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Kein Sturm, nur Wetter / No Storm, Just Weather

A Novel

220 pages

Sample translation by Alexander Booth

pp. 5-46

23.12

This evening a young woman came up to my bed and put a bottle of Borjomi down next to me, the same mineral water Brezhnev used to drink to counter his vodka hangovers. The woman in my dream would like to say something, I can see that. She pulls the blanket straight, folds a sweater, pulls my stockings up. At last she says, So much snow and so much light in the darkness.

She's wearing a thin grey coat.

SUNDAY

Where are you flying?

I'm not flying anywhere, and you?

Siberia, he says, may I sit down?

Si-be-ri-a, she repeats to herself and thinks, My God, is he young.

Last fall she had got into the habit of regularly going out to Tegel airport, preferably at the weekends. Those are the easier days. When she's lucky her table, the one she refers to as her table, in the café in the departures hall is free. The moment the evening's first flights show up on the display she orders a small beer from the bar. Today too she will sit here until one of the last buses takes her back into town. There's a kind of uneventfulness to it all not unlike meditation. On this early Sunday evening an elongated dog walks past, a dog like a sausage with a head, pulling a small man behind it. Yesterday, on her way home, a woman with lace gloves had sat behind the bus driver and softly spoken in his direction. Stepping off the bus she wondered whether the woman would be going back home with the driver once his shift had ended, and taking off her gloves.

The main hall of Tegel airport. On the arrival and departure boards the city names, flight numbers, times, and gates ceaselessly change their positions. In the past, the movement was accompanied by an audible clacking sound. Now it is digitalized and silent.

The flight to Zurich has left its place at the top and is now on its way into the skies above Berlin.

Can I order you something else to drink?

She looks into the blue eyes of the man who is about to fly to Siberia. They are the same blue as the checks of his flannel shirt. With his large hands he can no doubt lay electrical cable and convince the apple trees along the sunny garden wall to grow on a trellis. He probably drives an old estate car with enough room for his wife, two or three kids, and a big dog, as well as crates of beer from the beverage shop. When he's not travelling, that is. He's probably a good lover, too, quiet and affectionate and immune to the bigger feelings. He looks like it's easy to make him happy, but just as easy to make him sad. She envies his wife. Is he even married? Well, in any event, a guy like that doesn't need a wife before fifty, and then just so he won't spend too much time alone.

A couple of times after her trips to Tegel she has gone back into town with a stranger. She didn't get on the express bus but into a taxi to some hotel or other. There she'd have another drink with the stranger at the bar, a whisky or two, until the desire to get closer than the border of the breath went silent. At least for her. The rule was simple. The urge comes from nothing. When she refuses to pay it any attention, it disappears as unpredictably and quickly as it arrived. The older she gets the easier it gets to stick to the rule. And so, up to now, such evenings have always ended with a one-to-zero for her, and haven't extended into the night.

I'm on the last flight to Moscow, he says, taking off his jacket and hanging it over the backside of the barstool. Tomorrow morning at six I have to keep on going, a national flight to Vladivostok, then on to Novosibirsk and Khabarovsk. Saturday morning I'll be back...

...from Khabarovsk, close to China? she asks. They say that all the women there are business students and that they wear really short skirts, is that true? She looks at the whirl of hair above his forehead, his eyes, his dark eyelashes, and once more at his hands. She once fell in love with a man despite his ugly hands, because that was precisely why men could walk on them.

When he stands up, her eyes scan his jacket for dog hair.

Can you walk on your hands? she asks him when he comes back with a small beer for her and a large one for himself.

No, I'm too old for that kind of stuff.

How old are you then?

Thirty-six, and you?

My birthday's tomorrow, she says. A flat-out lie.

He smiles and watches a woman in a thin grey coat walk past, until she disappears by the exit of Terminal C.

And what's your name? he asks, and looks at her as if coming out of a dream which was simply incoherent.

Me?

Your name's Me?

He wipes a hand across the seat of his stool before sitting down. In the short moment he was away a bunch of small and noisy birds had gathered in the empty space.

I don't walk on my hands, he says, but as a skilled German professional I use them to install compressors, which are said to be the best in the world. I travel from oil refinery to oil refinery. Recently, I've spent more and more time in Khabarovsk, always in the same hotel, with a view onto the Amur.

The river Amur?

Yeah.

She looks towards the exit of Terminal C, where the woman in the thin grey coat disappeared.

Do you like to be in the hotel there?

Yeah.

And the country, what's it like?

Dirt, dust, shit on gold, and sometimes marble. And now no doubt you're wondering why a German engineer is speaking this way, right? The thing about dirt, dust, shit, gold, and marble is something my colleague Sergei always says. Our country is rotting, he says, it's the system that's rotting. As for me, I'm always relieved when Friday comes around. Saturdays I fly back, but Fridays Sergei takes me to his weekend get-togethers with his friends. We sit in a garage, drink beer and vodka, someone plays guitar. The others laugh and sing along. I do too. Most of the time the mechanics, who back in the GDR days were already coming to Khabarovsk, can't speak any English. They've forgotten all their Russian. That's why Tatiana, Sergei's wife, is there, to act as an interpreter. He pauses before adding, Tatiana cries pretty easily and teaches yoga too.

Does she like to wear a thin, grey coat? she would like to ask.

The other day Tatiana fell off her chair at the end of one of our garage evenings, just like that. Not because she drank too much vodka, but because she was exhausted, he says. You've got to be prepared for anything over there, and I am. Over there I'm prepared for anything. I could fall off my chair one day too.

His mobile rings.

