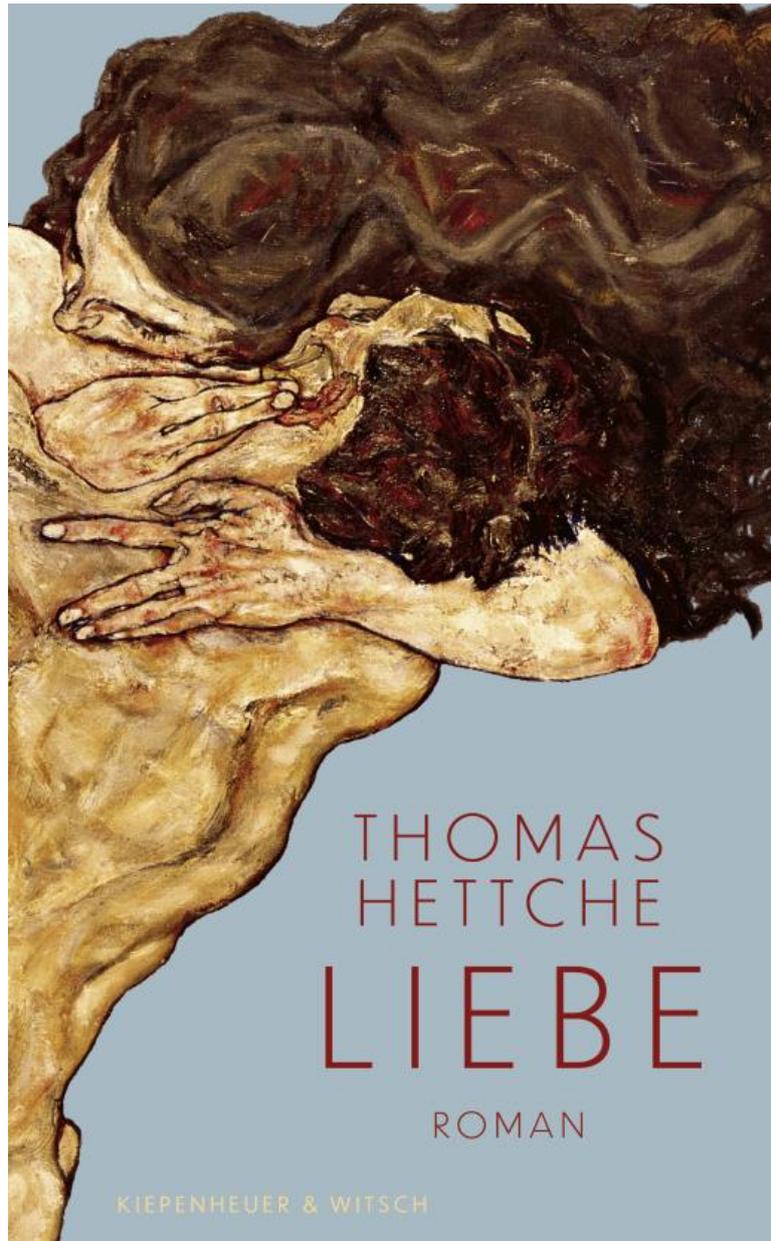


LOVE

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ONE

Love is one of those rare words that prescribes what it describes. That says a lot about love, but not what it is. Which is why Max asked this precise question, not entirely seriously and without any great reflection, in fact simply to kickstart the conversation at their table.

'What is love?'

Love was work, came the instant reply from the person sitting next to him, a beefy man of about fifty, who looked triumphantly around the circle of strangers brought together by the seating plan of a summer party somewhere on the Baltic coast. A thatched farmhouse, a cobbled farmyard with white-clothed tables, coffee and cake, loud children running around, changing tables for babies, pinned-up hairdos, summer outfits. The beefy man added that people changed over the course of a marriage, so you had to keep forging a bond. It was horrible to see couples in a restaurant staring silently at their phones.

Next, the young woman sitting opposite them said that she had met her husband on a dating app and they got married two years ago. This was the first time she had lived with one of her partners. The man next to Max immediately interrupted her to say that he and his wife were celebrating their silver anniversary this year and had two grown-up children.

