

Marjorie Sandor

an excerpt of

A Lesser Sonata

The *Requiem* has its mystery in its excessive light.

—Max Kenyon, *Mozart in Salzburg*

LOOK only at this street, in this light, and you can't tell there's been a war here, an occupation. Even the writing on the back of the old photograph is faint—*Getreidegasse, Salzburg, 1945*—as if someone wants to erase a complicated truth and make a pure dream of this place. It almost works. You are tempted to forget history, just for a moment, and imagine, with your eyes shut good and tight, a fairy tale of narrow European streets, window boxes in the rain, and *Fräuleins* leaning out to wave to an American medic, twenty-eight years old and handsome in a melancholy way.

The medic is named Maurice Rudens, and this pure dream is, in fact, what he wants the viewer to feel—a particular viewer, a girl named Clara Shapiro. She is twenty years old, blond and green-eyed, engaged to his best friend back home. In years to come, Clara's children will know this medic as Uncle Maury, a balding bachelor who spends every Sunday in their house and appears to love music to the exclusion of all else. Maurice Rudens will grow old in their living room, waving his glass of Scotch as he makes thrilling, impenetrable statements about Mozart, Bach, and Schumann, never taking his eyes off their beautiful mother.

Getreidegasse, Salzburg, 1945. Is the photograph his last valentine, his last gambit for her heart, in a code no one can decipher? In it he poses outside Mozart's birthplace in his army coat and wire-rims, managing even in uniform to suggest the brooding romantic of a girl's adolescent dreams. He's only been in Europe three weeks, and already he has perfected the devouring gaze of a handsome film star. There are new little creases on either side of his mouth,

suggesting stoic acceptance, a hint of superiority, so she should know he's a man of bitter experience now, of mystery and grief.

He'll send a postcard that day, too. Years later, Clara's children will find it, along with the photograph, in an old shoebox of their mother's mementos, and toss them both carelessly back in. Boring! No hint of the dark and interesting stuff they're hoping for: a hint of wartime romance, passionate adultery, a secret baby spirited away in the night from their mother's small Indiana town. It's just Uncle Maury; no big deal.

But look at the postcard again, in a different light, and it seems deliberately unforthcoming. It's addressed to *Clara Shapiro, 15 Belair Street, Kossuth, Indiana* and shows a picture of a small room containing nothing but a small, ornate table, its legs slender and curved. On the back, Maury has scribbled *Mozart's birthplace, Salzburg, April, 1945*. Nothing more.

At home in Indiana, Clara's mother, ever alert, always gets to the mail first. She hands the card to her daughter, then lingers at her side, lays a cool palm on her arm.

"That's all?" Clara murmurs. "Why isn't there a message?"

Eva shakes her head. "He's just trying to punish you. You're making the smart move choosing Abe, believe me."

Abe, the man she'll marry in a few months, and with whom she'll have her four children and make her life. He's an army medic too, but 4-F because of a crippled leg from childhood polio. So in April 1945, while Maury is mailing a cryptic postcard and photograph to Clara from the tortured heart of Europe, her fiancé is sending his own hopelessly prosaic missives from Fort Sam Houston in Texas, sometimes three or four a week, so she won't forget him. These will have a place of honor in the family album on the living room coffee table, there for anyone to see. Homely and unabashedly sentimental, they are crammed with descriptions of the heat, the cockroaches, the *crazy characters* at the army hospital. Abe is trying to impress her, too, wanting her to see that he's confident, at ease with himself and the world, that he will never keep a secret from her, not in a million years, not like that *ploser* Maurice Rudens.

But the Texas postcards don't tug on the imagination the way the one from Salzburg does—so seductively blank, so withholding—from a handsome, melancholy soldier too shy, too analytical to declare himself directly. So Clara is left standing in the hallway of her girlhood home, holding a nearly blank

postcard in her hand while her mother clucks her disapproval. Surely Maury is taunting her for her decision, letting her know she played it safe by choosing Abe, though Maury himself has never done anything but talk to her about music—and once, when she played for him, frowned at her so intensely she began to cry.

Now Clara gives her mother a frown of her own. But Eva only sees it as a childish squint with something new and disloyal in it. Eva Shapiro is nobody's fool: behind a blank postcard might lie a romantic code, or something else entirely, something even an army medic, trained in technical speech, won't say. She shakes her head to scatter memories like old papers, old rags: the night, in her own girlhood, that her whole family crowded into one bed while the Cossacks took over the rest of the house. In the morning, her baby sister was dead, curled up under a carelessly thrown pillow.

Eva is safe in America now, but certain things a mother can count on. For instance, that behind a daughter's rebellious looks lie dangerous fantasies, brought on by history happening far away: a fantasy of traveling gloves, a light spring coat tightening around the hips as a young woman walks away from her comfortable house, with just enough money to buy a train ticket, maybe even a ship's passage, to a place she's never been.