



**“betrayal”**

Susana Funck

Susana Funck\*

The sharp clear whistle of the TEE nervously pierced the immense darkness that, like a medieval cloak, covered the valley of the Neckar. Fast and efficient, the train advanced toward the Hauptbahnhof, where it was received with the ceremonious formalities of a centuriesold ritual. Along the platform, on worn-out benches, a few sleepy-eyed travelers patiently waited in solemn silent respect.

Out of the second-class car, among throngs of backpackers in faded jeans and tennis shoes, a woman, alone, almost inconspicuously descended onto the platform. She was small, girlish-looking, but her trenchcoat betrayed a certain caution, a preparedness that clashed with the adventurous freedom of youth. She glanced around her and, unnoticed but for a polite nod from the train officer, proceeded toward the central lobby. Her short hair bounced to the rhythm of decided steps, made somewhat uneven by the weight of the shoulder strap that sustained her one piece of luggage.

"Need some help, miss?" Ramona thought she might have heard. Nonsense, she soon added in her mind with a condescending smile. That was a voice from the past when, eager and excited, she attracted companionship by the sheer curiosity stamped on her face. Now, in her mid-thirties, at that age when naiveté and innocence become dangerously incongruous, she had learned to conceal the spontaneity and trust with which she had once embraced the world. Her face showed no excitement, no awe at the foreignness of the place, not even the fear that rose within her as she faced the Bahnhof door and acknowledged the emptiness of the station plaza outside.

---

\*Ex-professora de Literatura junto ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês e Literatura correspondente da UFSC.

It was the first time during this trip that Ramona had arrived at night. The search for a hotel, which had in the last three weeks become a matter of routine for her as a limited-budget tourist in Europe, appeared now as an unsettling challenge. The plaza became increasingly dark as she left the station. At the Tourist Information Center only a silent, confusing map of the city and a foreign list of hotels greeted her. And there she stood - small, unacknowledged, invisible. Younger and more inexperienced than she ever remembered being. Almost as paralyzed as on that day long, long ago when boisterous Aunt Elsa had pulled out her first loose tooth after having solemnly promised only to feel it. An early betrayal. But there had been many after that. Why was she then surprised that Heidelberg could receive her so?

"When in doubt lead trump," she heard the confident voice of her bridge teacher, who knew, or pretended to know, all the rules of the game. With renewed strength, her face impenetrable as ever, Ramona returned to the station, which took her back with the unprejudiced warmth it impartially bestows on the lonely. By the closed newspaper stand, a janitor ate his liverwurst sandwich, probably half stale, no doubt prepared by his tired wife before he left for work. Ramona thought of her marriage. Of the many brown-bag lunches she had sleepily prepared. Ten years of conventional happiness. Husband and kids waving at the airport. The conventional postcards. The conventional telephone calls to make sure everything was alright. For a moment Ramona even felt guilty for not missing them as she should. "Just think," her friend Carol's unconventional voice, full of suggestive misgivings, interrupted her thoughts. "While in Europe you can be yourself. You can be anything you want." Anything I want, Ramona echoed as she thought of the Youth Hostel as a possibility of lodging for the night. Why not? After a silent dialogue with the

map outside, she almost joyously found her way to the stop, from where, relishing this time the anonymity of night, she rode to the Jugendherberge stop.

The large building was by the Botanical Gardens, next to the Zoo. In the silent darkness beyond the trees, wild forces lay dormant, waiting for a new day. Unopened flowers. A lioness, resting and waiting. The mystery of sleep. As Ramona approached the Hostel, however, she found herself uncomfortably caught in the binary rhythm of disco music. She tried to change her steps, make them irregular, slower, less blunt. But the spell was too strong. Resigned, she marched on. Her shoulder bag had all of a sudden become too heavy, and a feeling in her stomach suggested that she might be hungry. She wished that stupid music would stop.

The door was open. Directly in front of it, a coke machine and a juke box appeared as the inscrutable chaperones of a wild throng of teenagers, whose many foreign sounds mingled in a disharmonious uproar of young excitement. Walking awkwardly through groups of pulsating bodies, Ramona recognized silent promises of eternal love, which, she knew, would not last beyond summer. Nauseated, she searched for an escape in the magic privacy of the restroom.