Now the elderly couple at the end of the table piped up. They had only been together for a year, the thin man with a three-day beard in a waistcoat and colourful scarf explained. One evening the waiter at a restaurant they both frequented had just sat them at the same table. They didn't live together, added his girlfriend, a woman with boxy black horn-rimmed glasses, they were too old for that. After all, they had their own friends, their own habits. But they didn't live very far away from each other. Love was a feeling, the thin man said with a jovial laugh. Feelings came and went, they changed, that was what was so wonderful about them. For example, he had once been desperately in love with a woman, but she could only love red-haired men. Everything stopped when a red-haired man came into the room. He offered to dye his hair, including his eyebrows and pubic hair, but it didn't work, sadly. Love did its own thing.

Max's neighbour scrutinised the couple uncertainly, and this was the moment when everyone realised that he was in an unhappy marriage. But no one said anything. It was the woman with the large glasses who finally took pity on him. You did have to make sure you suited each other, she said. At their age there wasn't much time left. The young woman stared

at the tablecloth in front of her and nodded. She had known at once that this was the one, she said. All of a sudden, the disquiet she had always felt inside was gone. She had been totally at peace since then. And it was wonderful.

Max can still see the splendid blue sky arching over their heads that day and the gulls drifting and screeching overhead, and he can remember exactly how he had pictured the young woman's thumping heart and her surprise as the peace she described suddenly flooded through her. All the dreams of plenitude that have burgeoned in the lonely years of childhood naturally seek out love as their vessel, because it is the long-desired site of adulthood, that first kiss the irreversible, sadness-tinged but yearned-for dividing line from childhood. Now the small flat, the ring, the first glass of champagne, their date nights, and how proud she is of it all. Max can feel, once again, the pain he experienced as he looked at that young woman. He had just turned sixty-three.

Later on, there had been a host of candles flickering on the tables, their dim light barely illuminating the guests' faces, and he made no attempt to memorise their names. The white wine was so cold that the liquid condensed on the glasses. He drank too quickly. When the table had been cleared away, the DJ turned up the music and the first people began to dance, he grabbed a bottle and a glass and made himself scarce. Bright lanterns in the fruit trees, their glow spreading across the lush grass that yielded to his footsteps like a carpet. The unruffled water of the Baltic. A wooden jetty leading out into the darkness. He stepped on to it and felt with relief how everything became quieter and quieter, and the air cooler. He sank down into one of the two deckchairs at the end of the jetty.

'Good evening.'

Max looked around in surprise. Yet even though his eyes quickly grew accustomed to the dark and he could discern the silhouettes of moored boats and trees on the opposite shore, he could make out no more than a pale shimmer on the hair of the woman sitting next to him. Hesitantly he returned her greeting.

He really doesn't recall what they talked about that night, only that there was a kind natural affinity between them from the very first moment in the darkness that hid them from each other. Her voice was soft and warm. He soon felt that he could hear whether she was smiling or not as she spoke, whether she was on her guard or relaxed. How long did this last? Max can't remember. But at some point one of the typical red-sailed fishing boats chugged past, its spotlight ranging over the smooth water and across the whispering reeds, and finally sliding over the two of them as well, and in its dazzling light they saw each other for the first time.

'I have no idea what your name is.'

'Anna,' she said without taking her eyes off him.

Silently they studied one another, with some curiosity about the other's appearance but also indifferent to it, as if there were a deeper pre-existing intimacy between them. Max registered that they were about the same age as he stared at her lips. Now the corners of her mouth curved upwards and she smiled, wrinkles appeared on her cheeks, her eyes smiled too, and her smile was inviting and yet also tentative, grown-up yet girlish. Just as Max was telling her his name, the spotlight slid on, and they sank back into darkness.

He no longer knows how long they were silent, but it seemed like an eternity to him at the time. As if they needed some time to consider. But there was nothing to consider. The chugging of the boat faded to nothing. He heard the water gurgling around the jetty. It was she who finally broke the silence.

'Max – Anna,' she said quietly. 'So many As.'

'Like dark-blue eyes.'

