

Slavenka Drakulić

**Mileva Einstein,
A Theory of Sadness**
(Mileva Einstein, teorija tuge)

Novel

Translated by Christina Pribichevich Zorić



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Mileva Einstein was not only the first love and the wife of the remarkable father of the theory of relativity, Albert Einstein, but also the mother of his children, a scientist who gave up on her career, a person whose fate reflects the women's fight for emancipation and equality in a male world. After novels about great artists' wives Frida Kahlo and Dora Maar, Slavenka Drakulić writes another novel about a woman from the shadows.

Writing a novel based on facts, Slavenka Drakulić creates a credible and actual character of the person who was assisting Albert Einstein, whom he forsook over another woman, but also with whom he shared his Nobel Prize money. The woman who struggled with her physical shortcomings, who never gave up, but who never made a brilliant career as a mathematician although she was undoubtedly exceptionally talented. Mileva Einstein, who came from the rural regions to study sciences in Switzerland, who was confident among scientists, gave up on her career for her famous husband and, later, their children.

The novel about Mileva Einstein is a novel of sorrow, of how to cope with misfortunes in life, how to live and survive, how to be a woman and not lose a sound mind. *Mileva Einstein, A Theory of Sadness* is a novel in which Slavenka Drakulić brilliantly engrosses the reader into the protagonist's life, making us identify with her troubles, struggles, sorrows and small joys. A trilogy about magnificent women shadowed by genius men puts Slavenka Drakulić among the most interesting contemporary writers, showing how women were and still are inferior in the male world.

PRAISE

“Slavenka Drakulić is a female author that brilliantly knows how to do two things - to fictionalize facts and to point out the brittleness of a woman's identity, in an instant she gives up and subordinates herself to the other person.”

- Jagna Pogačnik, *Jutarnji list daily*

“In the novels about Frida Kahlo and Dora Maar the author steadily, skillfully and with much sensibility for nuances writes about crises and breakdowns of her heroines, and she is equally persuasive in her new literary work.”

- Strahimir Primorac, *Vijenac*

In The Kitchen

Mileva is sitting at the kitchen table. It is summer, early morning. The window is open and the air is still fresh.

She smooths out two handwritten sheets of paper, knowing they are from Albert. But she studies the signature all the same. As if she cannot believe that he would write such a thing even though she knows her husband's handwriting only too well. The sloping letters, the distinctive L, N, I, A., his writing has so many curlicues that even a forger would be hard put to imitate it. Even if he had signed just his initials, she still would have known it was from Albert. She had received more than enough letters from him, seen him sign his name with a flourish too many times. The letter she received yesterday shows no signs of hesitation, no second thoughts. The handwriting is steady, firm. Mileva even recognizes the ink; she had bought it for him in Zurich, at the stationary shop where she bought writing paper and school notebooks for Hans Albert.

She reads the letter his colleague Fritz Haber handed her yesterday. Albert had not had the guts even to deliver it in person.

*Berlin, 18 July 1914**

Conditions

A. You will make sure:

- 1. that my clothes and laundry are kept in good order;*
- 2. that I will receive my three meals regularly in my room;*
- 3. that my bedroom and study are kept neat, and especially that my desk is left for my use only.*

B. You will renounce all personal relations with me insofar as they are not completely necessary for social reasons. Specifically, you will forego:

* Excerpts marked with an asterisk are original quotes (Author's note)

1. my sitting at home with you;

2. my going out or travelling with you.

C. You will obey the following points in your relations with me:

1. you will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way;

2. you will stop talking to me if I request it;

3. you will leave my bedroom or study immediately without protest if I request it.

D. You will undertake not to belittle me in front of our children, either through words or behaviour.

This is just written confirmation of my situation, she thinks. If I don't accept these humiliating terms, our life together is over.

Leaving the letter on the kitchen table, she walks over to the window and leans against its wooden frame, as if for support. She needs to touch something firm and stable to prove that she is here, that she is alive. Mileva knows that she must look pathetic in her nightgown, her hair disheveled. But there is nobody to see how unsteady she is on her feet, how hard she is trying to hold back the tears. I can't keep crying, she thinks, I've got to pull myself together and decide what to do.

She breathes in the fresh morning air. The kitchen window overlooks the courtyard. Berlin grey, that's what she calls the drab colour of its façades, its streets, its courtyards. She misses the hills and the trees she was used to in Zurich. She misses the light. She misses the air. The kitchen smells of last night's dinner, of roasted sausages and potato salad. The greasy pan and porcelain bowl of left-overs are still standing on the stove. The bread on the table is stale. The maid hasn't arrived yet. Mileva and the boys have been staying with her friends Fritz and Clare Haber for some ten days now. She could have put the food away herself last night; she could have been useful. But she hadn't had the energy. Stunned by Albert's letter of Conditions, she had felt dazed, as if she had received a blow to the head. That must be how a boxer feels after a match, she thinks.

When she first read his "letter" last night, she had been shocked. Then she burst into laughter. Albert's Conditions reminded her of those notices you see in pastry shops back home: No combing hair! No spitting on the floor! The signs were pretty pointless, because most of the people they were intended for, people likely to spit or comb their hair in front of the shop mirror, couldn't read anyway. She had seen that for herself on her summer forays to the pastry shop in Kač, the village where her parents had their farm: the boys would fix their hair in front of the mirror right next to the sign.

She remembered how she and her friend Desanka used to laugh at the sign in the school toilet: "Wash your hands before you eat and after you sit on the toilet

seat.” They were amused by the rhyme of eat and seat. So when either of them had to go to “that place”, as they used to say in those days, she would simply say: eat-seat.

Albert’s Conditions were just like that eat-seat sign, she thought. Dear Mileva, just wash your hands properly, don’t spit on the floor, don’t comb your hair in the sweetshop pastry shop, cover your mouth with your hand when you cough, don’t burp in public, cross your ankles when you sit, don’t speak unless spoken to, be modest like a good little girl and everything will be fine, she thought. She was seized by a fit of hysterical laughter, followed by sheer incredulity that Albert could seriously write something like that. He really had a nerve to set conditions for her to continue living with him! The woman to whom he had been married for eleven years and with whom he had two sons! Hans Albert was ten, and Eduard would turn five in a few days.

Then she crumpled up the letter and threw it onto the floor.

But the laughter had given her only momentary respite. Mileva could not accept that these Conditions were real. She realized it only when her body told her. Only when she felt an emptiness in her chest, when she couldn’t breathe, when her heart jumped like a frenzied cat trying to claw its way out of her ribcage, when she felt the all too familiar pain. She knew that pain was her faithful reminder of reality, which always manifested itself if, for whatever reason, she refused to accept what was happening. It didn’t take much for her to sink into utter despair. The pain is a warning bell; as long as it hurts at least I know I’m alive, she thinks leaning against the kitchen wall.

Mileva didn’t sleep much last night. She knows that the weariness she feels this July morning is simply because of last night’s shock. It is usually the prelude to an oncoming headache and nausea. There’s nothing she fears more than these headaches because they keep her in bed for days. She can already feel the dull ache at the back of her head that will turn into increasingly piercing stabs of pain. The headache is usually followed by a long period of lethargy, a kind of paralysis. She hates it because she has the children to think of. The decision she has to make concerns them as well.

I have to bear up. I have to try and block this headache. The boys are about to wake up! Where did I put that new medicine, Mileva wonders, rummaging through her handbag. She takes out two small packets, dissolves the powder in a glass of water and gulps it down. She keeps turning the glass in her hand. She is waiting for the pain to ease, for it to stop before it gets worse, for the drug to trap it. All she can do is sit and wait.

The night before, after she had read and reread Albert's brazen letter, she had said goodnight to the Habers and asked Hans Albert to help her to her bed. Clara brought her in a cup of tea. She, too, had read the Conditions, but saw nothing funny about them. Especially not after that evening when Mileva had shown up at her door with the children. Albert has rented out the apartment, we have no place to stay, Mileva simply said. Naturally, Clara invited them to stay with her and Fritz. The children were tired and Mileva was pale and looked a wreck. Clara could see that she was distraught. As she got the children ready for bed, Mileva told her that she had quarreled with Albert because he had rented out the apartment. How could he do something like that without telling me? Albert did it to make us go back to Zurich, she told Clara. She gave no further explanation. Mileva was reserved, even then. She did not tell her that she had heard the rumours about Albert having fallen in love with his cousin Elsa, that it was the talk of the Institute. It may have reached Fritz's ears too and he may have told Clara. Mileva did not have the strength to mention it or to tell her that she had had her suspicions for some time already. Clara did not try to comfort her; she knew there was no point. She merely took her hand as tears ran down Mileva's face. Clara's hand was warm and strong. All that Mileva had to lean on at that moment was the touch of a woman she barely knew.

They spent the evening like that, two women alone in the kitchen. The plates and leftovers from dinner sat between them on the table. Sadness weighed on them like a heavy mantle.

Mileva goes back to the window, only to collapse helplessly onto the kitchen chair, as if she has walked miles to get there. She knows it is just a reaction to the shock of Albert's Conditions. She had not felt well in Berlin even before; he had wanted to come and she had had no choice. After nine years at the Patent Office in Bern and a brief stint teaching at the Polytechnic in Zurich, after his experience teaching at the university in Prague, he had finally secured a position that gave him more time to do his research and write scientific papers, as well as a higher salary. He became a member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, professor at Humboldt University and director of the new Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Physics. What reason could she possibly give for him to turn it all down? That she and the children preferred Zurich? That she was used to living there and felt safer there? That the boys would find it hard to adapt to a new environment? Albert might even have accepted some of these reasons, but when he told her the salary he was being offered, she simply could not object to the move. They needed the money; Mileva was not earning anything. She had no choice. She had to join him.

When they moved to Berlin from Zurich three months ago they found an

apartment in Ehrenbergstrasse. But Mileva found it difficult to settle in. They were there only temporarily, she felt, so some of the suitcases were left unpacked. They were still stacked up in the hallway, next to the boxes of dishware and bed linen that almost blocked the way into the rooms. If she scolded the boys for being untidy, Hans Albert would protest: But we haven't finished moving in yet, Mama.

At first she blamed herself for lacking the energy to fix up their new home. But now, having read Albert's Conditions, she thinks maybe she had a sense of foreboding. Where had that come from? The fact that Albert did not spend a lot of time at home was nothing new. Maybe it was because he was irritable and in a bad mood. Even when little Eduard, known as Tete, asked when Daddy would take him out for a walk. Not so long ago, Albert would have sat him on his lap and patiently explained how the planets move in the sky, or he would have told him a story. Now he just snapped at him. He would look for pretexts to go out at night, come back late and sleep in the other room.

And Albert had sudden mood swings. She usually took that as a sign that something was bothering him, but when she asked him what was wrong he wouldn't answer.

She remembered that two years ago, after one of his visits to Berlin, he had received a birthday card that had made her suspicious. It was from his cousin Elsa Löwenthal, who had never written to him before. When Mileva mentioned it, instead of being his usual ironical self Albert got angry: What do you care? How do you know she didn't write to me before, he shouted. Albert, why are you talking like that? Why are you shouting at me? She tugged at his jacket but he roughly pushed her away.

