

Stefanie Kremser

POSTCARD FROM COPACABANA

a novel



reading excerpt

published by
2000 Piper Verlag Munich
2007 Club Editor Barcelona
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About the book:

Everything started with the aspirin salesman Alois Bichl, who went into a lake surrounded by the Alps, suddenly reappearing on the shore of the lake Titicaca in the Andes. But now Alois has been dead for many years; his magical adventures belong to the past, and all there is left for his excentric widow Elena are colourful memories. But she's not the only one longing for better times: her daughter-in-law Rosa – also widowed - dreams of love stories as shown in the telenovelas; and then there's Elena's granddaughter Alfonsina, who wishes she could leave the small town of Copacabana, falling in love with a Bavarian back pack tourist and thinking that all is nothing but a coincidence....

Press:

"Those who followed, breathtaken, how a postcard from Bavaria transformes itself into a splashing lake, want more – more from Stefanie Kremser" - **Frankfurter Rundschau**

"With a delicious irony" - **El País**

„Magic images and a tender language“ - **Brigitte**

„Written vividly and sensitively“ – **Buchkultur**

"Stefanie Kremser has the ability to transform the extraordinary into something natural" - **Time Out Barcelona**

„She achieves an expressive impact with this positive feeling for linguistic values... a book full of grace and humour“ – **Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk**

About the author:

Stefanie Kremser, born 1967 in Germany, grew up in São Paulo, Brazil. 1987, at the age of twenty, she moved to Munich and studied documentary film at the Munich Film Academy. She now lives as a writer and screenwriter in Barcelona.

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When Alfonsina was about ten years old, there were certain nights when her grandmother used to sit beside her bed and tell her the story of Alois, her grandfather.

To Alfonsina, Elena was an unusual grandmother, not only because she knew how to tell the most beautiful stories, but because she always wore a Bavarian Dirndl, and this in the middle of the Bolivian highlands. Even if the children Alfonsina used to play with sometimes laughed about her grandmother: Alfonsina never felt ashamed of her, she had always known her just as she was, and her whole family was said to be a bit strange anyway. It was uncertain what people really meant by this, all they did was call them “los

alemanes”, the Germans, o “los locos”, the lunatics.

Alfonsinas Dirndl-dressed grandmother, who was anything but German or crazy, was most definitely a talented story teller and she used a trick, which Alfonsina discovered later in the television soaps: she divided the story into small chapters and ended each time with a kind of preview of the next part. While falling asleep, Alfonsina tried to imagine how it might go on, she could hardly wait until the next evening, which would be the fulfilling of her imagination and of Elena’s promises. On those occasions, Alfonsina used to go to bed without grumbling, forgetting all about her dolls, her new turtle, her wish to watch television and, most of all, her longing for her mother, Rosa, who was always moving from place to place, and used to send her daughter good night kisses on postcards. She wrote each time: “To my dear Alfonsina, a kiss from ‘what’s its name’... your Mamá.” Alfonsina owned all the

aeroplane models of the Lloyd Aereo Boliviano company that were pictured on postcards, sent by her mother only when she had a late night stop somewhere, with time left merely for a shower and for resting her swollen feet on a pillow, falling asleep exhausted, with the sound of airplane motors humming in her ears. Mostly, however, Alfonsina received postcards with panoramic views of the cities where Rosa had just been: Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Manaus, Caracas, Mexico City, and Miami.

In the evenings the grandmother read Rosa's greetings to her, and if the postcard came from a country which Alfonsina's grandfather had been to, Elena wove his adventures into the bedtime story. Alfonsina knew by then that Elena did not just invent the stories: she was finding an expression for her memory of a love which could not be more profound. Elena's love for Alois and Alois' love for South America were perhaps the origin of Alfonsina's own longing, which she was soon to seek and

satisfy. All she had to do was find out a way to pursue this longing of hers, to go after it.

When there were no doubts about how weakly grandfather's heart was beating, Alfonsina's grandmother started to embroider her husband's story onto a sheet. It was to accompany him, as a remembrance of life, to the place where miracles perhaps no longer existed.

For seven weeks of sleepless, loving work Elena sat beside her husband's bed, washed him, fed him, caressed his hand and embroidered day and night. Darkness and silence ruled in the House of the Geraniums during those weeks. The only sounds that echoed through the halls where the soft voices of friends and relatives sitting in the living room, drinking tea and waiting for a last chance to shake hands with Alois. They talked in whispers, refreshed their memories of late friends and recent illnesses, gave advice and exchanged recipes for the next funeral

feast. Sometimes a teaspoon clattered on china, and the whispering guests held their breath, startled, as if they wanted to inhale the unusually loud sound, digest it in their stomachs and make it go silent. Thick dust lay on the heavy, wooden furniture, cups and saucers piled up in the kitchen, sticky with remains of sweet tea. No one dared to move unnecessarily, fearing that sleepy, lurking death would be startled.