He stands up and takes a few steps away from the table. She watches him. My God, what kind of childhood must he have had to not have that relaxed way of moving suppressed and to give him that happy ease with which in no time at all he had caused that fibrillation of her heart and head, and of which he wasn't even aware? What is his presence reminding her of? That she was once capable of falling in love? And if so, what would that change now?

Across from the café a young saleswoman with a tired face was jerking a garment rack with twin-sets back into place in front of her high-end shop until it was parallel with the window. Purple, she sees, is still available in any size. As far as red is concerned, however, there's just a single piece left, all the way to the front. Wasn't there once a kiosk for newspapers, postcards, and see-through children's umbrellas there instead of a boutique? Once, when was that?

The man had left his wallet lying next to his beer glass. The edge of a business card was peeking out of the pocket reserved for bills. She pulls it out with a jerk.

Storm, it says, Robert Storm.

I know that name, she thinks, I know the name Storm. But who hadn't known someone named Storm at some point? She looks over at him. He was still on the phone, his back was turned, and he was rocking back and forth from his knees. Was his wife or one of his kids on the other end of the line? How old would they be? Two girls with sharp faces and dimples? Or two boys who constantly hit each other because the little house, a terrace house at the end of the street, was too small for four people and a dog? What made her think he lived in a terrace house at the end of a street?

She stuffs the business card into her pocket.

Half an hour later he gets on his flight, and she takes the bus into town earlier than usual. Outside it is August.

Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk. The city names combine into a rhythm that matches the movements of the bus. Vladi – vostok – Kha – ba – rovska – Novo – sibirsk, he would be landing at Tegel again the following Saturday. She pulls the business card out of her pocket. The address of his compressor business was printed in bold on the front, and on the back, small and in cursive, his private one. The bus bounced and buckled on through the early twilight.

...Storm, Robert Storm! *Only this one thing was plain, he was never seen again...* How did that line get into her head? From memory? From what had been forgotten? Whatever, the two things went together like yeast and dough. She leans her head against the glass. Once the bus is driving down a wide street like a flight path leading away from a canal she bends her back, pulls her head between her shoulders, and tries to see as much sky as possible from her seat.

...*Soon they got to such height, they were nearly out of sight! And the hat went up so high, that it almost touch'd the sky...*

30.12.

The plan: When she's eighteen, she'll fall in love with a man who's thirty-six. When she's thirty-six, she'll in love with a man who's also thirty-six. When she's fifty-four, she'll fall in love with a man who, once again, is thirty-six. I know that much, I'm the narrator here.

The men remain thirty-six.

But what does she remain?

1.1.

I told a man at a New Year's Party yesterday that I once watched the way a girlfriend of mine would occupy buildings until the moment I suddenly threw a stone myself. He added: And back then I drove an Opel Kadett.

What colour?

Poppy red.

What year was it built?

Sixty-three, he said, like me.

And: only just now on a bench with him in the Tiergarten, the man who once drove an Opel Kadett and still smokes. Beneath the bench an empty bottle of Rotkäppchen Sekt and the spent cartridges of a blank gun. He kicks one of them onto the path, without looking at me, but into the sun, as if he were still waiting for someone, and says, In a boxing match the people who fight back don't go crazy.

Do you box?

Yeah.

Nuts, I say.

And: What should the woman from the airport actually be called? Irmgard? Not at all? Nina? Nope. Konstanze? No. Laura? Maybe...that might work.

Like me?

Me?

31.1

Would you like to help me come up with a ballet?

Who for?

A few elephants.

How old?

Really young.

(Pause)

The Opel Kadett driver from before, who now drives a Volvo, leans against my refrigerator and says, OK, if the elephants are really young, I'll do it.

MONDAY

She places a box of teabags on the table and looks at the label. English Breakfast. My God, how long she's been in Berlin already! This life of hers had slowly grown up around her, solidly familiar, and there's really not too much to see that you couldn't have seen hours, days, years before. She'd come here at the beginning of the '80s with two suitcases and the train, back at a time when taking a train to West Berlin wasn't just a simple here-to-there with the high-speed ICE, but a long trip on green or red imitation-leather seats, with scraped armrests between each person. In winter, with the appearance of the border guards, the heating regularly stopped so that more than once in the middle of the cold war she'd almost frozen to death thanks to German-German relations. She takes two bags out of the box and pours water over them. She remembers. The first time she was in Berlin was with Nina, on a school trip. At the border the girls grew quiet. The boys all turned into James Bonds behind mirrored sunglasses. GDR border guards moved from compartment to compartment with vendor trays of transit visas, stamped the papers for the fluffy kids from the West in their velour pullovers, those kids who had learned that throughout the entire Zone there weren't any oil sardines, no whole asparagus spears, just their bottoms. The asparagus tips were exported from an illegitimate country that went by the name of the GDR to the West. I don't believe it, Nina had said, there's no way. On the second day of their trip Nina and her had taken the U-Bahn alone over to Wedding. They sat at the window, for there was something to see: underground ghost stations in the eastern half of the city, where the train did not stop but went more slowly. Mounds of coal had been dumped in front of the exits that led upstairs. Placards outside of little *Mitropa* kiosks announced the victory of the people's revolution or an international football match in the Walter-Ulbricht stadium. People's revolution, Nina had said, the way you repeat a foreign word you want to ingrain in your mind, and pointed to the soldiers standing under the emergency lighting which reflected green off the green tiled walls. Had they got lost in the darkened corridors of their own lives? Were these ghost stations simply echoes from the void? That just can't be, Nina had said, and on the last day of their trip they had gone over to East Berlin to see what the world above the ghost stations looked like. At the Tränenpalast border crossing they were caught by a sudden shower, which threw a thin curtain across the yellow headlamps of the Trabis, Ladas, and Wartburgs and over the streets. Unter den Linden didn't smell on linden trees at all, but on exhaust, and in a milk bar at Alexanderplatz, which was called Ice Bear or Espressobar, two boys—their fingers raised in Vs and barely any older than Nina or her, wearing stonewashed jeans and blue-tinted glasses—edged their way into the photo in which, later on, they all looked like they'd been scared by a snake. Or was it the memory that later, in its own way, illuminated the film as well? She takes the two teabags out of the pot. What had the name of the old national railway disinfectant been? Without a doubt the leftover stock was sold in Ukraine, or even further east. During the train ride it had settled in to their hair and clothing like the smell of old pea soup. The North Koreans probably smelled that way now. But she'd forgotten what the stuff was called. Whatever. She fishes her breakfast egg out of the boiling water and toasts two slices of white bread. What had the name of her professor for the philosophical foundations of psychiatry and psychotherapy been? Him, the one who during his lectures would like to repeat a single phrase and then look up from his manuscript while letting the phrase grow larger in the stillness of the lecture hall...We are what we have forgotten.

