



**HOFFMANN
UND CAMPE**

Antonia Baum
Vollkommen leblos, bestenfalls tot
(Completely Lifeless, Preferably Dead)

**Translation of the first part of the novel the author has read at the
Bachmann Prize 2011**

Bachmann Prize goes Europe
Translated by Stefan Tobler

Hoffmann und Campe Verlag GmbH
Harvestehuder Weg 42
20149 Hamburg – Germany

Contact:
Nadja Mortensen
nadja.mortensen@hoca.de
Tel: +49-40-44188-281
Fax: +49-40-44188-319
www.hoca.de

Copyright © Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, Hamburg

The city has many cities inside it, but at night it's a different one. You walk into its belly. Once I saw someone in the red-lit crowds plunge his whole forearm between a woman's legs.

With his free hand he was jotting down notes in a tatty book because he was a writer. His eyes darted from his forearm to the book which he was resting on the shaken belly of the woman, who seemed to be very glad about his fist.

'What are you writing?' I asked.

The man was sweating and had a shock of messy hair. He shouted over the music that he would text me later to tell me, but that I could also look online if it was urgent.

I wanted to push myself away quickly through the crowds, to carry on drinking, but then the writer put his hand to my ear and said, dropping the words in, 'No stories, just inconsequential things. But that's not my fault. If I were poor, if I were an Ali, if someone threw a bomb at me, or at least discriminated against me or violated my human rights, then believe me, it would be very different.'

1.

My parents should never have met.

My parents are called Carmen and Götz and these two people should never have met. In fact, I think as I chuck my cigarette butt on the garage roof, I should call them mother and father because I can't in good conscience put them together in the same word, the 'parent' word. That would be presumptuous and a lie. The more I think about it, it just doesn't fit them, I think as I sit down at my desk again and try to revise.

It's too loud. It's impossible to be less alike than my mother and father are. For years they made life hell for each other with all kinds of scary actions in the courts, until there was no longer any cause left for which one could drag the other through the courts. Only then did things quieten down around their dismantled and unhappy marriage. What remained was the scrap of a family and, as I'm forced to remember once again right now, it was an anti-social scrap of a family which has money and which can terrorise me with its screaming right up here in the attic.

Families can be caught, they are contagious, I think. Down below Astrid is screeching.

Astrid, who without thinking attached herself to my father in matrimony, is now screaming at him. He has just come in from somewhere and never listens anyway, and anyone who really thought Götz ever listened must be completely messed up in the head, I think, sitting in front of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Their argument gets louder. I should go down there and ask them to be quiet, but I try to carry on reading, because I want to. I'm out of here, tomorrow is the last exam and then I'm out of here.

A door slams down below. I jump up and go to my bedroom door. But I turn around and go back to the window. I sit on the windowsill, smoke, breathe and think. Smoking on the windowsill has saved my life a thousand times. Yes, I think, without being able to look up at the sky and smoke on the windowsill you would have jumped out the window long ago, I think and blow smoke up into the sky, which carries on past the mountains.

Astrid's screeching bores into my ear. It leaves you cold, just like everything here always leaves you cold sooner or later, I think. They're probably arguing about my dad's new work colleague who was just on a business trip with Götz and of whom Astrid is jealous. That's why she has been walking around the house like an injured deer these last two days. I felt sorry for her. I feel sorry for Astrid, for Götz and for Carmen. I want to be on my own.

That was around lunchtime yesterday. Astrid licked her wounds and started to drink wine early. You never know with her, so I sat down next to her.

I stroked her hand and nodded sympathetically, although normally we keep a certain reserve in our dealings with each other. She stroked my hand too. She fingered her pearl earrings, which Götz had to buy her as a sign of his love, and then it all came out. She cried, she hid her crying face behind one tissue after another, which she then plucked to pieces, and she made equal sized piles of the bits of tissue and her trembling eyes focused on them as she told me about how in-con-siderate Götz was, who of course was in-con-siderate, as Carmen would have said, because your father never lets a chance pass him by, she often said when she was still here and later on the phone from Tuscany she said it again and again and probably, I think at the window, she had always known that. She had always known that, and I can't stop wondering how you can set up your life so that you run with eyes wide open towards a catastrophe. A wife catastrophe, thinking about Carmen and Astrid; a catastrophe for work and other people, thinking about Götz and the three of them; a life catastrophe, a human car crash, a complete write-off of people.

