

Sweetie Boy

by Michael Kleeborg

For thirty-five years, Ernst Braun had lived and practiced medicine in Kühlenborn, a red-brick side street in northwest Berlin in the so-called Siemensstadt, built in the early 1900s to house Siemens workers. Although at sixty-seven Braun was old enough to retire, he was still practicing, if only sporadically. Most of his patients were as old as he was. Braun was their family physician and they could not or would not pay for more expensive doctors. His other patients were foreigners, Turks and Romanians, and now that the Wall had come down, people of obscure origins Braun had no interest in teasing out of them.

He hadn't set out to be a doctor for the poor, back when he passed his boards shortly after the end of the war, nor later, when he got married. But since he'd never yielded to his wife's demand that they move to a better neighborhood and this one was populated by the working class, things had just gradually worked out that way. Moreover, Braun had never evinced the social ambition typical of so many of his colleagues. Whether people's illnesses were serious or trivial, it was enough for him to cure them as well as he could and live a respectable life.

Now, it's next to impossible for a doctor to remain poor himself. Braun had never wanted to leave the house in the Siemensstadt, but despite this lack of ambition, he had managed to acquire a vacation house on the island of Sylt. When he got divorced in 1974 after eighteen years of marriage, he surrendered it to his wife with a light heart. (30) His son, born in 1957, was a nutritional chemist and lived in West Germany. They saw each other maybe once or twice a year and spent only half a day – at most one entire day together. His wife had left him for a more urbane colleague, and an exchange of Christmas and birthday cards was the only contact he still had with her.

Yet he didn't think of himself as either lonely or unhappy. If loneliness means being cut off from other people, a G.P. – especially if he practices out of his house in a working-class neighborhood with a lot of foreigners where everyone knows they can reach him any time, day or night – can hardly be called lonely. The first early-bird, some retired widow, would be wanting to talk to him while he was still eating breakfast and the last illegal squatter would be ringing his doorbell at midnight for a refill of codeine cough syrup. And since Braun had always been absorbed by his work, he had never spent even a moment wondering if he ought to be unhappy because of his broken marriage or the fact that he lived alone.

On this particular morning in November 1990, there was only one old woman sitting in his waiting room. In the time it took him to stick his head in the door and say he would be with her in five minutes, the doctor had been struck by something in her impoverished – even unkempt – appearance. What was it about her that seemed different from the other elderly patients who came to his office? After a while, he realized it was that she wore her gray hair long and in a sort of pony tail. Her brown skirt left her knees bare, and despite the time of year, she wasn't wearing pantyhose. She had a purple scarf wound around her neck like the ones to be found in the secondhand shops of Kreuzberg and she was wearing makeup. (31) In short, she was dressed like a young woman, but was at least as old as he was if not older. And he could tell by looking at her that she drank. She was no lady.

The woman sat there on a chair with her arms folded, looking around the small waiting room. In the row of chairs that ran around its four walls, interrupted only by the two doors and the narrow, tall radiators, not one chair matched another, as if his patients had all brought along their own or Braun had salvaged them from the curb on trash day. There were no potted plants. There were, however, colorful reproductions on the walls: blue horses, pink hills, and green men and boys without proper faces and with staring eyes. She didn't like them. She was a physiognomist and took a good deal of pride in her ability to read faces like a book. The lack of individuality among these figures made her nervous, as if she were surrounded by people wearing masks. It took her only a second to size up the doctor's face. All the thousands of faces she had seen in her long – overlong – life, fell into just a few types. The doctor's face – narrow, clean-shaven, with a fan of crow's feet, a fleshy nose descending from two deep furrows in his brow, no grooves in the corners of his mouth to drag it down into a grimace of contempt or abdication like the faces of so many men over forty, and finally, tufts of curly white hair over his ears and on the back of his head – all this was the old-age version of a type of face she had already categorized as a young woman. He was neither haughty nor self-assured. He would honor her request.

As he ushered her into his office, she looked back, gestured toward the prints, and said, "Who are those by?" (32)

"Various German Expressionists – Müller, Schmidt-Rottluff, Marc . . ."

"Hmm," said the woman, and turned back to him.

"Have you ever been here before?"

"No, I live in Pankow."

“So what brings you way down here?”