But what was the professor's name? Weißbach?

She puts the white bread on a plate and throws away the package of cream cheese. It has mould. She cleans the salad spinner and dries it off. When she goes to turn the handle, it gets

stuck. Oh man, Johann, she thinks, but that man who could have solved the problem with his big, skilled hands is no longer a part of her life.

Kiss me, she'd said to the man her friend Nina had introduced her to as Johann. That New Year's Eve she closed her eyes as his breath, his lips, his chest, his heartbeat touched her. Behind her eyelids the whirling of leaves. Every leaf a laugh. She, a medical doctor without any real job, was thirty-six years old, had been in Berlin for eighteen years, and separated from Viktor for three. Numbers told stories. Hers did too. More and more fireworks shot into the air. In no more than five minutes the sky would be a smoky, dirty yellow. But in the end it was only a motion detector at the edge of a moss-covered stone terrace in Pankow that tore her and that Johann out of the darkness of the garden, shortly after midnight. What a dumb light it was, crying out at each and every cat and rat. The moment it flicked on they continued to cling to each other as if even the minutest change between them would toss them off the edge of the terrace, the edge of the world. A new year and a new millennium had begun.

She'd come back to Berlin on a train from the edge of the Ruhr in the early afternoon and in a bad mood. The days between the years on the eighth floor with her mother and grandmother had been marked by an evil grey eternity and had triggered a hopelessness she knew well from before. Boredom. If it had been summer, she would have retreated to the balcony and the shadow of the satellite dish, and been able to have corrected the manuscript *The Shores of Consciousness* for a scientific publishing house she was working for as a freelancer. But holing up with the pile of papers she'd brought with her in the overheated living room was hopeless. A lot of things were hopeless there, where she came from.

Arrival. Track 3.

Zoo Station had four tracks and therefore was no bigger than any old station off in the sticks. Don't come too late, Nina had said, that way you can still be a part of our action. She took the S-Bahn and got off near Hackesche Markt to get the tram. Our action, Nina had said, starts there and stretches out over the next three or four stops.

Once the tram got moving, a young woman abruptly stood up. She had a wide cat-like face, and walked to the front of the car in order to press the stop button next to the driver. Milk was running out of her shopping bag. Don't you see anything? an old man asked. Turning away from him the woman with the cat's face said, No. She got off at the next stop while a bunch of children pushed their way past her into the tram, five of them squeezing themselves into a seat made for four until a girl elbowed the boy next to her: Come on, man, go somewhere else. The boy stood up and hung off the strap with one hand. Milk was running out of his backpack. Everyone saw it, but no one said a thing. She didn't either. At the next stop the kids got off. The man who now got on was thirty-six, as old as she was, she learned later, and was wearing a tattered tote bag over his shoulder, which didn't suit him at all. He sat down across from her and looked into her eyes. She returned his gaze. He reached into the bag. Puckered his lips. They broke into a smile, a bit unsure maybe, a bit melancholic, but then got stuck halfway.

The tram kept on going.

Kiss me, she thought.

Kiss me or throw me against the wall, his glance replied before he got up and walked down the car. Milk ran out of his tote bag. Hey, the old man called out. Hey, what's all this supposed to mean? What's your name? His fingers spread out as if ready to wrestle, he stood up and with a few wide-legged steps placed himself right in front of the man with the tote bag, who for his part

just sunk his head and smiled his unfinished smile from the other side. I've forgotten my name, he said casually and beatifically.

My God is he friendly, she thought.

Nina was waiting at the next stop with a sign that had been painted with the question that was also the title of their action:

How many outrageous things do I resign myself to every day?

Once the tram had begun to move again Nina raised her sign even higher. Nina, her friend from before, the little girl from the other side of the abandoned lot where her parent's yellow villa stood, pouring honey into the night with the warm light of its windows, while over at theirs, up on the eighth floor, there was a TV quiz show turned up far too loud, her mother whinnying on the worn-out sofa next to her grandmother opening another bottle of beer, and her, leaning out over the concrete railing. Plagued by feelings of emptiness...

Then man with the tote bag walked up and stood next to Nina. Their shoulders touched as he lit his cigarette.

They need to get a real job, the old man said, spreading all ten of his fingers against the glass as they passed.

Someone should shoot every last one of them!

The man with the tote bag was named Johann, he worked in the theatre, but not onstage. Sadly, he said. That stated, the most important things in his life didn't have to do with art, but football, bicycles, and women. And so on that New Year's Eve he reacquainted himself with an old question.

Why didn't I become a teacher? An unglamorous but secure existence, no doubt.

