

Jan Brandt

Gegen die Welt

A novel, 930 pp.

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Jan Brandt: *Against the World*

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On the late summer day when Daniel walked into their trap, it suddenly started snowing in the morning. They'd predicted a change in the weather on the radio, on TV the night before, but no one had reckoned with it being that extreme. It was mid-September. The temperature had fallen overnight from over fifteen degrees to zero, and the first snow fell outside the windows, just a few flakes, white shadows that floated down from the sky and disappeared again the moment they touched the ground, as if they'd never been there.

Hard had pruned back the poplar trees lining the garden in the spring, and now Birgit could look out from the kitchen over the railway lines to the old signalbox, to the dairy. The chimney was smoking and the milk trucks were driving into the yard to make their deliveries. The gates at the level crossing closed – a train

rushed by, making the cups on the table tremble – and opened again, cars drove across the railway lines in both directions, and she watched them until they turned off somewhere or their outlines blurred into the horizon in the distance.

The fridge behind her hummed, the dishwasher whooshed quietly, and every time the upper spray arm brushed against one of the plates the crockery gave a rattle. Other than that there was absolute silence. No screaming any more, no arguing, no bright laughter. The children were out of the worst phase, as she'd said herself recently whenever she talked to her sisters or old school friends, all far away on the telephone. Daniel left the house at half past seven and cycled to school, no matter what the weather. The twins had to be at kindergarten at eight, and now they preferred to take the short walk with other, slightly older children from the neighbourhood than holding her hands, one on either side. Birgit was glad and proud of having finally got them settled in at kindergarten, but as soon as she shut the door behind them she was scared of having to settle herself back in.

In the first few weeks she hadn't known what to do with herself. All the jobs she'd previously passed on to the home help, a neighbour – vacuuming, dusting, tidying, shopping – she got done in the hours before lunch. She even managed to cook something different every day, and she was surprised she had got down to things with such energy and enthusiasm, closing the hole that opened up in front of her after breakfast with housework.

Daniel cycled across the junction, past Vehndel Clothing, the Superneemann mart, the sports ground, until he reached the track called the Broadway, which was no broader than the other tracks in the area and wasn't exactly a track any more either, having been tarmacked years ago, before he was even born. There were only a few stony tracks left branching off it here and there, which the farmers used to get to their fields. It would make more sense, Daniel thought, to call it the Longway. He thought that every time he cycled past the *Broadway* sign after turning off Goethe Road. It really was so long that you couldn't see the end from the beginning, even though it ran as straight as an arrow until it crossed Groninger Road and then merged into School Road.

He pedalled harder to ward off the cold and watched his breath coming out of his mouth like smoke and flying away behind him. The grass and hedges all around him were covered in glittering frost, and the spiders' webs, otherwise barely visible, stood out clearly against the blades and leaves, every thread white and brilliant. It seemed to him like a sudden return to the Minus World, and he wondered whether the temperature would fall even more, to minus nine hundred and sixty-one degrees, and what it felt like to be an Iceman, a creature with no memory.

The maize stood head-high on either side, green and yellow and already turning brown at the tips, huge fields, some of them up to thirty hectares, which he and Volker had penetrated like a

forest the previous summer. Out of rage and high spirits, they had beaten swathes into the field with sticks and laid out labyrinths, which they'd lost themselves in and walked round and round in circles, too proud to follow the seed rows even hours later.

The first time, they'd taken half a dozen cobs, peeled off the leaves and threads, spread butter on the corn, wrapped it in aluminium foil and laid it in a fire they'd lit on a field by the kolk lake. But they'd both only taken one bite. When Daniel told his father about it he'd laughed and told him he'd been out filching crops after the war, at night, always on the run from the farmers, and that even the field corn grown as fodder was edible if you picked it before the middle of August.

Once Daniel and Volker had almost got caught. The farmer who owned the land, a man by the name of van Deest, had posted guards on all sides while they were in there, hunters with rifles who combed the field on his command. And they'd only got away unnoticed because there were deer hiding in there too, which had broken out and diverted all the men's attention.

Some of the fields had already been harvested, and now the snow gathered in the furrows left behind in the damp earth by the tractors. Outside some of the farms he cycled past were towering piles of maize, the ones that weren't covered over and weighed down with old tyres looking like sand dunes. Now, white and uneven, they reminded him more of Christmas stollen dusted with far too much icing sugar.