“I heard . . .” the woman began, but didn’t finish her sentence.

The doctor left it at that for the time being. He asked for her personal information, then opened the brown envelope and skimmed through her medical history.

“You can call me Rose,” she said. “Everyone does.”

“OK, Rose. And why have you come to see me?”

She sat up straight, cleared her throat, looked the doctor in the eye, and said, “I would like to die. I want you to give me a shot or a pill to swallow or I don’t know what. I want you to euthini . . . euthoni . . .”

“Euthanize you,” Braun completed her sentence in a soft voice.

“Exactly. That’s why I’m here.”

The doctor pulled open his desk drawer, took out a cigarette, and lit it.

“You smoke?” said the old woman.

He nodded.

“Mind if I have one too?” He shook his head.

After a brief hesitation to see if he was going to offer her one, she fished around in her scuffed shoulder bag. At least he gave her a light, and then they sat there in silence, blowing smoke past each other’s faces.

Finally Braun stood up and with an explanatory gesture toward the clouds of smoke, opened a window to the back courtyard.

“This is a pretty picture: a doctor who smokes in front of his patients.” (33)

“All doctors smoke,” said the old man with a smile. “I refrain if there are children in the room. Anyway, there’s no danger it will kill me before I’m old.”

“Which brings us back to what we were talking about,” said Rose.

He looked at her. She had probably been pretty before the alcohol did its work: dimples, double chin, like a shop girl in a Viennese operetta. Except for her eyes. Those cool gray eyes embedded in wrinkles silenced any wisecrack before it ever reached your lips.

Braun stubbed out his cigarette and said, “I don’t know *what* you’ve heard. Maybe that I sometimes give free care? That’s true. That I don’t ask too many questions if somebody shows up here with a stab wound or an early pregnancy? That’s true too. But I don’t know any doctor who would voluntarily kill a patient. I’d be the last doctor to . . .”

“. . . perform euthanasia,” Rose finished his sentence.

“You’re really stuck on that word, Frau . . . I mean: Rose. My job is to save lives, not end them.”

“Is it the money?”

He shook his head with a weary smile.

“Good, cause I haven’t got any.”

That’s pretty obvious, thought the doctor.

The old woman looked at him, then said, “If you do abortions, why can’t you euthanize me? Doesn’t it boil down to the same thing?”

“Are you going to start arguing ethics with me, Rose? It doesn’t boil down to the same thing for me. I don’t believe in god. I’ve seen cases where it was better for both of them: for the girl not to be a mother and for the embryo not to be born.”

“If you won’t agree to euthanize me, I can rat on you for the abortions, my friend,” said Rose with a sly look.

“Yes you can. The police station’s right next to the subway. Shall we go there together?”

“Hold on! Can’t you take a little joke, Doc? Where’s your sense of humor? OK if I have another?”

He nodded. “That’s another way to do it, by the way. But let’s stop putting the cart before the horse. Would you care to tell *why* you want to die?”

“I like you, Doc,” said Rose. “You don’t make a big deal out of which word you use. You don’t get preachy like a lot of other doctors. ‘Die’ isn’t so hard to say, after all. Not in these surroundings, right?”

“Maybe.”

“You want to know why I want to die? Well, you just read my death sentence yourself. The only thing left for me to choose is the date that’ll be on my tombstone, as long as I still can.”

“Whatever date you choose, it always comes too soon . . .”

“You think so, Doc? You know, I had them explain to me how Alzheimer’s works. You start to lose it a little bit at a time. First, you just get forgetful sometimes, like an old motor running down. It’s already happening to me. I’ll be sitting on a bench in the Zoological Garden and I don’t know how I got there. But at some point, it gets really bad. And you know, my whole life long, I’ve never sponged off anybody, not financially and not emotionally. I live alone. (Thank god I do, by the way.) I don’t want my super to find me lying in my own crap some day and then have to spend four weeks (35) attached to hoses

and in my final moments see the disgust on the face of some young girl who has to wipe off my ass.”

She paused and gave him a cursory look. “I’m not sentimental, Doc. I’d be lying if I told you I’m looking forward to the experience.”

She gave him a crooked, pouty smile with her ruined mouth. “You may not believe this, Doc, but my best years are over . . .”

The doctor grinned and stood up. “Can I offer you a little sparkling wine?”

