

Mon Chéri and Our Battered Souls
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A FEW PRELIMINARY WORDS

Handke once said that sexuality doesn't need to be written about. He said he always looks away in the cinema too, that sex scenes are degrading for all concerned, the audience just as much as the actors. God knows Handke and I don't always see eye to eye, but in this case, I have to give him a pat on the back.

Sometimes I wonder whether it's just one big mistake. Whether all filmmakers think: my audience wants sex, so it has to go in, and yet perhaps there's not a single viewer who wants this sex, and still everyone has to live with it. I wonder whether every poor author also thinks: Oh Jesus, another several hundred pages without so much as a masturbation scene, who's going to buy this?! I wonder whether it's a bit like with the *Emperor's New Clothes*. Everyone's agreed that the emperor is wearing clothes. No one dares point out that the emperor is naked, just as no one dares say that sex scenes are degrading.

After an exhausting discussion on this topic, someone once whispered to me: "Yes, but Charly, sex is just a part of life!" Okay, sure. All kinds of things are a part of life, but you don't subject people to them in every entertainment medium. A prominent example: going to the toilet. Going to the toilet is, I'm sure we can agree on this, a part of life. I'd even claim that, for anybody who doesn't make ends meet by having sex commercially, going to the toilet is even more a part of life than sex. Or, to use another example: dreams. We're constantly dreaming! If we're not on the toilet, we're dreaming! I myself think that, whenever someone dreams in a book, we should immediately stand to attention. If an author is explaining something to us through a dream, something's not right. He's trying to convey through a dream something that he isn't managing to do through serious means, he's trying to let the *unconscious mind* speak.

Sex, dreams, a character we see on the toilet – if, for you, one of these categories forms the cornerstone of good literature, you should put this book down again as quickly as possible. Given that we're still in the prologue and you ideally start reading books *before* you buy them, there's a good chance you won't be throwing your money out the window. Buy something by Knausgård or the like, then you'll be playing it safe; unending masturbation, sex on every page, and for sure the character will have the occasional preposterous dream or squat on the toilet, although I can't be absolutely certain, because of course I've never finished one of them.

This story here is – just so that we don't misunderstand one another – a love story regardless. Kind of.

Apropos of Handke, I recently dreamt that Handke and I were at a literature festival. In the dream I was an author myself, my latest book was called *The Dappled-Grey Horse* and had a few fans, but Handke didn't like my books. He hadn't yet won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and I mentioned that prophetically in the dream to a festival visitor, I said: "Handke hasn't yet won the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he will soon."

I was strolling hand-in-hand with Handke through a picturesque landscape, like Tuscany. He had fragrant hair, and later expertly prepared ravioli for me and an Italian extended family, and drew interesting pictures. Then he told me that he loved me.

"But Handke," I said, "just this morning you didn't like my books."

"Yes, but that was this morning! Now I love them!" said Handke.

"And I yours," I said. "But only the early stuff."

What can I say? It was just a stupid dream, and it sounds completely made up, but the important thing about it is: that's also exactly how things played out with Dragaschnig.

THE LETTER

When I opened the letterbox and looked through the post, I noticed it immediately. The envelope was made of good-quality, strong paper and addressed by hand. According to the company address, it came from a solicitor's office in Vienna. It was definitely a job for a letter opener, but just as rare as it is to receive a handwritten letter are the number of people who own a letter opener; I didn't know any, certainly. Apart from Schabowski, but he didn't count of course. Just like a top chef turning up with his initialled knife and a bricklayer with his own trowel, Schabowski had his hand-forged letter opener. Who is Schabowski? Jesus, yes, I'll get to that soon, this is about him, after all, and of course about the others too, about Dragaschnig and Hänse and Sybille and so on, but we're not there yet. I mean, I've only just taken the letter out of the box. Or should I have started this story differently? With the legendary Christmas perhaps or, I don't know, with how I ran to the chemist like a participant in a methadone programme who's forgotten to pick up her thingamajig, her portion, her ration – or is it called an instalment? Or, purely and simply, with the purchase of my first dungarees? Perhaps. But I've started on this path now, so we'll just have to keep going.

So, Herr Schabowski, about whom you're going to find out *a great deal* later on, would certainly have had a letter opener, while I had none. But I wouldn't have opened the letter even if I'd had a letter opener. I didn't open the lawyer's letter from Vienna, just like I didn't open all the other letters, purely and simply because I didn't open letters.

I put the post, together with the daily paper and leaflets, into one of my shopping bags and began to climb the many steps up to the fourth floor. Halfway up, I ran into the guy from across the hall. I had no idea what his job was, he wore these non-iron suit trousers which were always just a little too short, and narrow, sharply-pointed leather shoes with thin soles; my guess was banking consultant. Or insurance broker. He said hello, I said hello too. We had a hello relationship.

Arriving at the top, I leaned my forehead briefly against the door and caught my breath. I should do more exercise. I should exercise, full stop. I searched for my key.

I set the shopping bags down in the kitchen and opened the window. The air was still warm in the evenings; an unsettling trend. I looked at the new building opposite, the offices behind its

glass facade were still brightly lit, workers wearing surgical masks sat behind white desks, making dentures.

In the bedroom I changed out of my suit and into a pink tracksuit, immediately feeling sporty. Karl Lagerfeld apparently said that anyone who wore jogging bottoms had lost control of their life, and I could only say: that may well be, Karl. But because I never felt as though I was in control of my life, there wasn't really anything to lose. I actually felt a bit sorry for Karl. Karl lounged around on his sofa until late at night in a suit and tie and, in all honesty, had a great deal to lose; all his fame, all his money, and was it worth it? I suspected that Karl secretly thought: Not really. I suspected that Karl sometimes envied me. Then I remembered that Karl was dead; that he'd died without ever having seen a pair of jogging bottoms from the inside. Life wasn't fair.

Back in the kitchen I opened Spotify on my phone and set a saucepan of water for the pasta on the hob.

I had never understood these easy listening tracks – the frothy jazz clips to which Americans in films always dance so incredibly slowly on the spot. It was the most boring music in the world, but ever since I'd been living alone, I found pleasure in it. It tinkled away without highs and lows. More than anything, I liked the soft sound of the drum brush, which played an important role in this kind of music, a kind of wiping and stirring, as though someone were sweeping the pavements with unlimited patience.

