



THE GIFT FROM BERLIN

Lucette ter Borg

Translated from the Dutch by Liedewy Hawke

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A Novel

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*Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen,
die sich über die Dinge zieh'n.
Ich werde den letzten vielleicht nicht vollbringen,
aber versuchen will ich ihn.*

*Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm,
und ich kreise jahrtausendlang;
und ich weiß noch nicht: bin ich ein Falke, ein Sturm
oder ein großer Gesang.*

RAINER MARIA RILKE, Das Stundenbuch

*I live my life in ever widening circles,
Which fan out over the things of this world.
I may not complete the ultimate one,
Yet, even so, I will try.*

*I circle around God, around the ancient tower,
I have been circling thousands of years;
And still I wonder: am I a falcon, a storm
Or am I a glorious song.*

R.M.R., The Book of Hours

Translator's Note

The original German quotations, which appear in English in this edition, can be found at the back of the book, listed by page number.

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

Part One

THE SILENCE

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

IT HAD TO BE something he really wanted to do.

He went for a checkup and mailed the results to the Canadian Embassy in Bonn. He needed to include seventy-six years of medical history.

He had to state in writing that he could get dressed and undressed, tie up his shoelaces and wash without any help, that he could do his own cooking and shopping.

He had to go and see a psychiatrist, who questioned him about the relationship he'd had with his mother and father, with his brothers and sisters, his children. The psychiatrist jotted down observations in a thick notebook. He tried to make out what was being written across the table. He read upside down: "Perhaps a typical case of" — but that was all he could see.

He had to declare that he wouldn't be financially dependent on anyone in Canada and submit as proof all his financial data: the revenue from the sale of the Rothenburg house (one hundred and fifty thousand marks), part of the contents of the house (antiques and paintings worth ninety thousand marks), his pension income, the alimony he paid Hannelore.

“If your financial situation is good,” his son said, “everything will turn out all right.”

And everything did turn out all right.

When in February 1977 he officially received permission to immigrate, he cried. He wrote on the outside of the envelope: “My immigration to Canada! Thank God!”

He put together a list of the things he absolutely had to take. After a month of tallying, choosing and discarding, he was left with four closely typed sheets.

The first two read:

Bechstein

Piano stool

Elisabeth's things (jewellery, girls' books, glasses, hearing aid)

Writing desk

Beds (1 double, 2 single)

Duvets (5)

Blankets

Covers and fitted sheets

Mattresses

Secretaire

Swabian cabinet

Frankfurt cabinet

Chesterfields (4)

Bookcases (10)

Red sofa, green sofa

Tea table

Dining-room table with chairs (6)

Low table

Persian carpets

Bohemian crystal
Meissen service
Enamelled bronze snuffbottle
Mortars
Weights
Barometer
Bronze bell (Hauenstein)
Paintings and etchings
Curtains
Huntinghorn
Washing machine
Dryer
Vacuum cleaner
*Household: miscellaneous (plates, pans, cutlery, mixer,
et cetera — left and right kitchen cupboards)*
Two record players with speakers (8), amplifiers
Radio
Television
Long-playing records
Books
Music books
Lawn mower
Chainsaw
Rake
Pruning shears
Hoe
Spade
Hammer drill
Sander
Lathe

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*Tools, miscellaneous (2 hammers, 2 handsaws, monkeywrench,
pair of pincers — garden hut)*

Guns (Sauer and R93)

Skis

Tents and accessories (large, small)

Sleeping bags (3)

On the other sheets he had itemized his favourite records, books and music books. He skipped the clothes. No need to list those. He was just going to take what fit into his backpack anyway.

He tried not to get all choked up when he shuffled through the house in his dressing gown — through the conservatory with its white, pink and purple amaryllises, the music room with the grand piano, stroking it gently as he passed, the living room with the Persian rugs, the sheepskins piled in thick layers in front of the fire place, the dining room with her knick-knacks.

After Elisabeth had stopped performing on the stage, she got rid of her evening gowns, her diamond earrings, her large feathered hats, and bought loden skirts and cardigans with leather buttons. She threw herself into collecting cuckoo clocks, dolls in traditional costume and lace cloths just as fervently as she used to practise her scales. Mrs. Baches, the housekeeper, always took a deep breath when she was about to tackle the dining room. She'd loosen up her shoulder blades as though she were getting ready to dive ten metres under water, and only then would she step inside.

