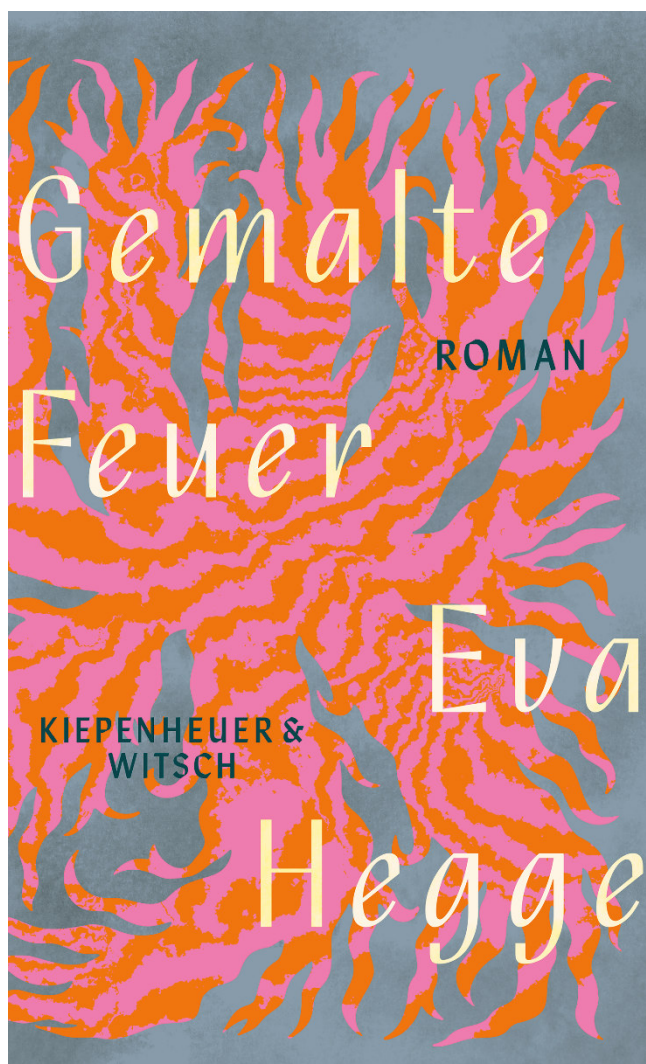


PAINTED FIRE

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As though the man had read my thoughts, he said: “The neighbourhood isn’t that pretty at first glance, perhaps. But in my opinion, we should accept the circumstances we sometimes find ourselves in, and be content with things as they are. If it’s dark, then we have to immerse ourselves in the darkness and find its own unique beauty.” He emphasised this last sentence in a peculiar way, as though it were a quote or a well-known saying. “To stick with the same metaphor, many people keep seeking the light instead – they try to drive away even the slightest shadow. And to what end?” I thought for a moment. Wiping his hands on his apron, he concluded: “Ultimately, everyone has their own burden to carry, whether they live in the darkness or in the light”.

PROLOGUE

One winter, I went to the library almost every day. That was before my life was plunged into shadow. The shadow was cast not by a deep darkness, but rather a slow shift in the light conditions. Back then in the library, I had no inkling of this; I presumed the time I would spend there until I completed my studies was the opening chord for an interesting life, in a bright future that was about to begin. My thoughts regarding this future were muddled at times, of course, but in essence I pictured it stretching before me as something promising, just like I'd always imagined the times ahead to be. A golden autumn after the summer holidays, for example, with new friends and the new items of clothing I would wear; or the time when I would have a child and we would stroll together beneath chestnut trees; or a period spent living abroad, where in the haze of the future I saw myself walking the streets of an unfamiliar city, in shoes I didn't yet own. In my imagination back then, the future became a chain of floating, welcoming spaces in which I could roam and spend time as I pleased. I could have known – and I did – that these images and real life were two different things. However, because this knowledge was confined to theory, it was irrelevant to me, and so I went to the library in order to write my final thesis, and to prepare for that life.

