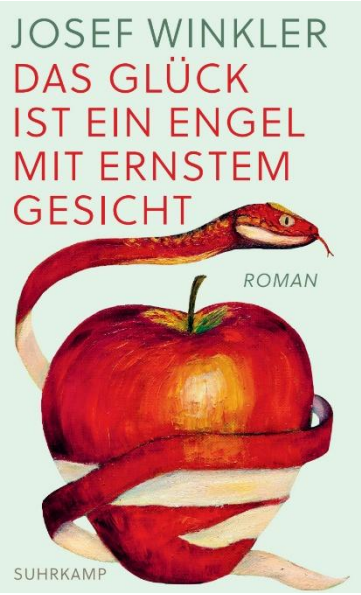

Josef Winkler

Fortune is a Stern-Faced Angel

A Novel

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With a long, lingering look, I conveyed to the confectioner, redolent of pastry dough, at the Patisserie Chaim Soutine, that the seventh chamber of my heart was not a sweets shop for love, that the night would always wait for me, and I'd have happily been her doughy, flour-scented cherry gardener, as she lifted from an urn grave a basket of cherries red like the blood of steers as a name day gift for me. Not a single cherry had been gnawed at by worms.

No adornment but tiny coffins in the braids of her chestnut brown hair as she hinted wordlessly, with a mere wink of the eye, that she could no more wait wistfully for a breath-thin crescent moon, which she wished to ride off like a deadly Gillette through the dark night. See André Breton: her cloven tongue is a holy wafer stabbed to death by the Carinthian Bishop Dr. Dr. Joseph Kösnter, the body of Christ bled dry, and her sloping brows are the ridge of a swallow's nest. Her wounded sex is a gold prospectors' town along the Mississippi and a disconsolate platypus that cannot keep

the ivory skeletons beneath the glass grasses of her thin skin from running riot as soon as the foretold little death—*foretold*!—takes place and the toes of the lovers in lust's afterglow cramp and claw at each other until they bleed. "If you write a true love letter, seal it with a defiled host," we read in *The Immaculate Conception*, a guide to "ideal obsession."

How often, in the heat of day, arms dangling like an ape's, bent over, reciting holy jingles, did we run through the ripe wheat fields, feeling the grain ears tickle and slit our cheeks, yearning to throw the arms away from our bodies up into the sky, high over the clouds transfixed by a colorful rainbow, but our arms would not dislodge like missiles from the two cursed blades of our scapulae, where, in the earliest days of our childhood, it was prophesied that one day, black devils' wings would grow.

When the confectioner, my imaginary listener at the Patisserie Chaim Soutine on the Rue Chabrol, lifted high her bare arms before the village crucifix, smelling of overripe rye fields in midsummer, depraving words of grace with her billowy lips, the house martins—the flour martins, as in Austria they are known—which had built their nests in the outer wall of the Patisserie Chaim Soutine, opened their beaks hungrily in the dense damp, the black hair, the musky scent of her armpits with the words: *Out past longing's border / Let your stern angel lie / Sway him to give the order / For my sisters to cry / As games that came before were / Pure like roses to the eye, / So pure shall be sorrow and sordor.*

The aromatic batter of water, flour, and vanilla at the Patisserie Chaim Soutine must "breathe," as they say, then the body of Christ will "come in," whether by foot or no, and only then can we speak

of a holy wafer, of the sacrament, kneaded, naturally, by the hands of the confectioner at the Patisserie Chaim Soutine into braided pastry glazed with egg white with sweet, wrinkly raisins from the noble varieties Sultanina and Korinthiaki! I am lucky enough to be a depraved four-leaf clover made of marzipan, the size of a human hand, later shaped into two marzipan horses, and my sister Maria lays me on the death bed of three angelic figures, beautiful boys with big wings and wreaths on their heads, placing me between their hands folded in prayer. “Mother!” Mitzele shouts, “there’s lily of the valley growing on the roof of your mouth!” “Those are the keys to Heaven, my child!” The keys to heaven!

