

HEIMITO VON DODERER

A Second Kratki-Baschik

Translated by Vincent Kling

To the god of summer, great Pan, city dwellers make offerings of camphor and naphtha; it's their cool fragrance of solitude in all the forsaken and half-darkened homes that wafts like a gentle wraith around the draped furniture while the occupants of these rooms are taking walks out in the real woods or standing in formal gardens, on narrow gravel pathways amid flower beds with reflecting glass globes. The dark woods can be seen lying like a garment dropped at the foot of the high mountain farther off in the distance, whose bare crags, here and there still accented in white by a patch of snow, are sparkling milky-mild in the vaulting summer sky.

The city has fallen below the horizon. In the heat, it sinks down into itself and grows lonely, because so many have left it, and it grows yet more lonely above the asphalt fumes, even though hundreds of thousands of people are still dashing and riding around. It inclines to meditation. It has many enclosed spaces well suited, caverns and cavities; all those drawn curtains, all that cool redolence of camphor. Finally the furniture begins taking on a life of its own. The city's meditations aren't all carried out in closed-off rooms like these, however. On the pavement in front of the little tavern called the "City of Paris" a few tables have been put out along the side street. They're set with sparkling beer mugs. From inside comes a faint smell of cool cellar, perhaps of barrels—wine barrels and beer kegs. Just now is when you first notice that the moon's made an appearance high above the street. It's evening, but it's still very warm.

For tavern keepers in the hot streets of Vienna, summer isn't the best season, even if the heat does make the beer flow faster—when you broil even in the shade, as they sometimes express it here. At the end of the workday, to say nothing of the weekend, everybody heads for the hills. The Vienna Woods draw people away from town in droves; city dwellers love sitting outside in the airiness of the hillside inns, where the wine grapes are growing right there in the arbors and the moon is gleaming on their jagged leaves so that they look as if cut out with paper scissors or even as solid as metal, as if made of tin.

Everybody heads for the hills, and then the city begins meditating even inside its deserted taverns and out there on the pavement, where those tables are and perhaps a few laurel trees in tubs as well.

And so the young owner of the "City of Paris" and his wife were pondering ways to get business back in full swing after so long a succession of hot days that it seemed as though the very weather wanted to pluck away the last remaining patron in the evening and send him out to the greenery of the Prater or to Sievering, to one of those outlying rustic inns called "Heurigen." Special measures would be required to counteract the exodus, of course. But now tavern keepers really get to know their patrons, by and large; hardly any other line of business offers such an abundance of personal relationships branching off in so many directions—into every occupation and social class, every profession, every area of life imaginable,

even the strangest ones, so that connections of every kind are forever presenting themselves to a tavern owner, especially when he's been blessed with an engaging and warm-hearted personality, as was the case with Herr Franz Blauensteiner and yet more so with his beautiful wife Elly, who combined the sort of corpulence one often finds in Viennese women with a dainty way of walking (a combination almost typical of women in our city) and so would go rolling cheerfully through the tavern at a fast clip.

They got to know practically everybody. What's more, they sooner or later got to know everything about them, right down to details, too. For example, they were attuned to the subtle dynamics between this one engaged couple; the young woman, following the latest style, wore slacks with a sport shirt and dyed her hair Titian red, while the man, quiet and mild-mannered, always showing up in the same conservative business suit (though it didn't fit him right), was self-employed but devoted almost every minute of his free time to one of those tranquil pursuits like bee keeping, which would go to show that the boy was a dreamer. She, on the other hand, would most likely rather have been riding on a motorcycle; even without wheels, though, she was deep down an ally of those who move with the times, which largely consists in their eagerness to create noise, no matter what equipment they have to use to do it. "How did she ever wind up with a kid like that, of all people?" "Opposites do attract," answered Elly, adding, "besides, he's all hers now, and you can see how she dominates him. Of course she won't want to give that up." "He probably has a lot of money, and she knows it," her husband said. We can see that he took a no-nonsense view of human motivations. Frau Elly, on the other hand, wasn't one for mincing words either, but she had a gentler approach and yet was more incisive. Taken together, this couple made a competent psychologist.