When morning came in my halls of residence, I made coffee and two slices of toast with marmalade. As a student of the humanities, I wasn't accustomed to getting up early; it seemed like an exotic habit, one I pursued with curiosity and diligence. While the other residents slept on, I sat on the windowsill to eat my breakfast, gazing at the ancient green river which flowed slowly from left to right beneath my window in the fog of the cold morning. The fog stood like a wall, unmoving and silent, over the sedately drifting, wide river. On other mornings, isolated swans would drift slowly over the water, the light of the dawning day captured within them. If I squinted, the steam from the hot coffee in my hand mixed with the floating haze over the river. I stretched and cracked my knuckles, as I did to provoke my boyfriend Bernard or, in the past, my younger brothers. A loud cracking sound, as though from strong branches, even though my fingers were thin. *Crick, crack*. Then I tossed a few things into my bag, had a quick wash, pulled on my coat and scarf and headed out, across the river and through the fog into the city.

The library was in a side street at the rear of the museum to which it belonged. It wasn't large, and you couldn't take anything out on loan; you could only request the books and read them quietly at a desk. The books you wanted to continue reading on your next visit had to be shelved in a so-called individual reference collection. Despite my preceding studies at the university, where I had often heard mention of these collections, I hadn't grasped until I started going to the library what they actually were. To begin with, I felt slightly proud to have one in the museum library: among the professionals, as it were. You had to write down on a slip of paper when you had last used your collection, so the librarian could see it was still in use. To begin with, I anxiously

made sure I wrote down the correct date, in clear handwriting, so that my arduously-researched books wouldn't be cleared away overnight. But after a while, the librarian began to recognise me, and from then on, I forgot to note the date, became free-handed and confident that no one would tidy away my books. I was a regular reader and no longer had to give my name at the registration desk.

My reference collection grew and made it increasingly unclear what I was working on at the time. “The Reversed Perspective”, “The Mendicant Order”, “Speculations on Anonymous Materials”, “Shadows – their Representation in Western Art” and “Nuns” stood alongside one another on my shelf. Perhaps the librarian thought I was indiscriminately ordering books and using them as a pretence to sit at one of her desks and kill time. These were the kinds of thoughts I wrapped myself in as I walked past the other readers, my books under my arm, to a vacant desk.

It was pleasantly peaceful in the low-ceilinged reading room with the beige carpeted floor; the only sounds were the occasional turning of pages and the hum of the scanner, otherwise there was concentrated silence. Like before the starting gun for a 100-metre sprint. Except that this silence lasted the entire day and remained calm and even. Because the reading room had glass windows on two sides, I would sometimes imagine that it was an aquarium, that the books were fish, and we readers at our tables, aquatic plants, climbing up the stones and swaying gently with the current. According to the website, there were over 700,000 books in the library's holdings. Most were stored in a warehouse outside the city and ferried in by white transporters when ordered. I had seen this a few times through the large glass windows. When I sat there, it was as though the library had many depths and

hidden nooks and crannies in which unexpected swarms of unknown fish drifted around, and I was overcome by a feeling of infinity.

With every sentence I read, something new began: the underwater reefs grew larger and more convoluted, corals and sandbanks appeared, though I didn't know where they were. When I surfaced again, I stared straight ahead out of the window or at a shelf and vaguely followed my thoughts, which hung like a veil over the book I was reading, over my eyes and head. I crossed my legs, stretched them out and leaned back in my wooden chair. The sea surged beneath me, vast and promising.

Externally, everything in the library functioned in a straightforward and orderly fashion. The librarian was always there; she was never ill or absent for other reasons. If she wasn't distributing books or clearing them away, she would be sat behind the desk at the entrance, reading or writing. Only occasionally did she look out of the window, seemingly thinking or relaxing. Her nameplate stood at the edge of her desk: "Mrs. Sánchez". She wore a blue jacket, brown trousers and a bronze-coloured neck scarf. Her hair was soft and dark and bound into a short ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her movements were swift and controlled and almost soundless.

Once, I ran into her alone in the morning. The window behind her desk was open, and fresh, cold air streamed in. She was just turning on the touch screen in the entryway, which displayed library updates, newly-acquired book titles, numbers and facts about the collection, and forthcoming readings.