The field outside the schools campus was still untouched though. Daniel chained his bike to one of the fence posts and removed the satchel of books from his luggage rack. Their first class was English, in a room right next to the main entrance. The bike stand was on the other side of the campus and he didn't want to run into Eisen, waiting there for him and other first-years, nor to walk all the way across the yard past the gym and the staffroom in the cold.

Downstairs, she heard Hard opening the door and pushing the bike stand outside the shop. She knew he'd be going into the garage to fetch his bike and hers and position them outside the shop so that it looked as if they had customers. Every time she heard him she remembered the time, not long after she'd moved in with him, when she'd stood at the open garage door one morning, shopping bags on the ground, hands on hips, shocked and incredulous that their bikes had been stolen overnight. And she remembered she'd been even more shocked and incredulous when she'd walked round the house to the shop doorway and seen the bikes standing there, both locked up and laden with bags.

Pale in the face but determined to demand the key and take him to task, Hard, that stubborn bugger, she'd gone inside. She was annoyed at him making plans and putting them into action without talking to her about them. After the wedding she'd told him she was willing to give up her job for him, and he'd assured

her he'd let her in on everything to do with the shop. But he hadn't kept his side of the bargain.

'What's this all about?' she'd asked, pointing outside, still upset by the double whammy.

He'd shrugged and said, as if to justify himself, 'It's psychology, Biggi.'

'Give me the key!'

'Doubters find it easier to come in when they assume someone else is in the shop.'

'The key!'

'No one goes in an empty café or restaurant when there's one next door with someone sitting in there waiting to be served.'

'That's not psychology, it's nonsense. There isn't any other drugstore in Jericho than yours.'

'Ours.'

'What?'

'This,' he'd said, throwing out his arms, 'is our drugstore.'

'No, it's yours. And now give me the damn key, will you!'

And when she remembered that she thought of *Dallas*, one of the very first episodes when Bobby went into his brother's business, and J.R. refused to let him look at the red files and gave him the feeling that although he might be on the team, he was an inferior, less powerful member, and that, she feared, was what she'd always be if she gave in to Hard's coaxing to come in on the shop with him.

Sometimes she wished she'd just carried on cycling on one of her bike tours, back before they had the children, kept on and on, taken the ferry across the river back to her parents and started a different life from there. Instead, she had cycled aimlessly between the bare East Friesian hamrich fields to the dyke, sat on a bench for hours and hours and stared at the water, the silt. She'd made out the contours of a passenger ship in the distance, and she'd imagined reclining on deck, sun and wind on her face, a book in her hand, travelling around the world into an uncertain future. She still sometimes imagined that, that there was some way, but at the same time she sensed that everything was just as certain or uncertain in that other life as in this one. Back then though, she'd simply felt immature and she'd returned home again, not wanting to grant Hard the triumph of having to look for her and being able to find her.

Once he'd even borrowed bikes from Oltmann's, dozens of ladies' bicycles that Oltmann's, Oltmann's Cycles, rented out to tourists during high season. But that day they'd stood in untidy rows outside the shop, every which way as if hastily parked, to reinforce the effect of an ad published that morning in the *Friesenzeitung* newspaper: *Attention all housewives: Spring is on its way! Multi-purpose cloths, floor cloths, mops, scrubbers, cleaning fluid, dustpans and brushes and vacuum bags – Special offers from 79 pfennig!*

The first customers had been rather surprised to enter an empty

shop through this cordon of bikes, craning their necks past him to the office, the photo studio, the darkroom, holding their breath, listening and then reaching for the crates with the special offers set up by the counter, after all. A few of them had asked Hard where the others were, but they had no reply to his question of ‘Which others?’ and they paid up quickly out of embarrassment. Luckily, the shop was soon so crowded that no one else spotted the difference between the bikes and the women greedily clutching at packages and purses.

‘Psychology,’ Hard had told her again that night, as he stowed the cash box under the bed and switched off the light without turning around to her again. ‘It’s all psychology.’

If there’s one thing he knows nothing about, she thought, it’s psychology. And it seemed like proof when people started seeing through his bike trick at some point but he continued to believe in its appeal, even as it became less and less effective.