So they soon found out the full story on man, woman, and child—where this one's shoes were pinching, or how that one felt a pressing need to show off his handsome new shoes, or else a photograph of his aunt, because she was the widow of a captain in the Kaiser's army; or when the retired coat-check woman, on a small pension from the Imperial Opera, would start hinting—aided by numerous photos, all graced with autographs—at the cordiality and confidence between her and renowned singers of her era ("You simply don't hear voices any more like the ones in those days"); or for that matter, peered at through a large gold-rimmed lorgnette, you could even be scrutinized (and extensively commented on) here by the face of a bygone age that, even as it was still going on, was actually more an imitation of itself than a truly existing entity. There were the fat little section chief's wife with a beaky nose like a mynah bird and her daughter, so pleased with all the world, with her dachshund, and above all with her own self that all the world found her unbearable. There was Anton Rieger, a board-certified engineer, always alone and always a little sad, a handsome man who owned a very prosperous firm; he was the one the Blauensteiners knew almost best of all, and they could tell from small signs that would

start cropping up around midnight—certain movements with his hands, certain recurring words—when he wouldn't be making his way right home but would instead be guided by a wayward star through the night and into the champagne bars of the entertainment district in the heart of the city; it happens to old bachelors from time to time.

We'll be introduced to more of the patrons by and by, but not until the magic show is over—yes, that's what the Blauensteiners had in mind for bringing back some life, all drawn away by the strong ebb tide of the July heat. Naturally they had their contacts in that line of work as well, one that's rather out of the way but nonetheless very popular in Vienna, where it in fact commands an eminent tradition. Around 1870 or 1880 there lived in our city a certain Kratki-Baschik; it was no trouble for him to take his real name, the Bohemian Kratky, and Arabacize or Turkicize it—to give it a touch of Oriental flavor, anyway—by changing the y to a short i and adding on the unintelligible "Baschik" part. In the Turkish language there's only one word that sounds a little like that, though the meaning is altogether different, more or less. . . . But wait; how did we get onto this? Time was when everybody knew who Kratki-Baschik was. He was located in the amusement park called the Wurstelprater; besides being a magician, he owned a famous "Cabinet of Oddities," where all sorts of objects were preserved in alcohol, things you'd never see anywhere else. Still today, when people in Vienna see someone in any way misshapen, they'll say, "He must belong to Kratki-Baschik."

Since then, his followers and adepts to the second and third generation have grown in profusion; in fact, their numbers have multiplied enormously. They even hold conventions and competitions. The minority work in the field as their main occupation; the majority do it just for pleasure, though many of these are exceptionally talented.

It was one such amateur that Herr Blauensteiner had lined up, and on the evening in question every last seat was soon taken in the "City of Paris," all the earlier considering that no cover charge was being asked, since the magician was displaying his skill as a sheer favor. We might call him a "gentleman magician" more or less the way people speak of wealthy gentleman farmers. By profession he was an official in some municipal bureau. There are very significant expenses associated with doing magic, incidentally—everything costs money, and not even a magician can conjure it up—mostly from having to invest in complete sets of quite elaborate equipment. The guests watched it all being brought in: various kinds of chests, tube-shaped objects like pipes, and some contraption that looked like an old-fashioned machine for generating electricity, with a large glass disc and shiny brass plates.

The evening was a great success, not just for the owners, but also for the gentleman magician, who'd been so generous about displaying his talent and who wore a glued-on white goatee during the show. He was a regular customer, by the way, but his name was hard to remember, so Herr

Blauensteiner had long since christened him "Kratki-Baschik," for the municipal official's involvement with magic was something his host had come to know about early on.

Soon after his show started, this relatively high-placed city employee performed a feat so astounding that the audience was forced to fall back on the assurance that this whole thing was somehow based after all on legerdemain and distracting feints. Even this rational reminder as to the actual situation almost fell short for a few moments, however, such as when one young man's handsome, colorful silk handkerchief and another's twenty-schilling banknote were first cut up and then shredded into tiny pieces by one of his gadgets (both men inwardly giving up their property for lost) only to be plucked unharmed out of the owner's thick head of hair (the banknote) and his shirt collar (the handkerchief) amid general oohs and aahs, tremendous applause, and the observant eyes of several people who'd stepped up close.

All were sincere in thanking the city official, who truly had earned his applause. His exciting presentation, during which the guests had done a good share of hearty drinking, had lasted long enough. The gentleman magician packed up his unusual and complicated props and had a taxi come for him. Soon the large crowd of guests had all scattered.