I was so pathetic! Why did I think that something like that could never happen to us?

After reading the Conditions, she told Fritz to inform Albert that she agreed to everything. She said it, knowing that it was because she felt helpless. What else could she do? What choice did she have? She had no money, no job, no inheritance. She had felt this way before – like a boxer in the ring used to taking blows. She had been ridiculed for being lame, for being a woman who wanted to go to university. She was despised and rejected by Albert's mother. And she had lost her first child. When she was young, she used to reproach herself for being able to take blows but unable to return them. It showed a certain submissiveness, a passivity. Was she now going to succumb to her pain and not respond hit back? Or was she simply a coward, like Albert?

But once she was alone in her bedroom, Mileva felt all that misery turn into anger. What is the matter with me, agreeing to such humiliation? Who does he think he is, treating me like that, as if I were a maid? Conditions? Rules? He should burn them so that nobody ever sees them and causes him embarrassment. I wasn't brought up to live like a slave. My father didn't give me an education only for me to wind up washing my husband's laundry and mutely serving him his meals.

What Albert's letter did awaken in her was something that she had not felt for a long, long time: her pride. As if she were once again that lame little girl coming home in her mud-splattered dress. The next day, she would put on a clean dress and go to school with the same children who had made fun of and hit her; she would sit with them in the same class as if nothing had happened. She did not want them to see how hurt she was. She would simply strive to be better than them, to be the best. She remembered her father's words: You have to find a way to show what you are capable of.

At the all male Gymnasium in Zagreb, her classmates would pretend not to see her when she walked into physics class, they would nudge each other, whispering. Still, at the end of the school year, it was she who had the best grades. And there was the time at the school party when she waited in vain for someone to ask her to dance. The next time there was a dance, she played the piano and everybody applauded. When she enrolled as the only woman at the Polytechnic in Zurich, she received the same looks she got for her limp when she was a child. As if being the only woman there made her some sort of a monster. It was in these situations that her anger ignited that life-saving sense of pride and for a moment she would forget that she was different and hence weaker.

And now it was happening again: You've miscalculated, Albert. You've gone too far this time, you've offended me, you've sullied all our years together, you don't deserve for me to stay with you. I'm leaving you because you're not the man I used to know, that's what she wanted to scream at him.

She had spent the night next to her sleeping boys. In a strange bed, in a strange room, in a strange city. As day broke she decided that they would leave Berlin together as soon as possible. She would go back to Zurich. Her one consolation was the thought that Albert would probably not want to keep the boys. What would he do with them anyway? Send them off to boarding school? And she would make him promise that the children would never, ever, stay with his family! His mother Pauline would not be particularly upset because she disliked Mileva and had never taken to the boys anyway. But she knew that Albert would miss his walks with Tete and mountain hikes with Hans Albert.

There was no point staying in Berlin now. She couldn't stay, not even for the boys' sake. Not if the price was accepting his Conditions. She wouldn't let the shock, or fatigue, or growing headache stop her from leaving. Especially not after Albert's second, equally unpleasant message which arrived on the heels of the first:

*I am prepared to return to our apartment because I don't want to lose the children and because I don't want them to lose me, and for this reason alone. After all that has happened, a comradely relationship with you is out of the question. It shall be a loyal business-like relationship; the personal aspects must be reduced to a minimum. In return, however, I assure you of proper comportment on my part, such as I would exercise toward any woman as a stranger. My confidence in you suffices for this, but only for this. If it is impossible for you to continue living together on this basis, I shall resign myself to the necessity of a separation.**

She had spent the whole night thinking about it. The way he had formulated and enumerated his Conditions was truly humiliating. But she had the impression that they were intended not just for her, that they were not entirely personal. As if Albert wanted to say that this was how other women who depended on their husbands lived. Although not quite so crudely formulated, there were strict social rules of behaviour determining the balance of power. She knew of few exceptions in her own social circles, few women who broke the rules because they wanted to be independent. Such women, women like Clara for instance, were exceptions even in Berlin.

Why did Mileva think that she was one of them? Was it because she belonged to that first generation of academically educated women? She thought of her mother Maria, who had not had the opportunity to continue her schooling beyond fourth grade. Worse still, her mother had believed that she wasn't entitled to more. Then she thought of her schoolteacher Smilja in Ruma, who was the reason why she had wanted to become a teacher. Mileva, you like to read and you're a quick learner; it would be such a pity if you didn't further your education. Knowledge is the only thing worth investing in, the only thing we take with us to our grave, she used to say. The word *grave* had sent a chill down Mileva's back. Maybe that was why she had remembered the conversation and recounted it to her parents. Her mother was thrilled: Mitsa, your teacher is right, I couldn't continue my education but you can go on with yours. It was the first time Mileva had heard her mother say she was sorry that she had not stayed in school, the first time her mother had intimated that she sometimes felt the lesser for it. But Mileva dismissed these thoughts because she knew that her mother felt her daughter had thrown away an opportunity and was probably more upset by her lack of a degree than her father.

Years later, when she enrolled at the Zurich Polytechnic to study physics, she was grateful to her teacher and also to her father Miloš, who had sent her to high school and even managed to get her into physics classes at the all boys Royal Gymnasium in Zagreb. She still remembered their astonished faces the first time she appeared at the door of the school laboratory. She shivered in the warm Berlin evening at the memory of how lonely she had been, sitting and listening to the lectures all on her own, separated from the boys, Sometimes she dreamt that nobody turned around when she entered the lecture hall because she was invisible. She would try to say something, to shout, to cry, but nobody heard her.

She needed to be strong if she was going to attend every lesson and persevere with her studies. She practiced looking blasé. She cared too much about physics to give it up because of others who were not as good at it as she was, because of mediocrities who thought they were superior just because they were born male. Unlike them, her grades were so good that she was exempted from paying the school fees.

Later she was proud to be the only female student of mathematics and theoretical physics in her year, one of only a handful in the whole of Europe. How had she come to this point where she no degree, no job and to all intents and purposes no husband? Were her boys to blame: Hans Albert, who had already started school, and little Tete, who snuggled up to her in his sleep? Had having children become her excuse for squandering the chance to graduate and find a job? Yes, that was true, she knew it was. But it wasn't about the two little boys clutching at her skirts; it was about the little girl no one could know about. Mileva struggled to breathe just thinking about her first child, the one who had been abandoned, the one none of their friends knew about. It was as if she was now being punished for it.

Albert's second letter, the one that Fritz had brought to her later that same evening, struck her as more personal, and all the more cruel for it. Albert had used the word *stranger*; he had to know that it would hurt her. He wrote that he would behave towards her as he would towards "any unknown woman". He did not even offer her friendship; it was pure business. In return for his financial support, she obviously had to carry out certain duties, such as taking care of the house and the children. Like any hired housekeeper. Did he really think that his offer was fair and well-meaning? Or was he deliberately humiliating her because he wanted to get rid of her and had found a simple way to exclude her from his life as much as possible? Once he had put it in writing, his decision looked official somehow. It was the same when he got an idea; once he wrote it down, it became clearer. But he seemed to forget that relationships are not the same as ideas, that the words he used could have consequences. He found that hard to understand

at the best of times. He was always surprised when one of his “jokes” or cutting remarks fell on offended ears and made people angry. When he told Mileva’s friend Helene that her future husband was a fat bore, he couldn’t understand why both were offended and later he had to apologise. Mileva did not know if Helene ever forgave him. She assured her that Albert hadn’t meant it, even though she had made him ask for Helene’s forgiveness.

Mileva had been his colleague at university. His co-worker. The love of his life. Then his wife and the mother of his children. And now he was calling her a stranger. There was something deeply hurtful about the word. More hurtful than his conditions and rules. She had known him since he was seventeen, when his moustache was no more than fuzz on his face. She knew that his rude jokes and cracks were a defence against his own sense of insecurity. He was an awkward, maladjusted boy who saw her as someone who would protect him. No one had ever been that close to him. Not even his sister Maja or his mother Pauline.

Could two people who have lived together for so long really become strangers? They may not get along anymore, other people may enter and change their lives, but that didn’t mean that they had to become complete strangers. The two of them could even be enemies, like now, but not strangers, thought Mileva, shifting to the edge of the bed to give the boys more room.

She remembered that the first time she saw his lively eyes and mop of dark hair she thought he looked like an immature kid. His sarcastic comments and jokes scored him no points with their little group of students. But he was the youngest among them and they forgave him a good deal. In comparison, their colleague Marcel Grossman was a grown-up. Albert was not very polite to his professors either. He addressed Professor Weber as “Mister “ instead of “Professor”, even after Weber sternly reminded him of the Polytechnic’s rules of conduct. Albert did not take these rules seriously, and later it cost him dearly. That was one of the reasons why Weber refused to write him a recommendation for a job. And yet, this disregard for the given rules was what helped him make crucial discoveries in theoretical physics. Mileva understood Albert and tried to defend him, especially in front of her girlfriends at the Engelbrecht Pension where she boarded as a student. Although superficial and immature, he was chatty and amusing, and he played the violin beautifully. The girls enjoyed their evening concerts when Mileva accompanied him on the piano. His musicality opened all doors.

The first time he kissed me in that small room at the boarding house, I thought it was spontaneous, almost accidental. We had been playing Mozart that evening,

one of his favourite composers. When we were on our own, we sat next to each other, our heads bent over the same book. He suddenly turned around and kissed me. Later he admitted that he had spent a long time mustering up the courage, looking for an excuse to be alone with me. I was playing Mozart for you, just for you, did you notice, he asked. I did not tell him that even then I saw him more as a boy than a man.

I am afraid, Albert, that you haven't changed in all these years...

And now, now I have had enough and you'll have to learn to be responsible for your own actions, thought Mileva brushing the crumbs off the table.

She remembers again what she felt after reading his Conditions and the letter that followed: despair, then anger, disappointment, indignation. Pride. Only pride can explain her two different reactions: acceptance of his conditions, quickly followed by a resolve to leave Berlin.

She was not, after all, like his ex-girlfriend Marie Winteler. He would send her his dirty laundry with no message attached, and she would return it washed and ironed, with a love letter, hoping to hold on to him this way. Writing to her parents, Albert would patronizingly refer to her as a *dear child* and *sweet girl*, although the young lady was older than he was; he was only seventeen. Mileva herself was older than he was. The four-year age difference seemed unimportant when they met in their first year of studies. Now it turned out that Albert was not only younger, but that he had never grown up. To grow up meant to take responsibility for one's actions, something he avoided.

Albert had changed but he had not grown up. The change had become particularly apparent in the last few months as he became increasingly in demand. After years of working at the Patent Office waiting for a better job, he finally started receiving offers to teach not only in Zurich and Prague, but also in Leiden and Utrecht. She knew he was impressionable and enjoyed charming people, and that he was also very vain, even though he tried to hide it. What she had not expected was that his family would come to mean less and less to him.