“This early in the morning?” the woman exclaimed. “You’re a funny kind of doctor, that’s for sure!”

“I need a drop for my low blood pressure, and as long as you’re here . . .”

“All right then, if you twist my arm.”

Actually, he was just trying to gain time. He was a bit perplexed by this old woman. She was no lady, he’d already figured that out. But she wasn’t a tragic figure, either. Seems to know something about life. Doesn’t want to go on. Not doing it out of desperation. Who am I to deny her wish? Because if you look at it objectively, she’s right, isn’t she . . . ? No, it’s the other way around. Objectively, every day, every hour, every ray of sunlight and drop of rain is worth experiencing. Objectively, it’s stupid to give up hope before you draw your last breath because you never know what may save you even in the most hopeless situation. But how can you explain that to someone who doesn’t know it already? But not me, not me. I didn’t become a doctor in order to . . . no, no. Every single day of a dog’s life is better than death . . .

“Well, bottoms up,” said Rose. “Looks like a ladies’ portion, (36) just without a schnaps on the side. But in a doctor’s office, wow!”

Strange guy. Smokes, drinks a glass of champagne with me. Maybe it’s him who’s crazy and not me. But would he go to all this trouble if I’d asked for cough syrup or something for my varicose veins? Not likely. You know this kind of face, Rose. You’re dealing with an idealist. He’s going to tell you about life and how beautiful it can be. As if I didn’t know that. But it can be shitty, too. As if HE didn’t know that. And enough is enough. Does he have any idea how I live? He’s going to preach me a sermon. I can hear it already. But when he’s finished, Rose, you’ll get what you want in the end. An idealist is just waiting for someone to come along and free him from his straightjacket so he can do their bidding. An idealist is like a virgin overdue to be deflowered. But they were always my favorites.

Because you were one yourself: Rose the idealist, the most soulful piece of ass on the Potsdamer Platz. Who was it said that? – too long ago. Decent work for decent wages. “Professional code of ethics,” she said out loud.

Braun, who had no idea what she was talking about, looked up from her file and answered, “This illness progresses slowly. It’s quite possible you can still have a completely normal life for many years to come. Even if we agree you shouldn’t have to suffer, it’s much too early to begin thinking about consequences.

Rose stood up and put her hands on her hips. “Too early? Live a normal life? Whatta you know about my life? I live in a rented room that’s black from coal smoke. Water comes through the ceiling but (37) not out of the faucet! By the twentieth of every month, I start doing the rounds of the garbage cans along with the Turks. They’re the only ones who still talk to me, by the way, and I can’t even understand half of what they’re yakking about. I spent five years in the joint and I haven’t had a man in eleven – not for fun and not for money either. I don’t even have a TV. My time was past thirty years ago. And this guy comes along and wants to tell me about a normal life!”

Braun regarded her in silence.

“And that’s not even the half of it! The one thing I got left, my head, my brain, is floating off down the Spree, bit by bit. I don’t want to be rumaging in a garbage can when I run out of steam some day like an old wind-up doll.”

“If only we knew what we were trading life in for,” whispered the doctor. “The undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveler returns . . .”

“Wha . . . ?” exclaimed Rose. “What are you mumbling about?”

“I’m just saying that a dog’s life may still be better than none at all. And it can sometimes be a mistake to give up before the final moment, because . . .”

“What are you, some goddamn priest?” shouted Rose. “Next thing you’ll want to hear my confession! I came to you cause I heard you don’t make a lotta fuss and don’t just treat millionaires, and I ask you for the simplest thing in the world: a needle. I’ll use it myself so you don’t get into trouble. And His Holiness has a smoke with me and serves me champagne like we’ve got the whole place to ourselves, and then he pulls a Bible out of his sleeve! You wouldn’t believe how many priests I’ve known and (38) what I had to listen to and what I had to say to them before they could get it up. But in the end, they all did, and afterwards they went to confession and everything went a lot smoother the next time. But

you, you're just a coward! You babble about the joys of life and you're just shitting in your pants. And all your naked boys out there on the walls, the ones that don't look you in the eye . . . you're nothing but a . . . a sweetie boy! That's just exactly what you are, a little sweetie boy!"

This time it was the doctor who jumped up and Rose instinctively raised her hand in front of her face.