By the time Astrid has finished crying, piles of tissues surround her in a semi-circle. I stroke her hand again.

She stands up, clears her throat with some embarrassment, and in her normal Astrid way says a normal Astrid thing about a normal Astrid activity which she then does: she cleans the house, the bathroom mirror, the curtains and the garden. I go up to my room. I'll get out as soon as I can, I think right now. As soon as I can. It's time to leave this house, which for me is dead, which Astrid has killed. She has killed it with her mania for home furnishings catalogues.

Cushions, lamps, book covers arranged on coffee tables – and all of it colour coordinated. Picture frames everywhere. Astrid locks into them pictures of supposedly happy people, in other words: of herself, Götz and me. The pictures in the frames were only spread around the house for one reason: to pretend to herself and to visitors that happy people live here, which is of course a lie. No one in this house has ever been happy, I think, still standing at the window. Astrid has systematically given the whole house a varnish of book covers, coffee tables, picture frames – a thick syrup of furnishings, which is why we move in slow motion here. We're stuck fast in the syrup of furnishings and can only move with the greatest of difficulty. But in our movement-inhibiting house it's not only the furnishings that hold us down. The air in the house is a grey paste in which words fall slowly and heavily. Saying each word hurts, because you hear it fall for years and crush other people. It's a paste you have to fight your way through, otherwise you don't go anywhere. So there are always fights here. We hit each other because we have no other option. It's not an exaggeration to say that we're continually hitting our way through a conversational paste and over the syrup of furnishings which Astrid has spread everywhere, suffocating the house. That's life here. Those are the facts.

But to be honest, the house was already dying when it was only Götz and I who lived here. Actually, I think, when Carmen was here the rot had already set in. The rot set in, to be precise, when the family started. To be fair though, when Astrid came the house really suffocated to death, and with it Astrid, myself and my dad, who's dead already anyway, I think at my window. He's dead, to me he's dead, just like Carmen. My parents are dead to me. They're dead as parents, as Götz and Carmen they're still around of course, but as parents they're dead, they were never born as parents or if they were, they killed themselves. What do I know?

It's too loud. I'm going down now. I have to, I think, and stand by my bedroom door. But I have to turn away again. I don't want to see it, I think. I don't want to put myself in the middle of their terrible relationship.

Standing there I breathe in slowly and then go back to my desk and sit down to carry on with the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. I read, make notes, get a headache and just shouldn't think. Just tonight and tomorrow morning, I won't think, then the stupid learning by heart of pacts will be done for good, I think. And what's more, I'll be done forever with everything else which is so much worse, I think and stare at the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Done with that terrorising institute, school, where fear is always being spread in the terrorising corridors. The more time I spent in those windowless corridors of terror the more scared I became. More than anywhere, fear was spread in classrooms, centres of fear, into which the corridors of terror led. In the classrooms they terrorised us for years with their intimidating words about the future and jobs with or without futures and not much time, that's what they always said, that we didn't have much time and had to hurry, not repeat a year, had to get good grades and a good average and then a bachelor and then start on a master, or rather – finish the master, without wasting time, as they always told us in our lessons about the future. From about year three they were handing out brochures about the future and these lessons about the future were divided up into Jobs Market, Jobs Abroad, Discipline, Flexibility, Work Experience, Financial Crisis and that obsession with the future, I think now as I sit over the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, must have been picked up by all the teachers in the newspapers or whispered in their ears by some ministries, definitely, everyone in the whole teaching body must have a sick idea of the future in their head, at least – as I often said to my friend Lisa – this village on its own is not going to make you as jittery about the future as our teachers are. The future isn't here at all. Everything carries on slowly just like it always has, I said to Lisa, who shrugged. She always just shrugged; I remember that now, sitting over the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

