heard the door and his sister's footsteps. He should have known this moment wouldn't last forever.



The merciless sun burned his cheeks and arms, but Günther didn't care. The water caressing his feet was cool and the old wooden planks smelled pleasantly of times gone by. He could spend years out here, he decided, away from the worries of the world, with only chirping crickets and croaking frogs for company. It was music. "Wind carries a cradle-song, Sun warmly smiles down so long"

"Günther!" his mother cried, breaking the calm and ruining his mood. Better get up or else she'd keep disturbing the frogs.

His mother looked worriedly at his reddened cheeks. She clucked with her tongue, but didn't say more, evidently deciding that she had been chiding him too often already and that the pain would be punishment enough.

"Fetch your sister from the village. It's not good for her to spend so much time with the village rabble."

Günther nodded disgruntled. And he had to leave the peaceful pond for that? Couldn't she go and find her herself? At the very least that would embarrass Hilde and not him. He would look like her favourite, obeying her every word. Nothing was less impressing than being his mother's errand boy. Not that it had anything to do with wanting to impress Klaus, of course. Still, he mounted his bicycle and slowly rode past the full yellow fields and lush trees to the nearby village.

Klaus was seventeen, the son of a local farmer and very helpful if anyone asked for directions, help or a chat. He was blond and worked without a shirt in summer, which had provided Günther with ample opportunities to admire his tall form, muscular shoulders and stunning smile. It had taken Günther a full week to acknowledge that he had a crush on him, and even longer to search for the courage he needed to act on it.

"I'm flattered, but no. There are enough girls for me, no need for boys," Klaus had said after Günther had clumsily kissed him. "I'm sure there are girls who'd like you too, with your fancy poems and all."

Klaus had remained blissfully ignorant to the fact that he had just broken Günther's heart into the sort of sharp, tiny splinters that inspired poets to write entire books of love poetry. Günther, however, for all his appreciation of poetry, was not a poet himself. The lack of disgust on Klaus' part, combined with his own stubbornness, had convinced him that Klaus was just shy. Or that he saw Günther's interest as mere infatuation and not honest and true love.

Neither Hilde nor Klaus were at the farm as Günther rode by, nor could he see them in the surrounding fields, so he continued to ride to the village, which was its usual dreamy self, so different from the city Günther lived in. Berlin never slept and the night was illuminated by electric lights, the stars of the new age.

None of the boys he asked had seen his sister, and neither had the pastor, which probably meant that Hilde had not been here. She rarely went unnoticed. It was a family trait. Well, he'd done his best. He could ask at Klaus' farm, but if she wasn't there either, he wouldn't know where else to look. And so he rode back, sweat teasing his sunburn. He silently cursed his mother.

The farm was quiet. The workers were mostly on the fields and meadows during this time of the year. A metallic sound from one of the barns rang sharp through his mind, even though his brain was quite sure it was just one of the barn cats chasing a mouse or sparrow. But no meowing or frantic squeaks followed.

Günther didn't know what persuaded him to check out the barn. He didn't remember entering it afterwards either. Maybe he had thought there was a thief, or he had wanted to look if it really had been a cat. He was just there suddenly, watching Klaus and his sister kissing passionately in the hay. He barely noticed the irritated cat strutting out.

Being his mother's errand boy suddenly seemed a lot more attractive, but Günther had to fight to keep the bile in his throat and the sneer in his heart before he cleared his throat. Neither had noticed him yet. A pigeon took wing in the beams of the barn. Hilde and Klaus scrambled apart.

"Mother sent me to fetch you," Günther said in a slightly acerbic tone. He could not fight the hint of a blush and hoped the sunburn excused it.

Hilde did not flush. She nodded and straightened her skirt to get rid of stray bits of hay. Klaus didn't say anything and he didn't look Günther in the eye. A coldness spread in him that not even the sun that burned his skin could melt. He didn't speak another word that day.



Everything about Hilde irked him lately. He once thought of her as his only ally in a world populated by enemies of all shades. He desperately wanted to think of her like that still. Sometimes he caught a glimpse of the boyish girl he loved, but then she was at the Moka Efti, hanging out with his – their – friends, and worse, she had Hans wrapped around her little finger.

“Is Hilde coming today?” was the first thing Hans said to him more often than not. When she was there he behaved like a fly drunk on light. When she was not, he was Günther’s, but their lovemaking was robotic instead of passionate. The kisses were empty and the smiles mere masks.

Günther sighed as he went home from a day in the park with Paul. At least those were what they used to be, mostly. Paul was as enchanted by Hilde as everyone else, but she didn’t even remember his name, so Paul was suffering in silence and poetry. Darkness followed Günther into the afternoon sun and the pressure on his chest grew with every step. He didn’t want to see Hilde right now, while his love for Hans was still tearing him apart.

Günther was not prepared for the sight that greeted him at home. The door had looked as ingenuous as always. Behind it, in the corridor, next to the stairs, Hans was pressing Hilde against the wall, sneaking a hand up her dress and kissing her with the passion he once had for Günther. She looked so small next to him.

He froze when he saw them, but they barely acknowledged him. Then Hans winked. He *winked*. And for the first time in years, Günther exploded. The hat stand was nearest, so he took it and hurled it at them with all his might, and a scream that shook his entire body. Next came the umbrellas and every insult he could think of. He remembered the screaming and the throwing, but just barely. Mostly he remembered their shell-shocked expressions, and the rage of a kind that he had never felt before, cold and hot and all-consuming. It drowned out Hilde’s shrieks, Hans’ confused protests, then his flight and her stomping up and into her room.

It finally died down when he was alone and nothing was left to be thrown or screamed at. Time stood still, tears ran down his cheeks and he broke down, crying until he couldn’t move. He was cold and he shivered. Finally the sobbing ceased as abruptly as it had begun. He was empty and nothing was left – no rage, no love, not even hurt. Only a deep, dark emptiness of the size of his soul.

It was dark outside when he finally dragged himself into his bed. His head was empty, so empty, as was his stomach, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered at the moment, until the overwhelming sadness would be back to torture him. For now, he lay in his bed, wearing his clothes, and only one thought ran through his head, again and again, like a broken record: "I will that I was dying, then everything were still."

Fin

Author's Notes:

"Beyond a thousand bars, no world" is from *Der Panther* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by A. Z. Foreman

"My heart, it looks, and there it finds no tree, nor yet solace, just stone and a city" is from *Magnolie des Herbstes*, by Rudolf Borchardt, clumsily translated by me.

"Once you'll visit me as well, You won't forget me" is from *Bruder Tod* by Hermann Hesse, very badly translated by me.

"None to the other exists: Each stands alone." are the final verses of *Im Nebel* by Hermann Hesse, as translated by Walter A. Aue

"Wind carries a cradlesong, Sun warmly smiles down so long" is from *Juli* by Theodor Storm, translated by me.

"I will that I was dying, then everything were still." Is from *In einem kühlen Grunde* by Joseph von Eichendorff, translated by Walter A. Aue