She looked awful. Tired and old. Though her body still retained some of the suppleness of youth, she knew very well that under the confining jeans a few stretch marks would always remind her of her two pregnancies. And her breasts would sag as she took off her bra. She knew. Mechanically, Ramona fixed the little make-up she wore and with a shake of her head arranged her hair, carefully hiding a few stubborn gray hairs that had refused to remain in their place.

Out in the lounge the music still pounded, more sensual than ever. She took a deep breath, ignored the

pulsation in her own body, and without looking around, hurriedly reached the garden. A fresh breeze blessed her with the strength to continue her hotel search. Aware that it was getting late, Ramona feared for herself. A woman alone. In a strange town much older than her knowledge of history could grasp. A town which refused to show itself, to trust, to be loved. Back at the bus stop, Ramona stared into the darkness and thought of her daughter. She wondered what her daughter's life would be like, whether she also would become wife and mother, or first a woman. And she wished she knew how to teach her to be a woman, a woman alone and without fear.

"American?" a voice asked behind her. Turning her head, Ramona beheld the source of that voice - a slender, rather plain-looking young man who seemed, by the intensity of his honest gaze, to be actually waiting for an answer. "Well," she replied, "yes and no. I've lived there most of my life." She was used to such banal conversations. They always followed a similar pattern, starting with an eager where-are-you-from, and ending with an inconspicuous hope-you-enjoy-your-trip. Innocuous conversations. Helped time pass. "Where are you from?" she asked automatically. "Ireland." Stephen Daedalus, Ramona thought with excitement. But her voice simply ventured, "Tourist?" "Well, yes and no. I took a summer job on the Continent in order to learn some German." "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" she heard herself ask. Whether he smiled at her bad pronunciation or at the banality of her question she couldn't tell. But his smile shone warmly from within, and she knew she was blushing with the confused embarrassment of a teenager. The silence was heavy. She searched in vain for any of those commonplace questions she had so often asked of strangers during the trip. But they had all vanished. In the distance - or was it in her own tired body? - she still heard the disco beat, like a living heart.

"Staying at the Hostel?" It was the voice again.

"I thought I might," she said, this time avoiding his smile. "It's much too noisy, though. I've decided to go back downtown and take a hotel room instead." At the word 'hotel' she inadvertently blushed again, self-consciously acknowledging the connotations that came to her mind. I must be going insane, she thought. This is ridiculous. Yes, Carol, she mentally addressed her friend back home, you may be right. It may be possible to be anything you want. But what the hell is it that I want?

Around the corner two headlights bluntly announced the bus was coming. Busy with getting her luggage, Ramona was again her own confident self. He did not offer to help, but waiting for her to select one of the many empty seats, sat down next to her. He was indeed young. Much younger than his voice. Yet older than that smile, that open, honest smile without a trace of bitterness or worry.

"I can help you find a hotel, if you'd like me to," he resumed the conversation. "I'm a porter at the Schrieder, and I don't have to work the morning shift tomorrow. It's still early, anyway."

Ramona thought of how unimportant time had become during this trip. Without having to worry about getting the kids off to school or meeting her classes at the university, she had been restricted, and only slightly so, by nothing but the schedules of museums, theaters, and concerts. Looking at her watch, she saw it was 11:30. But that was Italian time. So it must be either 10:30 or 12:30. Still today or already tomorrow, she wasn't quite sure.

"I still don't know your name," Ramona said, postponing her answer to the young man's offer of help.

"Ciarán."

"That's a strange name. Never heard it before."

"It's not really strange in Ireland. But I've had a few problems with it here at work."

"What's this place you work at like?"

"I don't recommend. Much too expensive. Full of rich businessmen and old ladies."

"Well, then I might qualify."