After I'd poured myself a glass of wine, I began to put away the shopping. On the table remained the small, tantalisingly aromatic tomatoes, a thick bunch of basil, the parmesan and the Rummo noodles, as thick as sewage pipes, in their poetic packaging. Every feelgood movie, every Rummo advert, begins like that: a gracefully-aged kitchen table, the day's last light falling elegiacally on the craggy Parmesan landscape, and soon things get very lively, numerous people turn their attention to the preparation of the evening meal, one cuts the tomatoes, one sauté the onions, the music bobs up and down, a sip of wine, a gentle kiss on the nape of the neck, someone stares mesmerised over their beloved's shoulder into the pot, as though they've never seen boiling water before, laughter, happy children dashing past at a hair's breadth, someone just manages to save their glass with a deft movement, more laughter, steaming pasta, basil sailing ever so slowly through the air and landing on the sauce, everyone talking over one another, there's so much to tell, such an eventful day yet again! The brass band tingle-tangles, the bassist launches into a smooth solo, but then: scratch!

Does anyone remember the scratching sound of a needle being carelessly removed from a vinyl record? No, barely anyone knows first-hand what vinyl is, apart from the nerds, of course, with them it's all the rage again, with sinfully expensive record players and screams if you ever touch a record with unwashed fingers, but I give the nerds a wide berth nowadays. So, no one else really remembers what a record is, but they'll recognise the sound. It's always used in the feelgood movie when an idyll is abruptly disturbed, when the happy family isn't happy after all and the beloved grandma terminally ill, and in the Rummo ad, then, when it's not at all about Rummo pasta, but about all these happy people not having any accident insurance, and oops, the hot boiling water is knocked over, oops, someone cuts a finger slicing the Parmesan, it wouldn't be the first time, and Scratch! Scratch is the noise that accompanies that.

There on the table lay all the bits and pieces for a perfect evening, but also the contents of my stupid letterbox. There was no one here, no one cooking, no one talking over anyone else, no one laughing, no children dashing off somewhere, there were no children here at all, no one to father them, no one kissing, the only person here was Charly Benz, who had no accident insurance either and, what's more, not the slightest inclination to contest the Rummo romanticism all on her lonesome.

With the good Solinger knife (*for four generations and without compromise!*) I chiselled a hunk off the block of cheese and put it in my mouth, I liked the crunch of the salt crystals between my teeth – these small pleasures of everyday life!

Oh, nonsense. I like eating, that's all there is to it. Whether it's a beautifully-crafted cheese slice, with that gorgeously crackling, wafer-thin plastic film that rests so dully and smoothly on your hand after you've peeled it away, or a three-year-old Sbrinz, which only four Alps in Switzerland still produce, and for which you have to use a special Sbrinz cutter to pry (*not cut!*) the crumbs out of the wheel – I don't care, I like everything.

I ate cheese, scanned the newspaper headlines, and packed the letters into the yellow postal crate. I studied the pretty envelope from Vienna a little longer. I didn't know anyone in Vienna, let alone a lawyer. I began to feel slightly nauseous. I mean, even the circulars from my energy provider gave me palpitations. Whenever post arrived from them, I presumed they were raising the monthly direct debit by around 1000%, and of course I wouldn't open a horrifying letter like that. I didn't open any post at all, for safety reasons. What positive reason would energy providers, health insurance providers and insurance companies have to

write to you? *Wishing you all the best on your 40th birthday, and as a present we're transferring 500 Euros to you.* Post from an energy provider was bad, and a lawyer's letter, accordingly, an absolute disaster.

I looked up, saw the steam billowing out from between the pan and the lid, and turned down the gas flame. Then I sat down at the table, finished my wine and read the address of the Viennese lawyer once more, word by word. I turned the envelope over in my hands. Perhaps the letter had ended up in my letterbox by accident, perhaps it was intended for the letterbox of the insurance broker next door, but written on it, in rousing royal blue handwriting, was my name and address.

I sat at my table, lowered the letter and stared over at the dental laboratory. In the background, someone dedicatedly patted his drum with a brush, his colleague was blowing ever so delicately into the trumpet, and another was caressing the piano. It was the most boring music in the world.

[...]

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THE END OF THE DON

I was there when they explained the results of the laboratory tests to Herr Schabowski and when he was x-rayed, I accompanied him to the bronchoscopy and to the fine needle biopsy, to the CT scan and the magnetic resonance therapy, to the ultrasound, the bone scan and the mediastinoscopy. I accompanied him to all kinds of words I had never heard before.

And I was there when all the waiting around and hospital corridors and treatment rooms and all the different doctors and examinations and results were summarised by yet another doctor.

We waited. The chairs: okay. The coffee: good. The snack: Ferrero Rocher.

“Frau Benz, out with it, what was in the letter?” asked Herr Schabowski as he poured me another cup of coffee. By the way, I have to make my feelings on this clear, the 1990s Dallmayr coffee advert is, for me, still the prime example of a perfect ad – does anyone remember it? First the flight of birds to the magnificent baroque Dallmayr headquarters in Munich (*Quality since 1700*), then, inside the shop, the atmosphere of the good old days: lots of wood and brass, the gentle morning light, saleswomen in enchanting blue dresses with spick and span white aprons that they attentively adjust for one another, product signs written oh-so-slowly with fountain pens, the splotch of ink on of the young actress’s nose, coffee beans trickling into gold-toned packaging, the scales on which the freshly-filled coffee still gets weighed, everyone smiling at one another. This kind of retro ad is always effective (Jesus, does anyone remember the *Landliebe* yoghurt ad? The young farmgirl with the loosely-bound headscarf and the earthenware bowl in her lap stirring strawberries into yoghurt at a meditatively slow pace? Legendary. This kind of advert made me want to become first a Dallmayr prodomo beans saleswoman, then a farmer and, immediately after that, a grandfather (on account of Werther’s Originals).

‘Frau Benz?’

‘Sorry, Herr Schabowski, my mind wandered for a moment, what did you say?’

‘The letter. You opened your post for the first time in years and, among it, the letter too. From the lawyer in Vienna. The letter that would change everything.’

‘That’s true,’ I said. I watched Herr Schabowski screw the thermos flask shut.