A few patrons had stayed and were sitting with the owners at their regular table; some of them we know already, like that engaged couple and Herr Rieger, the engineer. Mynah Bird, Dachshund Girl, and Madame from the good old days of the Imperial Opera weren't there (a lucky thing, too, we almost want to say, in view of what followed). Ancien RÈgime also hadn't left her lorgnette behind this time, which meant she didn't have to go through her occasional ritual of showing back up the same evening to retrieve it—though we really couldn't have said "evening" anyway, for by this time it was late at night. Even so, Doctor Hugo Winkler was still sitting there; he was a retired university lecturer, supposedly well past his seventieth birthday, which is of course the age one would be bound to assume of a retired professor, but which, whenever this particular gentleman was present in the flesh, and all the more when he was speaking, looked not just undetectable but downright unbelievable—with his polemical vigor and his obstinacy he could have replaced any ten debaters and with his capacity for passionate enthusiasm any half dozen high-school boys. There was also a writer sitting at the table, a Doctor D`blinger. It's a known fact that a writer will be found sitting wherever anything is going on. Like all men of letters, this one wasn't fond of being addressed by his academic degree; such people are of the opinion that the glory of their name should be quite sufficient by itself and that they accordingly don't have to be helped along by any title.

"She's right; everything she's saying is right!" the professor was forcefully proclaiming, turned to Frau Elly, who was showing more patience than actual agreement with his views. "She's absolutely right!" ("She" was the Titian redhead in slacks.) "It's only what's exceptional that makes a man what he is. And some woman has to challenge him to it. Makes no difference what it is—boxing, writing poetry, performing magic. But it has to be exceptional. After all, every single achievement is about—is really about nothing but a woman, a woman and nothing else, I mean nothing else whatsoever. No other ideal even exists! You can say whatever you want to; I know. Am I right, Herr Rieger? A woman stands behind every goal in life, and nothing else!"

"If you'll allow me, Professor," said Doctor D`blinger in a considered tone, "I'd like to raise an objection and offer a rebuttal—"

"No way! No way, I tell you!" was how the professor energetically interrupted, his little bald head rising up like a porpoise coming out of the water. "There's no such thing as an objection or a rebuttal in this case. Why, the truth is right in front of your eyes. All you have to do is be willing to see it."

While Doctor D`blinger was in the process of falling silent before this polemical onslaught, it was also becoming clear to see how the betrothed bee keeper (with the good suit that didn't fit very well) kept shrinking even deeper into himself. It should be stressed in passing how greatly it redounded to the credit of the city official, dubbed Kratki-Baschik, that his performance had given rise to a conversation about the nature of the exceptional and about exceptional achievements. Of course, the professor's way was to pare down any issue to its underlying principles. Not so Anton Rieger. He'd been watching the magician's whole act very carefully, and in such a way as only a technical engineer would be capable of; as a result, he'd broken down and reconstructed in his mind three of the man's sleight-of-hand tricks, down to the minutest details, completely unobserved. He never said a word about it. He practically never said a word about anything. The professor, meanwhile, had leapt away from the mode of the untrammelled apodictic and landed in that of the unmitigated dithyrambic. "You mean you didn't see her? She was here during the show. A magnificent woman, let me tell you, Herr Rieger! The most beautiful woman I've ever set eyes on. Third table on the left—"

The conversation reached this point, and then it fell quiet for a moment. The bee keeper was now visibly fretful—staring into space and brooding inside himself. Who knows what kinds of images the poor boy might have been dredging up in his imagination? His redheaded fiancée wouldn't look his way even once; her eyes went off in every direction but his. She'd been aroused (perhaps in part by the professor's discourse as well); she was off and running, breasting the air, we could say, her bosom thrust forward in

prowess, though, paradoxically, the prow of her ship coming in had to first make the surging waves it was breasting.

Not a breath of air came in through the wide-open double doors of the tavern. The night was still hot.

Not a drop of rain had fallen when the first bolt of lightning flashed, and there stirred hardly the faintest breeze, which they would have felt blowing gently inside. Even so, the flash outside was followed almost immediately by a loud thunderclap.

At that very moment a guest entered the tavern, empty by now except for those sitting at the owners' table. He was a well-dressed gentleman with a broad, flat face, the eyes in which—as they soon noticed, especially after he'd removed his hat—stood somewhat slanted under what's called a lofty brow.