He smiled. Safe this time, after having somewhat asserted their age difference, Ramona accepted his company. They got off at the Bahnhof and started their pilgrimage through the quiet dark streets. Like tired children after a day in the park, they walked slowly, pausing briefly here and there to consult a map and decide where to venture next. No luck. Most boarding houses were already closed for the night, and the budget hotels near the station were completely full. The few people they met along the way seemed to know precisely where they were going. Ramona envied their certainty. Turning a corner, she caught a glimpse of a prostitute being picked up by an inconspicuous dark car. Her legs felt weak.

"I must find a hotel soon. Do you think they have vacancies at the Schrieder?"

"They always do. Their prices are too high."

"For one night it's OK, I guess. Tomorrow morning I'll find something else."

He helped her check in, under the inexpressive, almost oblivious gaze of the night clerk. Ciarán himself took the key and, professionally carrying the luggage, led her through long carpeted corridors, faded under half-lit chandeliers. The room was surprisingly large, frighteningly so. As he handed her the key, after depositing the bag on an excessively big stand, Ramona wondered if tipping would be appropriate or expected. Instead, she found herself saying, "You've been awfully nice. I'd like to take you



out to lunch tomorrow."

"Sure. I know a good place near here. Biergarten and all."

"Twelve?"

"Twelve," he agreed. "I'll wait for you in the lobby."

The morning was bright and calm. From her window Ramona looked out over the Neckar where a few barges floated slowly by. On both sides of the river a luxurious dark forest covered the mountains like a thick carpet. On her right, high against the sky, smug in the comfortable mystery of its history, the old Heidelberg Castle looked over the city below. The city was there, in all its old beauty, waiting to be met.

After a quick shower, Ramona felt hungry and excited. She decided she would wear a dress – that bright, soft red dress she had bought especially for the trip but had postponed wearing she didn't quite know why. The mirror returned a girlish image. She still had nice legs, and her stomach looked flat after the few weeks of constant walking and irregular light meals. She stretched, took a deep breath, and after glancing once again out the window, decided to take the stairs.

Breakfast was pleasant in the company of a charming Spanish gentleman who had come to Heidelberg for his fiftieth reunion. Ramona felt young and confident. But the formality of the dining hall reminded her that she must look for a more reasonable place to stay. This trip had not been easy to afford. She had seen it as a necessity, as a source of new energy for her, for their life as a family. It had seemed a way of saving her marriage for at least a while longer – until the children were old enough to understand divorce. As if they ever would. As if she would ever understand it herself. At any rate, taking some time

off had seemed a last effort against that constant feeling of being about to drown.

Walking around the city, one could not really avoid the river. It was there, sluggishly separating the University Town from the Philosophenweg on the other, older side. She could feel centuries of thinking and creating emanate from across the Neckar. She could almost see old philosophers pensively walking along the irregular garden paths. And she suddenly wondered where the women had been then. As if challenged, Ramona started across the Alte Brücke to join the philosophers in their morning walk. Their ghosts would certainly still be there. And with an urgency she had not felt in years, Ramona knew that they must be faced.

Along the way she met colorful groups of tourists with their all-absorbing cameras, couples embracing without the self-consciousness of home, ignoring the past and the future alike, living the present, grasping the moment. And Ramona wished she were not so keenly aware of the past, of that past that made her future as an old woman so important, of that past that so terribly limited her present. She would face the ghosts. She would talk with them, tell them they had been wrong - wrong for centuries, wrong in having made history and dictated customs, wrong, wrong, wrong.

Shifting her eyes from the green slopes ahead to the river below, Ramona noticed she was being watched. A long, slow-moving flat barge, empty except for a crew of three sunburnt healthy men, approached the bridge right under the spot where she stood. They were free, moving. She had been paralyzed by her thoughts. What were they thinking? Why did they look at her so? A woman, alone, gazing down at their river. Or did they see the puzzled despair in her eyes? Yes, she would cross their river and

meet the ghosts.