‘Well, I opened a load of letters, all boring stuff. No dramas, no spectacular news. Until I got to this letter.’ I fell silent. I swirled my coffee around in the cup. I looked up, Herr Schabowski was looking directly at me. ‘So in the letter it said that my father is dead and that I’ve inherited something.’

‘Herr Schabowski to Dr. Faruki please!’

We stood up, I drank down the coffee in one gulp and burnt my throat.

‘I’m very sorry. About your father, I mean.’

I waved my hand dismissively. ‘I don’t even know what I’m supposed to think about it,’ I said, ‘we hadn’t seen one another for years. Before that we saw each other now and again for a while, and each time he criticised me for everything, and before that we didn’t see each

other for years. The don is dead. That sounds as abstract as it feels for me.’ I packed our snack utensils into Herr Schabowski’s bag and we walked down the long corridor.

‘And what have you inherited?’. Herr Schabowski stood in front of the door we were about to walk through, because this time I wanted to be, had to be, with him.

It was inappropriate, entirely improper given the circumstances, but I couldn’t stop myself from laughing manically. ‘A hotel,’ I said, ‘I’ve inherited a hotel! In Bad Gastein!’

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THE BOTTOM LINE

We sat down inside on the visitors’ chairs. Dr. Faruki was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. He looked like someone from *One Thousand and One Nights*, he looked like a Persian prince, he looked like a cliché of himself. Then it occurred to me that it’s not even called Persia anymore. I pondered briefly before remembering that Persia was modern-day Iran, which didn’t sound so romantic, because in Iran things aren’t exactly running smoothly, politically speaking, and presumably Dr. Faruki didn’t spend his free time sweeping across the Düben Heath on a camel with a turban on his head and a falcon on his arm. No, Dr. Faruki was a lung specialist, and when I tuned in again, he was summarising, calmly and briefly and remarkably gently, the last weeks and the results of all the tests. “Lung cancer,” he said, and: “Meta-stasis, in the brain, recommended course of treatment: radiation and chemotherapy, predicted life expectancy: two months.”

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MIRABELL

I can no longer remember how the conversation ended, can no longer remember us leaving, I only remember that, in front of the consultation room, I leaned my head against the wall and forced myself to take deep breaths, closing my eyes, because otherwise I would have vomited. I feared I was about to faint. Inside me everything was black, but when I opened my eyes, everything was still black. Fainting, I thought, how ridiculous, like in the 19th century. Then I collapsed.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself staring into the faces of a Persian prince and a German civil servant. “Herr Schabowski,” I murmured, reaching for his hand, he gripped mine and squeezed it tightly.

“Does this happen often?” asked Dr. Faruki.

“I’m fine.” I struggled upright, Dr. Faruki took my other hand and together they pulled me up. I let go of the doctor and turned towards Herr Schabowski.

“Herr Schabowski,” I said, “I don’t know what to say, there I go fainting and you’re helping me up, and yet it’s me who should be helping you, Herr Schabowski, I–”

“Frau Benz, will you do me a favour?”

“Anything!” I cried, “everything!”

“Let’s forget the last quarter of an hour for a short while. Just for a while. Just for today. Let’s act as though that conversation never happened – nothing against you personally, Dr. – let’s act as though we didn’t find anything out, as though you just told me about the letter. Just for today. Okay?”

I was silent. I felt we had to do something immediately, fight this diagnosis and bring about some miraculous cure, I had an irrepressible desire to fall into a never-seen actionism and eliminate the monstrous diagnosis that was hovering over Herr Schabowski like the sword of Pericles, or rather, the sword of Damocles. Dr Roggenpöhler, my dermatologist, hadn’t hesitated for even a moment where my hemangioma was concerned: diagnose, eliminate. And even if that wasn’t a fundamental concept for my sister’s affair, it surely was for Herr Schabowski. I looked at him, my *PostAngel*, and thought about the unending waiting of the past weeks, in countless hospitals and corridors, I thought about his restless hand on his jacket, and now I saw the fear in his eyes; a great, untameable fear, a fear that wraps itself around you like a dark, suffocating sack, and understood that he needed a grace period in order to confront it. And I suddenly knew that I would be exactly the same, that I would want to have a few hours of my old life back, a life without the new information that turned everything upside down.

“Okay,” I murmured.

Herr Schabowski pulled the packet of Ferrero Rocher out of his bag and offered them to the doctor and I, then took one himself. “And I’d like to ask you the same favour, doctor.” Dr. Faruki nodded. We ate our pralines silently; I noticed my circulation stabilising again.

“Can I do anything else for you?” asked Dr. Faruki.

“No,” said Herr Schabowski. “This lady has just inherited a hotel, so she has a lot on her mind.”

“Really?” said Dr. Faruki in surprise. He looked at me thoughtfully, as though he were trying to imagine me as a sophisticated lady in a Dior suit, serving a delicately fizzing Taittinger and gently asking the Persian prince whether the suite was to his taste.

“Yes,” said Herr Schabowski, offering the Ferrero Rocher box around once more, we all helped ourselves and unwrapped the crackling, golden spheres, “in Bad Gastein. My dear,” he turned to me, “I completely forgot to ask the name of the object in question.”

“Mirabell,” I said, taking a praline and studying it. I realised that I would never eat Ferrero Rocher again, not ever. “It’s called the Grand Hotel Mirabell,” I said, and began to laugh, suddenly realising how incredibly ridiculous the whole thing was, “I’m the heir of the Hotel Mirabell!”

I think,” said Herr Schabowski cheerfully, “that this deserves a celebration.”

FRUITLESS EFFORTS

“Frau Benz, it’s lovely that you’re showing such concern, but I can’t go to that kind of course.” Herr Schabowski sat at his kitchen table and pushed the leaflet over to me. The cover showed around ten people in “comfortable” clothing, sitting in a circle and looking at one another attentively and sadly. It was an invitation to the meetings of *Living with Cancer*.

“Herr Schabowski,” I said, “it’s only a start, so we can figure out the next steps. Also, in two days you have another appointment with Dr. Faruki, he wants to speak to you about the chemotherapy and everything.”

Herr Schabowski stood up and went over to the window, gazing out. The Berlin late autumn was continuing as it had begun; grey, snowless and devoid of any charm.

I had never seen Herr Schabowski like this. Normally he received me in immaculately polished shoes and a suit and tie, and accompanied me, after he had gallantly taken my coat, immediately into his office, where the Krupps machine would be wheezing away cosily.