Sitting in the kitchen, feeling lost, Mileva can't stop herself from thinking about the past, from feeling that this is a defining moment. How will the boys take to life after Albert? Albert has been a good father; he has tried to spend time with the children. Hans Albert is very attached to him. It will be especially hard on him, worries Mileva. She walks back into the room and covers him carefully with a sheet, as if to protect him from the troubles to come. He is big enough to understand what has happened. She is more concerned about Tete, whose reaction

to any change is to fall ill. She presses her lips against his perspiring brow. He is not running a fever and is sleeping peacefully. For now.

Suddenly a tide of sadness overwhelms her. Like that time in the autumn of 1902 when she took the train from Novi Sad to Zurich, leaving her first child, her little girl behind. She never recovered from the grief of that moment when she walked out of the room where Lieserl was asleep in her cradle

I did not leave her, I abandoned her. I never saw her again, Mileva remembers, biting her lip. She starts feeling anxious, unsure of herself after having been so self-confident this morning.

Gazing at the sleeping children, Mileva cannot escape the feeling of uncertainty, and fear. She is afraid of being even more helpless. She gets like that sometimes, listless, unable to move. When it happens she cannot get out of bed, let alone walk, Although she is physically perfectly healthy, she does not want to call it by its real name: mental illness. Let sleeping dogs lie, her mother would say. It's dangerous to call things by their real name, although sometimes she thinks that's just a superstition she has carried with her from home, like luggage, the way one carries inherited traits. Mileva tries to get a grip on herself; she tries not to succumb to such dark thoughts because then she definitely won't find the strength to leave Berlin. If she goes back to bed, if she gives in to despair and the urge to lie down, she knows it will be a long while before she gets up again.

I cannot be a burden to these people who have been so kind and taken us in. I cannot put Albert's colleague in such an awkward situation. Fritz and Clara have already done a lot merely by letting us stay with them. Where else could I have gone? Certainly not to his parents. Actually, leaving the apartment was the first step towards leaving Albert. The moment I slammed the door behind me, suitcase in hand, I sentenced myself to life without him. And he sensed it, which is why he has the nerve to send me such offensive conditions, knowing full well that I will ignore them.

A stranger? Alright. So be it.

The best thing she can do right now is make breakfast for the boys. She has to boil the milk and spoon off the skin because Tete doesn't like it. Then she will write to Mrs. Hurwitz in Zurich and to her parents in Novi Sad. She will be very busy; that is the only way to stop the walls from closing in, to stop her prison from becoming a tomb. This growing sadness reminds her of the pain she used to have in her joints. The fact that she recognizes it doesn't make it hurt any less. It is like having limestone build up in your veins until it completely lines them.

That is how I will die, she thinks. Fossilized.

She has to calm down before everybody wakes up. After breakfast, she will take the boys to the nearby park and sit in the shade. She doesn't like the summer heat. She has more trouble walking, tripping over the smallest crack or unevenness in the pavement. Her sandals are as heavy as her winter shoes, especially the orthopaedic one she has to wear on her shorter leg. She is used to her limp; with time it has simply become a physical fact rather than an impediment. Sometimes, though, she feels that her limp is a crucial part of her, that it can determine the course of her life. Rather like fate. Could that really be? When she was a young girl she noticed that all the boys were interested in was how a girl looked. Wasn't that one of the reasons why she respected Albert – because he could see beyond her looks, beyond her limp? Even when colleagues drew his attention to it, Albert saw a different kind of beauty in Mileva, and that made her forget about her limp, at least for a while. Today she is a thirty-eight-year-old disabled woman with coarsening features, greying hair and a limp that is getting worse; indeed sometimes she cannot walk at all. She is a woman who has not learned how to live without Albert.

The boys will be getting up soon.

Why did he ask them to move to Berlin if he was already in love with Elsa? Mileva is especially worried about Tete. He is sickly as it is; he catches colds, and worse, at the drop of a hat. The measles, chicken pox, the mumps - Tete has had every children's disease there is. Unlike Hans Albert. Fortunately, his older brother is already going to school, which helps to divert his attention away from the unhappy situation at home. The Habers do what they can but Albert's behaviour is affecting them as well. They can't but comment on it, albeit discretely, at least in front of the children. But the boys sense that something is wrong; moving to the Habers' was already a shock. Hans Albert knows that his parents aren't talking to each other anymore, that there is tension between them. But he doesn't probe, and when little Tete asks for his father, he says: Don't bother Mummy right now; she'll tell you when she has the time.

When the boys wake up she'll tell them that they will be going back to Zurich soon. That may make it easier for them to part with their father. Their friends are there; here, everything is unfamiliar. Mummy why do we have to live in Berlin? Tete has already asked. Because Daddy got a job here and he wants to be with you. But he's never with us, the child wailed. And he was right. Whenever he came to visit them in Zurich, Albert spent more time taking them to the mountains or lake, than at home. He taught them to love nature and music; they were quite like their father that way.

I should have thought about it more, I should have waited a month or two before moving to Berlin, so I could see how Albert would cope without us. Maybe he wouldn't have even invited us to join him? I should have known from experience that I have to be careful when Albert takes a decision. This is not the first time the whole family has moved somewhere, only to go back to Zurich.

Mileva recalls that it was the same in 1911 when they moved to Prague, where Albert had been offered a professorship at the German University. She still remembers the Prague apartment in the Smichov district. They arrived in the late afternoon; the apartment was new, spacious, bright. It was the first time they had an apartment with electricity rather than kerosene or gas lamps and Mileva was thrilled by the novelty of it. But when she went to the bathroom to wash her hands and opened the tap, the water that came out was brown. They had to boil it before drinking it. It was a constant health concern, especially for the barely one-year-old Tete.

But Albert was barely touched by these worries because he was away at the university all day. Or at Bertha Fanta's literary salon at the Café Louvre, the gathering place of Prague's intellectuals and artists. Albert usually went with his colleague Philipp Franck and afterwards he would tell Mileva who had been there and what they had said - whether it was the writer Max Brod, the composer Leo Janáček, or the reticent Franz Kafka, who would sit in a corner and simply listen to the discussion or the music.

It was in Prague that Mileva realized that she and Albert were beginning to live completely different lives. Was it because of the arrival of their second son and the added work it gave her? Was it because her illness was becoming increasingly obvious? She does not dare think about it now. She does not have the courage to even approach the abyss that such thoughts open up.

After the birth of Hans Albert she had recovered quickly and picked up her life where she had left off. She and Albert went out, attended lectures, saw friends, hosted discussions and musical evenings. It was not easy even with one child, but she continued to believe that she and Albert could do it all together. When Tete was born they were still Ein Stein, one stone, they were still one, as she would say with a smile. But with two children it was hard enough in Zurich, let alone in Prague. There were times when she thought that if she could choose between taking care of the children and going out, Mileva would have opted for an interesting conversation in a café. Even though they had a maid in Prague, she was worn out by the children, the cleaning, the cooking. She could barely wait to crawl into bed at night.

They had lost each other long before Berlin.

They grew apart without ever asking themselves why. Mileva's dark moods

became increasingly frequent. Even before Prague there seemed to be no end to her gloom. She went out less and less, and even when she did, she was mostly silent.

Three years later, in Berlin, she is no longer sure that it was just about taking care of the children. Even then I avoided company, avoided going out. The boys were just an excuse. I felt guilty about it. After all, Albert earned enough for me to hire a nanny now and then, if I wanted to go out with friends. I know that the way I devoted myself to the boys, and to them alone, was unhealthy. It was as if they were a lifebelt saving me from myself. From the unbearable emptiness left by Lieserl, an emptiness I have carried with me like an open wound. I didn't even care about a career anymore, about going out with Albert or being with friends.

Her mental state was deteriorating. She increasingly felt as if she had an iron ball chained to her leg. If she didn't think about it, it did not feel so heavy. But as soon as she took a step, the ball pulled her back. For more than ten years now she felt as if she was slowly falling into a well. It is dark down there, with only an occasional glimpse of light from above. Mileva yells and shouts, but her voice never reaches anyone. She huddles in that black hole, afraid of plunging even deeper. A prisoner with no hope of a pardon. Others decided the conditions and space she had, the depth of her prison, the weight of the ball, even the acuteness of the pain.

She remembers looking at herself in the bathroom mirror of their Prague apartment and bursting into tears. With her disheveled hair and dirty apron, she looked like a housemaid. Albert's colleague Philipp Franck, who once saw her in this state, later said that Mileva was probably schizophrenic! It was a fashionable diagnosis in those days, like hysteria. Mileva wonders if Franck hadn't been right even then - not so much with the diagnosis, as with his feeling that there was something seriously wrong with her. But Albert paid no attention to what he said. As if he hadn't heard him or didn't want to know. He had no time for her anymore.

Perhaps it was motherhood that had gradually driven them apart. Maybe he did not find her attractive anymore, she thought as she lay in bed alone at night, or next to him with his back turned. He would fall asleep the moment his head hit the pillow, and she would snuggle up to him longingly, letting his body warm her. Was it because they had grown apart that he fell in love with Elsa, that he created those Conditions and forbade any intimacy?

Why can't we talk anymore? Let's talk, she sometimes said when he appeared

at the door late in the evening. He would give her a surprised, sad look. I'm tired, he usually said. I'm tired too, Mileva would think, but did not say. What reason did she have to be tired? Albert complained even to Carl Seelig, not exactly his closest friend, that his wife had become withdrawn, that she nagged, that she was always in a bad mood. Did Albert ever wonder if she might be suffering from melancholy – or depression, as the illness is now called? He knew that any serious mental condition, whatever it was called, required help. And that if he admitted that her anxiety and despair were part of that illness he might have to do something about it. But he was suspicious of mental illness. Besides, he avoided any situation that might distract him from his research and writing.

He had found himself more interesting company and left her to her own devices. Surely you're not jealous of science, her friend Helene joked in a letter. I am, and I am jealous not only of science, but of his life as well, she admitted to herself, but that did not make it any easier.

Anxiety, sadness, despair, apathy. She is more than familiar with this progression of moods. It started long before Prague. For the umpteenth time she feels the ground slipping away from under her feet.

If she doesn't pull herself together she will drown in the dirty dishwasher.

Her decision to leave Berlin makes her feel better. Because I have never had much of a say until now, Mileva thinks to herself, finally clearing the kitchen table. My decision-making powers were confined to the walls of the apartment and the boys: wipe your nose, don't forget your scarf, it's cold outside, close the door, pass me the newspaper, what do you want for lunch today, when will you be home tonight, Albert? When will you be back? Never, she thinks to herself, as the cup slips out of her trembling hand into the soapy water.

Washing the dishes, she holds on to them for dear life. Like in Prague and Zurich, in this Berlin kitchen objects are all that she has to hold on to. She is utterly lost without them.

Albert's handwritten document proves it.