"Good morning," said Mrs Sánchez, "...isn't that beautiful." Just as I was wondering what she meant, she looked at the screen, where a landscape in evening light could be seen, with a stone house lit from

the inside. It was the manufacturer's pre-installed start image, which appeared before you could log on and start the system. In the right-hand corner of the picture was the word "fan", and beneath it the words "not a fan", with an upturned thumb and a downturned thumb, as well as the name of a Scottish location.

"I usually click *not a fan*, then a new picture appears", she continued. "That way I can see a few more beautiful landscapes before I log on." She paused, stepped away from the screen and studied the image from a slight distance. She smiled. "I've never been to Scotland. It looks beautiful." I agreed. "Or at least, they've framed the image well," she added. We chatted for a while longer before I entered my name onto the list and went into the reading room, to finish reading "The Beggar File".

But one day when I arrived at the library, a thin man with glasses was sitting at Mrs. Sánchez's desk. He had a pale face and greeted me with a nod. I took "Reflections. On the Culture of Visuality in the Middle Ages" and "Breaking Forecast: 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation Artists" from my reference collection and sat down at a desk near the scanner. The man stared straight out into the room with an empty gaze. I slipped down in my chair, opened the first book and began to read.

In the epic poems of the European Middle Ages, I learnt, the narrative was repeatedly paused for several hundred verses in order to give extensive descriptions of objects, individuals or animals. Before the characters in the sagas could continue their quests, ride over black rocks and through thorny forests, slay wild animals or die in battle, the storytellers described everything in the most vibrant of colours. There

was, for example, a famous description of a colourful horse. It was more beautiful than any horse anyone had ever seen, and more valuable too. Its left ear and mane were as white as snow; its right ear and neck, jet-black. The head, one leg and one shoulder were red, and the other leg and the other shoulder, pale yellow. The horse's flanks shimmered like the feathers of a wild peacock, its back was apple-grey and flecked like a leopard's, *diu ein gofe was aphelgrâwe, / rehte als ein lêbart*, I quietly read along with the medieval text. The curves of the saddle, made of ivory, were adorned with precious stones and sat just right, as the poet emphasised, *ze mâzen enge unde wît*, while the saddle cover was made of velvet and the belly straps of silk, in order to protect the horse's coat. These were just a few details from the description. The medieval poet spent page after page describing what someone was wearing, listing veils, skirts, shirts, seams and collars, lauding silk sleeves and velvet coats that were trimmed with rare furs, with gold and emeralds. I looked up. There was a milky light outside, grey with a hint of blue and silver. Someone went over to the scanner, and the typical humming tone began. The past was a different place with different laws. It was far away.

On my next visit, Mrs. Sánchez was sitting at her desk as usual. She wore a dark grey jacket and a blue neck scarf. I laid "Products for Organising" in front of me, then saw her stand up and come over to my desk.

"I wasn't here..." she said, and I saw her dark eyes. "Something bad's happened."

"Oh..." I said.

“If you need something new, please let me know”, she continued. She touched my arm. “I can’t bear it. I won’t bear it”, she said quietly.

My stomach cramped up. Before I could answer, she wrote something down on a piece of paper, passed it to me and said: “This is the library’s direct line. If you ever can’t come in or need a book at short notice, please call me on this number”. 21-22380 was noted on the paper in neat digits.

After that day, she didn’t come in for an entire week. And then one morning as I walked into the reading room, I saw her, dressed in a black cardigan, tidying books away. I walked past and tried to meet her gaze, but she didn’t look up. Later, we said goodbye with just a nod. She looked pale and her eyes seemed more sunken than usual, as though they were behind some invisible line.

We didn’t speak to one another in the remaining weeks I spent in the library before submitting my thesis; and our gazes met only fleetingly. I spent the time laboriously summarising everything I had read. To me it felt like a time of hard work, and at night I dreamt of chapters and footnotes.

