

This sample translation was commissioned by *New Books in German*.

www.new-books-in-german.com

nbg@london.goethe.org

Stillbach

Sabine Gruber

C.H. Beck Verlag, Munich, 2011

Translated by Rebekah Wilson

For a moment I thought I heard the boss calling my name, but when I pushed the window open and listened outside, all I could hear was the chirping of the cicadas. I've never actually caught sight of one of these insects. Apparently they're covered in such bold and contrasting patterns they're often very difficult to see.

Antonella had disappeared as soon as our shift had ended; she was going into town to meet her brother, Mimmo. I read a little, dozed, wrote a letter to my mother and then a quick postcard to Aunt Hilda, in which I told her that I had been to see St. Peter's, that the Castel Sant'Angelo was closed because of staff shortages, that I had nearly broken the nose of a woman from Stuttgart, and that I was sharing a room with a girl from the *borgata* who – no, better not tell her that – was in the habit of sneaking out at night, and who received messages from strange men.

When I stepped out onto the terrace, I found Signora Manente sitting hunched over one of the tables. In the bright midday light, her rounded shoulders looked like those of a strong elderly man. On the table was a piece of chipboard no more than one metre square in size, and she was drumming on the board with the fingers of both hands, like a pianist playing the same notes over and over again. It was unlikely that she knew how to play, even though she looked like she might well be musical. Above her hands lay rows of jigsaw puzzle pieces, all sorted according to colour. Steg had been making fun of Signora Manente's jigsaw puzzle hobby that morning. He said she had started off with 100-piece puzzles a few years ago, and worked her way up

to 5,000-piecers. He asked whether I had noticed how she always went for the same thing: pictures of the countryside around Stillbach, views of Lake Reschen and the Ortler, even Innsbruck and Munich would do at a pinch. Last year, he said, he had seen her poring over the dismantled tiles of the Goldenes Dachl, and another puzzle called 'Autumn in the Uplands' which had 5,000 pieces. "That's what you call *lignam in silvam ferre*," he had whispered to me, pointing with his thumb at a pile of jigsaw puzzle boxes stacked up on a chair. I didn't know what he meant. He had put his other hand on my shoulder quite casually while he was speaking.

Signora Manente was so engrossed that she didn't notice me at first. She appeared to be working on the edge, and had already completed the monochrome sky section. In a corner of the board lay a pile of distinctive pieces, some brightly coloured, some an unusual shape. She had fitted a few of them together, and I could just make out a dazzling white mountaintop against a red sunset.

"What are you doing? Don't you want to go out and see the sights?" said the boss.

"I thought I heard you calling me."

"That was a while ago." She ran the tip of her tongue along her upper lip. Her fingers pounded away at the chipboard, and I got the impression she wasn't doing the jigsaw to relax: if anything, she seemed more on edge than usual. Perhaps her concentration was going and it bothered her that she could no longer memorise the details of a piece and then know where to find it later on. She kept picking up pieces that looked like they went together, then shaking her head when she found they didn't, oblivious to me standing there. At one stage, she tried to make two pieces fit together by forcing them, and she didn't stop until the top layer of each piece had completely come away from the cardboard beneath.

"What are you waiting for?" she said, "Go into the city, go and see the Piazza Navona or the Pantheon or something. You're wasting your day off."

Although I was reluctant to travel into the centre of the city on my own, I took a bus to the bottom of Via Vittorio Veneto, crossed Piazza Barberini, and after a while turned off Via del Tritone into a side street where there was less traffic. I was beginning to feel more relaxed: I told myself that there were a lot of tourists about and I had no reason to be afraid. When men tried to catch my eye I looked the other way, and I ignored shouts and whistles; in any case, it was hard to tell where they came from,

since the place was so busy, and I had no way of knowing whether they were directed at me. There was only one time that I knew for sure that a man was following me. “*Bella*”, he said behind me, “*Bellissima*”. I attached myself to a group of English tourists and looked on as the female tour guide pointed out the entrance to the Quirinale, and explained that the street we were on was named after the bakery that used to supply the palace. The man stopped too, and then went and stood behind the tour guide, looking over at me all the while. I guessed he was in his early twenties. His jeans were so tight it looked like he had put them on wet. He didn’t seem in the least perturbed by the fact that I was quite clearly ignoring him. I stayed with the group of English ladies, making sure I didn’t step on their feet. Most of them were wearing walking sandals. The heels of the woman in front of me were hard and cracked in places.

I heard the rattle of cups and the crunching of a coffee grinder coming from a nearby café, and I glanced inside to see if the place had a toilet. The white-haired man behind the counter banged the filter against the edge of the wooden drawer beneath the coffee machine several times. He was wearing a cream-coloured apron that fitted him so perfectly it might have been made to measure. With two quick flicks of the hand he screwed the filter, now clean and filled with fresh coffee, into the machine. I ordered a caffè macchiato and pushed my way past cardboard boxes, drinks crates and bottles of detergent to get to the toilet, which had neither lock nor toilet paper. I hoped my pursuer would have lost patience by now and moved on. I tried to hold the door shut with my foot whilst peeing, and missed the toilet completely at first. One of my legs was wet. I swore in Italian and was immediately reminded of my Aunt Hilda, who couldn’t stand it when people who otherwise never spoke a word of Italian would suddenly come out with *porco Dio*, *porca puttana* or even just *santo cielo*. I dried my leg with my hand as best I could. The tap water was a murky brown colour.

