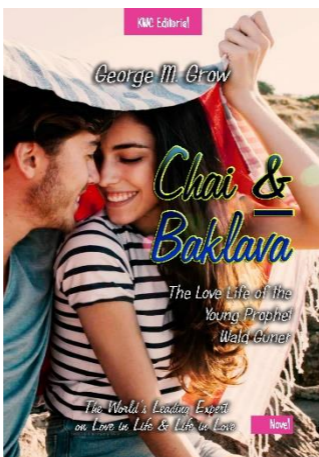


George M. Grow
Chai & Baklava
Romance

"Nobody else brings them
closer to themselves"



From the series
The Books of Life®



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Signs

The plush bistro Infinity in downtown Vienna has just opened. The high, bright room with its mélange of classic and postmodern elements is one big composition. Wald Güner could make his way through the room blindfolded, the Infinity is his hangout.

Wald seems pleased that I have arrived on the dot.

“Your first time here?”

He offers me an ultramodern armchair that is a good deal more comfortable than it looked. The whole arrangement is as luxurious as useful and betrays a cunning sense of taste.

Wald Güner, 27, lottery grand prize winner of Turkish origin, creative figure, ladies’ man, globe-trotter, makes an effort to be particularly polite and courteous.

“There is a particular reason for our meeting.”

“I anticipated as much,” I make the point, removing the signs of the summer heat from my forehead. “It has to do with your last journey.”

He had already let slip as much on the phone. I came expecting him to have an explosive story for me, and as journalist and writer, I always have a sympathetic ear for explosive stories.

“Okay, so shoot,” I utter in the moment when the chimes of the Church of the Holy Cross start to resound.

To the backdrop of the chimes, Wald rummages in his briefcase while I watch him. He is a young man with pleasant features, black,

shoulder-length hair, blue eyes and a slim figure, a smart appearance, always on the trendy side. And after the chimes have faded away, he takes his digital calendar out of his jacket and sets his watch before he starts talking about the cramps which had afflicted him in Vienna and in other European cities during the months prior to his stay at the manor and his flight to points distant. He calls his attacks “infections”, and he was stranded between his desire to save the world and his wish that the whole thing would just go to hell without him. Diagnosis: situational schizoid normativity.

“Do you still take crullers with your coffee?”

Wald nods to the waiter’s query, a young, pale man with black, slicked-back hair, looks at his watch and utters, “There’s ten minutes of our life that we’ll never get back again.”

“I still don’t know what led you to India,” I say as clouds of steel-blue doves take flight behind the glassed-in wall opening onto the street. For what reason ever, today Wald would prefer to see them in white plumage with fresh olive branches in their beaks. Then, he suddenly says that he hadn’t been at all well during the time up to his departure. He was losing sight of the Mystery, not completely, but to the point that his unswerving confidence had been frittered during the last years since he himself was last part of the Mystery, he says and stows his organizer away.

“Okay,” I reply, unclear about what he is trying to tell me.

“My mom was worried about me,” he says unhesitatingly. “She said

that I should look around for a woman to love and that being alone at my age wasn't nice. 'Perhaps I should spend a week at the family estate,' I told her. 'That sounds very sensible,' she encouraged me and wanted to send me there for half a year. 'Riding, fresh air, dairymaids.' 'Aha, but there aren't any dairymaids anymore,' I told her. You know the way she still lives in a past that never happened."

I nod without knowing what he is trying to tell me.

"She said that all I need was fresh air, because I used to be a dear and enjoyable person outdoors when spring was blossoming into life and it would certainly do me good again now."

The cup set to my lips, I look at him as if I couldn't understand properly.

"Mom only knows me after I have given in," he explains. "She is the most endearing and generous generalissimo you can imagine. 'That's because I'm close to the inner circle again,' I told her. 'Indeed, you work too much. Let me tell you again: Take care of yourself and leave your terrific ideas be with that ...' 'She never will remember it,' he tells me. 'I-Court, Mom, it's called I-Court. The gathering at the very core of consciousness.' 'Anyway, you never will achieve it on your own,' she said. 'It may be a new level for humanity in general but for one person alone it's a grave.' She told me I was tense and would be surprised how friendly and open people can be and that I could enjoy myself with them."

"Your mom is a clever person," I note.

“You've seen her and you know her strengths, but everybody has a blind spot, and hers is me,” he says. “‘You put me on display,’ I told her, ‘but I'm still in your shadow: The estate will be good for me.’ And how good it was to take a vacation from life, to follow the beat of my own drummer into the bright future and become a man of another world again. And suddenly, on the evening of the last day, the flood-gates were opened so that it fulfilled me as revenge for everything that had defeated me the years before.”