Once I had finally finished my thesis and was piling the books from my reference collection onto the cart, from where Mrs Sánchez would send them back to the storehouse, she looked at me from her desk with shadowy eyes. But when I was about to say something, she lowered her head.

I left the library without speaking with Mrs Sánchez again. At the institute where I had studied for five years, I tossed my thesis into

the letterbox, completed my exams and began the life of which I had that vague, softly-shimmering vision.

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Six years later, on the November morning when I discovered a moth infestation in my wardrobe, I was already plunged into the shadow, even though, as I've said, it was more of a half-dark, hazy shadow.

I was about to pull on a jumper when I saw that it had been eaten by moths. I inspected the others in the wardrobe and found holes in their sleeves and seams. One after another, I pulled out all the jumpers and cardigans and threw them onto a pile, then searched the laundry cupboard and the other drawers for the moths' nests, but all I found were additional holes, and nowhere any moths or their larvae, which ate wool and from which more moths would hatch.

I remembered having seen moth eggs in my parents' woollen socks. In a drawer in their wardrobe, I had stumbled across a few of these tiny little cocoons. As I'd searched hectically for socks in the dark of the morning before school, because my own were all dirty, I hadn't cared about the little cocoons. All that mattered was finding a pair of socks that fitted my requirements: black, as thin and inconspicuous as possible, and I didn't care whether there would be any left for my mother, whose size almost fit me, or how they would make their way back into the correct drawer after being washed.

But now that I was grown up and responsible for the housework myself, I became anxious, searched everywhere and sweated. I patted

down the sofa cushions, shook out the blankets and put them in the washing machine. I hoovered all the corners and cupboards and went down to the cellar to throw the vacuum cleaner bag in the rubbish; through fear of the eggs that I couldn't see.

By the time I was finished, it was midday. I sat down tiredly at the desk, my thoughts confused and sombre. Only tattered clothing and objects of disorder had passed through my hands. The apartment seemed cleaner, but I was restless and in a bad mood. I read that doing housework makes you live longer. Apparently, it's due to the physical activity. I imagined myself being very old and doing the housework with care, wearing jewellery that had become too loose and a silk blouse, and with a small dog as a companion, because my husband had died already due to doing too little housework. In my bedroom were piles of the books I still wanted to read, and outside the window an old tree grew and dispensed shade. I had a romantic, hazy idea of what it would be like to be old. But in truth, I was afraid of the certain solitude and the long phase of frailty. Of course, I was in the dark in every respect.

Since our wedding, Bernard and I had been living in a one-bedroom apartment with a small stone balcony. After spending a couple of years living in various locations after university – briefly in Turin, despite the fact we spoke barely any Italian, and later in a mountain region where we spent hours waiting for buses, picked blueberries and went hiking and skiing on weekends – three years ago, for reasons that were unclear to us in retrospect, we had moved here.

There was a river here too; it was wide and divided the city into two halves, and like my former halls of residence, this apartment wasn't far from the river, on a street that branched off from the riverside road.

From the kitchen window you could see the flowing water, which on some days was green, and on some muddy and brown. The neighbourhood we lived in was clean and relatively cheap, the houses were neither new nor old, and there was a launderette on our street. Everything seemed average and unremarkable.

As I hadn't found anything else after my last role in a small publishing house, I was temporarily working in a furniture shop in the centre of the city. Bernard was employed by the local building authority, was often at the office, and sometimes went on work trips. I could do a fair bit of my work from home, processing orders and writing product descriptions for the website and catalogue, and spent two, sometimes three days a week in our apartment, like today.

I searched online for an agency that provided cleaning services. The voice of the woman I spoke to on the phone sounded resourceful and relaxed. "Let me know what you need, then I'll see what I can offer you", she called. I could hear a radio in the background. I said that I maybe needed a bit of help with the cleaning, just once a fortnight, and that the apartment wasn't that big. I didn't mention the moths. "I can do you a good price for a cleaner without language skills. For the next few weeks, she would also be the only one available." "Ah", I said. "Would Thursday at one o'clock suit you for a no-obligation meeting? Her name is Janna." After a few formalities, the assignment was completed, we said goodbye and hung up. After that I stared out of the window into the rain, before opening my laptop and beginning to type stock quantities into order forms.