'What?'

'To me A is dark blue.'

'But there are no dark-blue eyes.'

'I make some.'

'You make eyes?'

Before Max could explain what he meant, someone called her name.

'My husband,' she said, jumping to her feet. 'I have to go. We're driving back tonight.'

'Where to?'

'Stralsund. How about you?'

'I'm staying here.'

Dark blue was her favourite colour, Anna whispered, as he hugged her goodbye, her back harmless beneath his hand in her husband's line of sight, her head against his cheek. And yet, he noticed, her breath and his breath found a common rhythm. That is how their story began. Nowadays, this memory strikes him more than ever as a delicate, frail little thing, desperately at risk of being lost, and his heart tightens.

Unusually, he didn't go off to his workshop that morning but prepared breakfast instead. Anna likes it when he makes her a cappuccino with lots of foam with their gleaming metal machine. They sat at the kitchen table in silence, she eating no more than a slice of white bread with homemade apple jelly, as always flicking one strand of her grey bob out of her face. The lipstick on her fine, nicely curving lips. She had paired the amber necklace he bought her a few years ago with the blue flowery dress.

When the taxi arrived, they walked through the large hallway of the old vicarage together to the door that always jams slightly. He thought she was exaggerating, taking a bag with her, he said again, like the evening before when she had gathered her things and calmly told him that he didn't need to worry. But she just shook her head. Didn't want him to go to the hospital with her either. They kissed goodbye. He waved as the car turned on the gravel, drove slowly towards the gate, indicated, turned left on to the main road of the village and vanished.

How hot it is already. The thatched roof normally keeps the heat out. The house is a single-storey, 18th-century half-timbered building, parallel to the road, shielding the large garden with its hunched bulk. Suddenly two Tornados screech over the house. Their wail cuts through the air and bears down on Max. Now that there's war in Ukraine, they often fly over from Schleswig airbase.

His heart has leapt into his throat. His fear is rising. He stands undecided outside the door and stares over at the fields. It's late June, and the wheat is tall. Heat shimmers over the yellow sea of grain. No cars pass. Apart from the chirping of the crickets, it is totally silent.

TWO

Yasemin came to his surgery shortly after Max first met Anna. It was a normal working day, the first patient an old man who had his glass eye replaced once a year and had been treated by Max's father before him.

Max turned the small white glass ball around in the hissing flame on the work bench in front of him. The glass for human eyes has been manufactured in the Thuringian Forest for over a hundred years in the form of small tubes – glass with a bluish tint mixed with cryolite to make it softer and bring down the melting point. Max had melted it over the Bunsen burner, wrapped his lips around one end and blown into it carefully until the ball formed. Now, one after the other, he picked up from the table the coloured rods that looked like long crayon leads, and melted the iris onto the eyeball as a gossamer weave of blue and brown with bright speckles, dark dots, and a sparkling wreath, topped off with a black droplet of glass for the pupil, next the veins with delicate yellow and red threads, and lastly the cornea with transparent crystal glass.

Lots of disabled veterans and victims of accidents had come to see Max's father, some of whom had since died, while the latter category no longer existed since the introduction of laminated glass in windscreens. Most of the patients nowadays had tumours.

One last check of the patient's good eye, and then Max began to shape the sphere into a bowl, which he then carefully detached from the remaining glass of the sphere with a pair of pliers on the flame of the Bunsen burner and then placed it in a cooling crucible to temper. A few minutes later, when the prosthesis had cooled down, he rolled over on his desk chair to the elderly patient who inclined his head towards him in silence. Max made a mental note to search the man's medical records for when he had first consulted Max's father, who had founded the slightly pretentiously named 'Institute for Artificial Eyes' after the war.

With one hand Max held the prosthesis, with the other he held up the upper lid and pushed the top part of the glass eye as far back under it as possible with a contact-lens remover. Cautiously he slid the prosthesis in under the lower lid, followed by a quick press on the glass to let out the air behind it.

