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Spaziergänger Zbinden (Zbinden the Walker)

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One morning we were walking past the shops on the high street, and Emilie suddenly disappeared from my side. I just heard a loud sigh and then it was as if Emilie had vanished from the face of the earth. Straight away a nice man, who seemed a little nervous, spoke to me. And don't ask me how, but I knew immediately that this had to be Walter Hensler, Emilie's admirer from the bird-watching course in Beatenberg. Emilie had told me he was dying to invite her to a Hitchcock film at the Rex Cinema. 'Are you going to go to the cinema with him?' I had enquired as nonchalantly as possible.

'Oh, Lukas,' she laughed.

And yet I'm not a jealous person. Everyone who knows Lukas Zbinden well will testify that I am not a jealous person. Everyone has the occasional infatuation, it's nothing to get worked up about.

'Sorry,' Hensler was saying now. He took a cigarette out of an opened and rather battered packet.

'Have you got a light?'

'No.'

He stuffed the cigarette clumsily back into the packet. 'Wasn't that Emilie? I saw her next to you but she seems to have disappeared.'

‘Yes, that was Emilie. Emilie Zbinden. Did you want to speak to her?’

‘Yes, please.’

I was getting angry. ‘Maybe this isn’t a good time. Her husband is terminally ill and her son has been hospitalised after a cycling accident and is paralysed down one side.’

‘Oh! Emilie has a family?’

He looked so surprised that I got even angrier. When he had gone and Emilie reappeared at my side I said, ‘Where on earth were you?’

Emilie’s cheeks burned. ‘In that shop there. I bought some dreadful, glittery wool I’ll never be able to use. And it was expensive, too. Is he gone?’

‘Why didn’t you tell him you were married?’ I checked and she was still wearing her wedding ring.

‘But I already told you – he didn’t ask me a single question. He gives endless speeches about budgies instead. When there’s some heat in the afternoon budgies sit in the trees and bushes in the shade of the paper factory. Feeling safe in their little community, some budgies take naps with their heads tucked under one wing and the rest preen each other’s feathers in places they can’t reach themselves.’

‘You watch budgerigars in Beatenberg?’

‘No, but that doesn’t stop him telling me all about them. In any case I now know all there is to know about helpless nestlings and budgies who are aeronautically challenged.’

‘He laid his heart at your feet.’

‘In an insufferable way.’

[...]

Soon after that, the situation got worse. Walter Hensler barged right into the lion’s den. He rang the bell and I opened the door. I remember it like it was yesterday.

‘Hello, Mr. Zbinden,’ he introduced himself. ‘I’m Walter Hensler. I would like to speak with you.’

‘I believe we’ve met. I was just in the middle of compiling a worksheet on Antarctica, but do come in. Can I offer you something to drink? Coffee, tea, water?’

‘Whatever you’re having yourself, thank you.’

He had thin lips and a strange mole on his left cheek. His posture showed he had spent years of his adolescence with his back straight and his gait even in an effort to bring his swinging limbs under control. He wore a beige suit with a clashing tie and well-worn loafers and he had impeccable manners. He stirred sugar and cream into his coffee, a cautious smile on his face.

‘Mr. Hensler, do you by any chance know why albatrosses migrate with the wind around Antarctica?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Just something I can’t stop thinking about. What brings you here? Careful, the coffee is hot.’

He placed the spoon gingerly on the saucer. ‘It’s about your wife.’

‘I see.’

He avoided my gaze. ‘Emilie. I love her.’

‘I see.’

‘Sorry if this comes as a shock to you.’

‘A shock? To me?’ I cried a little too loudly. ‘But why? Why shouldn’t you love Emilie? I love her too. She is the best, most intelligent and glorious woman on earth. She’s still a proper lady even though she’s a mother. Enchanting, stunning, ravishing. The country must be full of men who love her.’

When Emilie and I were getting to know one another, there were half a dozen gardeners from the tree nursery swarming around her with their mouths hanging open because her light-heartedness infected everyone. All those ardent men on school committees, in book groups and amateur choirs who must have fallen passionately in love with my wife! It was impossible to take your eyes off her.

‘Look, Mr. Zbinden, I want to be straight with you. It’s the only way for me to prove I’m not a... that I am behaving in a respectable way.’ Hensler spoke in a subdued voice as though he were pleading for mercy. ‘I got to know Emilie on the bird-watching course. I feel comfortable around her.’

‘Are you having an affair?’

‘Emilie and I? For God’s sake, no!’

‘There’s nothing going on between you?’

‘No!’

‘You’re being straight with me, Mr. Hensler,’ I said. ‘Thank you for that. But why have you come to me about this? I think you’re talking to the wrong person.’ I forced myself to smile calmly at him.

Hensler was squirming in his chair.