For my dead sister María, I shall bear frozen pools of blood and water on my back—I will flaunt them!—but the black devil’s wings have yet to grow. I will bring her dead angels on my shoulders, their wings hanging slack on my chest, for God’s angels invite thee in, throw open the door and shout: Come! I have only one heart, perhaps I’ll not wear it on my sleeve, for your many oh so warm and salty tears beyond bitterness, our wretched me and you, with the scent of crushed almonds, lost in the butter wedge at the Patisserie Chaim Soutine! I by day and you by night!

Remember how we were moles from the underworld with black fur, with pink hands, aromatic of freshly upturned cemetery soil, and that the one time when the blueish pink forget-me-nots embraced the marsh marigolds in spring, after a terrible accident, when a poorly anchored two-hundred-pound wooden statue killed a child, not a haloed or unhaloed saint, but a bear carved from a tree trunk, it didn’t bury the child beneath it, it crushed him flat and killed him! “Without twitching an eyelash, try and imagine the swallows!”

In the chaos of my soul's pyre, I can kindle no more fire for you, esteemed confectioner of the Patisserie Chaim Soutine on the Rue Chabrol, in my soot-streaked heart, errant and alone, of father and mother orphaned, on the way to Heaven or Hell, only the devil can tell! No angel dead or living can say better, no matter how long he has lain draped over my chest or my shoulder! No one can tell, so it's best not to say! How often we've heard that whatever IT is, only the devil can say––the devil can say, and only the devil, who hoists himself from the cesspit and paints himself on the wall, hopefully, like a coward, behind some scene from the Bible beneath which lies splayed a human soul on a horsehair mattress, and there was no word of anything but the hot shears used to cut the umbilical cord of the true Siamese twins, I mean, of course, the angel and the devil.

Not seldom, when the devil incarnate rose again from the cesspit to nestle in my dreams, would I jolt and jostle the white-haired head of my dead Grandma Enzn till the old woman woke wolf-hungry and bit into her own skull, uttering the words, "Only the devil can say!" and swallowing me whole before I could wake into the plague of her nightmares—me, her grandson, the altar boy in a red robe, a part in my brunette hair, holding the burning red candles of a first communion in my hands. But I woke unscathed and threw off my bedcover with its pattern of children's graves on the warm inner side and of marsh marigolds on its cold outer side to find my listener in the imaginary Patisserie Chaim Soutine and to tell her the herds of lambs would set off in the morning hours.

Hear now, bewitching and attentive listener from the Patisserie Chaim Soutine, I will tell you my story, which is your story, too. Hear now and shut your eyes and try to remember at least the shadows of our common past! "He won't die, he can't die," you used to always say as a child about

Stimniker, our highly esteemed funeral director, who sealed your grandparents and mine in a coffin, Grandpa Enzn with his wicked stare and corpse-bitter mien and Grandma Enzn, whom the death-bird, the jaybird, used to torment—Stimniker with his fat Cuban cigar in his crooked lips, enveloped in a perpetual tobacco fog, eyelids blinking from the bitter smoke as he screwed the coffin lid tight and took a swig of rowanberry schnapps from the silver hip flask with the death's head on it. "Did you see, Stimniker's driving through town," people used to day behind a cupped hand, in a soft tone, a few times a year; or with a trembling voice, hands hanging by their sides.

When the smallest of the church bells tolled that the end had come and someone had died, all the residents of the village raised their heads and wondered who was now standing at the threshold of the beyond, or who had already crossed over. Snooty old Stimniker wouldn't even say hello, he was the lord of life and death, the undertaker who laid the dead, on their sojourn to Heaven or Hell, in a coffin framed by Obermann the woodworker. People said this person would *go* to Heaven or that one would go to Hell, not that they would be *taken* to Heaven or Hell. Stimniker was gruff, he never said "Go with God!" or even "Go with the Devil!" He performed his duties wordlessly, his profession, his "business," was to put bodies in coffins and put those coffins in the ground. We used to call him the corpse gofer from the Drava Valley, he tooled around in a stretch Mercedes with frosted glass windows, and they paid him, too, to place a dead body in a coffin and put it on display for three days in a chapel with pompous black decorations and a tall silver cross next to the head embossed with the words *for those left behind*.