She goes back to the Conditions, paragraph B, items 1 and 2, prohibiting her from spending time or travelling with him. He put that in deliberately. Albert knows that these are her only pleasures, that she longs for his company, which he has deprived her of. And as for travel, she can't even remember the last time the two of them travelled on their own. That's not counting their recent Easter visit to Marie Curie in Paris. There they went out, they met people. Marie introduced them to her scientist friends and no one really noticed Mileva's melancholy and Albert's detachment.

Marie did not spend much time talking to Mileva, beyond what courtesy called for. Mileva had to admit that Marie was Albert's friend. Anyway, what on earth would Marie have to talk about with a physics dropout and housewife? She certainly wasn't interested in children. Or in "girl talk" about her younger lover, the scientist Paul Langevin, who had left his wife for her. Their affair had shocked not only le tout Paris, but also many scientists and colleagues all over the world. Even her second Nobel Prize in 1911, the one for chemistry, did not put an end to the snide comments about her relationship with Langevin. When the Swedish Academy sent a message advising her not to attend the presentation ceremony, Marie replied that she did not see how her private life had anything to do with her scientific work and she went to Stockholm. Albert sent her a letter of support:

Do not laugh at me for writing you without having anything sensible to say. But I am so enraged by the base manner in which the public is presently daring to concern itself with you that I absolutely must give vent to this feeling... I am impelled to tell you how much I have come to admire your intellect, your drive, and your honesty, and that I consider myself lucky to have made your personal acquaintance in Brussels.

Albert was right not to fault her for the relationship, Mileva thinks. Even though at the time she did not know that people might soon be thinking the same thing about her own husband. More and more she is inclined to believe that he offered Marie his support not merely out of friendship, but for his own sake. After all, she realizes, the attacks on Marie coincided with the beginning of his relationship with Elsa.

From what she had seen during their stay in Paris, Marie was not particularly bothered by the rumours. Mileva was sorry that she had not managed to develop a closer relationship with her. Because Marie Curie was the only woman, the only person outside the family, who could make Mileva feel guilty about failing the Polytechnic diploma exam and missing out on her planned doctorate. When Mileva enrolled at the Polytechnic in 1896, she looked up to Marie Curie. When Marie and Pierre Curie were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1903, Mileva, working night after night on Albert's mathematical calculations, felt there was hope for her too. Marie had a career, a marriage, children and two Nobel prizes. She distinctly remembers looking at Marie and wishing that she could achieve that kind of self-confidence herself, that kind of sovereignty in dealings with men.

Mileva just needed to pass the other half of her diploma exam. Had she passed the oral, she could have followed in Marie's footsteps and entered the world of science. She might not have gone so far as to win a Nobel Prize, but she would have been doing what she loved and what she so wanted. Then Albert would have been able to introduce her at scientific gatherings not as his wife, but as his colleague. If she hadn't met him, if she hadn't become so dependent upon him,

if they hadn't had Lieserl so soon...Only an oral exam stood between the reality of her life and the possibility of something completely different.

I have to stop letting my imagination run away with itself like that, or it will only make me feel worse, Mileva says to herself, still alone in the kitchen.

She still sometimes felt close to Albert, especially when they played music together. But even that had become increasingly rare. In Zurich, Lisbeth Hurwitz, their professor's daughter, now often accompanied Albert on the violin, with Mileva sitting silently in the audience, as if struck dumb. How could she have let go of even the music, the very thing that had brought them so close. She had let it disappear from their relationship. She remembers the scene in her room at the Engelbrecht Pension. She, Helene, Ružica and Milena were listening to Albert play Mozart on the violin; then, as now, he was never without his violin. There was something touching about his performance, about the way this young man, whose cutting remarks put off even his admirers, was transformed by music. He was a different person when he played the violin - gentler, softer, more open. When they played together, like when they studied together, it created an invisible bond between them.

Sitting at the table, staring at Albert's handwriting, she hears the blood pounding in her ears. She tells herself that she has got to get things moving because the children depend on her, especially now. If the children were indeed the cause of these great changes in her life, they were also the reason why she was determined to survive.

She has a bitter taste in her mouth. She looks around for something sweet to get rid of it. She doesn't usually like sweet things, though she will sometimes reach for a piece of chocolate or pinch one of the boys' favourite menthol candies. Mummy, were you sad again? Tete asks, seeing that some candies are missing from the little tin box.

She takes the teapot out from the kitchen cabinet. The best thing she can do is make a cup of tea. She looks for the camomile; it is a good relaxant. Especially if combined with a few drops of valerian, but she had left the bottle behind in Zurich. She finds only non-herbal tea, what at home they call "Russian", black tea. She takes a glass jar of plum marmalade from the pantry. The homemade one from Kač. She had brought it to the Habers' because the children liked it. She opens the jar and takes a spoonful of the thick, blackish spread. It dissolves in her mouth slowly, acting like a medicine. The bitter taste is gone. It brings back memories of her mother leaning over the pot on the stove as she and Zorka wait impatiently

to try it. The bubbling black marmalade fills the house with the aroma of plums. When it is done, her mother carefully pours it into the glass jars. She still makes marmalade every autumn and usually sends her a jar or two when somebody is travelling to Zurich.

If only Albert had not written that rude, cruel, selfish message! Would it have made her feel better? Those words written in blue ink on white paper seem so relentlessly official.

Admittedly, their relationship had been strained for quite a while. In fact, Mileva had only agreed to come to Berlin in the hope that it would give them both a chance to get closer. And what had happened? He had found an apartment big enough for him to claim one of the rooms for himself. The room was furnished not only with a desk but with a bed as well. They were already sleeping in separate beds but now Albert wanted to be completely separate. Well, what was left for them then if he wouldn't even talk to her anymore? Moreover, probably afraid of Mileva's reaction to his Conditions, he had gone to stay with Uncle Rudolf. As it happened, that was where Rudolf's divorced daughter Elsa Löwenthal lived with Ilse and Margot, her two grown-up daughters from her first marriage. That same Elsa with whom he had been corresponding for the past two years. When Mileva confronted him with the birthday card Elsa had sent him, he was dismissive and said that there was nothing between them. She knew it was a lie as soon as they arrived in Berlin. Now she thinks that Elsa may have been the real reason why he accepted the position in Berlin.

Albert certainly didn't leave her and the boys in search of peace and quiet, thinks Mileva with mounting indignation. That's why he specifies "intimacy"... *you will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way.* However hurt she is, this paragraph makes her laugh. Their intimacy boils down to avoiding any physical contact and it amuses her to see him formulate it on paper this way. She has a feeling that this paragraph may not have been his idea. She is sure that he showed the Conditions to Elsa before giving them to Haber. And that he was quite pleased with the way he had worded them. See, I may still be married to that woman but we have nothing to do with one another anymore, he must have told her. The document was meant to guarantee it in writing, to serve as a kind of obstacle between Mileva's body and his. If she could, she would tell Elsa that the paragraph was completely superfluous because there was no intimacy between the two of them anyway. She would warn the said lady, whom she had met only once, that she had suspected Albert of being unfaithful even before, but hadn't wanted to deal with such suspicions. She did not have the energy to stand

up for herself. After all, what would it achieve? Even if she had confronted him, he would have probably lied to her, just as he lied to Elsa. But his flirtations had never jeopardized their marriage before.

Mileva tried to avoid thinking about this aspect of his character. She believed Albert when he said that flirting was just a way of feeding his male ego. Once, after they were already married, when she rebuked him for openly flirting with a female acquaintance, he reacted like a hurt child. Don't take it seriously, Mitsa. It's just a game, a bit of fun, he told her. No little lady I flirt with or who flirts with me can jeopardize what you and I have. And those words were enough for her to believe him. It was easier that way, despite the suspicions that kept plaguing her. Elsa was living proof that she had been right. It was no consolation that Albert probably wouldn't stay long with Elsa. His attitude towards women was something Elsa could easily see for herself. All she had to do was observe him in their company - the way he looked at women, the way he approached and tried to charm them; she would have no trouble guessing his intentions. She should also think about her own two daughters who were younger and prettier than their mother. Else was said to be very seductive. Did Elsa really think that Albert would pay her no mind?

It occurs to her that she hasn't felt the touch of his hand, or even a friendly embrace, for a long time. And that his body had been sending her messages even before she fully recognized the change in their relationship. She had deliberately ignored them. She wanted to believe that she and Albert had a strong bond despite the fact that they had drifted apart, despite her loud rebukes and irritableness, despite the other women who appeared in his life and whom he lied about, saying they were just friends. This belief in their bond has blinded her.

She leans on the table, waiting for the water to boil for her tea. Feeling hopeless, wishing that Albert hadn't written those despicable Conditions, she still seems to harbour a kind of naïve, by now pointless hope that their relationship can change. Is she looking for an excuse for Albert? Yes she is. How else could she justify the fact that she had lived with him for so long, with a man who was now treating her in such a humiliating way? After all their years together, Mileva now realizes that their relationship had been based on common interests, trust and support; but there was also his youthful insecurity and inexperience with women. It had taken her time to see that Albert's sexual appetite grew in tandem with his growing status in society. He needed her support less and less. She remembers once writing to a girlfriend: I only hope and wish that fame does not have a harmful effect on his humanity.* She did not know when she wrote it that

it had already started to happen. But worst of all, his demands are forcing her to confront not only him, but herself as well. She cannot but wonder who she is and what she has done to make Albert treat her like this.

Her husband's simple edict that she was to take care of the laundry, food and cleaning does not mention any of her own rights. Over time, she had become a housewife and governess in the service of her husband. In return, he supported her. There was nothing unusual about their marriage; most of the people they knew lived like that. But Mileva never dreamed that after all those years of education, she would finish up as a housewife. And if she accepted his conditions, she would drop down yet another rung on the ladder and become an ordinary housemaid.

Like those quiet girls, usually from rural areas, who open the door, take the ladies' furs and the gentlemen's hats and coats and then usher them into the sitting room. Afterwards they serve the drinks, the hors d'oeuvres, dinner. No one pays any attention to them. It suffices to say "thank you" and the girl will curtsy and leave the room, knowing that she is superfluous. Unnecessary. Invisible. The mistress of the house makes sure that the girls are neither too young nor too pretty, so as not to catch her husband's eye. Because such things have been known to happen. But even if the girl is unattractive, it does not stop the husband from occasionally paying her a nocturnal visit. The mistress of the house is not feeling well; she has a headache and has withdrawn to her room. It is handy to have another woman in the house, at least for one night, as a substitute. The husband might sneak into her room. So what if she's not pretty, it's not her looks he's coming for. And if she is discrete, afterwards she will get some extra cash. Or else she'll be sacked, without a recommendation.

I would wind up being a maid, an old, worn out maid, thinks Mileva.

She wonders what Albert sees in her. The mother of his children, for a start. And what else? What did he mean exactly when he wrote: *you will stop talking to me, you will leave my bedroom or study?*

Are his Conditions just the ultimate in brazenness, a way for him to get rid of her so that he can pursue his romance with Elsa? Why else would he rent out the apartment they had moved to? Where was she supposed to cater to him and follow his strict instructions if they did not even live together?

