

# ***Pudore*** ***“Shame”***

**By Maddalena Fingerle**

**© Mondadori, 2024**  
**Translation by Sean Marc**

Like every Sunday we have to go to my parents' for lunch, and this time, too, I'm bringing dessert. To avoid making it, I buy it at Dallmayr, spending much more than I'd like. On the phone my brother tells me his car has broken down and he wants to pick me up in a taxi. This seems ridiculous to me, and I suggest we take the S-Bahn instead. He agrees but only on condition that I don't tell our parents. They'd be horrified at the idea of us taking public transport—and, even more, of us sitting on their living room bench in our dirty city clothes.

My brother looks worn out. He blames work, but it's obviously his marriage, which is on the rocks. I tell him something I didn't think I would: that you're getting married, and that I miss you. I whisper it in his ear, because I'm paranoid and worry that one of the people in the frenzied, faceless crowd pushing behind us might be the bigoted Bavarian farmer or you. My brother hugs me and I feel embarrassed. He thinks you were scared to give into your feelings for me, and I want so much to believe him. The thing I can't get over is that you didn't even invite me to your wedding, didn't even tell me you were getting married. I'd be happy to see you, be there for you and support you. I would've gladly been your maid of honour, if only you had asked me. My brother says you probably didn't invite me because it would be too painful to see me again. But he doesn't understand people, despite the work he does—he never has—and I don't believe him. Guess who also got married?, he asks and, without giving me time to think, tells me it's the friend I used to eat chicken with as a child. He remembers taking me round to her house, that she had a funny name, which he repeats in a tone that annoys me. I smile as I zoom in on the white dress he's showing me on his phone. It was an impromptu ceremony, done on the cheap, but with real feeling: that's the verdict of this two-bit therapist who wouldn't recognise a real feeling if one hit him in the face.

When we reach our stop, we get off and walk to our parents' house. Seeing me hesitate, Filomena compliments me on how I look, blonde today, quite a glow, she says with a chuckle. As she takes my handbag and the bag holding dessert and a bottle of wine, she whispers to me: be brave, green eyes. I don't understand at first, but my brother already knows. Being the asshole that he is he didn't warn me, while I was stupidly opening up to him on the journey over. In the dining room, dressed like a little soldier boy, sits a guy—my father, my mother, and a guy. He is ash blond, his thin and fragile hair balding, like all Germans over the age of twenty-five, and his shoes have been freshly shined. Shoes are to be kept on at my parents' place, it's considered rude to walk around barefoot. Our house isn't a mosque, my mother says, giggling. Plus, it's Filomena who does the cleaning anyway. This pisses me off, of course, but what pisses me off even more right now is the gawking face of the soldier boy sitting in the dining room.

My father introduces him to me fawningly. He is the son of my father's lawyer friend, a real catch, according to my mother's sparkling eyes. A man of letters, my father announces solemnly. Just a student, the soldier boy adds quietly, extending a soft, trembling and slightly sweaty hand towards me, which I shake only because I have to.

As we take our seats in the living room for appetizers, Filomena strokes my back as if to say: hang in there, the charade will be over soon. Filomena knows that I like girls. I think she knew even before I did. I wasn't sure at first, and then I always thought it wasn't such a big deal. Maybe I still do. But I was afraid not to tell her about it, as if I wanted to hide something from her, and I didn't want to keep secrets from Filomena. So one day I invited her round, to my nice little house, as she calls it, and I made her tea. It felt good to finally be able to do something for her. As we drank the tea on the balcony I said, there's this girl, and then I didn't know how to go on. She said, you like her?, and I nodded. That was all it took. The way it should be.

The literature student is the 32-year-old conservative son of a lawyer and a housewife. He's about to start a postdoctoral degree in Munich under my father. You can tell he is someone who gets his shirts ironed by his mother, and gets his beds custom built. I look gratifyingly out of place with my short dress, false eyelashes, and platinum blond hair. As my mother stares in bewilderment at my legs, my father launches into a heated discussion with the student about something I care nothing about.

On the pretext of going to the bathroom I pay a visit to Filomena in the kitchen. What a drag, I say, and she tells me to play along, my pretty little thing, and soldier boy will do the rest: he's so German he'll mix the salad with the first course and my parents will be so horrified they kick him out. I burst out laughing in a way

that is new and different, and very much like you. Filomena lets me taste the sauce with the wooden spoon she's been using.