His receptionist was only worked half-days, so Max was alone that afternoon. He prepared invoices and sent off orders. When he checked the cupboard containing his range of blanks, drawers full of round eyes, each nestling in a foam hollow with the iris facing upwards, like

nipples on little white breasts or gleaming sweets, his thoughts turned to Anna, their nighttime talk by the Baltic, and he kicked himself for talking in such a puffed-up way about dark-blue eyes.

'What's up?' was the first thing Yasemin asked him.

'Nothing, why?'

She laughed and shook her head.

'You know how long we've known each other?'

He nodded. Thought of how he'd first noticed her behind the counter at the bar, spotting her false eye the moment she looked at him. He sometimes thinks that he conquered her purely because of this knowledge, despite her being so much younger than him.

'Look up, please,' Max said softly.

Serious and concentrated, she pushed back her heavy hair, turned her face towards him and squinted up at the ceiling lamp. He thought of how he had buried his face in these locks. How he had loved her soft mouth. He gently pushed down the lid until the edge of the prosthesis was visible, pressed the contact-lens remover on to the iris and lifted the thin shell out of the eye socket.

They chatted while he worked on her new eye. Those were always the nicest moments between them, when they spoke about Lucia, and Yasemin revealed to him a little of what their pubescent daughter would never tell him. As they talked, she looked at him with her good eye. The absence of the other eye destroyed her face, which is why she never looked in the mirror without the prosthesis in. He had learnt to put up with this sight. Yasemin's eyes were dark brown. Max melted the appropriate glass.

'Something's up with you,' Yasemin said. She gazed steadily at him. 'I think you're in love.'

'Don't be silly.'

'You are. I can judge.' She smiled. 'In the land of the blind man, the one-eyed woman is queen, you know.'

He had to think back to how Yasemin had said this a few weeks later as he was waiting for Anna outside the New National Gallery one hot, bright late August afternoon when there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. The air was shimmering. A shimmer due not just to the heat but also to his jittery state of mind.

The subject of the messages they had begun to send each other after the seaside party was when they could see each other again. It was Anna who finally offered to come to Berlin. He hadn't had anything resembling a date since Yasemin and had actually come to terms with the fact that he would never have another. It had been a long time since he had last stood freshly

shaven in front of the wardrobe. Eventually he had settled on a shirt that Yasemin had given him once for Christmas, one he had barely ever worn.

"Why Modigliani?"

Anna merely shrugged her shoulders with a chuckle, and they stood awkwardly facing each other. He had hardly been able to remember what she looked like, only keeping her voice in his ear and the memory of her smell. She was wearing a green wraparound dress, gold strap sandals and a small knapsack. Might people think they were a couple? A long-wed couple of sixty-year-olds going to an exhibition?

'Shall we go inside?' she asked.

He entered the museum with her as if he were trying something on for size. In the exhibition they circled around each other, each moving independently from picture to picture, as if this were their practised routine, and whenever Anna was at a slightly greater distance, he would raptly observe her nonchalant, soft gait as she approached the paintings, most of them female nudes, mounted on a bland background.

Later on, he fetched two bottles of lemonade from a snack bar next to the museum, and they sat down on a wall and squinted into the sun. They readily agreed that neither was much impressed by the pictures. He did seem to like the women's backsides, though, Anna remarked with a laugh, and he laughed too, although he quickly turned serious. The thing that had really fascinated him, he said, were the missing eyes. As if they'd been scratched off the paintings. He was haunted by those absent looks. What did she think?

'As if they were ghosts.'

'You can't see inside those women.' Max shook his head violently, as if this were a fearful prospect.

'So, what's all this about your making eyes?'

He looked at her in surprise. So she hadn't forgotten.

'I'm an ocularist. I make glass eyes.'

Max had to think of all the things he wouldn't tell her now. About his childhood in Berlin and wanting to become an artist, studying at art school in the early seventies, and eventually deciding to take over his father's business. The low sun bathed Anna's face in light, and he saw that her eyes were the lightest of blues, a colour he had only ever seen in textbooks.

'You have blue eyes.'

She nodded.

'Did you know that blue isn't actually a colour? Eye colour is produced by the melanin that colours the iris, but blue is produced by the diffusion of light when there's no pigment present. A genetic mutation that emerged in Europe four thousand years ago.'

