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Nick's Story



This sudden pressure to marry was great annoyance. I was only 20 and felt no desire to settle down. Marriage meant the end of freedom, and I wanted more freedom, not less. I had too much energy and too many unexplored talents to tie myself down to a domestic routine. Besides, I'd never met anyone yet I would be willing to marry.

Not that I had ever been in love. From the age of 13, I'd had a steady boy friend named Henry. All this meant in those days of close supervision was that Henry and I would meet after school every day and "promenade." Henry was a very good-looking boy, almost pretty, and our feelings for each other were intensely romantic. One of the few regrets of my life is that I never did make love with my first love.

Henry's older sister lived in America and sent for him soon after Munich, while I was in Brussels. When I came home again, I missed not having him there. We wrote to each other frequently. But when he asked me to come to America and marry him, I was not tempted. I did not want to leave my family, and I did not want to get married. The truth is, I suppose, that I had outgrown Henry.

Then, a few months after my return, a mutual friend introduced me to a young doctor named Nicholas Berman. He was pleasant and easy-going with a very nice smile, though not particularly tall. Not that any of this mattered, since I had already made up my mind never to marry a doctor.

Nick was 30, serious, intelligent and unusually successful in his

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profession for one so young. This made him eligible in every way. A man was expected to be settled in a profession before marriage. He was also supposed to be sufficiently older than his wife for her to look up to him and allow herself to be molded to his specifications. His qualifications were irrelevant to me, of course, since I had no desire to be molded to anyone's specifications.

Being the provincial place it was, Uzhorod was always starved for diversion. The terrible times only made it more so. No sooner was Nick introduced into our circle than family members began considering him for their young girls. My two dear friends, Vera and Agi, had met him at about the same time. Overnight, he became a major topic of discussion.

One day the three of us were together, talking about Nick, of course. Vera sighed, "I wonder which one of us he'll take to the movies first?" The question struck my fancy and I suggested we make it a competition. Whoever won would get a pair of silk stockings from each of the other two. This was no small prize, since stockings were a luxury item that had to be imported from Austria. Both girls agreed.

Never one to trust luck, I telephoned Nick the next day. I told him I had an important matter to discuss and he agreed to pick me up the next evening as soon as he finished work. I was very happy and quite proud of myself for having been bold enough to make the call. Girls of the day were supposed to be demure and passive, but as my mother always said, I had to be different.

Nick came by as promised, and we went for a walk around town. By custom, that was the first thing a courting couple was supposed to do. Nick was so talkative, and so easy to talk to, that we chatted on and on and I never got around to mentioning the wager about the movies. We were still talking when we reached my gate, so I suggested we finish our conversation the next day.

Nick agreed and came by again. During that second walk, I finally told him about the bet. He laughed as if he had never heard

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anything so hilarious, then asked me out to a movie. I was happier than I would have believed possible. Two pairs of silk stockings and a date with Nick too.

He liked me. Direct and unconventional as I was, he accepted me. He not only accepted me; he enjoyed me, and even admired me. With Nick, I could be myself.

Word soon got around. Reports came in that Vera and Agi's relatives were extremely disappointed. It was as if our entire little world already took for granted that I had won something more than stockings—that Nick was mine and I would marry him some day.

Only Nick and I didn't know this as of yet.

If the town was expecting an engagement, disappointment was in store. Instead, I persuaded my mother to let me go to Budapest to study fashion design. I wanted nothing so much as to try living on my own in a big city. The war talk had temporarily died down, so she let me go in June 1939.

Budapest was beautiful, a cultured city full of charm and history. I was on my own and could explore it as I pleased. It was a great adventure. I worked hard mastering my new interest, but much of it was fun and easy for me. Nick came to Budapest to visit me, and we went to concerts and the theatre. Each of us was eager to please the other and we felt completely natural and right together.

The two months passed quickly and I went home again. I had enjoyed Budapest, but I was glad to be back where I could see my loved ones every day. Nick and I were seeing each other almost daily. Doctor or no, I began to think I might want to marry him after all. If only the world would leave us alone! If only the war wouldn't happen! If only the Hungarians were not so cruel and senseless in their anti-Semitism!

I could feel my life becoming more and more centered on Nick. But how did he feel about me? What was in fact going on was a process. We kept getting closer and closer and finding more and more things that we wanted to share. This process continued on all

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throughout our friendship, our courtship, our engagement and the years of our marriage. There was no point at which we fell in love. The love gradually came into being.

Matchmakers were still coming to our house, for me as well as my mother. One of them was a shriveled little woman named Hanemirele. Hanemirele was always running. I don't remember ever seeing her walk normally like other people. She would arrive every few days with another pile of pictures and information about the various suitors, including lists of their likes and dislikes. In return, the appropriate suitors were all sent my picture.

I would keep Nick posted about the latest possibilities. Once a gentleman came all the way from Switzerland to look me over. I found the whole process hilarious, but the poor man seemed miserable through the entire interview.

One day a letter came from one of my Romanian aunts. I must visit her at once, she declared, and meet "a Jewish prince." It was the opportunity of a lifetime and I mustn't wait a day. My mother seemed bemused by this passionate insistence, and I found myself not wanting to go. That evening, strolling with Nick, I described my dilemma. Should I honor my aunt and go to Romania or stay home and risk insulting her?

Nick smiled his sweet, playful smile. "Don't bother. Tell your mother that we shall get married." I was thrilled with delight, yet felt no surprise. By now, it seemed inevitable. So I went home and matter-of-factly told my mother that I would marry Nick instead of going to Romania. She smiled radiantly. "That's very good news. I like Nick so much."

We did not set a date, however. Life for the Jews grew more precarious each day, and healthy young men like himself were being taken off to labor camps. Nick wanted us to marry when we could count on some time together. He suggested we wait a bit and see what was going to happen.

Meanwhile, I took the chance to get better acquainted with his

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family. Nick's old father lived across the river with two of his sons and a housekeeper. His mother was dead but the family was large and close, with four brothers and three sisters. Nick was very fond of his father, a kind, warm gentleman who treated me like his own daughter. At first I felt somewhat overwhelmed by such a huge clan, but I got over that in time and learned to love them all.

The biggest challenge was his older brother, Barat, an intellectually vain sort of person known around town as "the walking encyclopedia." One time, when I was just beginning to see Nick steadily, Barat made a point of finding out when I would be coming by Nick's office. I was alone in the reception room when he walked in and sat down next to me. He began asking me questions and I soon realized I was being given an I.Q. test. Barat was out to learn if I was smart enough for his brother.

At first I answered his questions quietly and correctly. Then I turned the tables, quizzing him back with the strangest, craziest puzzles I could dream up. Barat got so busy trying to come up with answers that he forgot that his original purpose had been to quiz me. It was delightful to outwit this self-styled genius. Up to then, I had found Barat definitely intimidating, but now I could relax with him and we became good friends.