

SARAH KOKERNOT

Pleasure to Make Your Acquaintance

Magdalena Schuler arrived in Hot Springs, Arkansas on a March afternoon, balanced unevenly between two suitcases. The lightest one contained four family photographs, the crucifix that had hung over her mother's death bed, and her father's sheet music to Chopin's *Nocturnes*. The heaviest one that tipped her to the right held three shirts, two skirts, a nightgown, her undergarments, her toiletries, an extra pair of shoes, and a set of seven records on elocution and vocalization. Her mother had bought the records four years prior and she and Magda listened to them obsessively on their neighbor's stolen gramophone. Of the two, Magda's voice had experienced the most improvement.

When Magda arrived at Mrs. Woods' house on Orange Street her accent was barely detectable except for an under-enunciation of *th* and *wah*. She sat without fidgeting on a rose-patterned sofa as her new employer read over the letter of reference. Mrs. Woods was elderly but enjoyed good health. She was trim and erect with powdered white skin which on warm days like this one shone like cake icing. Magda was relieved that she would not be helping her employer get on and off the toilet, at least not for a few more years.

Mrs. Woods sat upright and looked over her

reading glasses. "So you're a German then?"

"Yes," Magda nodded. To people like Mrs. Woods it probably made no difference that Magda was in fact Polish. Shortly after immigrating, her father discovered that it was better to be a German immigrant than a Polish one. No one in Baltimore believed that Poles could play piano, let alone read sheet music—an understandable prejudice, her father insisted, because what American would believe that one of those beet-faced *za chlebem* had trained in a Warsaw musical conservatory? He changed their name from *Szcepanski* to *Schuller*. Her father had died the first year in an accident at the docks. Music lessons could not support a family.

"Your family left Europe during the Great War?" Mrs. Woods did not wait for an answer but looked down at the letter of reference again. It was handwritten from the employer of Magda's mother, a distant cousin of Mrs. Woods, who had paid for the second-class train ticket. "I'm terribly sorry to hear about your mother's passing." Mrs. Woods shook her head and sighed. "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away." For a brief moment, Mrs. Woods' dark eyes clouded with tears.

There was a soft-heartedness to Mrs. Woods

that reminded Magda of the distant cousin in Baltimore. Amelia Davis was a gentle woman with big gray eyes. At Magda's mother's funeral, she gave a eulogy in an even, dove-like voice: Ludamilla Schuller, she said, had been more than a secretary, she was a dear friend and confidante. Amelia Davis had even arranged a wreath of chrysanthemums to be laid out on the coffin. Magda's mother had spoken little of her employer, except sometimes to remark that Mrs. Davis wore men's trousers around the house and was drinking away her looks and shouldn't be so angry that Mr. Davis kept a mistress in Atlantic City. To her shame Magda crumpled into Mrs. Davis' arms, weeping, as they lowered her mother's casket into the ground. Mrs. Davis did not seem to realize that Magda would have fallen into the priest's arms had he not been holding such an enormous Bible. She took Magda's dizzy spell as a personal sign of her great friendship with Ludamilla. Magda rode in the car and stayed in a guest bedroom for three days at the Davis house, drinking vegetable broth and reading last year's magazines.

Beulah Woods. Whenever Mrs. Davis spoke her cousin's name there was a swing in her voice and the tone of a church bell. Magda did not yet recognize this intonation as southern. Mrs. Davis said that Beulah Woods a modern woman in an old-fashioned place. Beulah Woods would not be only be an employer, but a benefactress. She always sent her girls to the women's teaching college after they spent some time in her service. Magda wanted to ask why Mrs. Davis could not

just pay for her tuition at the teaching college in Baltimore with the large allowance that her husband gave her. Of course it was better not to ask these things. More than likely, Magda's mother had given the impression that they were too proud to accept charity.

But Magda was not too proud to accept charity. Not at all.

It was only since Dr. Woods passed away four years ago that Mrs. Woods employed a *lady's companion*, the term she preferred over *housekeeper*, which she used to describe the black women who wore maid uniforms and pushed baby carriages down Orange Street. The two employees who had preceded Magda were mountain girls. They declined Mrs. Woods' offer to further their educations, instead returning to hollows to marry and raise children in dirt-floor cabins. One had used the toilet as a wash basin. Another had never seen a gramophone before. At the sound of a disembodied voice, she had run out of the house screaming that Dr. Woods had returned from the grave. Mrs. Woods expressed relief that Magda was not so ignorant.