Thirty-six's a bit late for those kinds of doubts, don't you think? she replied. What do you do in the theatre?

I'm a dramaturge. There was something decisively not depressing about him when he said that.

What exactly does a dramaturge do?

With her question she lured him away from the party that Nina had brought them both to, lured him onto the moss-covered stone terrace, out into the cold, the open air, where they were alone. The others inside the house were gathered around a tray with glasses of Sekt and began to count down in loud voices as outside she said, Kiss me, you don't love your girlfriend any more the way it is.

Which girlfriend?

Didn't you come here with Nina?

You did too. Have you all known each other for a long time?

Have you?

Then he kissed her, but it was far too short due to that damn motion detector, and Nina was standing inside by the panorama window, her hands in the pockets of her wide trousers, her white men's shirt buttoned all the way up to the top. Nina, the flick knife, next to whom she'd always felt like an old rubber. Nina, charming, bright, derisive, and most of the time unemployed, when she wasn't launching a milk action like the one earlier that afternoon, that is.

When the new millennium was still rather young, she and Johann went back into the house as if nothing had happened and danced in a circle with all the others to *Zehn kleine Jägermeister* by the *Toten Hosen*. Afterwards they pushed up against each other in a corner, where she ripped open the sewn pockets of his new, pike-grey suit in order to bury her hands, her shameless joy and

herself inside them.

By that time Nina had already left.

Although the streets on that New Year's Eve of 1999 were slick with ice, from one moment to the next she had decided to cycle home. Johann and her, however, had danced until the morning of the new millennium instead. Around five they went back to his place. He had undressed her solemnly: Be still, my darling. Shortly after seven she had looked at the luminous numbers of the clock next to his bed, while they lay next to each other, naked, and she balanced an ashtray on her stomach, its cool metal telling the story of how the last few hours had felt. Johann stubbed out his cigarette. You don't need to do that, she said, but she liked it.

Would she ever learn at how many tables and after how many Jägermeisters which version of this story Nina would tell?

Or would Nina simply forget the evening and only her body remember him as she rode home alone across the mirror-smooth streets?

On one of the following nights she dreamt that she was jogging through a hilly area, wearing a winter coat with side pockets as big as saddlebags. I've got a bunch of dead animals inside, could you be so kind as to pull them out? she asked everyone she encountered. Ask Johann, they all answered. Over and over again she asked and over and over again she received the same answer: Ask Johann. Finally she posed a different question: Who's Johann?

...and the world exploded.

The got married one year later.

No, they did not get married.

Monday morning. She places the salad spinner next to the bin bag by the front door, walks to the bathroom but doesn't put on the jeans and blouse that are hanging over the heater. Only next Saturday. She takes the business card out of the back pocket and balances it on the washbasin, against the toothbrush glass.

Robert Storm, *Only this one thing was plain, he was never seen again...*

The name smiled at her mysteriously. But he had a totally normal address, Schenkendorfstraße 7, in Berlin Kreuzberg, a fax machine and a phone, and could be reached by mobile too. The mirror behind the toothbrush glass opened like a window onto a second room where none of that existed but at the same time it all repeated. It is snowing. Those are tiny splotches of toothpaste on the glass. Those are the flakes driving Robert Storm on alone through Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk, past shops with dark windows and even darker rooms behind them, but windows which nevertheless allow the silhouettes of people to be seen, people who, in an eternal, eastern twilight, are going on with their lives or simply sitting, talking, smoking, and showing him, Storm, the way down to the Amur, the river that, in such weather, is no longer a river but a glimmering white, deeply frozen road strewn with cars, and fishermen leaning against their driver-side doors. Small, bloody bait fish twitching at their feet at the edge of the black holes they've drilled into the ice. Yes, the holes are black, the snow is white, and the fish's blood is red in that wintry Siberian fairy tale in which she is now walking next to Storm, away from the Amur and along the river's promenade, and he has opened an umbrella to hold above the two of them, until they reach a bar and stop, and he closes it again, and deposits it in a corner where a dog is sleeping, rolled up into itself. In the dim light between the loud, Russian-speaking drunks she quickly reapplies her lipstick then huddles up next to Storm, the only quiet face in the room, who now turns to her for being so terribly and suddenly close, with a bit of a sneer, but happy at the same time. My God, what wonderful spots he has on his face, which some God or other has sown

there so that he will only harvest joy! Spots like splotches of toothpaste, but not white, rather a colour similar to café-au-lait. His voice gives the impression that he could sing well when he says, My umbrella there, did you notice, it is indeed black, but it's a children's umbrella and too small to protect two people. But whatever, there's music. They begin to dance all the way through the room and out the back door. It leads to a dark courtyard. They keep on dancing all the way to an off-road vehicle, whose window is being covered in flakes. She wipes them away.

They drive off.

Where are they headed?

No one can say.

With the bin bag and the broken salad spinner under her arm, which disappears into a recycling bin, she leaves her house half an hour later and makes her way to the hairdresser's. It's her day off.

Is the water OK?

What do you mean?

Sometimes people complain, they say that the temperature goes back and forth.

People, she says, what can you do. She is the only client, maybe because it's a Monday. Already on the way here she had been happy thinking about the concentration with which he would massage the shampoo and conditioner into her wet hair, that pleasantly anonymous tenderness spreading out through the one-and-a-half kilo, 37-degree bit of biomass beneath her skull. How often he had already scared away those dark birds wanting to build nests in her hair. Washing out the special rinse for strawberry blondes he too repeats: People, what can you do? She leans her head further back, closes her eyes, and says, Hardly anyone knows people better than you, running through your programme of wash / cut / talk every day as you do. Go on and let them talk, for that's all it is.