How often I used to sit there reading *Old Surehand* on the sixteen-step staircase in my parents' house, the very one where my father and Stimniker, who strained as he puffed on his Cuban cigar,

brought down the corpse of Grandma Enzn wrapped in the wool blanket that used to lie on the divan in the kitchen, placing it in the coffin that lay at the ready in the servant's room, which my sister Maria had cleaned. She scrubbed the slanted boards of the wooden floor in the chapel-to-be, dotted with nails sticking out here and there, she polished the grated windows. Everything had to be fresh and clean for the two halves of the coffin, the body, the candles, the wreathes, and the tall silver crucifix. The blanket Grandma Enzn was wrapped in as she was brought down the stairs was tossed back on the divan in the kitchen where we could snuggle in her corpse's scent, and the rusty wires in the upholstered ottoman creaked like fiddles for a few seconds and it all reminded us of Grandma Enzn.

Even today, I can still smell those Cuban cigars and can hear my father and Stimniker's panting as they brought the very deceased Grandma Enzn carefully down the sixteen steps. I was frightened but at the same time hoped that the two breathless men would slip and fall down the steps and land on top of the dead woman. In the servant's room, they took Grandma Enzn by her hands and feet and lifted with her head bobbing back and forth into the coffin. Only when the slurping noises and the wheezing of the corpse bearers was no longer audible did Maria and I slowly and cautiously, hand in hand, walk down the narrow hallway and stand gawking at the threshold of the servant's room and look at the corpse of our fat grandmother, who filled the entire black coffin draped in black fabric. The dead woman's daughter Tresl Ragatschnig, had dressed her, the master baker, the *good soul*, they called her, she served the whole village, particularly on holidays, cakes of raspberry and chocolate, black forest cherry cakes and buttercream pies, Malakoff cakes and bishop's bread.

The sleeping villagers lifted their heads from their cushions in fear when the funeral bells pealed, the bells that were tolling for the dead. On hot summer afternoons, tying grain sheaves in the fields, they'd stand straight and looked toward the church tower, which swayed a bit as the bells rang. They'd turn circles with the gran sheaves in their hands, looking at their feet and reminding themselves that they were alive and the bells weren't tolling for them. They imagined the faces of five or ten of the villagers, not all of them could have made it through, one of them was dead, one of them had to be the deceased.

Perhaps it had been a traffic accident, perhaps a car had run over another child or a tractor had tipped over and crushed one, maybe another teenager had hanged himself in the barn with a dung-splattered calf rope still smeared with the dry afterbirth of the calf it had dragged into the world in the early morning a few days before, or perhaps the church bells were tolling for the girl who had killed herself but only after finishing very meticulously her chores in the stables so no one could speak ill of her after her decease. She had swept the stables clean *before*, had rinsed the milk cans out *before*, had brushed the horse named Fox and scattered oats into his trough with a scoop with the chipped enamel, people had remarked, full of praise. Only then did she have the decency to hang herself! To clean up herself! "She left it all looking decent!" Our father told me once about a farmer who got a girl pregnant and chased her off his land. "I hope you rot!" the girl shouted as she packed her things and left. And the farmer did rot away, starting with the tips of his toes. His toes turned black, then his feet, and so on, my father. said

And he, who had wished death on the Roman Catholics in the village, crept, dead or undead, into the mind of the villagers in the early evening, a corpse, as they milked their cows or harvested hay

or grain in the hot summer afternoon, then the riddle was solved, the name of the deceased spread like wildfire, and just a few hours later, Stimniker was there in his hearse with the crosses etched in the frosted glass windows, reversing onto the property to unload before the door the empty black coffin, pulling it on tracks from the car, standing it upright, looking past it to the left and right, and carrying it into the dead man's home, where someone from the family member greeted him and showed him into the viewing room. Afterward, he brought out the black catafalque from the car and set it up in the living room with practiced movements of the hands—a coffin, that was something he knew his way around!—standing it up on its lacquered legs.