This time, however, I had come without an appointment, unannounced. Or rather, I had announced myself. To be precise, I had been trying to reach Herr Schabowski for days, but he hadn’t answered the phone. I had left him multiple messages on the answerphone, he hadn’t called back, my emails went unanswered, my text messages unread.

When I rang the doorbell, he didn’t answer – but the lights were on in his apartment.

A short while later, there I stood in his living room, and Herr Schabowski was asking how I had gotten in. I said: “With my credit card,” he asked whether anybody could get inside his apartment at the drop of a hat like that, I said: “Anyone with a credit card,” that it worked with an EC card too, but a credit card was more stylish.

He was sitting in his armchair holding a bottle of cola, surrounded by numerous already-emptied cola bottles, and I sat down on the sofa. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt from Sparkasse, and checked slippers. I wasn’t sure how old Herr Schabowski actually was, but he now looked ten years older. When some men wear suits, you can see they don’t feel comfortable in them, that they’ll never fill them confidently; Herr Schabowski, by contrast, had foundered on these jeans.

“Come on,” I said, “I’ll make us a coffee.”

Later he stood by the window in the kitchen, resting the tips of his fingers against the sill like Hugh Grant as the prime minister, before he starts to groove his hips to *Jump* and dance down the steps – and I wanted nothing more than for Herr Schabowski to turn around and dance all his worries away, like Tony dances his worries away in the film.

But he remained at the window and it was heavy and quiet in the kitchen and I noticed how much I was struggling with this situation, how much I wished for a way out, a joke, an ironic twist.

“You have to force yourself, if you want to get healthy again,” I repeated, “you have to face up to it and launch a counter-attack.”

“I can’t ever become healthy again, Frau Benz.”

I stepped over to join him at the window, we gazed out of it together. In the garden lay wet, limp leaves, some of the roses still wore their dried pink blossoms, a cat was sitting motionless alongside the old shed. Everything was in a state of retreat, of contemplation. I actually liked that: nature, resting. It made people rest too.

“Herr Schabowski, you can’t give up now. You have to fight.”

“I can’t.”

I turned toward him; he was crying. His large, friendly face looked so tired.

“Please, Herr Schabowski,” I whispered, “don’t give up.”

“I don’t have any strength,” said Herr Schabowski. “I don’t have the strength left for something like this.”

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FAKE IT

“You’re a Shaman, right? And everything at your place is natural and free of chemicals?! Why don’t you try one of your stupid cures, why did you spend decades training in this nonsense, please!”

“Charly, your Schabowski isn’t at a point where he’s open to something like this, believe me. He’s in a deep depression. And as long as that’s the case, he won’t try anything that could help.”

“Then it’s a vicious circle. He needs help in order to get out of the depression, and as long as he’s depressed, he won’t accept any help.”

“Yes. It is a vicious cycle.”

“And so why would he be prepared to take psychotropic drugs?”

Sybille shrugged. “Because he thinks he doesn’t have to believe in it. He doesn’t believe in anything else, but to him psychotropics are – I presume, because that’s how most people tick – not a question of belief. It’s chemistry. Many people in his situation trust chemistry.”

“And everything else only works if you believe in it. That’s how it is.”

“No. It works either way. But with everything else, you have to be prepared to do something. You have to take responsibility, you have to act. As long as he’s depressed, he can’t do that. I recommend stabilising him with psychotropic drugs, and then we can see whether he’s prepared to act. You could say he’s not himself right now.”

I sat cross-legged on my sofa and leaned my head back, noticing that I was close to tears again.

“And what if he actually is himself right now? The hopelessness he’s feeling is real, and if the medication makes him feel better, is it fake? What then?”

“That’s actually true, even. Fake it until you make it. It’s like laughter yoga. Laughter is proven to be healthy and can actually heal – it has an anti-inflammatory effect, stress hormones are reduced, breathing improves and so on. A quarter of an hour per day is enough.

In the interesting thing about it is: it doesn’t matter whether the laughter is genuine or artificial –the body can’t differentiate. Psychotropic drugs work differently, of course, but at the end of the day we have a similar result: the suggestion of well-being, of being carefree. Whether this is brought about artificially or naturally doesn’t actually matter. The person starts to feel alive again – and only someone who feels alive can do things that keep themselves alive.”

I thought for a moment. That made sense to me. Schabowski had to break free from this paralysis, that much was clear.

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ACTIONISM

“No,” said Herr Schabowski, when I presented him with the idea, “I’m not taking antidepressants.”

“Why not? It’s a matter of chemistry!”

“I can’t see why that’s supposed to be a convincing argument.”

“You don’t even have to believe in them! It’s just chemistry!”

“I don’t believe in anything anyway, and I still don’t want them.”

“And why not?”

“My previous experiences with them haven’t been good.”

“With chemistry?”

“Yes. With psychotropic drugs. Chemistry, if that’s how you want to put it.”

I fell silent. I was surprised – my Schabowski had taken antidepressants? Why? And when? We were sitting at the kitchen table and staring out together into the bleak little garden, which drifted in the early autumn dusk like a ship with no one at the helm – like a plague ship, for example. It seemed to me that Herr Schabowski hadn’t left his apartment since my last visit two days ago. Nor had he left his jeans. He hadn’t shaved, hadn’t washed, hadn’t done anything at all. He had sat there and smoked and drank cola, and the sadness surrounded him like a thick layer of cotton wool.

“And what do you want to do instead?”

“What would I do? There’s nothing to do.”

“Dr. Faruki wants to see you to plan the radiotherapy and chemo.”

“What’s the point?”

“What’s the point?! So that you get better!”

“Frau Benz, there’s something you haven’t understood. It’s not about dying in two months if I don’t do anything about it, compared with not dying if I do something. I’m going to die of this cancer. In two months.”

“So why would Dr. Faruki recommend the treatment to you?”

“He’s a doctor. What else is he supposed to do?”

“Then at least tell him that personally.”

“What?”

“That his career is pure actionism, a pretence of activity only so that no one thinks he’s indulging in idleness.”

“Whatever. There’s no need to be so sarcastic, by the way. Believe me, you’re simply too young still to know that everything that goes on in cancer treatment is absolutely comparable to actionism.”