'So I'm defective?' she asked mockingly.

'No, no,' he hurried to say, shaking his head indignantly. 'Quite the opposite. Blue is very rare globally. Ninety per cent of people have brown eyes.'

The way the light caught on her lashes and gleamed on her beautiful lips and in the small lines around her eyes: he could feel his heart thumping as he sat close beside her and studied her, and it was thumping because he could sense she was enjoying his gaze.

'Do you have children?'

'No.' She shook her head and set the empty lemonade bottles down on the floor. 'A husband, but no children.'

He lowered his eyes for a moment and felt that if he stayed like this for long enough, he would see her.

When he walked her to the station later, their hug was, as at their first meeting, the only time they touched. And once more his hand rested on her back and he felt as if he were holding her whole body in it. A sensation of not wanting to let go of her and a long unaccustomed sense of intimacy. He felt as if he was turning red.

'I'm not going to cheat,' she said quietly. The train pulled in, and she gently freed herself from his embrace.

He nodded, as if this was no matter, and yet his heart was pounding with happiness because he understood that she had just felt the same thing he had.

'Are you happy?'

'Happy? Satisfied, I would say.'

Given how their eyes met and they both had to smile, what she said next was incongruous.

'I know where I belong.'

THREE

2013-08-21 22:02:08

Dear Anna, it was lovely to see you again. It genuinely wasn't so easy for me to let go of you again. Was nice to sense such a natural connection.

Good night, Max

2013-08-21 22:12:52

Dear Max, yes, I found it hard to let go of you too. But daily life will straighten us out. Best wishes, Anna

Max stares at his smartphone. The old messages magic the past present back to life. He had written to her immediately after their meeting at the National Gallery. He'd been so disappointed by her answer. He had hesitated for so long before he dared to write her another message late that night.

2013-08-22 00:47:28

Don't take this the wrong way, but I miss you.

Anna's answer arrived almost instantaneously.

2013-08-22 00:48:32

I miss you too.

2013-08-22 00:49:03

I don't take it the rong way. Not at all.

2013-08-22 00:49:21

wrong

The way he stared at the light of the phone in the dark and wondered for the first time if Yasemin might be right and he was indeed falling in love. Although, he wasn't really sure if he still knew what that felt like. It had been so long. Max uses his thumb to scroll through the messages, which whirr across the screen like the fruit on a slot machine. He keeps swiping, it kills time, and time stops when he reads them.

2013-09-11 18:02:45

I can't think of an excuse to write to you,
so I won't write to you today.

2013-09-11 18:03:34

Are you laughing?

2013-09-11 18:04:57

Yes.

2013-09-11 18:04:57

That's nice.

They texted for many months, sharing every detail of their lives, mostly at night, as if the darkness reinforced the silent, disembodied closeness that seemed to increase with every message, and they spoke incessantly about the longing they felt and further fuelled. Max swipes the screen and tries to recall that late summer. He can remember that the heatwave broke at some point, and it turned cold and started to rain. And that they still didn't meet, even though his longing grew and grew. She kept coming up with different reasons why it wasn't possible just then. Until he couldn't bear it any longer.

2013-11-10 22:02:45

Another day gone. I spent it waiting for you. If only you were here!

He had felt so bad after sending that message. He knew it wasn't correct the very moment he sent it, because what he wanted was something more than games and flirting. He wanted presence. And he was so unhappy when Anna didn't answer. He can't remember how much time passed after that – it seemed like an age to him. His curiosity piqued, he scrolls to find her message. A week. He remembers precisely the moment it arrived. It was a cold autumn day, already dark and he had locked up the surgery and was on the way home when he heard a message notification, one, then another, a third. He wrestled his phone out of his jacket pocket.

2013-11-18 18:12:34

I sometimes ask myself, Max, what we've got ourselves into here. If someone had told me on that night by the Baltic that things would turn out like this between me and you, I would have laughed out loud and shaken my head.

2013-11-18 18:14:09

We are a tune to which I don't know the lyrics, and yet I can't get it out my head, I keep humming it, sometimes it just pops into my head, in the middle of my work or a conversation, at any moment.