Mileva pours herself a cup of tea. She spills some of the dark liquid and it tints the saucer. Her eyes well up with tears. She leans on the table and lets her tears trickle into the cup.

There in the Berlin kitchen, the cold fingers of despair clutch at her throat.

Absent-mindedly, she takes another spoonful of marmalade. She wishes she could escape back to her childhood. She would run and hide on the top floor of the belvedere next to the house in Kač. From there she could see the storks in their rooftop nests, and the clover-blanketed orchard and meadow. And the sky. Thoughts of the sky brought her back down to earth. We had that in common, she says to herself. We both loved gazing at the night-time sky for hours, gazing and talking; that was our greatest bond.

In the early days of their studies they were both lonely and insecure. She was a provincial girl from the Balkans, and being lame, she was of no interest to the boys. Albert was withdrawn, an oddball whose ideas and behaviour made him the butt of jokes. Their relationship started as one of mutual support; how did it become one of mutual understanding? At first she resisted her feelings. She tried to escape by going to study at Heidelberg University, but she found herself anxiously awaiting his letters. She should have stayed there. She had left Zurich to escape from Albert. By that autumn of 1897, she felt she already knew what was waiting for her if she went back to Zurich. She was afraid of her feelings for him, of a closeness she had never experienced before. She did not want a serious relationship that might hamper her studies. She tried to control her feelings by devoting herself to her lectures during the day, and to reading at night. She wrote him only a few restrained letters. She did not want to become too close to Albert because it threatened her goal of obtaining a degree and finding a job. Those had been her father's wishes when he put her on the train to Zurich, because Switzerland was the only place in the German-speaking world that allowed women to study.

That winter she realized that having seen Albert every single day, she now found it increasingly difficult to be without him. She did not think about him during the day, when she had lectures, but she missed him dreadfully at night. They had both become used to sharing their every thought, their every new idea and experience. Nothing seemed to make sense without the other person there to react and respond. They had already developed a good relationship, where they depended on and reflected each another. Mileva was used to being alone and thought it gave her the freedom to devote herself to her studies. But studying together with Albert, discussing subjects that interested them both, had become appealing to her. Their relationship, which had started with a common interest in science, in ideas, in an exchange of views, soon turned into a feeling of mutual belonging. She could no longer distinguish her own ideas, thoughts and plans, from his.

It all seems so long ago now. She has almost forgotten the softness of his lips,

the first time he touched her, the feeling that she was not alone anymore. She had come to trust someone who knew her well and on whom she could always rely. It is the trust that they had developed during their fifteen years together that she would miss the most. If only they could at least sit down at the table, take each other by the hand and talk, like in their student days. Like that evening when his eyes had sparkled, Mileva remembers. They were talking about the properties of light but it was his face that had caught her attention. The moment when he took her by the waist and pulled her towards him; she did not understand what he was saying, she just listened to the sound of his voice and surrendered to his touch.

If they were to sit down and face one another again, if he were to appear right now in this kitchen and say: Mitsa, I'm sorry – what would I do?

I would tell him it's too late. That's for sure.

Mileva listens for a second to the noises outside. The sound of the tram, footsteps in the courtyard, doors opening and closing. The city is waking up. If Milica, her friend from the Engelbrecht Pension, could read her mind now, she would call her a suffragette. Girls study biology, languages, chemistry, literature, but what they really aspire to is marriage. Why had Mileva been different? She had not even thought about getting married. Yet fifteen years later, here she was.

Mileva adores her two sons but she sometimes hates being a mother. Children can be a burden as well as a joy. Like so many other women, at such moments she feels she is paying too high a price for motherhood. Having given up physics after a nervous breakdown from which she never recovered, having had neither the strength nor Albert's support to stand up for herself, she was left with a gaping emptiness.

I've reduced myself to being just a mother, thinks Mileva, knowing that women who view motherhood as a blessing and lofty duty might take the word "just" as belittling their lives.

Whom can she talk to about the emptiness she feels? Her mother? Her sister? Perhaps Clara, whose kitchen she is sitting in now. After all, Clara was the first woman to obtain a degree in chemistry from the University of Wroclaw. We started off together, Mileva remembers. But I did not graduate and she did not have children. No, better not to talk about myself. Clara might ask me why I hadn't graduated, and the answer to that is too painful and long. I don't want to talk to anyone. I can barely think about it myself.

I'm sometimes shocked by how little we know about ourselves, about our inner world. Albert has no idea about that world.

She is back to the Conditions again. Laundry! After everything they have been through. After knowing each other for so many years, after eleven years of marriage, the poverty they have lived through, the freezing cold, sometimes even hunger. After the hard time he had with his professors, every single one of whom had refused to write him a recommendation for a position at the university. And lastly, after 1905, when he published four papers on relativity in *The Annals of Physics*, which became the basis for his future career. She had helped him review the latest scientific papers. She had worked on ideas with him, trying to see them from every side, to ask questions, to provoke him, to contradict him. That is what he needed, a partner to discuss such things with, someone who was at least as qualified as he was. He had still not dared to polemicize with such towering figures as Hendrik Lorentz or Max Planck, for instance. He was merely a young employee at the Patent Office. She collaborated on mathematical calculations; he could not publish his theories without them as proof. She was better at them than Albert. She read foreign scientific papers and took notes. Publishing under his name, she wrote reviews of specialist works. He was too busy to write them himself. He sat at the Patent Office all day, six days a week, using whatever time he managed to “steal” to pen his theories. And when he started to give student lectures, she prepared them for him. He tested each of his postulates by discussing them with her. She was at his side, always at hand. She remembers they both often fell sleep over their books just as day was breaking.

She encouraged him and he needed that in those days. He had told her a hundred times, Mitsa, where would I be without your support? She did not think she deserved any particular credit. First of all, she knew that he was exceptionally talented in theoretical physics. The second reason was more practical: he needed help because if he wanted to obtain even the lowest position at the university, he had to publish. She could have asked for both their names to appear on these scientific papers, but there was no point. She could not embark on her career as a scientist when she did not even have a degree. And without a degree, there was no doctorate.

The circle around her was already closing. Her anxiety was never to leave her.

In times past, Albert would either give her mathematical problems to solve, or go out and leave them for her on the table. And it is the same again now. Only it isn't about mathematics anymore. Again she smooths out the sheets of paper on the table with her hand. Mileva realizes that what really offends her is that they do not involve numbers. She was used to getting mathematical problems from him, equations, formulas. These two papers were only a list of orders and instructions on how to behave!

It is hard for her to believe that Albert has forgotten absolutely everything.

How can it be that she is now expected to take care of his laundry? How can it be that Albert, her beloved Albert, has left her a list not of mathematical problems but of ridiculous instructions ?

Still waiting for the children to wake up, Mileva thinks that really she should not be so surprised by this turn of events, or even by Albert running off to Elsa. Has she forgotten that she went through something similar once before, in Zurich? When Albert was finally offered a professorship at the University in Zurich in 1909, the local newspaper reported it. Soon afterwards, he received a letter from a certain Anna Meyer, nee Schmid. She reminded him that they had met at the hotel where Albert and his parents had spent the summer some ten years earlier. They had become close. Her letter was innocuous enough, but suggestive. She congratulated him on his appointment and said she hoped to see him again.

Albert was delighted by the letter. He wrote back graciously that he too had fond memories of that summer:

*I probably cherish the memory of the lovely weeks that I was allowed to spend near you in the Paradise Hotel even more than you do.**

He gave his office, not his home, as his return address.

The letter accidentally fell into Mileva's hands. Who is this woman, Albert? Why are you giving her your office address? - she asked. Strangely enough, Albert had no persuasive answer. He saw that giving his office address was proof of his own dishonourable intentions, dishonourable with regard to Mileva, of course. He did not attempt to defend himself. Mileva told him to return the letter immediately, as if he were a bad little boy. He put it back in the envelope and re-addressed it. But before sealing it, and with Mileva looking over his shoulder, he wrote that he had not quite understood Mrs. Meyer's letter. Mileva decided that it was better if he pretended not to understand the lady's allusions.

She thought that it would avoid further trouble, but she was wrong. The letter again wound up in the wrong hands, this time in the hands of Anna's husband George Meyer, who demanded an explanation from Albert. For the husband, it was a matter of honour, even though Anna and Albert never met again. An indignant Mileva replied to Mr. Meyer herself, complaining about his wife's inappropriate insinuations. She did it behind Albert's back. When he found out, Albert was mortified. Even though he despised bourgeois notions of honour and propriety, he found Mileva's conduct intolerable. He wrote to Meyer, explaining that Mileva's outrageous behaviour was because she suffered from baseless, acute bouts of jealousy. Michele Besso later confided to her that Albert had been horrified by her jealous outburst. Her love is stifling me, he complained to Besso; she neither forgives nor forgets.

She puts her hand on her heart, as if to check whether it is still beating. Even now, the thought of his letter to Anna Meyer upsets her. She hadn't liked suspecting Albert of being unfaithful – a word that Albert would immediately dismiss as a bourgeois prejudice, a phrase she once even liked. But after Elsa entered their lives, she could no longer turn a blind eye. Albert, her Albert, was cheating on her. And who knew how many times he had done it before? She had been warned discretely by friends but had paid no attention subconsciously; she was protecting herself from the pain.

After Prague, she felt that he was increasingly shutting her out of his life, that she was no longer his equal. He did not need her support anymore; he spent more time with their neighbour, the physician Heinrich Zangger, in Moussonstrasse where they had recently moved. He could spend the whole night talking to him, but barely exchanged a word with her. He spent all his free time corresponding with Planck, Lorentz, von Lane and others. He did not take the children to the park so often anymore, even though he knew how much they enjoyed it. He now turned to Jakob Laube for help with mathematics, not to her. Jakob was a pleasant young man and Mileva liked his spontaneity and humour. But she did not like the fact that his presence cut her off from Albert's research work. Albert kept assuring her that he just wanted to make it easier for her with the children.

Yes, Albert, thank you.

Did everything really change in 1910, after Tete was born? Did the children and Albert's dedication to science change their relationship that much? Why had she lost interest in science, in writing papers, in doing research? When was the last time he had come to her with a scientific problem? She remembers the day in Bern that he came rushing home from work all excited and started telling her about a man in free fall. She remembers it very clearly: it was in November 1907. A man in free fall does not feel his weight, he said to her walking in through the door. He was so excited he marched up and down the kitchen, repeating, almost shouting the words. Hans Albert had just fallen asleep and she signaled to Albert to keep his voice down. Calm down and tell me slowly. What man? Why is he falling? Why is it important? Eating in the kitchen, he explained the idea which later served as the basis for his equivalence principle. Mitsa, this is the happiest thought of my life, he said, stuffing food into his mouth. He did not even notice that she had made him his favourite dish: lentils with sausages.

This brainwave later led him to write a whole essay about gravity. Mileva had been his test audience. She knew how to help him get a grip on himself and articulate his thoughts. But that was before Tete was born.