‘I want to say something to you, Mr. Hensler. When Emilie arrives, we’ll ask her straight out whether she would like to fall in love with you, and ask her to pick one of us.’

Kâzim, don’t think I took this matter lightly. I scowled at the man who could, at any moment, be traded in for this touchingly honest and kind bird-watcher: Lukas Zbinden, reading teaching materials on the sofa with his belt unbuckled to ease the feeling of tightness around his middle. Cupping his chin, looking first at the right side of his face and then the left, like in some ridiculous advert for shaving foam. In the

middle of correcting worksheets, not running to her when she came home. Twitching those unpleasantly cold feet whenever she was just about to fall asleep. I was not a good husband to her. True, I didn't drink or play the field. But still. When had I last surprised her with a present out of the blue? Maybe Emilie was lonely and I had never noticed – despite the choirs she had joined, in spite of her job and her charity work and the consolation of her only son. Maybe every time I interrupted her she had said to herself, 'Give him another chance,' and bitten her tongue? A less patient person would have traded me in a long time before.

'Where are you going all of a sudden, Mr. Hensler? Have a seat. – Someone's here to see you,' I called to Emilie when she came in.

'Good evening, Walter,' said Emilie cautiously. 'What brings you here?'

'Mr. Hensler has something he wants to say to you, Emilie. Go on, tell her.'

Hensler blinked anxiously. 'I have nothing to say.'

'He wants to tell you that he adores you. We've decided you're to choose between us.'

'I'm to what?' asked Emilie.

'Mr. Zbinden, this is just absurd,' cried a tormented Hensler.

'Sit down here with us, Emilie. Do you want to be kissed by that man over there? Yes or no.'

'Lukas, you're angry.'

'I am not angry.'

'I'm terribly sorry, Emilie. I'd better go...' Hensler gathered up his coat.

'You stay here! You have things to discuss. I'll leave you two alone. I'm going to go and lose myself in a crowd. Goodbye. It's been a pleasure.'

Outside, with the wind blowing hard in my face and my jacket fastened up to my chin, my thoughts began to wander. I reacted to everything happening inside me like some completely inexperienced walker. Emilie could leave me. She was a free woman. She could leave me whenever she wanted. Maybe not for the sake of a bird-brained bird-watcher who had got himself into a mess with all his talk about budgies. But why go on kissing the same mouth forever? She could leave me because she had filled out a 'How well do you know your spouse?' quiz in a magazine without having to guess a single answer. She could leave me with a devastated Marcus on my hands, whose red-rimmed eyes would always remind me of her and of the fact we would no longer be bringing him up together, as a proper family. That was something I had, until that point, regarded as an unassailable part of my life. I thought about a lot of things, not least about how unpleasant it would be to hand over my son at weekends.

One fat raindrop ran across my jacket. A second burst on the ground at my feet. I ran back home to see if Emilie had already packed her bags. They were sitting drinking tea in the living room. He seemed to be saying something particularly amusing at that moment because Emilie struck me as particularly amused. Her eyes had a wistful radiance to them.

'Back already!' she cried.

'There's a storm coming. But do go on. I don't want to intrude.'

'What have you got there?'

I handed her what I was carrying and she unwrapped the paper.

'Flowers? Are we celebrating something?'

'Does there have to be something to celebrate? It's getting late, Mr. Hensler.'

'Yes, of course.' He stood up carefully. 'Goodbye, Emilie.'

‘There’s no rush.’ Emilie flashed him a wonderful smile. Not at all the type of smile a faithful wife bestows on a budgie-stalking-study-buddy. ‘It’s raining. Stay another quarter of an hour until the rain stops. You can stay to dinner if you like.’

‘I’m not sure I’d like that,’ he said, looking in my direction.

‘Then at least borrow one of our umbrellas,’ offered Emilie.

‘Very kind of you, but...’

‘Take an umbrella.’ Her gaze was friendly and frank. ‘Some things in life are free. You can take them. You’re allowed.’

‘Thank you very much, Emilie.’ He actually bowed. ‘And thank you for your candour.’

He lowered the umbrella like a fencing foil and stepped through the door into the raging storm. Once my rival was gone I took a deep breath and sat down beside Emilie.

‘He’s going to keep that umbrella,’ I said.

‘You didn’t have to throw him out straight away.’

‘I didn’t throw him out.’

‘It took a lot of courage for him to come here, you know.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘I’m worried about him.’

‘You’re worried about *him*! What did you talk about?’

‘Why?’

‘I’m just curious.’

‘He proposed to me and I asked for time to think it over,’ said Emilie in the voice of someone who is on the verge of casting all conventions to the wind.

‘You can go ahead and leave me,’ I said bravely. ‘Marcus can spend one week with me, the next with you. He’d be upset for two years but then he’d realise we’d done exactly the right thing. I’d be very happy.’