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IT HAPPENED AGAIN

“Herr Schabowski,” said Dr. Faruki, “to not do any radiotherapy, nor chemotherapy, that’s conceding the fight before you’ve even begun. For me that’s giving up.”

Herr Schabowski studied his hands. “I’m giving up,” he said.

“Why?”

“What is there to win in this battle?”

Dr. Faruki looked at him, then at me, and leaned back in his chair. “Time,” he said, “you win time.”

“What for?”

“To live.”

“I have to die. So why should I carry on living?”

“We all have to die.”

“Correct, Dr. Faruki. But normally we don’t get given an expiry date. We always live as though it will carry on for decades – and it does, sometimes. Then, when that’s no longer the case, we’ve still lived as though it would. But for me this innocence is gone. I’ll never again be able to live as though my death is in the distant future. Having the certainty of imminent death constantly in our sights is unhuman, it robs us of the ease we need to be able to live, to live well. The life that lies before me now, I don’t want to prolong it.”

Dr. Faruki studied the files in front of him on the desk. “Listen, Herr Schabowski, these therapies will keep the tumour in check. I can’t guarantee anything if you turn them down.”

“Dr. Faruki, you can’t guarantee anything either way. There are no guarantees in this game. I know that. And I know what these therapies mean, I know their side-effects. I know what the life you gain through them looks like. And I don’t want it. I don’t want to spend my remaining time like that. Either I get life the way I had it, the way I like it, or I don’t want it at all.” Herr Schabowski leaned back.

Dr. Faruki slowly pushed his files together. “I understand,” he said then, “I can’t force you into anything.” He cleared his throat. “I strongly recommend that you stop smoking.”

“Why?”

Herr Schabowski and Dr. Faruki looked at one another. They both remained silent.

“I don’t know,” said Dr. Faruki eventually. From the hospital corridor, muffled sounds pushed their way in, footsteps that neared and distanced themselves again, trolleys on which crockery rattled, chattering nurses, a sonorous male laugh. To me, these sounds of a cheerful normality were the worst.

“I really believe that it’s worth taking the drugs,” Dr. Faruki made a renewed attempt.

“Why?”

Dr. Faruki looked at me, I shrugged helplessly, he turned back to Herr Schabowski. “You feel very unwell. If you take them, you’ll feel better, believe me.” He stood up and stretched his hand out towards Herr Schabowski.

“I feel unwell because I am unwell. What would be wrong about that?”

“Herr Schabowski, that borders on masochism, and you know it. Give it some thought.”

I stood up too, to say goodbye, then something astonishing happened: I fainted again.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself staring for a second time into Schabowski and Dr. Faruki's faces. It was laughable.

"Whahpnd?" I felt sluggish, swallowed and tried once more to speak, and again nothing came out, but Dr. Faruki seem to understand the question regardless.

"You just fainted for a second time."

"That's ridiculous," I murmured, trying to pull myself up, but Dr. Faruki pressed me back down onto the floor and put a pile of textbooks under my legs. I stared at the office ceiling and studied the fluorescent strip lighting. The thick swathes in my brain slowly dispersed – swathes like the ones that had hung in the air at the end of one of the cosy consultations in Schabowski's office, after we had smoked a few joints – and my poor brain cells reformed in order to produce a thought.

"People don't faint anymore," I explained slowly, "it's a forgotten discipline that exists only in old books."

"Frau Benz, may I ask you whether you might perhaps be expecting?"

"Whether I'm what?!" I stared at Dr. Faruki. Then I swivelled my gaze to Herr Schabowski, who was also kneeling beside me. While in recent days he'd looked as though he had drifted completely away from his usual course, all of a sudden, he was there again. He looked at me, utterly bewildered, I looked at him, no less bewildered, then at Dr. Faruki. Dr. Faruki didn't look bewildered; Dr. Faruki looked professional.

"Excuse me?" I whispered.

Dr. Faruki held my hand and looked for my pulse. "So when was your last cycle?" He asked unceremoniously.

"What?!"

"Your period. When was your last bleed?"

"I've no idea!"

He nodded, made an inscrutable expression and looked at the clock. "I think you should pay a visit to your gynaecologist."

"I don't have a gynaecologist!"

Dr. Faruki gently let go of my hand. It felt to me as though I could read his thoughts, rolling across his forehead in speedy neon script: “What am I supposed to do with these two blundering idiots?”

He stood up and sat down in his office chair, rolled over to the computer and tapped on his keyboard. I studied the ceiling with the strip lights again. We had this kind at the office too. They were ugly, but they helped in getting through the bleakness of winter.

Dr. Faruki printed something out and then helped me up, assisted by Herr Schabowski, and handed me a referral. “Try Frau Dr Öhmel, she has an excellent reputation.”

He gave Herr Schabowski a prescription. “Perhaps you might give the medication some further thought,” he said.

Then he guided us to the door, both arms stretched out behind us like a goose protecting its chicks, and wordlessly we left his office, Schabowski and I.

[...]

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WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW FROM HANDKE

The thing is, of course, that I now have a problem. Jesus, Handke! How do *you* solve that? I resolved not to degrade anyone here, not the dear reader, not myself, but now the fat’s in the fire: I’m pregnant. And presumably my sister Sybille isn’t the only one to be somewhat, how shall I put it, *perplexed* over this astonishing turn of events, no, the reader too must of course be wondering, very self critically: have I missed something? Did Charly Benz inadvertently have sex at some point and I simply missed it? Or is it a kind of, well, virgin birth?

Well, I can rule that one out. From my very personal experience I would say: There’s no such thing as a virgin birth. Sure, it doesn’t say anywhere in the Bible that Maria ever went to bed with a man, let alone with three, but perhaps the author of the Bible – or the team of authors, one should probably say – had the same dilemma as Handke and I, perhaps they didn’t want

to degrade anyone; not themselves, not the dear readers of the Bible, nor Maria, and perhaps they also thought: sex scenes are completely overrated.

I would love to pop round to Handke's and ask him how a serious author can pull that off without degrading anyone, but I once read that Handke only likes beautiful women, so in all likelihood he wouldn't even open the garden gate to me if I turned up in Chaville, near Paris, and asked him for a few gems from his big box of tricks.

Somehow I've almost thrown the baby out with the bathwater, or however the saying goes, with my wholehearted declaration of establishing a guaranteed sex-free zone here, except that, with me, it's the other way round: I've caught a baby in my belly and no one knows how.