But all she found on the other side was an overwhelming quiet, a frightening absence, a disconcerting calm. How could she fight what she could not see? What does one strike when nothing stirs? Her frustration all too familiarly resembled the confrontations with her husband. She never knew how to reach him, shake him, make him angry. Like the workers on the barge, he also owned the river. No, he was the river, slowly and inexorably moving. Knowing where he was going. Without realizing, Ramona was running away from the valley, up through the winding narrow paths that led, through the dense forest, toward the old castle at the mountain top.

She had planned to take the cable car up, mix with the people, watch the city progressively shrink below her. Now she could see nothing but the path ahead and the richly intoxicating vegetation all around. Slowing down, she was suddenly afraid. "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" her mind ridiculously inquired. Bullshit. I own the forest. Heidelberg is a woman. I shall find her. I shall awaken her.

Arriving at the mountain top, exhausted, Ramona was vaguely annoyed at all those energetic people around her. She could not understand what they saw in this dilapidated castle, half destroyed in battle, worn out by the elements, kept artificially alive in the name of history and for its sake. Below, the city was alive. People lived and died there. People loved and hated there. Ramona felt a strange, long-forgotten desire stir within her. She felt uncomfortably empty, lonely. And for the first time she fully realized what she had read in Ciarán's smile. It was a promise, a promise of fulfillment, of renewed youth. Her discomfort with it had been a refusal to acknowledge the basic and sudden attraction between them. "Nothing exciting

ever happens to me." "Not until you make it happen," she inadvertently replied, remembering a counseling session she had had. The familiar fear of drowning in the river came back. But seeing the old city below gazing up at her with a confident smile, she understood and quietly whispered, "I will."

In the cable car on the way down, she excitedly talked with a group of young school girls and, less critically than before, laughed to herself at the ridiculous Hawaiian shirts and sunhats that moved around her as if dancing to the clicks of camera shots. Only one person did not stir - a woman in black, the very image of decorum, proper and heavy under a veiled hat. Her face was round and yellowish, almost bloated, and her double chin hung over her neck like the folded nets of fishermen. A character no doubt right out of the pages of Henry James, Ramona thought. After all, this was Europe. She shouldn't be surprised. But the image clung to her mind like soot. There it was - the ghost she had searched for earlier - conspicuously before her eyes.

Lunch was fantastic. Ciarán met her with an even more honest smile, or at least it seemed so in the clear bright sun. For the first time in years Ramona did not feel compelled to discuss her children, her husband's job, the cost of living. They were free. And, abandoning herself to this newly-found freedom, as if basking in the sun, she readily agreed to meet him in his room at eight that evening.

On the way to her new lodgings at the Goldene Rose - a simpler, less central hotel - Ramona began to sense an unwelcome change. Dark clouds and a vaguely gloomy air descended from the old castle and mixed with a fine misty fog rising from the river. A dense gray now covered the lush slopes of the mountains. But inside her room the

cheap wall-paper was bright, and enjoying the happy designs around her, Ramona lay down to rest. She saw the woman in black voluminously and diffusely float above the bed, and then progressively dissolve into a dark and musty dust over the walls. The far-away sound of a locomotive, mixing with the thunder that rumbled beyond the mountains, brought Ramona back from her slumber. As she so often had done as a child, she thought as she heard the thunder, "God is angry with me. I must have done something wrong." Her mind had lost that wonderful clarity, and her body sagged heavily on the feather mattress. Where had that exhilarating energy gone? Her red dress, carelessly thrown over a chair, looked limp and lifeless. How could she have imagined that it would be easy to discard years of desperate boredom and pretend that anything could happen? Looking at herself in the mirror, she saw Ciarán's smile turn into a sneer. She felt cold, and a feverish shudder shook her small body. She thought of the firmness of his muscles, the self-assuredness of his warm voice, and repeated aloud, ironically mimicking his Irish accent, "At eight?"

It was now five in the afternoon, a dark rainy afternoon quickly aging into night. If she hurried, she could catch the 6:08 local to Köln. Jumping into her jeans and sweatshirt, and carefully shielding herself in the beige trenchcoat, Ramona left. When the train whistled out of the Hauptbahnhof, tears prevented her from seeing the green mountains of Heidelberg once again asleep, drowned in the rain that inexorably washed them down into the Neckar.