You think?

They talk about brain research like it's a new religion too.

Really?

The hairdresser drops a comb. He bends over. When he straightens back up, laboriously but with a smile, it looks as if he's slipped a disc.

He grabs a fire-engine red hand towel.

A turban like this suits you well, you're a silent beauty, that's why you can get away with something this flashy, he observes, guiding her over to the mirror, where she sits down and he wraps the towel more tightly above her forehead.

Coffee? Water? Doctor?

Both, please.

He disappears into his cubbyhole behind the register, where a machine begins to buzz as it makes a drip coffee, just like when she was in the department of neurosurgery. It always tasted stale, even when it had just been prepared for those morning meetings behind the drawn curtains, bathed in the play of light of a seven-o'clock sun. In the warm months she'd climbed across the roof of the building opposite. Outside construction on the courtyard was getting underway, which was why, inside, one of the tired people in white had shut the tilted window to better understand the assistant physician, a Hungarian woman, sitting on top of the rubbish bin, coffee cup in hand, and giving reports on the previous night's arrivals: female polytrauma, born 1964, brought in around twelve thirty, fell from the seventh floor onto the flowerbed in front of her building after fighting with a friend. Fracture of the central skull and methadone. She's in the room next to our

complicated old guy, the one who smells on urine. At those moments someone in the station briefing room had always laughed tiredly...

Milk, sugar? The hairdresser calls out from his cubbyhole.

Both, please, she says, and her mobile in front of the mirror says that it's shortly after four. She is fifty-four.

I think that you'll be even more beautiful when you get older, my darling, Johann had said three months after that New Year's Eve in which not only the year but the millennium had changed. On that day at the end of March they had driven out of the city and stopped at a restaurant, but not gone inside. They were both thirty-six. They sat on the bonnet of an old white Mercedes, smoking and looking ever deeper into the landscape. He didn't speak. But it didn't matter; his presence was enough for her. The sky above them was a deep blue. Just like the sea, she thought. For the first time in her life she had the desire to describe the afternoon, nothing but the afternoon. She wasn't a born storyteller, that much was clear. Nina perhaps, but not her.

Be that as it may, you were still allowed to write without writing, right?

She looked at Johann. His gaze was once again as barefoot as it had been a few weeks ago in the tram, shortly before the milk had begun to run out of his tote. She wove herself into that distant gaze, which hung like a thread from out of her memory. Her grandmother, for example, who, working for 398 marks a month sewing mattresses on the assembly line, gave her one-thousand marks when she finished school saying, 'Make something of it', then cried, which was why she turned away to face the cupboard in the tiny kitchen on the eighth floor and make them both a piece of bread with artificial honey. With a cigarette in the corner of her mouth and only a few dyed strands of hair on her head. Her grandmother belonged in the feeling of that moment, was sitting on the bonnet of the white Mercedes together with them, out of place, but welcome.

Do you remember the apple tree, the one from back then? she asks. Do you recognize it when you look at the metal of the bonnet between you and this man? You're reflecting each other there, the two of you, and the apple tree is there too, the one beneath which you used to sit for days, in your pushchair, kicking against the undersides of its leaves. Their bright bellies. If someone had asked you, back then, you would have toothlessly and happily said on record that the world was a friendly and warm place. Even when staring straight ahead. Do you remember? And tell me, studying the brain, did you ever figure out where your memories go when you don't have them? Or where the memory of this man who's sitting beside you one day will be, this man who's lighting a cigarette with a lighter whose sharp click-clack will turn into the tuning fork of this successful afternoon? Where will the memory of this afternoon be once you've forgotten it? And where will those of this man next to you be once he's gone? You could tell him now, as long as your afternoon is still pure presence, about the good marks you got on your graduation exams, about your fear of failure, and about the mole on your groin, the one on the left, the one you should keep an eye on. Yes, someone should definitely keep an eye on it, and on you as well, her grandmother says with her voice of glass.

Happiness and glass, how easily they break...

Should I give you a compliment? Johann had asked at that moment.

Yes.

I love you, my darling.

He placed a foot on the bumper and looked like a cowboy, even if he didn't have the right boots. Afterwards they both continued to look out into the landscape, which faded into a vague blur. What a place, the clouds moving by with the slow speed of the earth. She noticed that she was already familiar with everything there, even if she'd forgotten where she had once seen it all,

had experienced it all, and had even had that very same thought: the thought that she had once had that very same thought. And that the bonnet of the old white Mercedes wasn't a memory, or just the memory of an earlier memory. Even the man next to her wasn't a case of déjà vu. No. He and the memories were what they were. Life.

Later, on the search for moments in her past that she would only have to think back in order to understand her present, she would remember that afternoon on the bonnet.

Once again the question: They got married a year later?
No, they did not get married.

The following year, however, they moved to the Rhein together. With a temporary position she left Berlin behind, where she had lived for eighteen years, at first with, then without Viktor.

Johann followed from Magdeburg, at first with, then without a car.

His offices grew smaller and smaller from job to job. As did the theatres in which he worked. At the beginning he'd stayed in one theatre for years. Later on his dramaturgical contracts would be limited to two or three years and never extended.

You've got to keep on going, he said, just keep on going, there are those that wander and those that sit on the couch.

But did a wanderer always choose to hardly ever be settled?

Goddamn rootless, Johann's friends who'd stayed behind in the city he'd left would say. For his part, Johann simply found his old friends old.

What am I supposed to do with roots when I can't take them with me, my darling?

His next-to-last office at the theatre of Dresden had been up under the roof, next to the men's toilet, and he'd had to share his last one at the Kammerspiele Magdeburg with a younger colleague. Good guy, my darling, he was a smoker too.