"What did you say?" cried Braun.

"Nothing, nothing. Calm down!"

"Repeat what you just said!"

"I said a lot of things . . ."

"The words you just said!"

"What? Sweetie boy? I didn't mean anything by it. Didn't mean to step on your toes."

The doctor sat down again. "Where did you come up with those words, Rose? Where'd you get them?"

"Those words? My god, it's just another way to say a queer, or . . ."

"I know, I know," Braun gave a hoarse laugh, "but it's been a long time since I heard that expression . . . my god."

His forehead's all sweaty. What have you gone and done now? Man, people can really be touchy, and all because of those stupid pictures . . .

She didn't just happen to pick that up somewhere, Rose didn't. Old knives cut deep. My god, I'm trembling and breaking out in a cold sweat. After fifty years. And I sure don't have Alzheimer's . . . (39)

He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his forehead.

"I'm sorry for scaring you, Rose. But I really need to know where you got that expression."

"Listen, you pick up all sorts of stuff in your lifetime," Rose said with a non-committal face.

"Where'd I get it? . . . I'm not gonna tell you my whole life story."

"OK," said Braun, "then I'll tell you mine. And you can smoke as much as you want while you listen. That expression was invented by a . . . man. I can't remember his name – something ordinary like Schmidt or Meier or Schulze, something like that. A doctor . . . a DOCTOR. A surgeon major. 1944. I had just turned twenty."

"I was twenty-one in 1944. It's a long time ago. You got another bottle of that champagne? You know, in case this is gonna be a long story."

He didn't seem to hear her.

"I never found out who had informed on me . . . Maybe somebody from the university, maybe somebody in the barracks. See, we'd been drafted that year. And I said to myself, they're going to send you to a surgical unit at the front. Instead, they arrest me, put handcuffs on me, and take me to a hospital . . . shove me into a cell in the basement with ten other guys. And I ask them, why're we here? And one of them laughs and says, You know just as well as we do. And then I catch sight of his pink triangle . . ."

"Jesus, that's why you're so upset. You're really . . ."

"Shut up, Rose. You do stupid things when you're twenty without . . . I've been married. I have a son!" (40)

"So they made a mistake," said Rose.

"Whatever . . . and then I saw him for the first time, in the big hall: fairly short, hair pasted to his skull, hands clasped behind his back, with a lab coat on over his uniform. On the door it said 'Institute for Psychic Disorders.' There he was, surrounded by his courtiers, seven or eight men, like they were on rounds. And there was a mattress on the floor . . . They brought me in and I didn't have a clue. I still thought . . ."

Rose inhaled deeply and then blew the smoke out. "Blue Luftwaffe uniform, expensive material, but a little pip-squeak. And it was a horsehair mattress."

Braun didn't hear her. "I still thought . . . who knows? An oversight, they'd taken me for someone else. And then he strode over and planted himself in front of me and began to speak while still looking me up and down. 'I see you are a medical student, young man. You know we must eradicate the dishonest, the unreliable, and the fraudulent, gypsy brood and Jews, of course. It's our duty to render them harmless. But someone like you, racially pure – what a disgrace!' And he slapped my face in front of the assembled company. 'A German man but a pervert – how can that be?' And he shook his head . . . What was that you just said, Rose?"

"I said, for example, that besides the medical officer Dr. Schulz, Lieutenant Strabitz and Lieutenant Strelow were usually also present, plus a blond guy from the Gestapo who never told me his name, a psychiatrist named Gundelach, an intern by the name of Rudi, the secretary Traudel, and two nurses, Frau Gödel and I forget the other one's name." (41)

“How do you know this, Rose?” Braun had stood up and lit a cigarette. He started pacing up and down like a prisoner in a cell, wringing his hands. “Rose, how did you come to know about this?”

He collapsed onto his chair again. “Were you one of the . . . ?”

“Life plays funny tricks on us, Doc. I was one of the ladies hired to find out which of you sweetie boys could be put back on the right path . . .”

“My god,” groaned Braun. “And you . . . and you . . .” He cleared his throat. “You remember everybody’s name?”

“Sure, cause except for Schulz and the women, we had to service the other gentlemen too – something we didn’t get *paid* for, by the way – so I memorized their names and testified against them after the war . . . But it was the word of a prostitute against the word of a Wehrmacht officer or a doctor . . . forget it.”