Herr Wolf was the teacher worst affected by the future disease and the one who worked hardest to infect us with it. He would always stand there and say that we had to hurry, that we had to spread the risk, and then in the next lesson – completely doolally from his disease – he would say the exact opposite: that we had to find our specialism, he announced in the classroom, and one day my friend Julian was reading his Young Törless or something else, he did it as a protest against the sick member of staff, in contrast to the others who let him infect them without any attempt at resisting, but on seeing Julian reading, Herr Wolf lost it completely. Julian the reader was picked up on by Wolf the member of staff straight away, or rather – picked on. The member of staff asked Julian what his plans for the future were, and Julian didn't say anything for a long long time and then, that he wanted to study theatre or sociology, and that made Wolf the member of staff chortle and laugh: And what do you want to do then? Drive a taxi. Ha ha, that is how the dehumanising future regime in the form of Herr Wolf laughed. He was not embarrassed to fit so perfectly into the cliché of the stupid, intimidating member of staff. I remember that now at my desk. No, the future regime which had taken control of him laughed openly from him, I think, and he laughed at me too, because I didn't want to leave Julian on his own and I said: Herr Wolf, I want that too, or maybe acting school, I said and he just laughed and didn't say anything. He just carried on with his ridiculous lesson about the future, because he hasn't said anything to me for ages. No, in his eyes I don't need any lessons about the future, because in his opinion I don't have a future, because – as he lets all the staff know, or rather: as he spreads among the staff – I shouldn't be at a grammar school. Now Astrid's screaming is getting really piercing. Soon she'll start cursing Götz. I can hear her; she's crying. I've got blood in my mouth. I've bit with such rage I can taste the redness, and I have to stay sitting on my chair.

At the window, my head out in the air, one more cigarette. Above me hangs the sky, eaten into by the mountains; down below, the street lies quietly in the lamplight. A little

side street, this street to which the boxy village bus stop sticks. Today and every day it hurts me to see it there, looking sad and yet also ridiculous. I don't want to wait at it any more, because when I think about it all I do is wait, and most of the time I've had to wait at that sad and simultaneously ridiculous village bus stop. To the city, out of here, I think.

2

The city has many cities inside it, but at night it's a different one. You walk into its belly. You have to know the way in and it was Patrick who helped me in. Patrick, who I live with now, and whom I'm escaping from once again, whom I'm escaping from by running away from him through the belly, who wants to own me, who has got it into his stubborn employee's head that he will own me. He wants to put me in his employee's designer flat next to the furniture, like one more item of furniture, something he'll enjoy looking at. That's what Patrick's like, I think, and today Patrick wants me to spend a party at his side, the most-imp-ort-ant party of the whole year, as he says. It's important, he explained over and over again today, his whole stupid industry will be there, including Sue, and that's why he absolutely needs me there as the standing-next-to-Patrick person. Saying I was going to fetch some drinks, I stole away and ran off, breathing and drinking in the lights – you should always be drunk, I think – and I go off through the partying belly looking for Jo.

No one keeps track of what's going on in the belly. Everything is a mass of people and arms needing something and there's always some sensation or other down here, and a bigger one is supposed to be coming next and people don't stop calling out their views on the size of the sensations. During the day people leave their houses for work, and in the night people look for sensations down here. I drank the first night to the dregs and I drank to the dregs everything that came after it, until there was almost nothing left of me. So this is where the people were who hurried along on the streets and never stopped, but down here too they never disclosed their identity before disappearing. But then someone came who took me in his arms. It was dark and he was wearing a narrow mask over his face. It was a stage and we turned around each other. His teeth were like houses. I felt weals on his skin and around us a continual pushing and tugging. I held his hand tight so that I wouldn't lose him. I found a scent on his neck which I've kept.