That's why I'm going to suggest a compromise: for everyone who, like me, doesn't want to be degraded, I'll now write an informative sentence. Then you can flick straight to page 313, thereby circumnavigating the dangerous obstacle.

For everyone else, after the informative sentence there will be the Master's Cut or, as it's also known, the *extended version*.

It's a bit like with yoga, where you always have the option of doing that chaturanga thing between two poses – it's strenuous, of course – or go immediately to downward dog, that's the shortcut. In any case, everyone meets at the dog, and we will all meet after the strenuous degradation.

So, here's the info sentence:

I had sex.

And here's the *extended version*:

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WHAT'S UP WITH THE MUSIC?

As I stepped into Hänse Quandt's apartment for the first time, I was amazed. I had always thought that I was the most loyal Last Jedi standing, with my fan loo-seat (*Aim like a Jedi not like a Stormtrooper*), my IKEA lamp PS 2014, which, with the help of two different tones of grey spray paint, I had skilfully transformed into a death star— as soon as you pulled the cord,

the dangerously shimmering inside opened up – and my cooking apron, which was smarter than I was and which I liked wearing to shove my ready meals into the oven (*Luke I am your father eat your vegetables*), but no, the culture journalist managed to provoke envy within me. He had an R2-D2 Hoover, a toaster in the shape of Darth Vader’s helmet that grilled the words *Dark Side* onto the bread, and on the wall – wait for it! – were two crossed lightsabers.

“So who usually wins?” I asked. I was standing in the living room after a quick tour, and now turned towards Hänse Quandt. He was still in hat and coat, like me, and kneeling in front of the log burner, in the process of lighting a piece of newspaper and waiting until the wood arranged above it caught fire, after which he left the stove door slightly ajar and stood up. Then he put on some music – with an ease that stunned me, I mean: putting on music! Is there any more embarrassing movie quote? You’d either have to be incredibly carefree or small-minded or very brave to do that, you can only either despise or admire it. I, for one, admired him for it. What a brave man! It was, by the way, the same courage exhibited by the men who cope with this gargantuan moment in the church, when they say: Yes, I do. The wittiest and funniest men suddenly become entirely focused. No fidgeting, no sarcasm, no little games. I myself had seen that – like everything, actually – only on the television, but honestly, it always broke my heart for a moment. Men, I would think, men, men, I love you. Is there anything more incredible than the sincerity of a cool man?

Oh yes, I have to concentrate, so he put some music on, this captivating and tender folk music by Johnny Flynn, who I liked, no, that was wrong. Music has a strange effect on me. Did I say somewhere that I listen to this easy listening nonsense in order to save myself the torment of choosing? If so, that was a lie. The fact is, as soon as I listen to music, I feel completely dazed. Sure, some music leaves me cold, but most of it grabs me by the scruff of the neck and gives me a thorough shaking and I fall for it. I fall for it hook, line and sinker; helplessly, hopelessly.

After my experience with Patsche, by the way, this effect had intensified to unbearable proportions. Just recently, I was sitting in the espresso bar, unsuspectingly drinking my healthy green tea – green tea, you know, the cancer-zapping stuff, have a cup of it and then you can chain smoke and indulge your coffee vice to your heart’s content – and reading a book, subject matter: irrelevant, something to do with men and women and melancholic resentments, and I was craving a cigarette and – bam! – suddenly *It’s all over now, Baby Blue*, the absolutely incredible version by Them, started playing. And yes, so that we don’t

misunderstand one another, I agree that Bob Dylan is the king and They are clueless minions in comparison, just good enough to polish his silver, but, honestly, when it comes to *Baby Blue*, they're way out in front. Do you know the one I mean? You can stream it anytime and anywhere nowadays, which is really great. Language is so sparse, after all. Words will never convey what I want to tell you if I compile a great mix tape for you – but that's no longer of interest, because now everything's Spotify and so on. So, there I was in the espresso bar drinking my cancer prophylaxis, with a book I would leave on the table afterwards – so someone else could grapple with the humourless stuff – and I felt like I was about to faint. No, that's another lie! I felt that I immediately, really IMMEDIATELY, needed to turn to the side, to a man one hundred percent unknown to me, who was sitting there flicking through the *Berliner Zeitung*, entirely clueless and content with himself and the world, and kiss him wildly. I had to hold on tight, really hold on tight to the stupid book! What was wrong with me? Had I had my erotic awakening at Busen and Co, and was I now roaming the streets, a danger, when any good song came on, for my respectable male fellow citizens? Exactly. That's how it was.

In any case, that had to be said, because now, at Hänse Quandt's, Johnny Flynn was playing and that's something I really couldn't handle.

Hänse Quandt came over to me and took both lightsabers down from the wall and threw one of them to me. He stepped three paces back, loosened his scarf and pressed the button, making the sword emit its shimmering red beam. "Let's find out," he said. I tossed my bag onto his sofa and opened my coat, grabbed the sword with both hands, pressed the button and lifted the blue shining sword above my head. "May the Force be with me," I cried, then we touched blades and began to fight, our coats billowing around us.

Have you ever fought to music? In the movies, they always fight to music; as we mostly know fights only from the television, it awakens in us the impression that it's like that in real life too, that as soon as you roll up your sleeves and gamely fling yourself into the fray, music will begin to play from some secret source. But I strongly suspect that's a fallacy. When the Mafia are doing their job somewhere, the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack doesn't play in the background, and if a Berlin taxi driver loses his temper and pulls another foolish driver from his vehicle and pummels him, *Sultans of Swing* won't be playing on the car stereo, giving the whole thing a somewhat amusing touch.

But I have to say, if you ever find yourself reaching for a lightsaber at home, I can thoroughly recommend musical accompaniment; it puts you in a great mood almost immediately, and it's like dancing, except with a winner. I really like winning, even though I admittedly don't have much experience in this regard, I mean – four older siblings! Siblings are the most ruthless beings in the world, I think because all siblings are secretly jealous of one another and want to kill one another, or at least that's what Master Freud, the boss of unconscious desire, says. As soon as someone who has siblings sits down at a board game, let's say, *Malefiz*, their killer instinct is awoken. They can be a perfectly nice, peaceable person otherwise, but now they want to destroy somebody. Youngest siblings, like me, are of course the ones most frequently destroyed. The good thing is: you get used to it. The bad thing is that, of course, when the opportunity presents itself, you fight to the death. It's a kind of frenzy, there's nothing you can do about it. With the music of Johnny Flynn in the background, it was as though we were fighting amid one of these delightful P.G. Wodehouse landscapes, green hills rolling off towards a hazy horizon, the low light of the evening sun falling on my opponent's face, mulberry bushes full of glistening fruits. I tossed my hat away and thought I could feel the wind in my hair.