"Mitzele! Polish Grandpa's shoes!" my father told his daughter, who was in the middle of washing the dishes. My thirteen-year-old sister Maria opened the can of shoe polish, with a red frog wearing a crown on its lid, smearing the black paste on the shoes of my deceased Grandpa Enzn. She scuffed them with a horsehair brush until the contours of her face were darkly mirrored on the leather of those shoes Grandpa would wear in death. Flecks of the black polish, *Erdal Red Frog Tried and True*, it said on the tin, remained for days under her fingernails after she'd slathered and stroked the leather. When she was writing in her school notebook after the funeral was over and glanced at her fingernails, still stained with shoe polish, the old man lying on the bier in the parlor stood before her and tried to untie the laces of those shoes brought to a high gleam. "Where are your shoes pinching?" the dead man's daughter, the master baker, Tresl Ragatschnig, kept asking my sister Maria. "Don't worry, one of these days it'll work out!"

Standing on the threshold, the first thing you saw of Grandpa Enzn as he lay there in death were the pointed tips of his shoes, shiny with Erdal Red Frog Cream, then the tip of his nose, now turned

blue, then the ever-growing gulfs of his hairy nostrils, which were spreading and inhaling the entire room where we kept vigil, and where the first worms were ready to bore in. The body in the coffin was covered by a black, transparent shroud with a pattern silver crucifixes and angels; it was drafty, because the door had been taken off its hinges, and the angels sometimes danced, sometimes stood on their heads and flapped their wings. Worst, and most exquisite, was the sweat of the invisible angels of death haunting the coffin's vicinity with their bloodshot eyes, whispering insistently, "Renounce the Devil! Renounce the Devil!" as yellow liquid drained from the corner of the dead man's mouth.

"For Grandpa!" they said, not *for the body*, as my sister Maria was polishing his shoes with the Erdal Red Frog shoe cream, as if Grandpa Enzn with his white moustache were still holding tenaciously to life! When father took a break his work on the farm to visit the deceased, who was laid out in the venerable parlor of our home, he spoke to him in a language completely incomprehensible to me, prayed the Lord's prayer while despairingly stroking his cold hands, which had been folded in prayer, then he wailed, and then he went back to his work, until you heard his footsteps in the hallway again two or three hours later. He was grateful, and could not stop saying goodbye to his father, who had left the farm to him instead of his oldest son Pepe, of whom I shall say more later.

The whole house smelled of the old man's rotting corpse and of wilting carnations and roses, gladioli and asters from Mother's well-tended garden. Our father shouted, "Boys! Girl! Go to the garden and fetch Grandpa some flowers!" The boys were Hansl, Seppl, and Peter, the girl was Mitzele, my thirteen-year-old sister Maria, we took knives from the kitchen drawer, went into the

garden, and cut the last asters with tears in our eyes. On the feet of the dead man lying in the coffin my father placed the shoes the girl had carefully shined with the “Erdal Red Frog Tried and True.” The dead man’s feet with their toes already blue slid in smoothly as if oiled, as if his socks had been soaped. My sister Maria was given the honor of tying those shoes and making a beautiful bow with the laces; and those loops ensnared the trumpeting choirs of heaven and the clamor of the choirs of Hell. The thin black leather shoelaces were draped over the back of her hands before she pulled them through the eyelets, tying bows that in her mind became a noose around the old man’s neck, to strangle him when the fear set on her her that the tyrant might awaken once more, coming to her the next morning with his cold trembling hands to button her flannel nightgown that was the gray color of entrails, to “help” her put on her underwear and smock and tie her hair, which hung in two long locks over her chest, into braids. “Embrace me, my damp sunlight. The wanderer’s stick has drifted off into his eye. The sleeper lends the fruit trees the chalk milk of our innocence. The words crackle softly in the oven.”