Did he also call Nina 'my darling'?

Johann had managed to be dismissed from Magdeburg through a discrete and friendly refusal to work. Now he was unemployed. All the more determinedly they threw their lives together and moved to the Rhein. Whether they would make it there remained unclear, though the fact that they liked one another in a considerate way did not.

Nina was never discussed.

Following the removal van out of Magdeburg in the white Mercedes, not far from the former border, under an Autobahn bridge, there was a bang like a deadly explosion. Immediately thereafter the motor went. They got out. Johann opened the bonnet. They looked out into the landscape, which disappeared together with the Elbe into a vague blur, treeless, cloudless, and as if fleeing from itself. What a place, she said dreamily, placing her hand at the very base of his back while he shook his head above the engine. Right, take your hand off my ass, Johann said, we've got other problems at the moment. The engine block is done. I forgot to fill up the coolant.

She looked out into the landscape alone. What a beautiful, friendly, attentive person, she'd thought up till now. Of course, he probably still was beautiful, friendly, and attentive, she just didn't see it at the moment any longer. The car upon whose bonnet they had once successfully been settled for an entire afternoon – even if only in the desire to be – would now have to be scrapped. The towing service arrived. Two very blond men with red faces jumped out of the cab and extended a hand to Johann alone. We'll hang a photo of it in a silver frame in our new apartment, she said a few hundred metres later as the trailer with the white Mercedes took the exit. Instead of answering, Johann laughed. A sound like truculent trumpets.

Damn it, why, just as they were moving in together, did she no longer really see them

together?

Their first night there they slept on unfolded moving boxes. This isn't an apartment, it's a hole, Johann said, casting his eyes at the ceiling as if early the next morning already instead of a lamp he wanted to install a hook and on the hook a rope and on the rope himself. But he wasn't like that. A rope was a rope, a hook was a hook. Johann wasn't one of those people who abused things. OK, he said instead when getting up, let me be the man of the house, my darling. He took a hook and a cord, hung up his old Japanese lantern, and was happy with the red lacquered wood hanging cabinet she'd bought in the early '80s in Berlin. She'd been eighteen. Then Johann mounted the cupboard above the former tenant's sink. Whenever life got difficult Johann would begin making things, as if in doing so any other damages would be repaired at the same time. Soon she would be asking herself why he had never opened a bicycle repair shop and given so much of his life to other people and—for him, maybe even the wrong place—the theatre instead.

What do you do? What's the name of your scientific project again? I didn't really understand it during our first conversation on the phone. How, oh, I see, you conduct medically based emotional perception tests? On people? And your husband, what does he do again? Sorry, a dramaturge, that's something like a doctor, right?

She hadn't wanted to disagree with their soon-to-be landlord. He was a chipper Rheinlander who only really cared about the world so long as it came down the street dressed as a carnival float. If he understood Johann's job as a dramaturge to be an obscure part of skin medicine, well, so be it, the important thing was getting the apartment, which Johann would grow used to for the simple fact that she liked it. Downstairs at the entrance there was a red light, which gave the building behind the station an unserious air. But so what, she was a life scientist. In Berlin she'd lived above a brothel for years, second floor, back courtyard on the left, stove heating and a small balcony like a stone nest stuck out over the rubbish bins down below, which did a poor job of concealing the branches of a frail sycamore tree. Sometimes an empty plastic bag would get caught in the limbs. Around noon the brothel in the front building would open two of its windows to let in a bit of air. The cleaning woman's humming would drift out into the courtyard. The club was a favourite of lorry drivers, especially the ones that liked to wear women's clothes. They'd handed over their coal cellar to the woman from the fourth floor. It had been turned into a dominatrix studio, and her upstairs neighbour would go to work with her German shepherd. Always. Sometimes when going down the linoleum stairs it would start to slide, its nails making a noise that said: This is what it's like when you're old. You're old when you're about to die. Coming home one night she caught two men pissing in the front hall by the letterboxes. She laughed and said, Not to worry, gentlemen, carry on. I'm a doctor.

The two rooms there along the Rhein were on the first floor, above a nightclub, near the main train station, but far from sanitized areas like the old city or the port. From the outside the building looked respectable with its expensive tiles, but the soot was deep down in the stone. The ground floor only came to life at weekends. A couple of sad solo shows by old cabaretists or a semi-professional chanteuse, accompanied by her husband on piano, presenting songs by Juliette Gréco, Barbara, or Dalida. Can I tell you something, Johann? she said shortly after moving in. This is exactly how I always imagined artists to live. Johann smiled, And how is that? He seemed to have had enough of art. Or of her?

The hallway smells of mould, my darling.

Better than smelling of piss.

At night you can hear the trains.

There's something about it.

What, may I ask?

Something tender.

Don't get all kitschy, he said and lit a cigarette.

They lived on a street where shoes were resoled and bicycles were in fact repaired. The first time she'd come there to see the apartment was on a Sunday and she'd been alone. She liked the street's atmosphere. Everything felt kind of leftover, above all the lime green sheets in a dusty shop window, next to which there was a red chewing gum dispenser with a handle. That afternoon the sun had shone down on the pavement, empty parking spaces, and flat, mortared garages with a particularly Sunday kind of brightness that made her feel like she was living in an important dream. Her life could turn out OK again. If I were to look into a mirror, she thought, I'd see a woman living way back in time, like a woman in a painting, with curtains hanging loosely to the floor in folds behind her.

Johann had not come with her that Sunday. That's why he was not in the dream.