The two of them stood for a moment by the gramophone. It wasn't as new as the stolen one at the neighbor's Baltimore, but it would have played Magda's elocution records just fine. "I hardly ever listen to records anymore," Mrs. Woods sighed. Magda struggled for the politest words to make a request. *Would it be all right if, on occasion, I used to the gramophone to practice my elocution? My mother always wanted for me to*

(improve? decrease?) my accent.

Improve.

By the time she caught the word, Mrs. Woods had disappeared into the study at the back of the house. Magda's hands sweated in her gloves. There wouldn't be another opportunity as good as that one. Mrs. Woods gave directions on how to clean the velveteen drapes. (Beat them on a rack, do not wash.) Magda nodded at everything Mrs. Woods said and wondered, not for the first time, what would be the most painless way to end her small life. Ingesting rat poison, which could be found in the basement of every fine home? Or falling onto the tracks of a moving train?

At the end of the house tour Mrs. Woods showed Magda to her room, a narrow slot at the side of the kitchen with large windows overlooking a vegetable garden. Mrs. Woods left her there to unpack and rest. Magda opened her suitcase and placed the elocution records in a milk crate under her bed. She fell asleep even though the sun had not set, and woke up the next day, determined that she would not end her life.

It would be so embarrassing to die when she was so close to erasing her accent.

She had forgotten much of her parents' language but carried its residue. Everyone on their street in Baltimore said it was a strange that a child who learned English quickly would maintain such a strong mark of the old country. Her mother spoke Polish only when she wanted to comment on the clothing choices of others, and German only when she argued with the butcher about his prices or the landlord about the mice.

The old woman who lived next door to them with the stolen gramophone said her Bohemian cousin, who came over when he was four, could never lose his accent either. She always treated Magda with the great kindness one reserved for simple children.

While she was alone in her room, Magda reached under her bed and pulled out a record. She practiced from memory, beginning with the vowel warm-up tracks then moving on to tongue twisters. *My. Thy. Nigh. Will my child die?* After her vocal chords had softened, she practiced the remaining consonants that were her giveaways, speaking into the flat of her palm to feel the bullet that shot *puh*, the dental hiss of *the*, the air kiss of *wa*. On the back cover of each record, Coretta Winston's face watched her, peering from the folds of a sable mink coat. A pearlescent light radiated from her skin, as if the photograph had been taken the exact moment of her revelation, as a young actress in New York, that *The voice must faithfully communicate the passions of the soul and the depths of the intellect.*

Coretta Winston was attractive but lacked the delicacy that would have made her pretty. Her mouth was large with overly muscular lips. "It looks like she uses her mouth for a living," is how her mother once put it. Regardless of this flaw, Coretta Winston projected a regal confidence whose power lay in the very fact that she had so little to do, only purr *Pleasure to make your acquaintance.* And one would know immediately that Miss Coretta Winston was a woman who owned more than one fur coat, who employed a

secretary, who brought along six-piece matching luggage sets when she stayed at hotels.

Mrs. Woods delighted in calling Magda *Fräulein*. This was done so playfully at first, as a way to lighten an unpleasant task that would take all afternoon, like helping her clean the old carriage house. After a week she began to call Magda *Fräulein* at all occasions, and apparently referred to her as *Fräulein* in public because that's also what visitors called her, even though Magda always introduced herself as Magdalena Schuller.

One Saturday afternoon, two young ladies from First Presbyterian came over to discuss the Sunday school curriculum. Mrs. Woods telephoned earlier to let Magda know that she was running late from the beauty parlor. Magda led the guests into the living room and announced the news as carefully as she could. Although her pronunciation was clear she caught herself, mid-sentence, speaking from the wrong place in the mouth. The ladies' faces lit up at her foreignness.

"Thank you, *Fräulein*," they said, and giggled.

Magda retreated to the kitchen and opened the china cabinet. She chose the teapot with a flower pattern that closely matched the living room sofa. Magda whispered a tongue twister down the hallway. *She sells seashells, she shells seashells.*

Back in living room she filled the ladies' teacups. She sensed that she was being admired, and that if they could have done so, the ladies would have reached out and touched her like they would the fabric of a new dress. "You are so very

beautiful!" Julia exclaimed. It was something an old woman would say, although Julia must have only been a few years older than Magda. No one would have denied that Julia was much more beautiful than her, more elegant. She had the sort of face that belonged on a jar of night cream.