“My dear Rose, you’ve got an astonishing memory for someone who claims to have Alzheimer’s!”

“You forget a lot of things, but some things you never forget even if you’d like to. I worked there nine months, from the middle of ’43 to May ’44. There were six of us.”

“I was there on February 11, 1944. Maybe you were working that day, Rose . . .”

“Quite possibly, Doc. But if it wasn’t me, it was one of my colleagues. We all did our best . . .”

The doctor was holding his head in his hands as if to keep it from splitting apart like a coconut. “I can still recall (42) his voice: ‘I haven’t given up on you yet, Braun. I’ve developed a medical procedure to find out if there’s any hope for you or not, if you’re a congenital pervert or just a sweetie boy . . .’”

“Sweetie boy,” echoed Rose. “Lucky you were fair-skinned and blond, Doc. They didn’t even bother having us test the darker ones.”

The doctor inhaled deeply and continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “And then he says to me, ‘Perhaps you’ve just been led astray. You’ve got the physique of a real German man! I assume you were influenced by Jewish elements . . .’ Yes, that must have been it, I say to him. (It was really a cadet from a Napola – one of those elite Nazi boarding schools. Anyway, it was just a bit of groping in the showers.) But I say, Yes, it was a Jew; I don’t know how he could have perverted me. That’s what I said.”

“Well don’t let it give you gray hair, Doc. What else could you have said? I saw a couple of brave guys answer no to that question. They didn’t even have the chance to get tested. They hustled em right out of there.”

“To get tested!” Braun spat out the words. “Yeah, that’s what they called it. And you know what, Rose? It wasn’t just that to save my life I had to sleep with a stranger in front of ten observers. I’d never slept with a woman before . . . I mean, I was still a virgin.”

“Sure you were, except for your Napola cadet,” grinned the old woman. “My god, you weren’t the only one, believe me. I must have administered the test to 300 guys and they all stood there with their shoulders drooping (43) and eyes staring straight ahead and their crotch as empty as a department store mannequin’s. And then, all the observers whispering and grinning. Cause just between you and me, Doc, maybe you were still a virgin, but some of them were – pardon my French – really hard-boiled faggots, and it was a lot worse for them . . .”

“I should have spat in his face. I should have refused to do it. My god, I can’t believe how low you can go, how deep you can sink . . .”

“Well,” said Rose, “but then we wouldn’t be sitting here today having such a nice chat, now would we? You put it so beautifully, Doc. Let’s see . . . A dog’s life is better than none at all. Wasn’t it something like that? If only we knew what we were trading life in for, right?”

“Of course, of course. But I’m sure if I’d had a chance to get my hands on one of the cyanide capsules all those gentlemen carried with them . . .”

“Just listen to the doctor who wouldn’t hear of euthanasia!” Rose scoffed. “You’re just this far away from insulting my femininity. Of course it was embarrassing and all that, but don’t you think it was more pleasant than getting gassed? I’ve never in my whole life put so much heart and soul into my work, so much technique . . .”

“Technique?” Braun had to laugh in spite of himself.

“Sure. Just think about it, Doc. Schulz would say, ‘If they can manage to have intercourse with a German woman under these circumstances, then they’re German men after all. They’re just sweetie boys and the front will cure them of that.’ And afterwards, while you subjects were in the next room putting your clothes back on, they stuck a finger into us to make sure – how should I put it? – that the act had been brought to a proper conclusion. Pretending wouldn’t have worked. And so, of course, (44) we used all the technique we had. What else could we do? We weren’t allowed to help you over your trepidation or disgust by

any of the classic means. Everything had to be German, clean, and in missionary position. And if I may say so in all humility after all these years – Rose had some pelvic techniques that could convince even the sweetest little boy that women weren't as distasteful as he had feared.”

“Yes, but with all due respect to your pelvic technique,” the doctor smiled weakly, “there was more to it than that. For me, it was the voice. I remember how she undressed me and told me to close my eyes, that was the most important thing. And then she never stopped whispering in my ear. I don't remember what, but I remember her voice and her breath and how it tickled my ear . . .”

“And then,” said Rose, “they also timed us with a stop watch.”