The hairdresser comes back with coffee, milk, sugar, biscuits, and water, and places everything in front of the mirror where, in a silver stand, he keeps his business cards. He pulls a stool over in order to sit right behind her, and begins to part her wet hair with a comb.

You're a special person, I saw that the first time I came here.

Thank you, he says, that's nice of you to say, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you. I'm not that special at all.

Are you sure?

Totally. For example, that thing about brain research and religion, what you just said, I didn't understand a thing.

We'll do it together: Putamen Amen, she says.

Sorry?

She takes the comb from his hand and rasps its teeth in her wet hair around her fontanelle.

The putamen, she says, is right in the middle of the core of my grey matter. It coordinates movement and makes it difficult for me to stumble around all the time. Amen. Here, she continues, moving in an elegant comb-curve in the direction of her forehead, here in the limbic system is where love and hate live.

The hairdresser swallows. Not in the heart, Doctor?

One moment, I'm not done yet. Mind and memory are located in the hippocampus, right here. She reaches for his hand and places his fingers on her temples.

And melancholy, where is melancholy located, Doctor? The hairdresser pulls his fingers back.

Well, melancholy...

With the comb she traces a line from ear to ear, like a pair of headphones.

A lot of melancholy or depression sits right here on the right, in the cerebral cortex, she says, whereas mathematics, speech, and intelligence are on the left. That would be the first rough sketch of the twists and turns of the brain, she says, but don't think that that alone makes a person. If everything that a person is was just the mass of his or her brain, then the taste of a strawberry, the painfulness of your pain, the smell of your wet dog, and countless other impressions—not to mention faith, love, and hope—would lose their power, they would simply be the electrical signals of the organ beneath your skull, which is the colour of semolina porridge.

The hairdresser's glance in the mirror says, I don't believe it.

It's true, she says, whoosh! That's how quickly it can go, that's how quickly a person can

become a brain-ality instead of a person-ality.

No, the hairdresser says, that doesn't just happen with a whoosh.

It does, she says, and a person can even take medicine to counteract their shyness.

No, the hairdresser says, that's no person any more.

They are, she says.

Seriously?

Seriously would be a good name for a person, she says and laughs.

The hairdresser takes the comb out of her hand and begins to pull the wet ends of her hair straight, with a concentrated look.

Who'd want something like that, he says, I mean, where's free will?

When half an hour later she turns around again by the bus stop on the corner, the hairdresser is standing in the doorway of his shop, eating a banana. Schenkendorfstraße, he'd said as she was paying, you can get the bus there on the corner every ten minutes. The street's real close to that old cemetery in Kreuzberg, where my father's also buried. Tell me, you doing OK?

Why?

You look so different today.

That's got everything to do with you, Sir.

The woman was responsible for me as well, Johann had said once they'd been living together for two or three months above the nightclub. I liked her dimples, and she wasn't too far off with her predictions. She'd seen right away that it'd be tough to place me. Same thing with that guy there maybe.

He pushed the newspaper over to her, past the bowl of risotto. Outside the rain slid quickly down the window. A fifty-two-year-old unemployed man with a heavy and tired face had shot the young woman with the dimples during a consultation meeting, the caption under the photo reported.

I hope she didn't have any children. Johann, how old was she?

About as old as we are. Thirty-six perhaps.

Awful.

It's worse than that, Johann said, it's a real goddamn mess.

He got up from the kitchen table and tossed the paper with the murderer into the bin, walked into the hall, and pulled a notebook out of one of the moving boxes, which were still in the corridor, next to the wardrobe. Basement books, he called them, and they'd probably stay in those boxes forever.

He disappeared into his room, came back, poured himself a whisky, and, glass in hand, looked at her silently and kindly before disappearing a second time. He didn't close the door behind him completely. I guess you'll probably go find a job when you no longer have any money for cigarettes and booze, she called after him. In the hallway she heard his Zippo click. Then he stuck his head through the door again.

Turn the radio on to keep yourself company, my darling, he said.

At that moment she saw herself through his eyes, sitting there, at the table. She didn't have a hardy face, but more of a night face, which might've had to do with the fact that she didn't sleep well. Was that also where her bedroom eyes, as her mother called them, came from? The Mona Lisa also had bedroom eyes. Was that why her smile was so difficult to explain? She'd once read how the experts had examined the pigment structure of the painting, in vain. The mystery of the spirit, the woman's being, had remained. In any event, an actress who was curious or sad, or had

a similar disposition or look on her face could train herself to have that very same smile in order to finally say what a woman with just such a look on her face was capable of. On horseback and with an axe. But did she really want to know?

Do I really want to know? she'd asked herself, in the meantime thirty-seven and a doctor without any steady employment.

Become a doctor, a psychiatrist, Nina had said during their last year at school.