He tried to keep a cool head and not think about that day, twenty years ago, when he'd set out hand in hand with Elisabeth to choose the wallpaper, and tiles for the bathroom

and the curtains. He tried to forget how they'd been back, hand in hand, six more times, because every few years she wanted a whole new colour palette in the house. That's what she called it and he cleared his throat.

"Come on now, be ruthless," he told himself at least a hundred times. And sometimes it worked: once, in a single afternoon, he tossed all the chipped cups into the garbage and stuffed Elisabeth's clothes and table coverings into bags for the Salvation Army.

He was only going to take the most useful things. Only what he'd otherwise have to buy in Canada anyway. Only what he couldn't do without.

WHEN THE SNOW AROUND Rothenburg was long gone, when the roadsides were blue with veronica and the swallows had made it back to their nests in the neighbours' carport (which used to be a cowshed), he'd sold off most of the stuff and the house had been cleaned from the basement to the attic.

"I'll take care of the vacuuming," he'd said to Mrs. Baches, because that was something he enjoyed, "if you'll do the closets and the bathrooms." He stretched an elastic sweatband over his forehead and two around his wrists, as he'd seen John McEnroe wear at Wimbledon. He vacuumed for two days straight. Then all the rooms, the windowsills, the corridor at the entrance hall, the landings, the stairs and even the hard-to-reach spots behind the radiators were clean as a whistle. He snapped open the vacuum cleaner and pulled out a full, bulging bag. He went outside and flung it with a wide sweep of his arm into the garbage container.

And so came the twelfth of May, 1977. On that day, three

movers in two vans turned into the steep lane leading to his house. The trucks' wheels dug deep ruts into the roadsides. The two Frisian horses that stood in the meadow across from his house took off with their tails in the air.

This was actually the last notable event of that sunny day. In three hours everything was stowed in the trucks, the house emptied. He joined the movers on the terrace for a final glass of beer and then it was off in a column to Antwerp. There, in dock 405, the household effects were loaded into three blazing-red containers on a Conti-Lines ship, destination Vancouver.

VERONIKA TOOK HIM TO the Frankfurt airport. They drove from Karlsruhe, and during the entire ride she never said a word. The night before, yes, then she'd talked and later screamed, too, with a full glass of wine in her hand. He was crazy to leave Germany. He never *ever* wanted to feel at home anywhere — and when he almost did, he was off. It was absurd to sell everything he owned and throw himself with his money into an obscure adventure at the other end of the world. He was a selfish man who only thought of himself — and not of her, his daughter, who really needed him, too. It was always only Wolfgang, wasn't it? Wolfgang the little angel, Wolfgang the *bon vivant* who never did anything wrong, Wolfgang the child who always did exactly what he wanted. Never, not even once, the daughter — always just that one son.

He'd protested. "But Veronika dear, it's not like that at all, is it? You know perfectly well why ..." He stopped in mid-sentence and turned around.

At the airport, just before he had to check in, Veronika cried, and he did his best not to see her tears. He felt embarrassed. She

was past thirty after all. Was it *his* fault she'd been unlucky with that husband of hers who drank too much? Really, she shouldn't be looking for comfort on her father's knee anymore.

Veronika took a handkerchief and a small bundle of letters from her bag. She pressed the letters into his hand. He tucked them into a tiny side pocket of his backpack and promptly forgot about them, for one, two, three, four — a great many years.

He said, "Goodbye. I've really got to go through now. Please, don't cry anymore. I'll be fine."

WHEN THEY LANDED IN Calgary for a stopover eleven hours later and taxied down the runway to the gate, Andreas got his first view of the Rocky Mountains. Blue flanks with more and more white dots. The higher he looked, the more dazzling the white. He pressed his burning forehead against the cold aircraft window and closed his eyes.

In the seat next to him, a girl of about eighteen was crying. All during the flight she'd kept her eyes fixed on the photo album in her lap. Sometimes she was quiet for a while, but then she would turn a page, open up a letter, and the blubbering started all over again.

Tears again, Andreas thought. He didn't know whether he should see it as a good sign or a bad one.