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Cuckoo

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

A 1949 short story set in a bomb-damaged city in post-war Germany. Frau Beigel's uncle comes from the country to the city to sell a cuckoo-clock.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Germany; post-war; city ruins; bombing; survival; starvation.

Frau Beigel came up from a hole in the ground into the light of a spring morning. Her forehead, her shoulders, her hands, her knees, in turn felt the warmth of the sun. Sunlight clothed her from head to foot, and through the rents in her slippers the soles of her feet became aware of warmth and a feeling of life.

It really was the first day of spring.

The sky was a pale remote blue, as if all night it had been rising higher and higher. There seemed to be an immense space of tender, elastic air between the height of heaven and the remnants of the little provincial city which three years earlier and for no particular reason had been pattern-bombed. And in that space nothing at all was happening: not a movement of wind, nor a cloud, nor a wreath of smoke, nor a bird; scarcely even a sound.

No one could remain unaware of the charm of such a morning. Having shaken out her duster Frau Beigel looked around her, saw the tender colour of the sky and the delicate pinks and greys of the scorched ruins, and conceived a hope to match the promise in the air. This summer there would not be so many flies.

For everything passes and gets forgotten. Children played among the ruins who did not remember when they had been streets and squares,

and the bodies buried under heaps of rubble and in obliterated cellars had mouldered away. So one might reasonably hope that this summer there would not be so many flies.

Frau Beigel stood warming herself, and little by little her shadow moved up the broken steps which led down to her dwelling, as if it, too, were creeping forth into the sunlight. Frau Beigel's dwelling was half a cellar – the other half was blocked by the heap of bricks which had fallen in when the house fell – and she shared it with a woman whom she believed to be called Ilse. They had lived side by side for over two years, but without achieving any intimacy. The two women shared nothing except their shelter and the fire they kindled when they could collect enough fuel. Each kept her food, her clothes, her cooking-pot apart, sternly not stealing and not examining. It was perhaps the best way to live.

The other woman went out every morning, wearing a hat, so Frau Beigel supposed she worked as a servant for one of the occupying families. Frau Beigel also worked, she was a charwoman at a clinic. But the clinic only opened three days a week, which was why she was now dawdling on her threshold at ten in the morning.

It was an empty hour. The queue had already gone from before the greengrocer's, the children were in school. An American with a camera, some journalist, no doubt, had crossed the further corner of the square, thoughtfully scratching himself and yawning, and after him there was no one to look at until an old man appeared, walking clumsily and like a crab over the broken ground. He was a countryman, so much she could plainly tell by his gait and carriage. He came on, staring round him as if he were looking for a strayed cow. And as a peasant looks for a strayed cow and sees nothing else, not trees, nor hawthorns in bloom, nor the ridge of a mountain, the old man walked among the ruins without seeming aware of them, and set his feet on door-knobs and fallen roof-tiles as though they were gentians.

Then he saw Frau Beigel, and quickened his pace. His countenance relaxed. He had found his cow. She recognised in the old countryman her Uncle Joachim. He looked exactly the six years older that the lapse of time since their last meeting warranted, and under his arm he carried a bundle wrapped in a black cloth.

'Good morning, Maria,' he said. 'What a fine morning! So I have nosed you out.'

'Good morning, Uncle. I hope you are well.'

'I can't complain,' he replied. And indeed, in his dusty ill-fitting black suit, with his brown skin and his small clear eyes, he looked as

hardy as an animal which has ridden out the cold season in its burrow and comes forth to shake itself in the sun. But why was he here? That, seeking her, he should find her, was not very remarkable: the peasant's shrewdness is not far removed from the animal's instinctiveness, he had, as he said, nosed her out – and for that matter she herself had kept enough of her peasant origin to have remained in the same quarter of the town, burrowing herself a new home under familiar ground. But that Uncle Joachim should seek her out for no reason beyond family affection would be remarkable indeed.

'How are things at the farm?' she asked.

'They don't go too badly. Better than here, anyhow. How old you look, Maria, and how out of condition! It hasn't done you much good, being a town widow.'

'Here, we are all more or less hungry,' she answered.

'So I suppose. Still, it is the lot you have chosen. I've not come here to ask you to change it.'

She had not supposed it, any more than she had substantially supposed that the black cloth wrapped a pound of butter, sausage-meat, or new-laid eggs. She knew Uncle Joachim. Such hands do not open to shower such gifts. But such hands can be opened with a golden key. In the promise of the spring morning Frau Beigel conceived a second hope. Why should not Uncle Joachim, selling on the black market, take her as an agent?

'I don't wish to change my lot,' she said. 'I am too old to change. Besides, I earn.'

He looked at her slippers.

'Good money,' she went on, forestalling his enquiries. 'There is no shortage of money, at any rate. Never in all my days have I known such spending. It has to be seen to be believed.'

She talked on, baiting the water, and he, like an old fish under the weed, watched her crumbs go down-stream.