A few years later, at the beginning of 1911, for the first time in a long time they went on a trip together. It was cold on the train to Leiden, the heating was poor, but Albert took off his coat, then his jacket, then his pullover. Some inner excitement was making him so hot that she thought he had a fever. It was not because of their trip or the lecture he was due to give. It was because he was going to meet Professor Hendrik Lorentz. He hadn't slept all night just thinking about it. Sitting in the cold train, he and Mileva discussed Lorentz's ideas about quantum particles. She could not imagine their relationship without these talks, whether they be about quantum particles, the properties of liquids or photons.

But these discussions gradually died out. Once he finally obtained his professorship, his work at the Polytechnic meant that she saw less and less of him during the day, and at night only if she went with him to a concert or the theatre. He would come home late. Deliberately so, she was sure. At first, she tried to join him on his jaunts around town, to taverns and concerts. She was unwilling to give up her time with him. If she knew she would see him somewhere, she would bring him sandwiches or cake, even though their friends laughed at her. Before going to bed at night, she would set the table and leave dinner for him on the stove. She often found it untouched in the morning.

Sometimes she would surprise him. She would embrace him, saying: Let's forget our quarrels. That would cheer him up. There was still some warmth in their relationship. He would play with the children and sometimes they would all go on hikes to the surrounding mountains, which always lifted Mileva's spirit. Their apartment was still their home. It was also her hideaway, her refuge from the world, a place where she still felt protected.

Mileva's fits of jealousy did nothing to bring Albert to his senses. He never asked himself why she was acting this way. Was it because of Anna or were there maybe other reasons for her outbursts? He didn't seem to care about her anymore. After the incident with Anna, they went on an excursion with Marie Curie, who was paying them a return visit. Mileva would have preferred to forget it, given how Albert had behaved. He had been completely incapable of having a coherent conversation. He spent almost the entire time entertaining the Curie girls' young nanny, who, of course, was flattered by the attention. She wondered if Marie had noticed and if she had maybe asked herself what Albert was like when she wasn't around, since he made no bones about flirting when she was present. Watching him entertain the girl, Mileva felt that she was becoming invisible, like an old armchair. Albert did not care whether she was with him or not; he simply did not notice her anymore. He saw her now not as a woman, but as a mother and a housemaid. Just like when he wrote those Conditions.

Meanwhile, illness and loneliness were taking their toll on her. When they were younger, he had needed her. She was the stronger of the two. Later, it was Mileva who needed him more, but he had less and less time for her. My friends are far away, in Belgrade, Vienna, Novi Sad, Mileva says to herself, lifting the cup of by now cold tea to her lips.

She remembers what she wrote to her closest friend Helene:

*I believe that we women cling much longer to the memory of that remarkable period called youth and involuntarily would like things always to remain that way...men always accommodate themselves better to the present moment.**

Suddenly she feels very hot. She undoes the top button on her blouse. Her skirt feels tight around the waist. She is gaining weight. What a time to notice it, to have to worry about such nonsense!

Maybe it would be easier if she could confide in someone. But who? She has told Clara as much as she felt she could, given the situation. And she does not want to make her mother's and Zorka's situation any worse. Zorka can't help her anyway. She has started avoiding people, their worried father had written. Mileva found her increasingly odd and withdrawn every time she saw her. Was that because Zorka, too, was lame? Could that be the reason? When Zorka visited them even she had remarked upon Albert's absence, asking her sister how she could live like that and why she tolerated such neglect. Because of the children, Mileva had replied tersely. Even if she had tried to explain, Zorka would not have understood. What did she know about marriage? Zorka was slightly wary of Albert. Admittedly, Albert could be cynical, even nasty. Even her good friends at the boarding house had refused to put up with his inappropriate jokes. And she was far away from them now. She had distanced herself from them after getting married, as if marriage was a kind of prison. She could not admit her defeat even to them. She remembered writing to Julia on the eve of her marriage:

Not too much should be expected from men, this I know quite exactly!*

Had she forgotten her own words?

The boys are about to get up. First Hans Albert will appear at the door in his pyjamas. He is already ten. He has grown tall this last year, and taken on a serious look. He is withdrawn, quiet. He likes staying in his room and reading technical books. He'll be an engineer, I can see it already, Albert says. From the tone of his voice Mileva can tell that he doesn't approve. Tete is chatty; he is still a baby even though he is now four. As soon as he gets up, he will run over and sit in her lap. Kiss me, Mummy, her sweet little boy will say.

Mileva swallows another spoonful of marmalade and instantly feels better.

To hell with her waistline! Who can think of such things now? And why should she? Her looks had not been her main asset even when she was much younger. She can't say that she exactly turned men's heads, not even Albert's. Her looks have always taken second place; she knows that. Some of their colleagues liked her for her brains. Albert acted as if he did not notice she was lame. He even said so. When somebody asked him if he saw that Mileva had a limp, he replied that she had – a beautiful voice! Only much later did it occur to her that Albert was just seventeen when they met as first year students. The first time she saw him he struck her as immature and a little strange. He had finished high school the year before in Arrau, where they followed the Pestalozzi principles of education. There Albert had felt free. At the Polytechnic, he seemed unsocialized, as if he had grown up alone in the desert. People sometimes felt sorry for him because it was so hard for him to adapt.

Although she was still only a student herself, she was confident in her own knowledge and in what she wanted to achieve. Albert later told her that he had been fascinated by her because he had never met such an educated, self-confident woman before, a woman who held her own in conversation with men. Mileva understood him and gave him the kind of support he could not find elsewhere. Was theirs really a relationship of mutual love or was it more one of mutual benefit? For, as his situation changed so did his attitude to Mileva.

And I changed too. I gave up my ambitions, my curiosity, my desire to do things together. I became increasingly ordinary.

I can't blame Albert for these changes, Mileva thinks; it was not just his fault.

Every day, Albert went to work at the Patent Office. After a long day at the office, he and some of his colleagues would stop off for a beer on their way home. He would not even manage to see his son. By the time he came back in the evening, the boy was already asleep, the dishes were washed and she had a newspaper or book in her hands, listening for his footsteps, tired but looking forward to talking to him. She used to love their discussions; it is what she missed the most. She had become less and less of a partner, less and less important to him, until eventually he found her repulsive. And now he had found a way to get rid of her. He had sent her his Conditions, convinced that her pride would never allow her to accept them.

She cannot sit still. She gets up, walks over to the kitchen stove, then to the window, as if searching for something. You're chasing your tail like a mouse in a pot, her mother used to tell her. She has never seen a mouse in a pot but the image brings a smile to her face. Her mother's sayings always made her laugh

when she was a child. She glances at the cups and plates. And she realizes that mentally she is already preparing to leave. What would her mother say? She would tell her to sleep on it, to consider her own responsibility for the situation she was in. Her parents had taught her from an early age about responsibility, about seeing the other side, about questioning herself. At times she thinks that it was this upbringing that made her unsure of herself. Maybe her decision to go back to Zurich is rash, after all.

But another look at the Conditions tells her that, no, it isn't rash.

The only thing that quelled her jealousy was the feeling that even if Albert was having a fling, it could not be so serious as to jeopardize their relationship. She remembers that, for a while, she took comfort from the thought that no other woman, however beautiful, could give him the kind of intellectual and scientific support she did.

Isn't that what I told myself, she wonders, pottering around the stove. Was that just something I imagined? Was I the only one with the kind of intelligence that could understand his thinking process? Maybe that's how I consoled myself because I was not given to flirting. When he was very young he needed understanding and support, but he has long since become very sure of himself. My role in his life has changed. It is as if he lost all interest in me the moment I had children. And why wouldn't he, when practically all we ever talked about were problems - with money, with the apartment, with the boys. We didn't talk about physics or philosophy the way we used to.

She had begun to complain, to nag, to make demands on his attention and time, all the while knowing that she was a bore, a pain, as he never failed to tell her. My dear Mileva, men do not like that, her mother would say if she happened to overhear her when they visited for the summer. But Mileva thought she was in the right, that her husband was not like other husbands. He was not patriarchal like her father. Don't worry about us quarrelling, she had said, placating her mother. But now? What is she going to write to her mother now, when she is taking the children back to Zurich alone? Is she going to confess that she has left Albert? How long can she keep the truth from her parents?

They eventually took to Albert and admired his success. At the beginning, before they got to know him, they had had their doubts. Had perhaps even disliked him. Her father could not understand how Albert could let Mileva go alone to Novi Sad to have her baby. Or how he could not find the time to visit her once the baby was born. He's very young, Father, he's only twenty-two, she said in his defence. If that's so, then *you* are responsible for this situation, he retorted.

It was not until 1905, when Hans Albert was a year old, that Albert visited her parents. About time too, said her father; people are wondering if you haven't

perhaps invented that husband of yours. His words saddened her but she knew it was not easy for him either. She had given birth to Lieserl and had left her with the grandparents.

Mileva, whose brains and knowledge were her father's pride and joy, had failed to graduate. Father has become withdrawn, her mother had told her. He doesn't go into town much anymore. He doesn't like being asked how you are doing. But he soon accepted Albert because Albert was cheerful and did his best to win them over. He went with her father to the local café, played cards with his friends, talked to his German-speaking neighbours, told jokes that made them laugh. He was modest, which her parents liked. But more important than anything else - he was the father of their grandchild.

Sitting in the kitchen, Mileva realized that her father's worst fears had come true. She was on her own with two children.

In the course of ten years she had changed from a being cheerful, self-confident girl who wanted to be a scientist into becoming a housemaid who had to tend to the dirty laundry. She knew that her father had been unhappy for years because she had not become a scientist. Or at least a secondary school physics and math teacher. He had invested so much hope and money in her education, even though everyone had laughed at him. Who ever heard of giving a daughter higher education? That was normal for his son Miloš, but what did women need an education for when they were going to get married and have children anyway? He had been so proud of her when she enrolled in the Polytechnic! She remembers that he stayed at a small boarding house near her own and took her out to lunch that day. Mitsa, my child, you have made me so happy today. You succeeded despite all the obstacles. I was right; you did not let me down. Father, it's *you* you should be proud of, you and your persistence. So far I haven't let you down but I still have my studies to get through. Let's wait until I graduate and have reason to celebrate, she said. Thinking now of those almost prophetic words, words her father certainly remembers, she feels even worse.

If only she could go to Novi Sad instead of Zurich. It would be so much easier for her to live with her parents and teach in some quiet provincial town, far away from Albert. But for that she needed a degree...

Dear Father, your Mitsa, who has disappointed you so badly, would send you these Conditions if she could. They answer all your unasked questions, Father. Just look at the humiliating terms Albert gives his lawfully wedded wife, the mother of his children. And it was not done in anger or after a quarrel. No, he wrote these conditions perfectly calmly. As if they were one of his equations. Or better still, an employment contract. And the very first condition at the top is

that I keep his clothes and laundry in good order. Can you imagine? Would you order your wife to keep your laundry clean? If you addressed her like a maid wouldn't you be humiliating not just her, but yourself as well? Look at how the conditions are itemized under letters and numbers. Neatly, clearly, making them easy to remember. His admirers would be delighted by the clarity with which he presents them, just as they are delighted by everything else he does. But this is not about a theory. It is not about the universe. It is about people close to him, about his family, and that is very different. I doubt that this document would delight anybody. I hope, for his sake, that his friends never hear about it. Which is why, Father, I am not sending the Conditions to you and will not write about them. Even though I know that you would understand me better than anybody, despite the disappointment and hurt I've caused you.

