

SIERRA BELL OWS

The City We Lived In After the War

In the city we lived in after the war, we recognized each other by our mutual thinness, the missing part of ourselves we had left on the other continent: the roundness of our cheeks, our rumps and bosoms. Mrs. Tz—held her hands in front of her chest, gripping imaginary cantaloupes, “Like this! They were like this,” she said. The old country was overflowing with our sexy flesh, with thighs and dimpled elbows, but we had escaped, just slivers of ourselves. We were like children again, knobby kneed and easily bruised, and some of us felt reduced. Mrs. L—said she didn’t make love anymore, her husband does not reach for her and she does not bleed. “That is when you should be like rabbits,” said Mrs. Tz—, “You have a free pass, like when you are still breastfeeding, no need to worry.” Mrs. Tz— gestured toward Mrs. E—, who was holding her coffee cup out of reach of the toddler on her lap. “You know what I mean, yes?” Mrs. S—, the youngest of us, blushed and went to the kitchen for a fresh pot. “Why can’t I say it?” said Mrs. Tz—, “What is so wrong about saying what everyone is doing? Huh? Everyone but Mrs. L—, at least.”

In the city we lived in after the war, we took the streetcar to the beach on Saturdays even though it was crowded with all the other immigrants who had come after all the other wars, all the way back until the beginning of time. There had been so many wars that the city was thronged with women in wool skirts, men in hats and children wearing clothes they had grown out of. We went to the beach because it was free and we liked to see our children with sand in their hair. Only

the oldest among us, those who no longer had any shame, would wear bathing suits. Mrs. Tz— wore a black one piece and cat's eye sunglasses. "What? They're plastic. Very modern," she said. None of us could swim, but we liked looking at the dark water of Lake Ontario. Our old men would bring fishing poles and sit with their hats shading their faces.

Our war was the most recent one, so we never spoke of it. The children and grandchildren of survivors of the old wars couldn't get enough of talking about the wars they had not witnessed. They wrote poems, songs and novels about them. Instead, we listened to the radio in our kitchens. We listened to pop music we were too old for and jingles for laundry soap and Chevrolets. We played cards and set the table with olives for our friends to fill their mouths with when they came to visit. Mrs. E—, who was an exceptional baker, made bread every Friday and gave each of us a loaf. It was so dense and crusty that it would stick to the top of our mouths and stifle our tongues. If we ate enough of it, our bellies would feel as full of bread as of unsaid words. We fed it to our husbands and our children, but always kept the heel for ourselves.

Mrs. L—worked in a department store on Bay St. and sold stockings, slips and gloves to ladies plumper than herself. She worked in the section that only sold clothes that were worn against the skin. Of all of us, she had the most expensive clothes, one green dress and one blue, both made of silk, which she wore on alternating days to her job. She always smelled of a different eau de toilette; she'd spritz some on her pulse points at the perfume counter each morning. When she came directly from work to sit with us and drink coffee, we would offer her an apron to wear over her dress, just in case. Behind her back, Ms. Tz—would say that Mrs. L—'s fine clothes were wasted on her. "Who is there to appreciate it? Not her husband surely."

Mrs. S—married a Canadian man. We did not know if she had a lost a husband in Europe or if she had never had one, but she'd come to the city with her sister alone. She was the only one among us who spoke English at home and we pitied her that. "What do they talk about? Huh? What does he know about anything?" said Mr. Tz—. Of course, the husband wasn't only Canadian, a branch of his family had left France after the revolution and another had come from Ireland during the troubles. "Look at his face! Big, smooth and bland," said Mrs. Tz—. Mrs. Tz—'s husband had a face like an un-sanded piece of wood, complete with saw marks. We watched Mrs. S— for signs that she was becoming less like us, we waited for her to forget words in her native tongue.

Mrs. E— craved sauerkraut when she was pregnant. She wanted boiled cabbage and salted meat. “Your babies know where they are from even before they are born,” said Mrs. Tz—. Mrs. E— had birthed three children during the war and two more since. Behind her back, Mrs. Tz— said, “That woman has no sense. Or no self-control.” The children were short and dark-eyed; all five of them looked alike despite the different soil where they’d grown. The children all slept in the same bed, a tangle of interchangeable legs and ankles, except the baby, who still slept with his parents. “Little good that does,” said Mrs. Tz—. We gave Mrs. E— the coats and shoes that our children had grown out of.

Mrs. Tz— was fined by the city for keeping chickens in her backyard. “What harm am I doing to anyone? Who is hurt by good eggs in the morning? Tell me,” she said. Her fingers were stained from cutting beets and she rolled tiny cigarettes that we all thought were vulgar. We would not have invited Mrs. Tz— to drink coffee with us in the towns we lived in before the war, but in Toronto she was unquestionably one of us. Mrs. L— had seen her first in the grocery store dropping walnuts one by one on the linoleum floor. When the grocer told her to stop, she said, “How will I know if they are good without hearing the sound they make when they hit the ground? You tell me. How?” Mrs. Tz— left the store without the walnuts, but with an invitation for coffee from Mrs. L—.

We met in kitchens to drink coffee in the late afternoons when the light thinned to the color of dishwater. In the winter, we held the cups in our hands to warm them, lifted them to our cheeks. In the summers, we would tie damp clothes around our necks but drink our coffee hot. For Mrs. S—’s wedding present, we gave her a coffee grinder with a silver handle. “Only peasants use the instant,” said Mrs. Tz—.