On Thursday, I tidied up and organised the cupboard with the cloths and tea towels, in case Janna would want to glance into it. I cleaned the

kitchen sink and organised the toothpaste, creams and medications in the bathroom. I put new sheets on the bed, folded the pullovers with the least holes and lined the shoes up neatly in the hallway. I put a little tip money ready on the kitchen table. The doorbell rang punctually at one o'clock. Pressing the door opener, I heard somebody with slow steps making their way up the stairs.

"Good afternoon", I said, as a woman appeared on the landing. She was shorter than me, and I estimated her to be in her mid-fifties. She was wearing a dark blue jacket, a white t-shirt and a delicate golden necklace with a small locket.

"Hello", she replied with a deep voice and clear eyes. She had blonde highlights, gently-curved lips, and the tip of her nose pointed softly upwards.

"Come in, would you like something to drink, a coffee?" She pulled off her shoes in the hallway, placed them carefully together and pulled a smartphone out of her handbag. Then she said something into it and held the display out towards me.

"My name is Janna. I'll have water."

I nodded, also introduced myself and gestured for her to follow me into the kitchen. While I ran water into a jug, I saw Janna looking around out of the corner of my eye. I poured water for her and we sat down while she laid her phone on the table and indicated for me to speak into it. I cleared my throat.

"Thank you for coming". She looked at the display, then nodded and smiled in a way that was friendly and warm, but still professional.

"Is it okay for you to come every two or three weeks? I spoke into the microphone as clearly as possible. Her facial expression changed and now seemed to express indifference or tiredness. With a

gentle shrug, she said something, and I read: “Yes, that’s okay. Can’t you manage things alone?”

I felt my face go warm. “Would you prefer weekly?” I asked. “I could ask my neighbour, he might need someone to help him with the housework. Then you could alternate...” The app seemed to translate these sentences effortlessly and accurately too, just as it did Janna’s next answer. Without giving it any thought, she said: “No, I’d rather not, I’m busy, and money isn’t everything in life.

Janna picked up the glass and stood up. She walked into the hallway, and from there into the other two rooms and into the bathroom. I followed.

“Do you have children?” The phone now translated.

“No.”

“Can’t you?”

“I don’t know. Not yet, maybe...”

While she continued to speak into the microphone, I stared motionlessly at the dust on the floor.

“Children are tiring”, the words appeared in the app. Then Janna looked out of the window at the river.

“Have you ever gone out on it in a boat? Have you ever rented a boat? I said no and thought about the moths in the darkness of the wardrobe. I imagined myself sailing along the river in the fog in an old, worm-eaten rowboat, over the shoulders of a moth-eaten wool coat. We went back into the kitchen.

“Do you need additional cleaning products? Should I get hold of anything else?” I asked, showing Janna the few things I had. With an appraising gaze, she looked through everything, then said: “I’ll think

about it and send you a message.” To say goodbye, she kissed me on my left and right cheeks.

Once I had closed the door behind her and was standing in the hallway, the apartment smelt like talcum powder and slightly of carnations. The sweet scent was in the kitchen too. I looked at the weather app on my smartphone. It was supposed to rain again over the next few days: Friday, rain, 13 degrees, Saturday, light rain, 10 degrees, Sunday, rain, 9 degrees, Monday, rain, 7 degrees. Nothing else could be expected in mid-November. Bernard had texted me, and my colleague from the furniture shop was asking whether I could cover for her tomorrow, she had to go see her sister. My friend Jenny had also sent a message. She would be in town soon for a few days, and did I have time to meet. I answered her, and we made plans to meet at a café one afternoon. Jenny was my oldest friend. She’s been there ever since I can remember, and belonged to my life like a specific, familiar sound, sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground, as the warm tone of a memory or an invitation. I was looking forward to seeing her. And yet at the same time, the thought also held unease, perhaps apprehension. I made a note that I needed to buy moth paper, and put water on to boil for spaghetti.

[END OF SAMPLE]