Magda had no idea how to reply.

"Betsy," Julia turned to her friend on the couch, a kind auburn-haired woman. "Isn't *Fräulein* lovely?"

"Of course she is," said Betsy, and looked at Magda with apology. Magda returned the look with a smile. It was perfectly fine if they wanted to talk about her like she was a child who couldn't speak.

"You'll sit down with us, won't you?" said Julia. "Didn't you bring some tea for yourself? Never mind. Sit down with us for a moment." Magda remained standing, holding the hot teapot handle with a towel. "I want to know everything you know about Europe," Julia continued. "Have you been to the Parthenon?"

Magda blushed. "I never had the opportunity to see the Parthenon. We arrived to this country when I was four." The two *w*'s in the last sentence flew out like *v*'s. She blushed even more.

Julia didn't hide her surprise. She glanced at Betsy for confirmation. "I was under the impression that you were a new arrival?"

"Only to Hot Springs." Magda set the teapot back onto the tray.

"The Parthenon isn't anywhere near Germany!" Betsy said, a rash of embarrassment had grown over her freckled cheeks. "Really,

Julia, that's like asking us if we've ever been to the White House."

"People travel." Julia grabbed Magda's hand and patted it. "I won't pester you anymore, my dear."

"We'd love to invite you to a women's social, sometime," said Betsy, leaning towards her. "Perhaps you can educate us? We must seem awfully provincial."

"Although maybe you should never leave the house." Julia held her teacup before her lips, the bow of her mouth pulled into a grin. "Mrs. Woods might lose another companion. As soon as the boys take a look at you, they'll be around the block day and night singing 'Good Ole Summertime'."

"Stop embarrassing her." Betsy lightly smacked her friend on the arm. "Thank you kindly, Fräulein, for the tea."

"You're very welcome," said Magda. The w came out in a perfect shape. She almost expected the ladies to applaud her, but they hadn't registered the difference. Magda had already dissolved into the background. Their eyes darted back and forth, communicating another matter that they were eager to get on with. "Please ring the bell if you need anything else." Magda walked into the hallway. As the door swung shut, she stood to the left of the threshold, and slowed her breath. Their voices lowered.

"When Aunt Beulah decides it's time to live with her children in Little Rock, I simply don't know who will hire her," said Betsy. There was a pause, and the rustle of a dress. "When the

doctor was alive, Aunt Beulah would have never considered—"

"I know!"

"He couldn't have kept his hands off her. Did you hear—" Betsy lowered and said something inaudible.

There was a loud gasp. A teacup clanked against its saucer. "Poor Aunt Beulah! How awful!" Someone laughed. "You hush now. I don't want to know any more."

"Well," Betsy said. "He tried on everyone, that man."

Julia whispered, "She can't hear us from the kitchen, can she?"

Heat rose up Magda's neck. She skidded to the kitchen on her toes, banging a saucepan loudly against the sink to let them know she was working. Had she heard right? Her heart pounded as she filled up the sink with water. She scraped the morning's fried eggs off the cast iron skillet. She wondered if she understood correctly, or if some regionalism in their speech confused her.

The meeting on the Sunday school curriculum was brief. They would teach the betrayal by Judas Iscariot and the Garden of Gethsemane until Palm Sunday. On Easter, the oldest children would hide dyed eggs in the park and the youngest children would hunt for them. Mrs. Woods advised they hide eggs in easy-to-find places only, since last year the park stank of rotten eggs until May.

After Julia and Betsy left, Mrs. Woods hurried

off to another meeting. She would not be back until eight o'clock so there was no need to bother with dinner. Magda went into the living room with a feather duster, and brushed it over the silver picture frames that stood on the back of the upright piano. There was one of an alive and young Dr. Woods by himself on the front steps of the veteran's hospital. His cigar smoke still lingered on the upholstery in the office behind the living room. In life he had been tall, and almost as handsome as his wife was beautiful. His long surgeon's hands tugged down the lapels of his jacket. Magda guessed that he was the one who had played the piano, since she had never seen Mrs. Woods show any interest in it. Before Magda's father died, he taught her Bach's Minuet in G. Magda touched the ivory piano keys, stained yellow from someone else's fingers. You were supposed to clean the ivory with milk. She played a C chord. The hammer in the piano stuck and the note rang flat. At the sound her arm recoiled as if she had stroked a dark and rotten thing.