I join the others in the dining room, where by now they're all sat around the table. My grandfather stares judgementally at us, and soldier boy looks intimidated. Oh, he says, is that a Rasch? My father lights up. What an eye, my boy, what an eye! He knows about painting too, how wonderful, bravo!, my father says with a delighted look in my direction. I don't think the asshole has ever complimented me like that before.

We eat the buffalo mozzarella and aubergine tortello, and soldier boy doesn't dare touch the salad, keeping a careful eye on my brother and doing what he does. Overacting, I decide to feign interest and ask him if he likes Munich. He doesn't know the city very well, he's just arrived; oh, but I'd be happy to show you around, it's such a lovely city, I say seductively, curling a lock of my wig around my forefinger, and more than an actress, I sound like you. He would be much obliged, he answers. I sip a little wine just to leave the mark of my red lips on the glass. My mother is looking at me with an expression caught somewhere between shock and pride. I can tell she is happy because they have chosen a suitable man for me, but is also upset to see her daughter dressed like a whore hitting on a boy under her roof. Ideally, for my mother, I would show up at these lunches the way she used to dress me when I was little: feminine, but with no skin on show, and no cleavage or slits. Knee-length skirts in faded colours and fuzzy jumpers in off-green or antique pink, hair tidy and pulled back, closed black patent leather shoes, stockings, diamonds in my ears, first communion necklace around my neck, and grandmother's ring: a *respectable* appearance.

Smiling under his moustache, my brother says, why don't you show him the nightlife? Take him to P1. He does this on purpose because he knows perfectly well that it's not my scene. But it is *your* scene, so why not? We can swap numbers later, I say. My father seems satisfied, and Filomena looks amused as she takes away our empty plates, in which soldier boy has managed to place his cutlery correctly. He doesn't take his eyes off me for a moment. It's embarrassing.

My father encourages him to tell us about his research project. He acts shy at first but then gives in and won't stop talking. In the meantime, Filomena has served the pan-seared fresh tuna and by the time we finish eating, he's still at it, boring us all with talk of innovations and ideas and toil—research, he explains, calls for a special kind of attention, not like any old run-of-the-mill job. Realising he's made a faux pas, he tries to make up for it by talking about just how much he would have liked to work with his hands, be a baker, say, or a shoemaker. But he wouldn't have been able to hack it, he says, with false modesty, because he's realised he's only

good at one thing: thinking. It's not much, but you do what you can. And over the years, he adds, he's realised that you can think well only if you eat well. On that note, he compliments the cook and then finally stops talking.

We eat dessert in silence, then have espresso and a digestif, and thankfully the torture finally comes to an end. Soldier boy hands me his business card, even if it's not entirely clear to me why a post-doctoral student would need one. I say my goodbyes, but my brother is staying behind to discuss something important with my father—that is, money. In our family when we have to talk about money we never say we have to talk about money because it's not proper; we discuss something important instead.

Soldier boy isn't a complete klutz and seizes the opportunity, saying he'll be on his way too, to follow me out. Filomena hugs me and whispers to call her if I need anything. We go down the stairs, soldier boy and I, and he asks me if I want to share his taxi. I tell him I'm taking public transport, and he tells me that's out of the question. I take off my wig thinking it'll shock him, but he doesn't flinch, says I look great without it and calls the cab. As the car drives me home, he asks if we can see each other in the next few days. Tired of pretending, I confess to him that I don't like men but please don't tell my parents, even though deep down some part of me hopes that he will, so they might stop demeaning me like this. That's a pity, soldier boy says, I hope you'll find the right person for you. Personally, I don't believe there's such a thing as the right person and don't understand why you say *person* when you're gay. You hope a straight single man meets the right woman, and a straight single woman meets the right man, so why should I have to meet a person? Could it be soldier boy is suddenly sensitive to gender-neutral language? I doubt it, it's just that he's embarrassed. The same way my mother gets when she tells people we have someone who helps out at home—when, in fact, Filomena doesn't *help out*, she's the only one who does anything at home. As soldier boy says goodbye stiffly, he tells me he's happy to cover the taxi fare anyway. He thinks he's being a gentleman but is just ridiculous.