The man serving had pushed my caffè macchiato to the far end of the counter, close to a good-looking woman in her mid-40s with the kind of rasping voice that not even a dog could love. I stole a glance outside: the man was leaning against the wall of a house on the other side of the road and had lit a cigarette. He waved at me. Two men came into the café, shook hands with the man behind the counter, looked on as he prepared their customary coffees, then left without paying shortly after. My cup

was empty; I tried to think of a reason to stay in the café, and dug around in my shoulder bag. I considered ordering a slice of *ciambella*, but it looked dry, and the icing sugar had long since disappeared. The top of the cake looked like a snowy forest that had been hit by a storm.

Then I spotted the telephone on the wall of the passageway leading to the toilet. I changed a 500-lire note into telephone tokens and dialled my mother's number. Above the phone hung a photo of Enrico Berlinguer in a blue suit and tie. I couldn't imagine him at the Fiat demonstrations in Turin, although he had apparently been there. Antonella had been on about her Sardinian hero again that morning, about a talk he had given at the Festival Nazionale delle Donne Comuniste in Arezzo. He had gone out of his way to distance himself from Moscow, she had said. "It's thanks to Berlinguer that we've got Pertini as President, that we've got rid of that bribe-taking Leone." She stopped for a moment and then added: "You're not interested in politics though, are you? All the same, if it wasn't for the communists, there wouldn't be any divorces or abortions. You do realise that?"

Mother wasn't in. I tried Aunt Hilda but she didn't answer either. I paid for my caffè macchiato and left the café. The man had gone.

I drifted through the streets, allowing myself to be carried along on the tide of tourists. After a short while, I found myself standing in front of the Trevi Fountain: the place was packed and people kept pushing and bumping into me. I managed to escape to the other side of the piazza where the crowd was thinner, then walked down the steps and sat on the edge of the fountain. The cries of the street vendors all around mingled with the loud rushing of the water, and snatches of conversations in English, French and Spanish filled the air. Couples were holding hands, turning their backs to the fountain and throwing coins into the water.

The floor of the fountain glittered and sparkled, and I found myself wondering whether the country's lack of coins, which people were always complaining about, could be due to this kind of wastefulness. Aunt Hilda had blamed the Swiss and the Japanese for our coin shortage: the Swiss made watchcases out of our cheap lire, so she said, while the Japanese used them for buttons. Mother had shaken her head at "such nonsense": in her opinion, the real reason for the lack of coins was that the

Italians were too lazy to empty their machines, plus they didn't mint enough coins in the first place, which was why they were always bothering you at the checkout with chewing gum and toffees and those mini cheques, which people were already forging anyway. Our real currency wasn't the lira but the chewing gum, Mother had said, which you could blow bubbles with if you chewed it for long enough, until they burst of course.

I kept a lookout for my pursuer. I was curious to see whether he had found someone else to tail. There were a few men standing around here and there who didn't look like tourists. One was playing with his car or motorbike keys; another, wearing platform shoes, was holding his crotch and looking around as if waiting for someone. A group of schoolchildren sat on the steps behind me, their rucksacks held tightly between their feet. "Keep an eye on your things," said the teacher.

Suddenly I caught sight of someone who looked like Antonella sitting on the edge of the fountain. What on earth was she doing here? She usually went out of her way to avoid tourist hotspots because she couldn't stand *stranieri*, foreigners. Had she arranged to meet her brother here?

I started walking towards her and was about to call out her name when something stopped me. She had on a peaked cap that half-covered her face and a pair of sunglasses that I hadn't seen her wear before. She seemed to be holding something in her hand but I couldn't make out what it was. I hid behind a group of French tourists. She took a few steps in my direction and then turned around. After a while she sat back down on the edge of the fountain. She had one hand in the water and was moving the other as if she was pulling on a cord, only there was no cord to be seen. I moved closer towards her, and as I did so I saw I was right: it was Antonella, and what she was pulling out of the water glittered in between her fingers. Now I could make out the nylon thread. It looked like she had attached a magnet to the end of it and was using this to fish coins out of the water. So all the coins I had found in the box in her wardrobe weren't tips after all but had been thrown into the fountain by tourists wishing for happiness and a return to Rome. I felt uncomfortable knowing what she was up to. I decided not to mention it to Antonella. Perhaps she had to support her family, and the money she earned from working at the hotel wasn't enough.

Before I left, I threw two coins into the water, not because I wanted to come back to Rome, but because I'd heard it could bring you love.



A longer sample translation is available from NBG – please contact Charlotte on
nbg@london.goethe.org