He would have tried on her.

She decided she wouldn't dust Dr. Woods' photograph ever again.

Mrs. Woods was not coming back until after eight o'clock.

Magda locked all three doors of the house then shut and latched all the windows. She noticed the tiny mutterings of the old empty house. Branches tapped on a window, floor boards groaned under her weight, a light bulb sighed an

electrical hum when she turned on the switch in the living room. To drown out the other sounds she recited her elocution exercises. *Pleased to make your acquaintance. Delighted to make your acquaintance. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.*

The brass petals of the gramophone shone in the lamplight, its black empty tunnel gaped. She ignored it. A drafty sadness crept into her heart and she picked up a magazine to insulate herself from this feeling. The clock struck nine times and the last time was loudest.

Someone banged on the door.

Mrs. Woods was locked out of the house. Magda's throat clenched.

She began apologizing before the door was even open.

Mrs. Woods' face was sunken around the eyes. "There's no need to lock the door in a town like ours, Fräulein." She unbuttoned her gloves, a process that always took longer than it should have, and unpinned her hat. She smoothed back the gray hair that had fallen over her eyes. Her chest rose and fell as if she had been running.

"What do we have in the pantry?" Mrs. Woods asked, already halfway down the hall.

"I can bring out the rest of the chicken," said Magda, trailing her.

Mrs. Woods emerged, her arms loaded with food. She dropped it onto the table and Magda caught a jar of tomatoes that had started to roll off. There was sugar, corn meal, canned salmon, flour.

"It's for charity," said Mrs. Woods gathering more food. She laid out on the table a bag of

dried beans, a package of salt, several jars of green beans, a five-pound dried ham. She stood and smoothed back the curly wisps of hair that continued to escape their bobby pins. “It’s for a family—very poor—who recently lost their mother in an automobile accident.”

“And their father? How is he?” Magda asked.

“Their father,” said Mrs. Woods. The light from the ceiling lamp suddenly made everything in the kitchen look slightly yellow. But it was not just the light, it was her face, drained of its healthy blush, old in the way she would appear in a handful of years. Magda reached for a napkin folded on the counter, expecting Mrs. Woods’ to cry. She did not. She straightened up tall, like someone had fitted her to a plank.

“Their father died a few years ago.” She sat down in chair, and lifted her hand, and drew a tired arc over the table. “Someone will pick all this up early tomorrow morning. We’ll leave it outside for them. Fräulein, would you be so kind as to retrieve those empty potato sacks?”

Mrs. Woods lit a lamp and guided Magda through the backyard where the low white fence emptied into the dusty back alley. The fat silhouette of an opossum scurried out of their way. They tied the bags to the low hanging branch of a tree, to discourage the vermin. When they finished, four stuffed bags of food swayed, fat as turkeys in a butcher’s window.

They paused in the kitchen in front of the empty table. “We’re out of everything now. Lord have mercy.” Mrs. Woods yawned. “I’m off to bed. Good night, Fräulein.”

By then it was so late that Magda fell asleep without practicing her elocution. She woke to the shatter of glass breaking outside in the alley. A deep blue light filled her bedroom. It was almost dawn. She had forgotten completely about the food, and wondered what the neighbors were up to that couldn’t wait for the day.

Magda went into the back alley as soon as she dressed. The potato sacks were gone. What remained was the knot of twine over the tree branch. A mason jar of blackberry preserves had shattered on a tree root. The bottom half of the jar was missing. Black ants and flies swarmed over the jam. Magda bent over to pick up the broken glass when she noticed the footprints in the dirt beneath the shade of the tree where the grass couldn’t grow. There were two sets of footprints, so small that Magda realized one child must have had to climb the tree to cut down the sacks of food while the other one below caught the sacks in his arms. What a loss—a whole jar of sugary jam. They must have dipped their fingers in it before turning back home.

Something in her chest felt raw. She sat on the ground, remembering the days after her father’s death. Her mother disappeared under the bedcovers and would not cook. A woman from the church brought over a wholesale box of sardines from her husband’s grocery store, and Magda ate nothing but sardines for two weeks. She loved the woman for not letting her starve and hated her for bringing sardines and not some other kind of food. The whole apartment stank

like a cat's mouth.