His sometimes cryptic, shadowy way of speaking is one of his trademarks which made him highly successful with women. It is new to me that he should talk about an inner side of his life he kept under wraps up to the present day.

“And then you made it to India,” I say to remind him of my question before he folds his napkin into a fan and tells me that India was as inevitable as destiny itself, if it is brushed against the grain, if you jump over your shadow, if you have outdone yourself, but first, he had to take care of his new paramours before going to his uncle's estate and after that to India. The one, Isabell, he took on a trip to Greenland where they, riding snow-mobiles, set out from a small, colorful Inuit settlement into a landscape which, in the light of its breadth, vastness and clear air through which the mountains miles away appeared sharp as a pin in intense colors, was unique in all the world, and the other one, Veronica, to Alaska where they devoted themselves to nothing than to

themselves with eyes snow-blind from the monotonous wasteland.

I can picture these things directly before my eyes, and I feel a slight bit of envy rising in me. Then, however, his face dims, and since this would belong to his report, the reason for which he told me to come, he confides that even these women, Veronica and Isabell, after some days of initial joy, simply started to remind him of his hometown where he hardly found anyone he wanted to associate with. Like in the one-and-a-half-million or more people in Vienna, it was impossible for him to find someone he could relate to, even both these well-educated women he had recently picked up in Milan and Graz. With a heavy heart, he reluctantly remembers that after his many compliments and devotions he had bestowed them, he was wistfully waiting during the meals with Isabell in Greenland and with Veronica in Alaska to be asked even once how he was doing, if something was wrong with him, what he might want for and what his heart beat for. He initially would have thought that their “insensitive behavior” toward his person was based on the fact that he had built a little altar out of stones and branches in Alaska and a little shrine out of snow around the flowers he and Isabell had picked in Greenland, or that it had to do with the fact that the Mystery was something bigger and more important to him than Veronica, Isabell or both combined. Then, in the course of time, he, however, saw that his behavior, most uncommon for common people, was immaterial to

their relationship. In their eyes, he neither lost nor benefitted from his behavior since the suspicion never arose that a spiritual man must remain stupid and penniless in light of his undeniable generosity. On the contrary, he discovered that everyone treated everyone else the same, Veronica, Isabell and the one million and seven hundred thousand people in “our beautiful, centralized Vienna”, which eased him for some moments but plunged him into a despondency for the rest of his stay in Alaska, Greenland and even more so on the estate. In addition, I should know that he, as he is telling me, couldn't distinguish between man and woman aside from their physical traits. Everyone was essentially be the same, perhaps older or younger, more or less beautiful but otherwise absolutely the same. Not so much what they do, how they dress, what they eat or say but what they believe in, what they seek and what they really want, they were identical. If he looked beyond the phenomena resulting from everyone trying to fit in as best as they can, he would always come across the same mechanical scheme. With this knowledge in mind, he had profited greatly but as mechanically, he had been disappointed or, in the better cases, bored by them tremendously till he only saw two possibilities left for him: He had to either stay and live with what is dear and holy to him alone or to escape with his money into an atmosphere where there is room for new ideas, new concepts and for new people, and if not in a better one, then at least in another one where he could find a

sense of wonder in experiencing other things, other people and other problems.

“And so you set your mind on India,” I ask while I am pondering. After all he never betrayed his dark side in my presence in all the years we had known each other. To the contrary, up to the present day, I have known him as a prosperous inventor and young businessman who has had success fall into his hands. Every time we met, I found another bimbo at his side who was just as attractive as the last. I also know about some subversive parties and societies he attended and heard that he proclaimed on one of these occasions that anyone who knows how to revel in the right way would be a “dancer between the worlds”. That he has birthday on the same day as the Sun King is hardly surprising if you have been to one of his opulent birthday parties, and it certainly will take some time until I have grown accustomed to this side of him, which is quite new to me. And after he told me that he went to India although Schiller was right when he said that you don't need to travel round the world to find out that the sky is blue everywhere with a dismissing gesture of his hand as if he has to be ashamed of this step that many have got away from him, I say,

“Sure, but it was Goethe, and it's equally certain that the sun shines behind the clouds for everyone.”