The new patron inquired politely and in a soft voice whether in spite of the late hour he might possibly still get something to eat, even if just a bit of cheese and butter. The friendly hostess rolled briskly over to the buffet, and the guest settled in at the next table. All he asked for to drink was apple juice with soda.

Now of course, as will happen when someone turns up late at a tavern and only a few are left sitting together, people start talking to guests at other tables. From the point where we left the conversation earlier, it had happened to take a turn back to Kratki-Baschik. The topic seemed to capture the interest of the newcomer, if in no more than a casual way; still, the others noticed how closely he was following the talk back and forth. The Titian redhead was now taking part, too, and she spent some time observing the stranger with interest—not very discreetly, either; we'd have to say, in fact, that she was looking at him quite blatantly. He was unexpectedly drawn into the conversation, and by none other than Frau Elly herself; turning to the new guest, she filled him in with a few explanations concerning the magic show that had taken place there that evening—that's what everybody's talking about now—and commented on the excellence of the presentation they'd all seen. The stranger, who was just getting ready to reply, was now asked by the tavern keeper if he wouldn't care to take a seat with them here at their table.

The man accepted the invitation and brought his glass to the table; Frau Elly, showing deep appreciation, told him more about the magician's amazing skill, in the course of which she mentioned his name and full-time occupation.

"Oh yes," the new arrival said, "I know him. An outstanding dilettante."

"Dilettante? Well, maybe," said Elly laughing, "but I wish I could do one twentieth of what he can!"

"I see what you mean," the stranger answered. "Blahoutek is very good, one of the best performers in the amateur class."

"Do you happen to be in the same line of business?" the young owner now asked in a lively voice.

"I am indeed," the stranger replied.

"So what's the difference, if you don't mind my asking; I mean, what is it that allows such a definite distinction between a professional and an amateur, which you say Herr Blahoutek is?"

"Well, dilettantes will often display fantastic feats of skill, sometimes even in routines they've created themselves, but of course they're lacking that final training in their craft all the way to their fingertips, that genuine, true mastery."

"I see. And you're an artist on the professional level yourself, sir?"

"Yes, I am," the strange guest answered.

"It's too bad Herr Blahoutek took his equipment home with him," said Herr Franz with a smile; "otherwise we could borrow it now, and you, sir, might be so kind as to show us a few good magic tricks."

"You don't always need all that equipment," the stranger said casually, in a nonchalant tone.

"Did you come here tonight from somewhere else, from another tavern in the neighborhood?" Frau Elly asked in a friendly way.

"No," replied the guest. "I was alone at home until just now."

"You mean," cried the hostess, "you didn't even go out until after eleven?"

"Yes," he said. At this point Doctor D[^]blinger had a flash of insight—through his nose, no less (part of the writer's trade, trained in its craft all the way to its tip). It hit him the second the stranger took a seat at the table; with a vividness that absolutely forced itself on him, indeed with a longing that subtly suffused his whole being, his quiet, empty apartment rose up in his mind's eye—the armchairs all covered up to guard against moths and the large mirrored armoire, where the rugs were now stored; it closed tight, with not a crack, but now and then there would come wafting out of it, like a gentle wraith, the pungency of camphor and naphtha into the relative coolness of the room.

What else, though—summer was at its height.

Everywhere this odor hung in dwellings, now turned deep in upon themselves and away from the noise and the heat of the streets. It was almost as if that odor were delicately trying to convey a message of the healing to be found in turning aside, were trying to invite one yet deeper inward.

This stranger was another one who'd come from such a lonely dwelling. You could smell the loneliness.

Meanwhile it had flashed lightning and thundered two or three more times, if weaker than at first; only now did a brief shower come splashing down, but only to fall silent again soon. Still, a cool breeze did come in from the street.

Franz Blauensteiner, the owner, wasn't one to let a good idea get away, and tonight he had it in his mind to see if this new virtuoso really were capable—and without special equipment, at that—of outdoing the city official who'd performed earlier. So the host asked this man what he would

need to show them a trick. "What you're most likely to have on hand is a deck of old playing cards and maybe a handful of nails. Six to eight carpet tacks would do. The cards can be old and dirty; in fact, that would be better, since they're all going to fall onto the floor anyway."