Magda put her hand next to the largest footprint. It ran the length of her hand from the base of her palm to the top of her ring finger. Next time she would suggest that Mrs. Woods buy the children shoes. She would make sure that the shoes would have extra room at the toe, to grow into. She would make sure that they were made from the sort of hard leather that pinched at first but then broke in and lasted as a hand-me-downs. Mrs. Woods might be tempted to buy something pretty—red patent leather, or black and white oxfords. But Magda would not allow it.

Mrs. Woods sat at the head of the kitchen table, writing a list the food items they needed to replace. Her hair was combed and a light dusting of powder shone beneath her eyes.

She greeted Magda and asked if the food had been picked up.

Magda nodded. There were still baked beans in the pantry, and strands of pearl beads tangled in the jewelry box, and envelopes full of cash underneath the mattress. "They weren't wearing any shoes," Magda said, her voice irritated. She hadn't eaten breakfast yet or made herself coffee. She lightened her tone. "They didn't have shoes, the children I mean. They left footprints everywhere. It looks like they came alone."

"That doesn't surprise me. The adults in their own family don't care enough to help, and they could help if they wanted too." Mrs. Woods leaned back in the chair. "Poor things.

They might even get whooped by their uncle, for coming here." Her eyes clouded with tears, as they had when Magda told her they had left during the Great War.

Mrs. Woods cared for the children, but in the dutiful way one cared for those who were not close family.

It was like looking through a blurred telescope that had suddenly focused.

"Are they relatives of yours, Mrs. Woods?" Magda asked.

Mrs. Woods went on like she hadn't heard, casting her gaze at the ledger. "I can't say I blame them for not wanting to accept help, seeing that my husband barely acknowledged their existence while their mother was still alive." Her cheeks reddened as she counted the items on the grocery list, wrote a number, and screwed the cap back on to the pen tip. "But the resemblance to him is undeniable. I knew at once who they were, the moment I first saw them." Mrs. Woods took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "You understand what I mean, don't you, Fräulein."

Mrs. Woods tore off the grocery list. The top corner ripped by accident. Mrs. Woods laughed politely, as if someone had made a joke that had fallen flat but she didn't want to hurt their feelings. "If you would be so kind . . ." Her voice trailed off as she handed Magda the grocery list.

"They also need shoes," Magda said. She held her breath. It could come out of her own wages, if it came to that.

Mrs. Woods nodded. "Stop by the Pendleton's. Buy two pairs of shoes for a boy and girl and put

it on my account. How does that sound?”

“I’d be happy to,” said Magda. It was a Wednesday, the day her mother had died. They had always practiced their elocution at this time in the mornings. The gramophone played the records while her mother stood by the stove, waiting for her curling iron to heat. *Straighten up so I can hear you better*, her mother said, because Magda was always slumping over the kitchen table, muffling her diaphragm.

Her hands shook. She had trouble folding the grocery list in half and tucking it into the pocket of her dress. She glanced at Mrs. Woods to see if she noticed. It was stupid to want a thing so badly. Had her mother been there she would have pinched her arm. Keep going, no matter what. She felt her tongue against the back of her teeth and raised her chin.

Then Magda asked if she could use the gramophone, to practice her elocution lessons.

When Mrs. Woods said yes Magda left the house. A green smell rose from the damp wood on the

porch. By now it was early spring. Lavender-scented steam rolled out from bathhouse row. She headed toward town. Velvety buds the size of closed hands hung in the magnolia trees that lined Main Street. A few visitors who did not seem infirm emerged from the bathhouses, pink-faced, drunk from steam and heat. The waters that ran beneath the town were a tonic for the stomach and left rings of chalk around the bath drain. The voices of the people were beautiful and perfect and the sound echoed because today there was little traffic. They had clear voices like a finger running over the rim of a crystal glass. Her mother never improved her voice but she always practiced. Now Magda wondered if her mother had really tried at all, or if she had given up in order for her daughter to have the sense that it was possible to excel. To do better. For the first time since she had fallen ill and died, the thought of her mother gave her a warm feeling rather than a sharp one. It would go away of course. She wanted to close her eyes and lean her face into this warmth. 