The culture journalist was the first to start sweating and take off his coat, but I quickly got hotter and hotter too, and soon I took off my coat, my scarf, which were followed by his pullover and my cardigan, his shirt and trousers and my dress. We stood there opposite one another in our underwear – him in boxer shorts, but without a shirt, me in a tank top, but no bottoms – and gasped for air, propping our hands on our knees, and I noticed how Johnny Flynn was working bit by bit on my inner dismantlement and that *Queen Bee* was now playing. If everything up to that point had softened me, *Queen Bee* made me melt like butter on a piece of Dark Side toast by grill master Vader, Johnny Flynn sang and we looked at one another and I dropped the lightsaber and Hänse dropped his lightsaber too, and then we pulled off the rest of our clothes, and then I came a little closer and Hänse too and when he touched me for the first time, gently stroking across my cheek and my neck and then everywhere else, I thought: either I'm dying or I'm dying, but when we kissed, I stopped thinking entirely.

HUNTER DAWN

For the sake of clarity, though, I really have to relay a dialogue at this point; one which admittedly doesn't put me in the best of lights, but which makes it clear that we didn't simply fall on one another like lovestruck teenies and leave unmentioned the important topic of protection, no, I remember rather clearly that Hänse, at some point when we were rolling across the carpet, straightened up, with a sock stuck to his shoulder, and whispered: "Hey, are you on the pill?"

I sat up too: "Oh! No! No. Do you have anything?"

"No, nothing."

"Oh, Jesus, so what do we do?"

"I don't know, sweetheart," he tucked a strand of my dishevelled hair back behind my ear, "shall we try the interruptus thing?"

"Interruptus?" I said originally: "Is that a dinosaur I don't know?"

Hänse froze mid-movement and lowered his hand. "What kind of dinosaur?"

"Well, something like an Eoraptor – which means 'Hunter Dawn' by the way – quite small, around a metre or so in height, comes up to your knees at most. Carnivorous."

Hänse looked at me, then laughed loudly and uncontrollably, and to be companionable I laughed too, we laughed until we no longer could, and then we kissed until we no longer could and then we had – sorry, Handke, but there's just no way around it – then we had sex until we no longer could.

Interruptus is, let it be said for the sake of thoroughness, a dinosaur about which, on this day, the top biologist Charly Benz found out nothing more.

THE STRAWBERRY THIEF

It was the day after the dancing in *Tente*. I woke up early and was puzzled by the William Morris rug that I hadn't realised was on my wall. A gentle dawn light had already crept into

the room, it was getting noticeably lighter. I sat up a little and looked around for my daylight alarm clock. When I couldn't see it, it occurred to me that I wasn't even in my room. This was Dragaschnig's room. It was his sublet, and there he was, lying right next to me, naked and brown-skinned and utterly relaxed, half covered by the sheet. He was breathing serenely. I stuffed the pillow behind my back and leaned back against it, dazed. I saw my glasses on the nightstand and, putting them on, saw that there were lots of little birds pilfering strawberries on the Morris rug, and remembered that the pattern really was called *The Strawberry Thief*. It looked pretty in the scant morning light.

I studied the walls, the Biedermeier furniture which gleamed in a soft reddish tone, our discarded clothes on the floor, a few moving boxes against the wall, and my gaze drifted over to Dragaschnig. I looked at him closely. He had the same slim, athletic body as before, insanely narrow hips. I always had liked incredibly narrow hips on men. I found it moving that they were as narrow as ever, like back then, when he used to stroll with effortless coolness through the school corridors, guide basketballs into the net on the court and kiss Sissi Schubert in the parking lot in front of the school. He had hips like an 18-year-old, and yet the first silver strands shimmered amongst his dense black hair. He was an incredibly beautiful man. Perhaps – apart from Dr. Faruki, of course – the most beautiful man I knew.

I was, to say the least, dumbfounded by the previous evening, it was as though I had caught up with my youth. We had danced and drank mojitos and cola, we had laughed a lot and the music had been good, and then they played *Out of Time* and he had stood on one side of the bar and I on the other, and we had raised our glasses to one another. We moved towards each other through all the people and kissed one another. And I wrapped my arms around these narrow hips and smelt his hair and the sweat on his neck, and after a while we leaned against the toilet door, snogging, in the lobby of *Tente*, and I can no longer remember how we got home, still snogging.

Jesus, snogging. Snogging is another one of those awkward words, the kind that makes you feel a little uncomfortable whenever you hear it, and I never thought I'd say it, but it's a bit like the Latin macchiato: if you really want to drink one, you've no choice but to admit it out loud beforehand, and it's like that with snogging too, when you snog, and I mean, really snog and not just kiss, then you have to say: I snogged. It's very similar with canoodling, you're never really sure which, as a raw, naked word, does you in more, snogging or canoodling. I personally have also never really understood when you refer to it as snogging and when as

canoodling. Was that even snogging yesterday, or was it more like canoodling? And do you then have to say: it was *still* snogging, but *not yet* canoodling, or the precise opposite; we canoodled but *didn't* snog? In short, is one more than the other? More extensive, more expansive, more inviting? On a purely intuitive level, I would say that kissing comes first. Then canoodling, then snogging. In any case, I reckon we pretty much covered all three categories, we kissed and canoodled and snogged. And some pretty good music played in the background, which Dragaschnig had put on somewhen and somehow, *Walk on the Wild Side* and *American Pie* and *Sound of Silence*, and it continued in that fashion, nothing but hits!