No, she cannot send her father these Conditions; they would be the end of him. Her father has a weak heart. Like this, far away he can only presume that there is something going on in her marriage. It is better for him if he doesn't know the details. Anyway, he has enough problems with his younger daughter. Zorka is very ill again. She was ill last summer too, when Mileva came with Albert and the children to see her parents in Novi Sad. Albert did not attend the boys' christening at St. Nicholas Church. He was not against the christening; he simply had no interest in seeing them join the Eastern Orthodox faith. He himself was not a believer, and anyway, his sons could not be Jewish.

For a long time, Mileva had resisted her father's pressure to have the children christened. But last summer she was so lonely, so far away from Albert that she needed some support, any kind of support. She agreed to have the children christened to please her parents, especially her father. That is the least I can do for my unhappy father since Albert doesn't care anyway, she thought, sitting in the pleasant coolness of the church, listening to the chanting of the priest. Her father could not accept Albert's indifference to christening the boys. He did not share Albert's view that it was just a formality. A christening is a serious matter, Mitsa, her father said. She asked him not to judge Albert by his own standards. They are the same for all civilized people, he retorted. What was he going to say when relatives, who knew Albert was in town, asked why was he not at the christening?

I know he can be strange sometimes, Mileva thought, but he's making things awkward for me. If it's really all the same to him, why doesn't he simply come?

But Albert was not to be persuaded. It was more important to him to stand by his decision than to honour her father's wishes. After the ceremony they left for Switzerland earlier than planned because Mileva could not bear her father's silent reproach.

At the christening she observed her father, dressed in his best suit, already

stooped, his hair grey. Her mother, head bowed, was wiping away her tears with a hanky. Zorka was not there. She had stayed at home in Kač; she was calmer there. If she was moved from the familiarity of her environment and sat in the carriage, she would immediately get upset. My cats, what's going to happen to my cats, who's going to feed them? she would cry distraught. Mileva would take her hands and say that Julka would feed them; you know how caring our Julka is. As if that meant anything to her sister, who was seven years younger and showing increasing signs of mental illness. When they reached the house in Kač, she found Zorka in a ragged dress, dirty, disheveled. She did not want to wash but Mileva took her by the hand and they stepped together into the tin tub and washed each other, the way they used to when they were young. My Mitsa is back, Zorka said softly. When they were little, Mileva would sometimes cradle Zorka in her arms, sing to her, brush her hair, tell her stories the way she did with her own children now. But lately even she could not reach Zorka; Zorka chased everyone away.

Zorka is unwell again, her father had written in his last letter. He did not need to give her any details. Mileva knew that the next phase after anxiety was aggression. Zorka did not dare attack their father but she was very hard on their mother, hurling insults at her. Then came withdrawal; she would retreat into herself, sometimes for days.

Mileva was scared by her sister's illness; she recognized signs she would rather not think about. Have I neglected my sister? Would it be different if I devoted more time to her and had her move in with us in Zurich?

The jar is almost empty. Goodness, when had she managed to finish off all that marmalade? What I'm really starving for is tenderness, she thought, only to dismiss the idea as a lot of romantic kitsch. Love? Well, she is paying a heavy price for having believed that there was something like ideal love and that it could last forever. She is not a naïve provincial girl anymore. Maybe what she wants is understanding. She certainly needs it when she writes to her friends. But she holds back; she is afraid they will feel sorry for her. All her life she has hated the thought of being pitied, because of her limp.

She closes the jar. Tete loved palatchinken with marmalade. He has a sweet tooth like his father, who breaks into a smile as soon as he sees a slice of cake on his plate. Especially if his mother Pauline sent it. By the time it arrives it is dry, of course, but Albert eats every last crumb.

Mileva knows she cannot leave for Zurich right away. She will have to find an apartment or at least some kind of temporary lodging. She has cancelled the old

apartment. She wishes she didn't have to spend a few more days at the Habers' in Berlin. How long is this going to last? How will she behave when she sees Albert? And they *will* have to see each other. Will they act as if nothing has happened? She would rather not see him at all. She will have Fritz tell him that she is definitely leaving, and that will put an end to this tense situation. She doesn't think he will be against her leaving. It's already more than obvious that he doesn't want to live with her.

Had she been wrong to hope for something different from Albert, something less official? Lisbeth Hurwitz, who often plays music with him and knows him well, once described him as follows: He is a cheerful, modest person, like a child. He was not modest, and he was not cheerful anymore, at least not at home. Anyway, Mileva did not need another child. She needed someone who would support her, not push her into an even greater emotional crisis.

Ida Hurwitz, Lisbeth's mother, will surely help her find a boarding house in Zurich. Once there, she will look for an apartment. I should write to her today, she thinks, looking for some writing paper and an envelope. But what reason will she give for returning to Zurich? That Albert made the entire family leave the apartment and that she and the children are now staying with friends, and he is living with his mistress? She does not want to lie; professor Hurwitz's family are old friends. She can count on them in any situation, but she cannot drag them into her battles with Albert. She wishes she could be honest: I want to get as far away from Berlin as possible! From Albert and Elsa, from Pauline and her nastiness, from his entire family. All those years they were together Albert fought them, avoided them, ridiculed them, including his adored mother Pauline. And now here he is, sitting in everyone's lap, even living with his Uncle Rudolf. He has the perfect excuse: a quarrel with Mileva. But the real reason is far more transparent - his cousin Elsa, who lives in the same house!

She will write to Ida that Tete is sick; that is not so much of a lie. He really is sickly, and they know it.

No, she will not write that. She decides not to give any explanation for her sudden return. She will simply ask them to help her book a room in a boarding house somewhere, because of "certain difficulties with my stay in Berlin". That will suffice for now.

Albert's mother tried to dissuade him from marrying Mileva. She is older than you, she's disabled, she's a Serb and to boot she's ugly, she told him to his face. He did not spare Mileva; he told her every ugly thing his mother had said about her. At first she thought it was brave of him to have told her; it showed that he didn't care what his mother thought. But Mileva knew that Pauline was the only person

who had some influence over him. That was the first time she was afraid of the grip his mother had on him. And what did you say to that, Mileva asked Albert, feigning indifference. I told her the truth, that you are my equal, that you have a good mind. But that did not persuade his mother that he had made a good choice. She replied : I can see that, like you my son, Mileva loves books. But, like any man, what you need is a woman who will look after you.

Mileva never forgot those words. However, what bothered Pauline the most about Mileva was that she was not Jewish. Pauline had planned for her only son to marry a rich Jewish girl, and told him so. My dear mother's wishes are petit bourgeois, he told Mileva, I couldn't care less what she wants. Anyway, religion doesn't matter to me.

Mileva did not like judging people by their looks. But in answering him she could not help saying that judging from the photograph of Pauline on his bookshelf, she was no beauty herself. That was insulting, of course, but Albert didn't mind; he just dismissed it with a wave of his hand.

The terrible thing is that Pauline was right, thinks Mileva that morning in Berlin. She must be pleased that her only son is with his cousin Elsa now; she may not care about books or science, but she will look after him properly. Mileva had heard that she was cheerful, sociable and a good cook. The fact that she was an empty-headed *mondaine* impressed by fame did not matter to him anymore.

Does Albert even realize how much he has changed? He is increasingly becoming the sort of person he couldn't stand.

And the world has changed too. Pauline thought all Serbs were bandits. What does she think now that Gavrilo Princip, the Serbian assassin of the heir to the Austro Hungarian throne, has committed an act that is pushing it into a world war? Is that yet another argument to be used against Mileva? The assassination in Sarajevo was less than a month ago; tensions are palpably rising. The newspapers keep warning that there could be a war. Albert does not mention it, at least not in front of her, even though Mileva is not a Serbian nationalist. She knows that he is a pacifist, that he is opposed to all wars, that he abhors the very thought of war. When he was sixteen he gave up his German citizenship and for years was stateless. With no papers he couldn't be recruited into the regular army.

The assassination triggered, but was not the reason for, the feeling of war in the air. The Habers talk about nothing else. About the coming recruitment, about the militarization of society, about difficulties in traveling, about possible shortages. The mere thought of Austria-Hungary at war with Serbia makes Mileva's troubles seem so insignificant that for a moment she feels numb. Belgrade is in the Kingdom of Serbia and she will be cut off from it because Novi Sad is on the

other side of the border, in Austria-Hungary...What will happen to her friends in Belgrade? And what about her brother Miloš? He has a medical degree. Will he be forced to fight his own people? She can't discuss this, or anything else, with Albert anymore. He despises politics even though it is changing their lives.

Why didn't Albert simply write that this entire humiliating situation is really about Elsa? Why doesn't he have the courage to admit that he has a mistress? They must have fallen in love at least two years ago. Being an astute observer, Mileva has a sharp eye where Albert is concerned; she notices the slightest change in him. Elsa had even offered to help them find an apartment in Berlin. What cheek. She thought that Mileva didn't know about her affair with Albert. True enough, Mileva could not be sure just how serious their affair was until she moved to Berlin. Actually, until yesterday, when those rules of conduct confirmed it, she'd just had her suspicions. It was little things that betrayed he was in love: he was cheerful, he avoided the house and the family, he took trips that did not include Mileva. Lastly, he showed that he wanted to remove her from his life by moving to his uncle's and renting out their apartment, while she was away visiting a friend.

If Elsa were merely a passing fancy, Albert would not have tried to define his relationship with Mileva in such detail. The Conditions are his way of finally admitting that Mileva is his wife in name only. He will not divorce her, but they will no longer be together.

When they arrived in Berlin a few months ago, Elsa came to see how they were doing. She simply showed up at their door one day. Mileva could not turn her away, much as she had wanted to. Elsa greeted her warmly, a little too warmly. She's attractive by today's standards, thought Mileva. But attractive in a banal way, she could not help observing. Blonde, buxom, with a broad smile. She must have been wearing a corset to pull in her waist, or at least one of those fashionable girdles. Mileva, being a progressive-minded student, had refused to wear them. Why inhibit the body? Women aren't mere ornaments anymore, she had said to the girls at her Pension. But looking at Elsa, she understood why women tortured themselves like that until they were barely able to breathe. As soon as he saw her, Albert completely changed. His eyes drank in her face and glided down to her bosom, accentuated by cinched waist. He thought Mileva didn't notice. Is that the secret of femininity, changing your silhouette, batting your eyelashes and smiling sweetly? She hadn't resorted to such "female tricks", as she called them, even when she was young, and now it was too late. Elsa was older than Albert, and just a year younger than Mileva. But she looked younger than that.

Her fair complexion and light hair softened her wrinkles, whereas Mileva's were increasingly visible. Suddenly, Elsa made her painfully aware of her own looks, of her limp, of her shapeless poplin dress.