When she was right, she was right. On top of it, the excitement with which her friend had made the recommendation was infectious. As opposed to Nina she'd always grown bored during their six-hour maths test and, by the first break, as opposed to all the others in the class as well she'd already be finished. Boredom comes from stupidity; she'd been convinced of that much even back then. And her absolutely sensational 0.9 average didn't change that opinion. At their graduation party Nina and her had got drunk and taken off their shoes to dance, which in that grey, enshrouded valley at the edge of the Ruhr was akin to something like a striptease. Was boredom a feeling or a state? And were all feelings simply signals from the brain? She asked her biology teacher during a slow waltz. He answered with some formula or formulaic phrase or other, which she forgot as soon as she heard it. While he was sucking on a violet-flavoured pastille he could not say whether a person was their brain, or something more. Whether what a person thought was also what they felt. Whether at the end of a life there was something like a recountable narrative or whether the memory of each and every human being lied in conjunction with the larger and smaller lies of their life. Due to the fact that despite her good exam marks she did not have a talent for anything in particular, she decided to study medicine. She followed Nina's inner voice. Not her own. She was diligent, could think quickly, and wanted to push her own, small but secure life between herself and where she came from. Had she had a talent for playing football or dancing, she might've chosen a different path. But talent was nothing other than interest, and she enjoyed using her brain to think about her brain. She enjoyed paradoxical situations that could not be solved with effort, but only withstood. When later on in her studies she began to research her own brain—that furrowed, walnut-like, porridge-grey clump of protein, carbohydrates, and fat—in order to understand more about the being of the brain, to spend entire nights in books before ending up stuck between scientific discoveries and completely different, unsettling questions that far too often had to do with a man named Viktor who was eighteen years older than she was, that in-between, that no-man's-land continued to have the scent of violet-flavoured pastilles even years after their graduation party. Financed by the state as well as her own pockets she finished her studies slowly. The reason it took longer than usual didn't just have to do with Viktor, but also a huge fear of future patients, who she, as a doctor, wouldn't be able to endure. She had never really believed that her hands were intelligent enough to operate on a brain. In the end, just the thought of a career in medicine and its attendant social climbing made her tired, apathetic. Whenever someone asked her how she was she would begin to yawn, even when she wasn't tired. During her intern year she spent her time in neurosurgery with a crazy professor who did everything because the good Lord wanted it that way. He spurred him on. Not her. During the doctoral colloquiums she continued to attend every week in order to remain a student within the safe space of the university, she would smile into the faces of the other young doctors. Emotional infection of the healthy and the mentally ill.

Over and over again every third Wednesday of the month she would present the arduous progress of her work to the same work circle. The always-the-same must be the best part, Viktor had said. Was he right? Her listeners just stared impassively back. But when had she begun to find the others shiftless? If anyone was shiftless there, if anyone just let life do what it had to do, it was

her. In any event, one day while they were standing next to the coffee machine a colleague of hers said, With this theme of yours you'd be better off in the theatre. Underneath the statement lay a second: With this friend of yours, this Viktor, it'd be best to call it quits, he's far too old for you, take me instead! She left her colleague standing and walked along the glass windows looking onto the courtyard of the university where a man in a blue apron, who was even older than Viktor, was trimming the boxwoods.

After the Wall came down, she got a job with a female GP who had additional training in psychotherapy but who clearly was upset by the fact that she wasn't a proper psychiatrist. The office was ninety kilometres north of the centre city, in the direction of Rostock. She would ride there with the train. Viktor didn't like to lend her his car, and she didn't have one of her own. When her train was stopped in Löwenberg, by the little station garden a bunch of geese would stand side by side on an unpaved road, holding their heads in a way that suggested an incurable longing for nationally owned enterprises. Whenever a goose left the group and waddled up to the colourful iron fence of the platform to press its white chest against the bars, she would try to wave. At the following station young kids in green bomber jackets would be hanging around the only bench on the platform, all pale and like little flags of smoke. On a few of them, even from the distance, she recognized Veraguth's fold on their upper eyelids, an indicator of depression. At the next stop black chickens picked about in dirty snow, at times in grey grass, and clearly lived in a dog kennel. Someone who had to be young and full of attainable dreams had arranged a cosy group of car seats on its roof. If she ever had a dog, he would get just such a living room. She liked dogs. With dogs you could walk alone and undisturbed through the streets, past people who produced ideas in a mature avocado beneath their skulls – on the results of the last vote, on bombings, imminent wars, American or other presidents, or on the death of glaciers. A dog didn't notice when, not having an opinion, she didn't have anything to add. And when she wasn't thinking about anything at all, the dog didn't notice that either. No, you can forget all about that, the GP with additional training in psychotherapy had said, no, a permanent position here is out of the question. You with your difficulties dealing with patients, what do you think, you can't even get a grip on the general day-to-day dealings of a GP office for me. On top of it, your neuroses and mine don't get along too well, do they? True, she said, and felt her shoulders grow tight. She gave notice the next day.

From that point on she kept afloat by working as a typist at her old university, where her doctoral supervisor encouraged her to once and for all finish writing her dissertation on emotional infection. And so she crawled on, from chapter to chapter, from temporary contract to temporary contract, from evening to evening, with or without Viktor, until they broke up in 1996. Because of a woman. One of many and, truth be told, more of a birch than a woman, but one who Viktor, suddenly in need of the solace of trees, had brought with him from Moscow. The relationship just did not make any sense to her. Three years after their breakup, at the turn of the millennium, she finally had her PhD in her pocket but was convinced that, both as a doctor and in general, she was completely incompetent. She scraped together a living as a freelance editor for scientific publishing houses, editing manuscripts with titles like *Decade of the Brain* or *Who is I* or *The Shores of Consciousness*. And that's when the next man came along, in a white Mercedes, and took her to the Rhein.

Johann...

In the meantime for almost ten years now she has been working in Berlin again as a secretary in a neurobiological institute.

Without Johann.

And Nina? Her friend from before had probably become a charming estate agent or was sitting behind a supermarket register or at an equestrian centre where men as well as women fell

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in love with her. Maybe she was going around giving interviews as a former punk rocker and clearly still had some of the old rage. Or maybe she had ended up working for a crisis line or even for the ground crew of some airport or other. In any event, she continues to take her friend from before into account, above all when she's not doing that well. But her job at the institute is really nice. The street below her window is filled with lovely acacia trees, just like back then on the street where she lived with Viktor. Sometimes one of the young biologists from the lab across the hall— Daniel, Raoul, Alasdair, or whatever the young men around her were called— stops to stand in her office door and ask: How are you doing?