Herr Franz brought the cards and some small nails. Everybody's attention was now completely keyed up. The stranger, who was sitting toward the end of the table, not too far from the wood-paneled wall, handed Herr Franz and Frau Elly the old playing cards with an offhand request for them to pick one, not tell anybody, be sure to remember it, put it back into the deck, shuffle, and then set the deck on the table.

While this was all being done, the stranger paid his modest check. Then he took the tacks in his left hand and the cards in his right and tossed or hurled them all at once up against the wood paneling. The stack of cards dropped and flew everywhere—onto the table, onto the guests' laps, onto the floor—while the tacks went clattering all around at the same time. The next instant, Frau Elly let out a shriek; up on the wall, directly opposite her, face outward and pinned by a tack, was hanging the card she and her husband had picked—it was the ten of spades. Nobody said a word. The stranger gave a friendly smile, got up, took his hat, and left the tavern with a short bow. The redhead, now sitting with her eyes almost popping out of her head and the small of her back arched, seemed virtually to be surging through the bounding main in hot pursuit, even after he'd already vanished.

And yet something far more astonishing still occurred thirty seconds after the stranger's departure. The bee keeper, starting up out of his gloom and brooding, bolted out the door in his turn. He left his hat behind.

We found out later, as he told us himself, that he actually had succeeded in spotting the stranger and running to catch up to him a split second before he disappeared and that the man had brusquely replied to his stammered approach with these words: "Young man, we do not acquire a great skill for any purpose whatever, and above all not to get the girl; purpose is death to skill. Keep that in mind."

For the time being, though, we just remained sitting where we were, without the magic artist and without the bee keeper, though we were expecting the boy to come back any moment. But he didn't. The first conjectures, not to say reassurances—actually more efforts at assuagement—were just starting to be directed to the Titian redhead, who was showing clear signs of the kind of rage which can so easily seize us when we ricochet off the delicate but totally unrelenting boundaries of our power. "Of course he's coming back," the professor said; "he'll be right here." But it wasn't quite such a matter of course after all. This predicament gradually began to slip out of balance and threatened to turn into a mortifying plight that would come crashing down around the redhead. (As always happened whenever someone else got into embarrassing straits, Herr Anton Rieger's eyes turned still darker and sadder.) The telephone rang not long after the professor had spoken. "I bet it's him," said Doctor

Winkler. Herr Franz took the call. It was him. The redhead vanished into the phone booth. Nobody said anything during their long conversation; it was as if everything were hanging by a thread, including the professor's diatribe about the natural course of human strivings. The phone conversation was going on too long. Finally she emerged. No one could help noticing how pale she'd turned or how she wasn't the least bit attractive now, how completely different she looked from just a few minutes before. No bounding main now; she wasn't surging. Her fury did rupture the corset of face-saving, though; she broke down in front of everyone. "What do you know!" she said, still by the phone booth, not yet making a move to come back to the table; "that idiot had the audacity to tell me he doesn't want to see me or have anything to do with me any more!" Reassurances (and it still would have been possible to think up some) stuck in even the professor's throat, and his little bald head silently submerged beneath the surface of the conversation. The redhead left her fiancé's hat hanging where it was, and when she went away, it was as if her departure were more a breaking off from this group of people (among whom she was in fact never seen again) than a farewell until later. After that, the owner tried several times to pull out from the paneling the tack by which the ten of spades was pinned; he had no luck just using his fingers. Up on the wall the card was bothering everybody. Finally Herr Blauensteiner brought out a little pair of pliers. That did the job. "It serves her right," said Frau Elly after the redhead's departure. "He'll go back to her in no time," repeated the professor, even as he stayed submerged. "He'll never go back to her," answered Rieger. The words he spoke were few, but the words he spoke were true.

Over the next few days that ten of spades on the wall—which much have had something of that famous Biblical handwriting on the wall about it, no doubt the reason they kept coming back to it over and over—that ten of spades got talked to death. It's never any different with any great skill, either; people have to keep chomping and chomping at it with their tiny jaws until it's collapsed and been all explained away; these matters are treated—though on a miniature scale—the same as a miracle. Great skills and miracles can't blend in with life; they'd become totally unbearable and wind up a set-in greasy stain from some state of the beyond in the here and now that would crush everything. So here and now, late at night, after that damned playing card had finally disappeared from the wall, Franz Blauensteiner looked off into space for a long while as he sat silently at the table, and then he said at last: "Of course! That was—that was a second Kratki-Baschik."

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