On the weekends, Alfonsina's parents came over to Copacabana, still unaware that they had already conceived a daughter. Alfonsina's father Ricardo was Elena's and Alois' only child, and he had chosen, very much in his parents' tradition of travelling, to become a pilot. He had moved to La Paz, where he met Rosa, who was flying her first missions as a stewardess in his plane. Ricardo and Rosa were a handsome couple, they seemed to be a good match, even if Alfonsina's father was twenty years older than her mother. Alfonsina could only imagine the matrimonial

harmony, because her mother never told her much about those few years of marriage, and all Alfonsina could relate to her parents as a couple was the wedding photographs. Of course, they both looked very happy and handsome on them, so there wasn't much more to say.

When they were on a visit, Rosa filled the silent house with an almost youthful cheerfulness that hadn't been there for a long time. Her freshness gave comfort to Alfonsina's grandparents, because it reminded them of the happy moments they had spent together, and it encouraged them: although it was early for Alois to part, it was not too soon.

Each time they arrived, Ricardo and Rosa found Alois fast asleep; beside him the embroidering Elena bent over her sheet; on the floor were empty rolls of thread, in the air the smell of camomile and farewells and bitter llave ticka, a herbal juice which Alois had with his meals.

“Go to sleep now, mother”, Ricardo whispered softly into Elena’s ear, and Rosa brought her mother-in-law into the backyard, so she could lie down a bit inside her hammock.

“Ay Rosa, this is not easy, it really isn’t.”

Rosa laid her hand on Elena’s Arm and shook her head, because she couldn’t find the right words of consolation.

“Just try to rest a while, you’ll need your strength.”

Meanwhile Ricardo sat by his father’s bed, watching him, stroking his hand with tenderness, for hours and hours, until it was time to leave.

Alois slept all day long, and he was so weak that he had long since given up speaking. His eyes were deep and dark, and when he woke up for a few minutes, his look was faint and gloomy: Alois had surrendered in his fight against death.

From the moment that his body began to blow up and become pale and spongy, Alfonsina's grandmother knew that death had already made itself comfortable inside him.

On the morning when Alois' heart finally ceased to beat, the embroidery on the sheet was completed in as many colours as Elena had used rolls of thread. The curtains were opened, and the sunlight, breaking in, also broke the silence, which had paralysed the House of the Geraniums for so long. Ricardo and Rosa came from La Paz, neighbours entered the house, weeping loudly, making phone calls, moving chairs so that all mourning guests could take a seat in the living room.

The doctor arrived in order to be a witness to Alois' death and, assisted by the undertaker, to wrap him in the embroidered sheet.

"He looks a bit like someone who's drowned", the undertaker whispered, but the doctor's answer was nothing but a shrug of his shoulders.

Alois Bichl was buried on a sunny spring afternoon in the hilly cemetery of Copacabana. Over the grave a wooden cross had been stuck, adorned with red bows by Elena. The bows fluttered in the wind, which rippled the shiny blue waters of Lake Titicaca and rolled up the hill of the cemetery.

As soon as her grandmother finished the bedtime story and left the room, Alfonsina lay under the covers and shut her eyes tightly, so the images inside her head couldn't escape into darkness. The wintry night on the Andes was cold, and Alfonsina took a deep breath. The preview of the next part of the tale went: How might it smell, there, at the other end of the world, where everything had begun?

A breeze drove the fresh smell of snow down into the valley, the tops of the dark fir trees moved evenly, as if they were being caressed. It was spring, there, where the blue-grey Alps stung the sky, and ice was melting everywhere.

Glass coloured icicles dissolved into drops, the brooks swelled and filled the lake. An agitated flight of wild ducks grazed the water, and there, at last, Alfonsina could see the weeping Hanna at the shore of the lake.

Tears ran over her blushing cheeks, and fell on the starched apron of her Dirndl dress. Behind her, sixteen members of the Urbach brass band stood on the narrow, stony path which went around the lake. They were all in their festival costumes, wearing green trousers and enduring shoes. The goat's hair brushes on top of their hats swayed smoothly to the rhythm of the sad folk tune: a farewell waltz for Alois, who was going into the water. He stood up to his knees in the Walchensee, and in his right hand he held a small leather-case, packed with a modern achievement which would conquer the world: aspirin.