“Yes, I still remember my time: seven minutes and thirty-eight seconds,” said Braun. “The longest seven and a half minutes of my life.”

“Not a bad time, Doc. My longest was twenty-four minutes. A real queen who was seriously disgusted by having to . . . And I had to tell him to close his eyes and pretend I was a guy and so on. Luckily, I know how men talk and I got him through it. That was the advantage with Schulz: the only thing he cared about was his theory. As long as it was confirmed, he was completely satisfied. If it worked, OK, send em to the front, even with lipstick and eye shadow . . .”

“What kind of people were they?” asked Braun.

“Just people. I saw one of em again after the war, (45) as a john. He'd become a cop. First I didn't want to, but then I thought, what the hell . . .”

“What the hell,” echoed Braun. “A sweetie boy . . . They let me go and Schulz shook my hand. ‘Be a credit to Germany and your race at the front,’ he told me, ‘and wash this stain off your record. And when we've won the war, start a family and make a lot of children for the Führer.’”

“And what happened then?” asked Rose.

“Well, I only fulfilled part of Schulz's hopes for me. We lost the war. I was lucky to be taken prisoner in Poland and turned over to the English. I was back in Germany by wintertime. I did start a family, but I made only one child. . . . and you, Rose, how did things go for you?”

“Oh, like always, at first. There aren't any big crises in our profession, just an age limit. The front-line soldiers and the big shots from behind the lines were gone, but there were the

Russians, then the Yanks – those were the best years. Then the Germans again, and that went on until 1961. I worked the Kurfürstendamm but I lived in East Berlin. I was dumb enough not to see it coming, and one fine day the Wall went up with me stuck on the wrong side, the one where everything was officially verboten now. Unofficially was another story, of course, but it wasn't as easy as before and not as profitable either. And then, bam! somebody denounced me and they stick me in the joint for five years. And when I get out, eh, what can I tell you, Doc? I was fifty and my looks were gone and so was my (46) apartment and they took away my civil rights and no money and from then on, things went downhill for Rose, and . . . Hey! What's the matter, Doc? Are you crying?"

Ernst Braun sat upright in his chair and the tears rolled down his cheeks. He sat quietly, not sobbing, and he lifted a hand to wave off her question.

"It's OK to go ahead and have a good cry after all these years," she murmured and lit up a cigarette.

After a while, the doctor smiled through his tears, gave a loud snuffle, and asked for a tissue.

"Was it you who saved my life, Rose?"

"As if it mattered, Doc. I think it was probably a colleague, cause if it was me and you didn't recognize me, I'd be pretty insulted, wouldn't I?"

"May I give you a kiss, Rose?"

"Hey! Don't start that nonsense, Doc! And don't get all sentimental on me. I haven't forgotten why I'm here."

The doctor stood up. "Come on, Rose. I need some fresh air. I'll hang a sign on the door. No one else is coming today anyway. My Turkish kids aren't due until tomorrow. We'll take a drive in the Grunewald and we can talk."

The old woman hesitated.

"Or have you got a better idea?"

"Not really," Rose conceded.

They went outside and got into his car – a 1962 silver-gray Mercedes 220 that Braun used so infrequently and had serviced so regularly it still looked brand-new after 175,000 miles – and off they went. (47)

"You drive like a grandpa," said Rose.

"I AM a grandpa."

"Haven't been in a Benz in a long time . . ."

They stopped at a outdoor café in the Grunewald and drank beer. The doctor suggested that Rose come and live with him. She could work as a receptionist or not, her choice, and he promised to fill a syringe and leave it in her bedside table. If she ever really felt like dying, it would be there. But only on condition that she move in with him.

Rose looked at him for a long time.

“I’ll think about it, Doc.”

“It seems like a fair deal to me,” said the doctor.

“But if I do it at your place, you’ll get into trouble after all,” she objected.

“It’s been a long long time since I had to face someone in uniform,” said the doctor. “I’ll be calmer than I was the last time.”

“I’ll think about it, Doc,” Rose said again. “Can you drive me back to my place?”

He parked in front of the shabby apartment building, got out of the car, and came around to hold the door open for her.

“See you soon,” he said.

“Good-bye, Doc,” said Rose and raised a hand in farewell. Then she turned and disappeared into the building.