‘You would not be happy.’

‘I would say: go ahead, I won’t stop you. In the morning I would bury my love for you and in the afternoon I would go walking for two hours. It’s impossible for a walker to be unhappy. I would walk, and sing too. I would sing, my love, so that your heart would break just thinking about it.’

‘That’s what I mean. You’d be terribly unhappy.’

I would get to know the lie of the land and find my feet again. A casual affair here, another there. Talking the women out of their clothes. Reliving my youth with a harmless girl with little in the way of brains and a marvellous pair.’

‘You’re not the type to have an affair, Lukas.’

‘Are you going to go out with him?’

‘Well he is pretty good-looking.’

‘He’s got revolting piggy eyes.’

‘I like them. There’s something tragic and mysterious about them.’

‘He must be thinking about etching your name into his wrist with a shard of glass.’

‘How flattering.’

‘Relationships based only on passion have fairly slim chances.’

‘I’ll take the risk.’

And then a long, intimate kiss, you gasp for breath and cannot move. I’m telling you, the cultural evolution that took place between one of Valentina’s kisses and Emilie’s kiss is indescribable. We held each other tightly and the thought came to me as clear

as day that I was in the very place in the universe where I belonged. At Emilie's side, her hand in mine.

The whole Walter Hensler thing did continue to rankle. He called every few weeks. While Emilie declined his invitations, I thought of ways to show my wife I wanted to be with her for a long time to come. I took it upon myself not to put used tissues down the back of the sofa, to replace the loo roll and clear away the daily paper. Maybe Emilie was as fed up with having to wash and iron her husband's shirts as Mrs. Wehrli was. I'd take them to the laundrette in future. I would buy Emilie a cashmere jumper. Perfume. Shower her with flowers. Once, Emilie called from the bathroom, 'What's this supposed to mean?' I had taken down the piece of paper that said 'Like yourself anyway' and replaced it with a notice saying 'Three hundred thousand men covet my wife.'

'It's just so that I'm constantly reminded how lucky I am to have you, Emilie.'

She scrutinized the mirror and said, 'Who's your competition then? Names, please.'

My colleague from the staffroom, an English teacher called Bertram, recommended a failsafe technique to make any wife melt. 'Don't eat anything at dinner. You'll see how impressed she is. If you don't touch your dinner she'll realize how lovesick you are. Leaving your food untouched on the plate is an international symbol for love.'

'I don't know, Bertram.'

'Just try it. You can always sneak down that night and raid the fridge while she's asleep.'

What do you think of this technique, Kâzim? I can't tell from your expression. You don't give anything away, do you? I imagined how Emilie would notice I'd lost my

appetite and say: ‘Lukas, my dear. I see you’re not eating anything. Is something wrong?’

‘Yes Emilie, my darling,’ I would say, ‘it’s kind of you to ask. You know I yearn for you, but I don’t know if you’re still hoping for something better. Are you happy with me?’

She’d just melt, wouldn’t she? So I starved like a professional hunger artist, refusing Emilie’s garden-fresh green salad, her unbeatable spinach tarts and the caramel flan that Markus had proudly helped to bake. And what can I say? The fact that his caramel flan stayed practically untouched upset him so much that he ran away from the table and cried under the covers in bed like a child – which at the age of twelve he still was. Emilie threw me a blazing look.

‘I love you, Lukas Zbinden,’ she said.

I started with shock. Whenever Emilie used my whole name, I had good reason to flinch.

‘And,’ she continued, ‘you should do everything in your power to hang onto this love.’

From that day on – the twelfth of August nineteen sixty-seven – forty-seven-year-old Lukas Zbinden gave his all. He lent a hand with all the housework, cooking and laundry and he even scrubbed the floor. He rolled up his sleeves, put on an apron and constantly busied himself while Emilie sat at the sewing machine, threw her head back and looked over incredulously from the studio. I kept a list, classifying tasks according to how urgently they needed to be done. If Emilie asked me to run an errand, I made it a priority on the list. Emilie was soon so convinced of the effectiveness of this system that she didn’t ask me to do certain errands, noting instead what it was she wanted done on my list.

When guests popped in for little visits I made coffee and handed around the pastries while Emilie described to our guests the ‘topsy-turvy world’ that had suddenly come about in our household. There was a time when nothing gave me greater pleasure than managing to get the Gugelhopf cake out of the mould in one piece.

It’s said that there was once a clearing in a wood with two deckchairs. They were meant for the couple who never regretted being together, even for a moment. But the deckchairs remain empty to this day. I mention this little story at my granddaughter’s confirmation, all the generations gathered around the battered table in the dining room and Emilie calls right across the room: ‘Lukas, those deckchairs belong to us!’

Translation by Sorcha McDonagh

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