I stood up carefully, needing coffee. From a hook on the wall hung a checked bath robe (*Derrick Rose*, all I had to do was check the label, *A men's dressing gown from Derrick Rose is key for relaxing in luxury*. The members of the English Royal family also slipped into their Derrick Roses before they made a coffee), which I pulled on, then set off in search of the kitchen. I padded across the delicate herringbone parquet in the large hallway and opened various doors and closed them again, it was a huge apartment, whose owners spent the winter somewhere in the south, for six months Dragaschnig looked after the many, many plants here and the bathrobe and the rest of the furnishings, including an overbred, long-haired cat. In the chic kitchen – Bulthaup, of course – I immediately found the coffee machine – Nespresso, what else? The numerous colourful capsules with the alluring names had always overtaxed me, so I simply took one at random, steel blue, it was called *Odacio*, and hoped it wasn't decaffeinated.

I watched as the luscious coffee dripped into the thick-walled cup.

I needed to briefly summarise things for myself.

I was 43 years old, and for the first time had just spent the night like a teenager, with canoodling and snogging and everything. It was strange. I took a second cup out of the cupboard, and for Dragaschnig I chose green, *Stormio*.

I lifted the lid off a bulbous glass candy dish, which hovered atop the mirror-smooth kitchen island like an elaborate jellyfish, and pulled out a couple of Cantuccini. Suddenly music came from the bedroom. I paused and listened. *These boots are made for walking* by Nancy Sinatra. Another great hit. Seriously, I couldn't have put together a better mix myself. I returned to the bedroom with my tray.

Dragaschnig had pulled on his boxer shorts and was kneeling next to the stereo. I went over to one of the armchairs by the window and put the tray down on the small table next to it, sinking into the red cushions with my coffee cup.

"These were yours, right?" He held something up, and at first I had to think hard about what it was, an object I hadn't seen in a long time. A cassette tape.

He looked at me. I looked at the cassette, then at Dragaschnig. My mix tapes, Jesus.

"I found them when I was cleaning out my mother's house." He laughed. "You know I never found out whose they were?"

No, of course I hadn't known that. At the time I'd thought: I love Dragaschnig and Dragaschnig loves me, and even if he doesn't yet love me quite as much as I love him, then he will after hearing my mixtapes.

He stood up and came over to me with the two cassette cases.

"I bought myself a cassette recorder especially – it wasn't easy, you can only get those things on the black market."

Yes, I could imagine that, he probably stole it from the antiquities collection in the technology museum.

"*Let's spend the night together, C.*" He read out what I had written on the cassette sleeve years ago, centuries ago. He sat down next to me. "Okay," he said, kissing me. "*Time is on my side, C.*" he read from the other cassette case. "Right," he said, he grinned and I grinned too, and then we kissed a little more, we were almost canoodling. And I thought: We really do have time on our side.

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SEX AGAIN

Well, and then there's Mo Gabler. I didn't leave out so much when it comes to Mo Gabler. Does anyone remember the night he turned up at my door? As pissed as a newt?

It turned out to be a very nice evening and actually much nicer than I've made out here, so let's go back briefly, it was like this:

We watched *Star Wars, Episode V, The Empire strikes back* and ate Mon Chéri, later I opened a packet of crisps and a few beers, Gabler connected his phone to my stereo and Graeme Jefferies, so, wow. I was pretty overwhelmed, *proper* music, in my apartment! And honestly, from up there, somewhere in space, Bregenz and the university and trees and flowers and everything were pretty far away. From up there, even Kafka was just another guy with trousers that were probably – almost certainly – too short, a man who worked for an insurance company, and I had to say, apart from his sad books, I found him damn attractive.

So far, so good. On the Gabler thing, I actually only left out a half-sentence, which I don't think that really counts, the half-sentence went like this:

I actually found Gabler pretty damn attractive, especially without trousers.

Yes, and then?! The dear reader may be asking, lacking any imagination. Well, what can I say! Eventually we lay helplessly or, how do you say, *hopelessly* entangled on my sofa landscape, the music: Graeme Jefferies, the trousers: off, the attractiveness factor: considerable. And then, Jesus, there are so many painful and embarrassing words for it, shag, screw, and those are just the ones beginning with S, then, in short, we had sex.

And here we catch sight of our friends who left out the chaturanga – whether wisely or cowardly, that's a matter of opinion - and all meet in downward dog. We take a few deep breaths, and on we go.

81

ALL THE THINGS I DIDN'T SAY

I could have told my sister Sybille all of this, but Sybille opted for the abbreviated version, the extremely abbreviated one, my sister didn't even know I had sex. But I imagine she knew something. And only later, when I was lying in my bed after our relatively one-sided dialogue, my previous cheerfulness had vanished.

And now? Now I was pregnant. It was obvious. Dr. Faruki had suspected it, the pregnancy test had proved him right, and the specialist Dr. Öhmel had confirmed it. How was this supposed to work? How could I manage something like this? Did I even want a child? I would have liked to have been asked. I could have done with some time to *really* think it

over, *beforehand*. Sure, I'd thought about it enough over the many years preceding this, but that had been theoretical, or rather - I had to admit it to myself bluntly now: I had thought about it and wanted a child without there being any chance of it coming true. In those circumstances, you can wish for anything you like. And now? Now I was trapped.

I lay awake in my bed, wondering if this would stay: this terrible feeling of being utterly vulnerable.

And then, all of a sudden, a very simple thought changed everything, because I thought: You don't have to have it.

It was a thought like a hand pulling away a veil, a veil of fear and despondency and self-pity, and suddenly my vision became crystal clear again. Because I saw my baby. Floating and compact like a mistletoe. And I thought: that's completely out of the question. And I felt confidence and a wild joy, very briefly, like a flare, then the fire subsided and what remained was uncertainty. Uncertainty, but bearable.

I just knew that not having this kid wasn't an option. In any case: I knew I didn't want that. And so, at first, all I could say clearly was what I didn't want, and not yet so clearly what I wanted, namely, a child, but maybe that was normal. Maybe you're always caught off guard by something like that, maybe even women who really wanted a child, and when it actually happens it's a shock and you need time. Maybe you need time for the fear of all the unknown to dissipate and make room for the wanting.

And then I thought: What the bikini girls were to the Red Stripe Ambassador, Dragaschnig, Hänse Quandt and Mo Gabler were to me. I too had ventured out to sea with far too little fuel, I had somehow got lost with far too few provisions, I'd had too little fuel in general and was so bizarrely stranded in this world, and – *expect good things* – then the three of them had strolled over, and whatever it was they had brought with them: it felt good.

[END OF SAMPLE]