There's no word for it; it was soft and strong and I wanted, I wanted!

I wanted to know his name, but I couldn't hear him well, I only heard Jo. Then he was gone and my only hope is that I'll find him somewhere here in the belly. I'm looking for him, Jo, and suddenly Patrick is there. He's standing there on the lookout with a drink in his hand, seeking me in the faces going by. He's not doing anything other than looking obsessively for my face in the crowd. He motions for me to go over to him. Patrick, I think, moving reluctantly towards him, is dangerous and has what it takes to be a psychopath, and I have a contract with him, the psychopath. Patrick, who lives in his boring computer, Patrick, who in his computer casing has a little inflamed heart which drives him crazy and always takes him for a ride, I think standing next to him and wanting to get away to find Jo, but I'm forced to stand next to Patrick. Now he takes my hand and in his head he's listening to a single command: namely, to tie me to him. Patrick – early thirties, art director, too much work, non-descript face and black-rimmed glasses.

Fluid, transparent, castrated.

Moving in with him was the biggest mistake, I think now, as he holds my hand in his and smiles at me. He's standing next to me, bathed in a dark blue light. His body is rocked by

the music. In reality he is sleeping, but when a professional contact swims past then he switches on his face briefly, says a few sentences, and then goes back to sleep. He wraps his hand around mine and watches out to make sure I don't move. Since his girlfriend, his ex-girlfriend Sue moved out, Patrick can no longer sleep, as I found out when I found him in his kitchen one night. He had just tidied and cleaned it. That's what had woken me up.

At the time I had just wanted to care for him, because if someone has trouble sleeping then that person can't be completely dead, so you have to help him, I thought, and all night in the kitchen I spoke to him like the smug and dilettantish daughter of a psychologist. Yes, you could say that the kitchen night and I were both soon wearing a halo and then we all laid down in his bed together where he, lying next to me and holding my hand, really did fall asleep. At the time that touched me – now it makes me angry, again and again, because again and again I lie down next to him and I get angrier each time, more and more so, soon the bed will explode and go up in flames. He couldn't sleep any more so he sourced a substitute. He sourced me as his Sue-substitute-person. Someone to fill his flat with a scent and a voice. The real reason he has sleeping problems is not Sue. Sue doesn't matter. He also only wanted her as a substitute. No, the real reason for his sleeping problems is the disease of being alone. It eats him up. Or rather, it ate him up long ago, as I realise whenever I consider his life, which consists of work, products and invitations and then once again: work, products and invitations. Patrick, I think and look at him from the side: his take-it-or-leave-it nose, his take-it-or-leave-it mouth, that who-cares-one-way-or-another face. Patrick drives around the world sitting in a remote controlled car and he found me on one of the shelves. He found me, took me off the shelf, bought me and I, let's not mince words here, I let him buy me, because I need a future and Patrick needs someone to stand around in his park, that's the deal. The woman standing around isn't just anyone, no, she's the one who fits in with the colour scheme; she absolutely has to be someone fit to be seen from the fence, I think and see Patrick scratch his fenced-in head, the head he's stuck in, unfortunately for all of us.

To Patrick, a girl, not a woman, a girl who is fit to be seen from the fence, I think, is one who doesn't have a single hair below her eyelashes. If Patrick sees a hair out of place he gets hysterical and immediately goes to cut it off. He's afraid of being seen with a girl who has a hair in the wrong place, I think and am introduced to a man, a writer, who has joined Patrick and me, the chained-together couple. Patrick kisses me for display purposes. The truth is, I think, that Patrick wants to put a girl in his park who looks like the girls in his magazine, which only proves once again his remote controlled nature, and there's more to come, because Patrick wants a girl to make him come who is sexually competent but has never had sex and this, I think, is where Patrick's remote-controlled nature reaches its limitlessly stupid climax. And the girl whom people see from the fence should never or only occasionally smoke. She should never or only occasionally drink, she should occasionally say things that sound clever and she should say them in a diffident way. She should plan on some great career or – even better – something great, but not too great. She should be interested in the same art, the same books, the same newspapers, the same films, the same furniture, the same topics of conversation as he is. In short, she should be completely lifeless and preferably dead. Patrick, I think, must have calculated wrongly in my case. There's no other explanation for his having put me in his park. Perhaps because of his sleep disease he was prepared to make concessions or perhaps not able to make clear judgments. In any case, he got it wrong and now he's trying to prune and trim me to fit his purposes. This remote-controlled and, indeed, inhumane Patrick, this dangerous gardener, to say it as it is, is