I look like a prim, aging governess. Like those frighteningly strict ones who rap children's knuckles. If only I could put on a *blasé* smile and pretend that I don't suspect a thing. This way, my scowling face and pursed lips tell her everything she needs to know about me. Everything that Albert has certainly already told her – that I'm a bore, an old bag, thought Mileva, eyeing Elsa.

Elsa went over to the children, her heels clicking on the floor. She walked as if she wanted to provoke Mileva, to remind her that she would never ever be able to wear such seductive shoes. And that made Mileva do what she had been trying to avoid. She glanced down at Elsa shoes – she was wearing beige ankle-strapped high-heels. Mileva had developed the habit of looking at women's shoes while she was still in high school, when she was becoming painfully aware of her limp. The school held monthly dances. She had gone only once with her classmate Anka. You know that I find it hard to dance, I can barely walk, she protested. Well, at least you can enjoy the music. Mileva was a very good pianist and could also play the tambouritsa. She spent the entire evening sitting, waiting for someone to ask her to dance. But no one did. She had known it would be like this, but still, she had hoped. Maybe somebody would come along and ask her out of courtesy, not pity. But the boys were probably afraid of being laughed at by their peers.

When you were little you danced like an injured bird, her father once told her. She never forgot what he said. She had seen birds like that, a little sparrow that a cat had injured in their courtyard; the frightened little sparrow desperately trying to get away. She cupped it in her hands and could feel the rapid beating of its heart, as if it wanted to fly away. And so when her father mentioned the injured little bird, she pictured the injured sparrow. The image, and her father's words, remained with her. Her father had not meant it unkindly, but at the school dance she realized that he saw her the same way the boys at school did: like an injured bird. She wished her father hadn't uttered that sentence. She wanted to say to him: But all the same I danced, I did!

She was sure she would have danced that evening if only there had been a boy brave enough to approach her. Later in life she chose to play music instead. Still, her father's words left their mark.

The day that Elsa came the first thing she did was pick up Tete and kiss his brow. As if he were hers! He tried to wriggle out of her arms because he was very mistrustful of strangers. Hans Albert was polite and shook hands with "Auntie Elsa", as he called her. Albert stayed by the door of the living room, delighting in Elsa's performance for his boys. Neither he nor she paid any attention to Mileva.

That was when Mileva realized that it was all over. That the tenderness, understanding and support they had once had for one another was gone. As far as Albert and Elsa were concerned, Mileva was already a shadow from the past. Feeling redundant, she left the room.

Her longing for pretty, elegant shoes made Mileva miserable. Elsa walked around their Berlin apartment as Albert looked on, captivated. Mileva's stomach cramped. She was jealous, so jealous. Pretty shoes remained in the realm of wishful thinking. Elsa's visit and Albert's behaviour had upset her more than she expected. Yes, she believed that being lame made it impossible for her to compete with other women in the good looks department, but she made up for it with her intellect and education. It was her intelligence, not female charm, that had won Albert over. This, after all, was the twentieth century where women studied and worked, and fought for their rights. Marie Curie had won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry a few years back, and that was after she had already won one with her husband.

Watching Elsa, she was not so sure that women could achieve anything in society anymore. Because, her genius of a husband had fallen in love with a woman whose greatest attribute was her looks, who belonged to a world he despised and had tried to escape ever since he was sixteen.

The older Mileva got and the more she and Albert drifted apart, the less sure she was of her femininity. Perhaps we are still living in the nineteenth century, she thought, following Albert's adoring eyes glued to Elsa. Women are still seen as muses, there to inspire men. When she was a student she used to think that women of her generation had moved on from the days of someone like Clara Schumann, who, born a hundred years ago, wrote in her diary: I want to compose but composing is not for women. She was the most famous female pianist of her day but it was not until the end of her life that she dared to compose. Judging from Mileva's experience, physics was not for women either. At least not for her.

Mileva is jealous, although she knows she cannot afford to be. Jealousy is a luxury for a woman who cannot support herself. If she looks at her situation coldly, there is no question that she is completely financially dependent on Albert. The math and piano lessons she gave in Zurich were not enough to pay for the costs of living. She could not support herself, let alone two children. Which was why, incredible though she finds it now, she immediately asked Haber to tell Albert that she accepted the Conditions.

Yes, Albert, I accept all your conditions. Her first thought was that she was doing it for the children, sacrificing herself for the children. But that was only partly true.

What other answer could I have given you? I was gripped with fear, a fear I'd never known before. Alone, with two children, no job, no income...What would we live on? My self-confidence crumbled. My pride was now just a mask. I saw myself as no better than a beggar. Haber conveyed my answer, but that did not stop you from making more demands. And just as well that you did, Albert, because it was my salvation. In the interval between your two messages - the second even crueler than the first - I came to my senses. It was as if I had woken up, as if you had aroused that defiant person you met all those years ago. I cannot live like a maid after having had a relationship of equality with you, however briefly it may have been. I know that I am not the same person anymore either, and that - this I can say - I do not deserve your attention in the same way. But I demand respect. Naturally, it is your duty to continue to support us. I am taking the children and leaving; I will not ask for a divorce. You and Haber can draw up a draft contract on financial support.

The kitchen door finally opens and Clara appears in her dressing gown. How long have you been sitting here like that, she asks. I couldn't sleep, Mileva replies. You should have woken me, that's what I'm here for, to help you. For the first time in a long while, Mileva smiles. There are people who care, she, thinks, people who try. I feel better, honestly I do. And she gets up to make another cup of tea, this time for Clara.

Still, it took some ten days to prepare for their return to Zurich. Mileva was busy packing and cleaning up. Albert's sister Maja came to take the boys to Wansee and the zoo. Albert joined them. Tete told her that Daddy had said he was sorry they were leaving, but that he would soon follow. Hans Albert corrected him; he always liked precision. Mummy, Dad said he would come to visit, not that he would follow. Mileva didn't want to make the situation worse. Of course he'll come, she said. She was sure that Albert would miss the boys and that he would try to visit them as often as possible.

She was waiting for their mutual friend Michele Besso to come from Trieste. When Albert had written to tell him about Mileva's decision to return with the boys to Zurich, Besso offered to accompany them. That came as a relief because it would be easier than having to travel alone with the boys. Plus, she wouldn't have to explain much. Besso knew that if Mileva was leaving Albert behind it meant it was something more serious than just a spat. He had been their friend for years and knew that Albert could be short-tempered and rash. And that she could drive him crazy with her dark moods.

In the meantime, Mrs. Hurwitz had sent her the address of a boarding house

and Mileva made travel arrangements, bought the train tickets and packed. She sent Albert the details of her departure. That meant, of course, that she had no intention of living with him, especially not under the conditions he had tried to force on her. He would simply have to understand that she cared more about the children than she did about his laundry.

When Albert received her final reply declining his Conditions and announcing her departure for Zurich, Albert sent a list of things she was permitted to take with her.

Look, she said to Clara, showing her the list, he's giving me permission to take the dinner service I brought over from Novi Sad! The dinner service my parents gave me. And the oak armoire and beds that my father gave me. It's all my dowry anyway, the linen, the curtains, the tablecloths, everything. He thinks I need his consent! He's just trying to humiliate me even more, to make me even poorer; but he can't do that, he doesn't have the power anymore.

She was rather surprised by the pettiness of his list but vowed not to let herself be provoked any further. Having decided to leave him, she would confine any agreements to technical matters. She would simply ignore his latest attempt to hurt her.

Her last meeting with Albert was at the Habers' apartment. At no point did he try to change her mind about leaving. He showed up on Wednesday afternoon, the day before their departure. This was the first time she was able to look at him dispassionately. Not exactly as a complete stranger, but as a man she hardly knew anymore. And that was the truth: as she prepared to leave Berlin she felt that this was not the man she had shared her life with. He was formal with her. They looked like strangers who had come to a lawyer's office to sign a contract.

They were not alone. Fritz was there to negotiate the practical details, in particular how she and the boys would live from now on. Both were hiding their feelings: Albert his relief, and Mileva her disappointment and worry.

She signed the document Albert brought, agreeing to the monthly allowance he would send her. In return, she asked that the children not see his relatives when they came to visit him. She was thinking of Pauline, but primarily of Elsa. The monthly sum of 5,600 Marks was not enough for the three of them to live on, but as it was half of his salary, she agreed. Signing the contract on financial support, she thought: What about those Conditions of yours now, Albert?

Nobody mentioned the word divorce.

She was still torn between feelings of contempt and loyalty. She hoped that on this, their last evening in Berlin he would come to see the boys one last time,

to say goodbye. She played cards with them; excited about returning to Zurich, they stayed awake until late. At one point, Besso came back from Albert's. He did not say very much; Mileva thought he was afraid she might ask about Albert. No doubt he would have said something if he had had anything to tell her. But she was more sad than curious. A part of her past was coming to a close here in Berlin, she thought, as she put the boys' toys and clothes away in the trunk. Even if they stayed together, nothing would be the same again.

Albert had finally become just an ordinary man in her eyes. Weak, contemptible, like so many others. And that saddened her. Holding Tete's teddy bear, she stopped for a moment, not sure what to do with it. Then she packed it away and closed the trunk.

At the station, while the porters are carrying their luggage onto the train, Albert gives Mileva a camera. Please take pictures of the boys and send them to me, he says. Mileva nods: Of course I will. He thanks Besso for his help in this, as he put it, unexpected situation. Not that unexpected, and you know it, thinks Mileva, but she doesn't say anything. No more reproaches. From now on their letters and communication will be strictly official and confined to only two subjects: the children and money. Mileva has already calculated that the amount he has decided to give them is not enough to cover their needs and that she will have to give private piano and math lessons. Haber has come along to see them off at the station and is trying to be helpful, but he looks sad as the boys board the train. Albert waves goodbye to them with his hat. The last image she has of Berlin is of Albert standing on the platform in a white suit, waving his hat and receding into the distance until he merges with the grey Berlin sky.

It is Wednesday, the 27th of July. Yesterday, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. The front pages carry the news from Wiener Zeitung in big black bold letters: War Declared on Serbia! What a miserable coincidence, thinks Mileva, She is suddenly caught between two wars: her private one with Albert, and this dangerously bloody one. Both are terrifying. She presses herself against her seat. What lies in store for her? Will she muster the strength to live through this change and the horrors that can be expected?

As soon as the train leaves the station, the boys fall asleep; Tete with his head on her lap, Hans Albert, across from her, his book on the empty seat next to him. He looks tired, pale. He understands more than he should. She was moved when he helped Besso with their luggage. He is my protector now, thinks Mileva, looking at the boy's narrow shoulders, at his slender hands and the knobby knees poking out of his short pants. Michele Besso is reading the newspaper, but he too

is getting sleepy. She decides that the best thing is for her to pretend to fall asleep herself.

Mileva knows that she does not have the right to despair. She is not alone, she most certainly is not alone. She has two boys. She will manage somehow. She will overcome, she knows that she has to, for the sake of the boys.

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