Alois was a commercial traveller, and at twenty-two he was young. He knew all the villages and valleys and farms in the region, he had even been to Munich. There was hardly

any mountain path left which could really excite him, and drag him out of this strange depression – Alfonsina’s grandfather was imprisoned by a deep and severe melancholy. There was nothing that could still give him some joy, he felt as if he were painfully chained up to what was supposed to be his destiny. It was so clear to him how he would spend his life! Travelling during daytime, in the evenings in the pub, at night beside the woman who waited for him, who was already waiting for him, strong-willed, imperturbable. What was left that could surprise him? A house, some children, birth and death in the valley of Urbach. Doubts and a bad conscience tormented Alois, because he felt ungrateful. What was happening to him, what was the meaning of his agony?

But when Hanna told him on a snowy afternoon under a dark winter sky: “I’m longing so much for spring to come”, Alfonsina’s grandfather finally knew how to put his sorrow into words: longing.

An urgent need for wideness, greatness! A different world perhaps, something that would give him back his appetite. Because the way Alois was standing there, the icy water already reaching his hips, made him look miserably spindly, his white shirt flapping around his shoulders, thin fingers grasping the handle of his small suitcase.

Hanna cried and shed helpless tears: her love couldn't stop Alois, the longed-for wedding would not take place (she had a very clear idea of what she longed for), and she would never give birth to children who might have inherited his short-sightedness. And she had been so sure of it all! Hanna grabbed her apron and suddenly felt the thin, metallic frames of the heavy glasses, marked by her breath, cleaned with her tears, the spectacles of Alois, who was disappearing in the lake.

“Your glasses!” she shouted, and ran into the lake, one hand holding her love's pledge, the other hand gathering up her skirts. Alfonsina's grandfather hesitated for a

moment, realizing only now that he could hardly see. How should he, if he had been looking inside during all this time, tensely waiting for a window in the deep. He turned around, saw a blurred Hanna, who had always known what she wanted, and who was now paddling through the water like a young dog. He waded a little way towards her. Hanna, frightened, opened her eyes wide and stretched her toes, believing never to gain ground again. She stood with the water at the level of her chest, and handed him the glasses, briefly touching his hand.

“Take good care”, she said, “and may Saint Anthony accompany you on your journey, so that you’ll find what you are looking for.”

Alois gave a little nod carefully placing the metallic hooks of the spectacles behind his ears. He pushed the glasses up onto his nose and turned around.

At this point Elena stopped telling the story, postponing the answers to Alfonsina's questions until the next evening: What was waiting for Alois in the depth of the lake? Would he survive his journey? Alfonsina thought terrified of her grandfather's corpse, which was said to have looked as if he had drowned.

“But grandmother, why didn't he take a ship? And if he really had drowned, we couldn't exist then, could we?”

Elena smiled and kissed her on the forehead.

Alfonsina knew how much one's eyes could burn if left open under water. She therefore believed that her grandfather's secret lay in his firmly closed, blue eyes, since you cannot fear what you cannot see. And whoever wanted to follow their longing had to forget fear, she thought, without knowing that this was a secret indeed, but the one which would lead to mistakes and not to truth.

So Alfonsina closed her eyes very tightly, as she always did when she wanted to follow the miracles her grandmother told about.

Alois Bichl wandered through the water, moving like a stroller in slow motion, or better: like a man on the moon. Soft, bouncing steps carried him slowly through the bleeding turquoise. Carps whisked by, the water became more and more cold, the ground black. He had stopped hearing the sad tune of the Urbach brass band a long time ago.

Maybe it was Hanna's Saint Anthony who accompanied Alois' first steps through the water, although it is more probable that from a certain point on someone else took care of him, because Alois had reached the native country of a god called Copac'Ahuana – the guardian of the blue. Copac'Ahuana was very lonely, no one remembered him, and his joy about this surprising and highly unusual guest led him to help Alois do the impossible: in the autumn of 1927 a young man wearing

Bavarian leather trousers and carrying a small suitcase stepped out of the endlessly wide, dark blue lake Titicaca on the Bolivian highlands. By its shore yellow reeds were shimmering, and the mighty, round summits of the Andes loomed in the morning sky like sleeping dinosaurs.

One single person, an old Aymara Indian, witnessed the miracle, but he spoke as little as the mute mountains that gave him life. He coolly chewed some coca leaves, spitting out their green, bitter juice now and then, and observed the stranger staggering towards him.

Both stood bolt upright in front of each other, Alois dripping wet, gasping because of the thin air – his bony fingers still grasping the suitcase – and the Indian with his shepherd's staff, his knee-breeches and a colourful shawl hanging over his back. With a short movement of his head he pointed right, and for the first time Alfonsina's grandfather saw his new country.

The sight was of such a perfect beauty that his heart expanded with a single beat, making his longing explode into millions of live-saving oxygen bubbles. The two towers of a church reached white and strong towards the sky of the rusty coloured Andes. Your home, Alois: the land of the Holy Virgin of Copacabana and her hidden face, Pachamama, mother earth.