In the city we lived in after the war, we distrusted our small comforts. We bought winter coats from the Salvation Army. “I wonder who died in this thing?” said Mrs. Tz—, wearing her coat two-sizes too big so it hung down straight from her thin shoulders.

It was disconcerting to find ourselves in a place where the store shelves were stocked with new things in brightly colored packaging, where the churches still had their roofs and where the bridges had their middles.

“It hardly seems fair,” said Mrs. E— and we didn’t know if she meant that it was unfair that the apartments and tenements where we lived had never been bombed or that it was unfair that we’d crossed the ocean to move into them. Certainly, it was unfair that Canada was so full of roads and wheat fields that had never felt the bottom of a soldier’s boot on them. The country felt so very, very young. Wet

behind the ears even. But it also felt unfair that we were breathing and drinking coffee and going to the shores of the lake on the weekends with our children.

We weren't sure that our lives could go on like this forever, with the war like a room we'd just left, like a song that had just ended. We could feel it at our backs. Mrs. L—'s husband woke up to check that the doors were locked at least twice each night. Mrs. E— said once, "I worked in an airplane factory in Augsburg. I helped make those airplanes. Can you imagine that?"

When Mrs. S— was pregnant with her first child, she would not drink coffee. "The doctor said it isn't healthy," she said. This is when we knew she would leave us, forget about the war and pretend she'd always lived in the city with her Canadian husband and her half-Canadian children.

"If a cup of coffee could harm a child," said Mrs. Tz—, "then Mrs. E—'s children would all be morons. What kind of nonsense is this?" Mrs. Tz— was the only one who tried to keep Mrs. S— from forgetting. The rest of us did not resist. We loved Mrs. S— and we wanted her to be happy. She grew plump and bought baby clothes from Sears instead of asking us for hand-me-downs.

"If happy is what's important, then Mrs. L— and Mrs. E— should trade husbands," said Mrs. Tz— as she collected the coffee grounds for her compost. She built trellises in her front yard and grew grapes where her neighbors grew lawns. "What do you get from grass? Nothing. You've tasted my wine. Good, no?"

Mrs. L—'s wrists were so thin we could see her veins looping around her bones, greenish through her skin; we could trace them like rivers on a map. She pulled on her sleeves to cover them when Mrs. Tz— remarked on them. With her hair up, you could see the knobs of her vertebrae, a ridge up the back of her neck. "Put more butter on your bread, a man wants a little flesh to grab onto," said Mrs. Tz—.

Only once did Mrs. L— say anything back to her, her lips as thin and taut over her teeth as the skin over her bones. "Not everyone can so easily make this new place into the old place. Chickens? Grapes? Even your neighbors can see that you are still a peasant." Mrs. Tz— looked down at her calloused hands. Then she stood up, her chair legs scraping against the floor as she rose. Mrs. E— wondered if Mrs. Tz— might hit Mrs. L—, though who could strike so slight a woman?

"None of us is the same person as we were back home. None of us." Mrs. Tz— sat down again. Fat tears dribbled down her long nose and salted her coffee. Mrs. L— reached across the table and put her small hands on Mrs. Tz—'s head, like a priest blessing a child.

When Mrs. Tz— kept a goat in her empty chicken coop, she gave extra portions of the milk to Mrs. L—. In return, each winter Mrs. L— gave Mrs. Tz— a pair of

soft leather gloves from her store. Inside those gloves, Mrs. Tz—'s fingers looked long and elegant.

The city would always be the city we lived in after the war, no matter how long we stayed. The war always breathed against the backs our necks.

We could remember the towns where we'd been born, with their green hills, muddy roads and white winters. We'd worn wool pinafores stitched by our mothers; we'd strung wild flowers in our hair on May Day. We could remember the bigger towns where we'd worked in factories and married our husbands. We'd cooked our suppers over hotplates in apartments we were proud we could pay for on our own. On sunny days, we'd listened to brass bands playing in the park among crowds of men and women we thought were very much like us. We didn't know that soon some of us would die, some of us would kill and some of us would flee across the ocean. We were innocents, and yet even then the inexorable momentum of our days was leading us to the war, like a bicycle coasting downhill. Those towns are no longer the places we were born or the places we were married. Even Mrs. Tz— would not go back to them.

Mrs. E— raised her children speaking Polish at home. "What for?" said Mrs. S—. "Will they ever visit?"

"Too dangerous to visit," said Mrs. E—.

"No need to visit," said Mrs. Tz—, "with so many children, they are a Polish village unto themselves. Am I wrong?"

In the city we lived in after the war, we would always feel like newcomers, even as we moved from our apartments downtown into houses just outside the city. Even as our husbands mowed our new lawns wearing their undershirts and short pants. Even as we bought laundry machines that gurgled in our basements. Mrs. Tz— got her driver's license. "Not difficult, just like a tractor," she said.

And we loved the city we lived in after the war because it did not change, or, if it did, it changed just as slowly as we did. New immigrants came after other wars. They were kept warm by the winter coats we'd, by that time, donated to the Salvation Army. The shops that once sold jars of sauerkraut instead sold spicy pickled cabbage from Korea. We still drank coffee, grinding the beans by hand.

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