2013-11-18 18:15:23

I keep hoping that our feelings will settle down at some stage.

Do you know something? You'll find a woman you can love, and I will be sincerely happy for

you. We will grow old and laugh together
about how it once felt.

Max feels again what he felt back then. That it really was serious between them. And that it struck him that Anna was admitting the same to herself, even as she wrote the opposite. He goes over to kitchen sink and runs the tap until the water is ice-cold. Drinks a large glassful. Hard is the sound as it puts it in the porcelain sink. Back in the living room, he draws the curtain to keep out the heat and sinks on to the sofa in the half-dark room.

Everything about this empty house washes him back into the past. He knows why, and yet he doesn't want to know. What is going on in Anna's life right now? How is she? He recalls sitting on a wet bench near his surgery that autumn day and typing his reply.

2013-11-18 18:18:52

Dear Anna, what you wrote feels like a
touch, even though you said the opposite.
I want to kiss you at last!

Again her answer came straight away.

2013-11-18 18:20:05

We kissed long ago, you know.

For a second time stood still. Max felt the same despair he had felt in that moment. He lowered the smartphone. He suddenly felt so tired. What should he do now? It didn't take him long to decide, but because he was scared of the consequences of his answer, he put it off for a few days in the hope that something would change. But nothing did. And so he finally sent it.

2013-11-10 22:02:45

No, that just isn't true. And that hurts.

2013-11-23. 21:05:11

Yes, it hurts

2013-11-23 21:05:42

everywhere.

And that was it. That night, he himself could hardly believe that he simply didn't answer her again. But that was what he did. And it was so easy for him, the way disappointment makes such things easy, and it was just as painful.

Max turned on the radio on the table next to the sofa. Only bits of melodies and scraps of talk got through to him on his flight over the fields of memory, but then for some reason a name dragged him out of his thoughts.

Kathrin Lutz, a reporter's voice said, had played ten-pin bowling for Schrezheim Bowling Club since she was a girl. She trained once a week, sometimes twice, on Sundays she drove to matches with her team, and everyone who was there on that particular Sunday afternoon described it as an incredible experience, even now. It was like a dream. But there was a video, the voice said, and in it you could see the milky sunlight falling across the lanes and how well Kathrin had bowled.

Automatically Max turns to look at the radio. Whereas her opponents had skipped after letting go, shouted something after their balls, bowed to the spectators or shaken their heads when their throw missed, Kathrin had simply bowled and then as soon as the ball was on the lane she had turned and picked up the next one to throw again as soon as the pins had been righted, without even waiting to see how many pins she had struck. Her face had been totally impassive.

In the video, the reporter said, you could see more and more spectators gathering behind her part of the rink, players in the other lanes staring over incredulously, the crowd cheering and stamping their feet, a TV camera team setting up behind Kathrin Lutz.

She couldn't remember a thing, Max now hears Kathrin Lutz's voice saying, neither the sun nor her opponents nor the noise inside the rink. She had been somewhere else, as if she were underwater. All she could say was that she had been bowling and absolutely sure that she couldn't put a foot wrong. She'd noticed that the place had gone deathly quiet and, wondering what was wrong, had turned to face the spectators, and all of them, most of them total strangers, had been staring at her. No one moved or said a word. Then they had all started

clapping, and her coach had yelled that she had just broken the seven-hundred-point mark, a world record, and she had suddenly felt all dizzy.

At that point Kathrin Lutz still had another four goes, the reporter says, potentially thirty-six more points. She had scored only eleven.

The spell was broken. Max turns the radio off. He finds something about this story moving. In the olden days, people would have called what happened there a miracle.

Love shimmers at the beginning. Max can still feel the grief he experienced when it was over before it had even begun. And yet he was the one who had let Anna drift out of his life. He hadn't written to her any more, that was all. He must have lacked the courage, and he had shied away from the wounds and disappointments that were now clear to see. Shied away from believing in the miracle. After breaking up with Yasemin he had been single for a long time, and now he was again. He knew how to accommodate it. With age you're more likely to accept that these things happen. Maybe, Max thinks, that this acceptance is what constitutes being an adult.