Furthermore he indicates that he would have never gone abroad in search of a place to settle and that he knew that your final destination is always yourself. Early on, he,

notwithstanding, would have lived over and over in the vision that it could be India that receives him with open arms since it has tolerantly opened itself to many of its conquerors. That he has made himself so unpopular or that he felt so misunderstood that he has voiced this sentence is enough to boost my astonishment at him. "But before I had conceived the plan to flee," he says, reopening the fan, "I wanted to go off to the estate."

This new retreat from the small-minded people who seemingly would have constantly reproached him for who he was trying to be and for being the way he was and why he even was there at all at the estate in order to "get in contact with the secret" after another five years would have been very therapeutic to him. He would like to tell me later what he was doing at his uncle's country estate on the banks of the Grossrussbach for four weeks. "And then, the same day I returned to Vienna," he says with his sober voice that, in my presence, has never lacked for joy to a pleasant extent, "this still unmentioned evening and this still unmentioned sky has descended on me."

"What's that supposed to mean," I wonder and get to hear that he just as he never drive anywhere except in his open convertible, decked out in rich furs, took an open ride and was happy about the soft covering around his body and the stuffy air that was wafting all around. He rejoiced in the black, ribbed clouds which eerily pressed down all the way to the ground, and as well the

dormant fruit trees stretching out their white fingers, the houses exuding their homely aromas and the myriad of other things gave him reason to rejoice. In this elation, safe in the fresh knowledge that he was not alone, listening to the music booming from the radio, he was cruising down the twilight alley while he was asking the “sky” where he should do the deed. Then he listened to the rolling peals of thunder and the music from the radio, and hadn’t waited a second when Motors blasted out of the loudspeakers with this song and chorus sound:

*“Airport, you’ve got a smiling
face,
You take me so far away,
Fly me away - fly me away...”*

Wald was completely beside himself. At the word “airport,” a single abnormally big drop of rain splattered on his forehead. “From this moment forth,” he says free of emotion, “I was seized so much that I couldn’t do anything else but to return home. I turned around, shut the radio off, sank down again and felt I was on top of the world, packed my bags and called a taxi that dropped me off at the airport at six in the evening.”

Leaning back, with my lower lip protruding, I had to admire how he attaches importance to the smallest things, even to a raindrop. Uncertain whether he was overstating or I had understated the events described in his place, I try to be at least a re-laxing interlocutor while I wait to see what else gushes forth from him. At this point I cross my

legs and, awkward as I am, the unintentional scraping of the chair legs against the floor seems to give him occasion to blink, to fan himself and to tell me about his blue Monday, a warning letter and his vacation from life into the blue.

“Up until that time, I knew that I had to go, not on holiday, but to answer a summons,” he returns to the funny matter with the drop, “but I didn’t know yet where to go, where the summons originated, and so I simply took a taxi to the airport in order to find out what I still couldn’t foresee. And since I didn’t know where to go, as chance would have it, I tripped over a dead body.

“A stiff?” Now his story is starting to pick up the pace, I think to myself.

“The man was still lying on the ground with his eyes open, and a paramedic said that he was dead. And since the man was beyond help, I snatched the ticket poking out of his breast pocket and said to the man kneeling beside him that his dad didn’t need it any more but that I would give him two hundred euros if he signed it over to my name. For obvious reasons, the young man was otherwise busy so I simply put the dough into his breast pocket. He signed over the ticket, and imagine how delighted I was when I opened the cover and read where I had picked a flight to.”

I guess it’s quite easy to imagine that it wasn’t always easy for me to follow his words while I was writing everything down, but this time, I nod respectfully, take the pen in hand and ask whether I may record some of this.

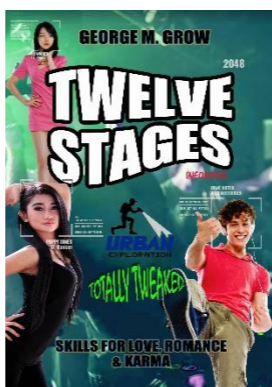
“Yes, that'd be great,” he responds, puts the improvised fan down and says, “Listen, and if you'd like to, make a concise report out of it.” And since I have accepted his order by a careful nod, there is no stopping him and he sets a pace my pen can hardly keep up with.

As he suggested on the telephone yesterday, I have a shot at obtaining an overview of the events In The Shadow of The Nanga Parbat (so the first basic idea for a title which could follow the second title In The Shadow of The Brahmins) to see whether the things that happened can prove sustainable in pleasing a reading public. On recycled paper, the outcome of my scrutiny and the things that arose from it is right there in your hands. This should be enough to prove that I will not have made my notes for nothing. Organized to some extent and brought into some sort of shape, they read like this:

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