'But those who have got the stuff to sell,' she concluded, 'are never the ones who get the high prices. It is the agents and the go-betweens who make the money. There's no fair-dealing left in the world, more's the pity!'

He hoisted the bundle more securely under his armpit; but all he said was, 'Stale news, Maria. No one will pay you for telling them that.'

His gesture with the bundle, though, had told her that he had brought something to market. She set herself more earnestly to cajole him. It was all she could do to keep the water from running out of her mouth. In the palms of her hands she could feel the freshness, the fatness, of Uncle Joachim's meat and butter – which she would sell for

him. Honestly, too, taking only a bit here and a bit there, not palming-off social relief stuff on clients and eating the fresh herself. For hunger was not her only hunger, she had a more imperious appetite to appease. Selling for Uncle Joachim she would have a career, and an object in life. She would be a person again.

But he was not hooked yet; and even if he took the bait, would she have the strength to land him? This burst of hope on a fine spring morning made her feel weak and dizzy – so dizzy that the power of sight seemed to drain from her eyeballs as she saw him come closer and take the bundle from under his armpit.

‘I had business in the town anyhow,’ he began.

She nodded. She could not speak.

‘So I thought I’d bring this along.’

As fold after fold of the black cloth was loosened a bony contour was disclosed, and she thought it might be the high breast of a fowl. He undid the last wrapping, and what she saw was a cuckoo-clock. Hunger and weakness undid her. Reckless with disappointment she exclaimed, ‘And what on earth possessed you to bring along that old trumpery? What use is a clock, a *clock*, when people are starving?’

‘That’s all you know about it! Clocks, watches ... they are selling like hot cakes. You’ll find me a buyer fast enough, Maria, if you just give your mind to it. And I’ll give you five per cent.’ Even then she could have landed her fish. But unnerved, she screamed out at him, ‘Sell it yourself, then! I’ve no time for such nonsense. People don’t even buy watches now. As for that old thing, you couldn’t sell it to a Russian!’

‘That’s what you think. But you don’t know everything.’

In spite of her fury she could not help feeling a waft of contemptuous pity for the old zany, as he began twiddling with his toy.

‘It’s in perfect order,’ he said. ‘It loses a little in the evening, but what does that matter? Nobody thinks of time in the evening.’

Jolted into movement, the clockwork set up a lumbering wooden rhythm, like the noise of a farm-wagon. He peered into the painted clock-face,

‘Listen, Maria! It’s coming.’

It was as though he thought she were still a child.

Rheumatically, the wooden bird raised its wings. The mechanism creaked, the tick-tock staggered.

‘*Cuckoo! Cuckoo!*’

A woman who was crossing the square stopped abruptly, clasping her shopping-bag to her stomach, and gazed at the sky. Another woman

rose breast-high into the sun from her cellar-hole. Two men coming round the corner stopped to listen, and one of them spat for luck. The woman half-way out of the cellar-hole began to call to someone underground. Everywhere heads popped out, people who had been dozing on the rubble-heap sat up, and voices asked, 'Did you hear that? The cuckoo ... It was a cuckoo!'

'Do you see, Maria? It's in perfect order.'

The bird's wings had stuck. He poked them with a horny forefinger, and they fell back with a little click.

Now the journalist with the camera reappeared. He, too, had heard the cuckoo. But being better-fed and better-clothed than those other hearers he was also readier-witted; and so, seeing the old countryman wrapping up a carved object in a cloth he approached, and said with polite interrogation, '*Kuk-kuk?*'

Uncle Joachim thrust the cuckoo-clock into the journalist's hands, and said to Maria, 'You know how to talk to these people. You're used to them. Tell him he must pay me in American money.'

The butter, the eggs, the sausages, the pork so rosy and so white, the taste of fresh food, the taste of life, the feet taking hold of the ladder, the achievement of a position, the becoming somebody again ... if she could drive a good bargain now, all these might yet be hers! But anxiety made her rapacious, and the journalist turned away from the bawling, malodorous woman, and did his bargaining with the old countryman, whose greed had, at any rate, a grace of briskness and gaiety. And because it was such a fine spring morning, and because he, too, had conceived a hope by it, a hope for some kind of bettered world, he gave two dollars for the cuckoo-clock.

Uncle Joachim had tucked away the money and folded the black cloth when an idea struck him. Capering after the journalist he began to gesticulate, puffing out imaginary smoke, pulling a long face, and pointing over his shoulder at Maria. When he had got his cigarettes he came back to his niece.

'Here you are,' he said, pulling two from the packet. 'You have not earned them, but I will make you a present of them, for luck.'

Off he went. Coming wearily to her senses Frau Beigel became aware that she was the target of angry and disapproving glances. For by now all the neighbours knew that they had made fools of themselves, taking an old cuckoo-clock to be the real cuckoo, and they resented her share in the transaction.

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Figure 4. Cover of *Lilliput*, March 1949.