running around unrecognised by everyone including himself, I think and this whole situation which makes my hair stand on end all goes to prove what I had guessed all along: that women's liberation, for which Carmen added a whole extra bookshelf at home, went completely wrong. I guessed it all along, and now I know for sure – it went wrong, it failed in every way. My head is just a head taken from the past and plonked here on my contemporary clothes. Nothing more. Nothing has changed in my head. It's still an airless woman's room full of lacework lies strewn around. It's stuffed full of hair curlers and curtains. Curtains which I myself can't put up. Instead I have to fetch the remote-controlled gardener, who's there to put up and nail in my whole life and as far as that goes the remote-controlled gardener didn't miscalculate at all. He got it just right, I think, nodding, and look at Patrick and the writer, who have to eat their boring conversation. They are forced to eat it for purely economic reasons. The writer turns to me and smiles. Patrick approaches my cheek. He brushes my ear and whispers that we should go and I'm still nodding. Inside his casing Patrick, I think, is a deeply insecure person, someone for whom current demands and contradictory announcements about life fall directly from his iPhone into his fenced-in head, and he does what they tell him to. They cause terrible chaos, which he tries to clear up, using force, I think. That's why I have to leave the park, the reserve, as quickly as I can, tomorrow, I think. Do I have time to go to the toilet? I interrupt the writer and Patrick. The writer furrows his brow and looks at Patrick in disbelief, who nods emphatically. I thank him and run off to get another vodka and disappear. You'll leave the park tomorrow. The pruning has to end. He's pruning you into his shape. You're letting him prune you. Together the two of you are the pruning squad but you are its leader. Somewhere in the handed-down mud of the centuries which has built up in your head, I think, it must be written that you will let a gardener cultivate you. A number of current announcements must have fallen into your head too, I think. The announcements fell on this handed-down mud and they state: that it's not right to allow a gardener to cultivate you. The mud doesn't tolerate the current announcements, which also state this: be completely totally free, be feminine, but be like men, be sexually free, do as many crazy sexual things as you can, get yourself fucked like crazy in all your orifices and show yourself to be self-confident as you do so, (which is why I don't want to and can't have anything to do with sexual stuff, really, I just can't do it). The propaganda announcements that fell into my head, I carry on thinking, have caused an explosion with the handed-down mud and left behind one completely irritated head, a head raging to destroy things, a werewolf's head, I think. By day the knitting wifely head, ready to talk with Patrick about his products and to help him to sleep, but when the wife's head is given free rein it changes into a horrific werewolf's head possessed only of a vicious desire to destroy remote-controlled Patrick. That's how it is, I think. By the toilets I run into the writer, who must have followed me. He asks if I want to go to some party. Yes, I say and bump into Patrick who was looking for me, who grabs me by the arm and says he wants to go now, come, right now, he says, wanting to arrest and march me away. I tear my arm free, run on, squeeze through the crowds to reach the exit, with Patrick hot on my heels. He tries to grab me. Outside the writer flags down a taxi and I get in. Patrick is left standing there. We drive off, the city is full of lights which the taxi passes on the way towards other lights. After eighty-eight nights in the belly I am lying along with others in the company of the writer under a bar. A special contraption supplies me with vodka and pills. One of us is always downing something. The writer lies on top of me, sweat running from his composer's hair, which is slowly going grey and he's crying about that, pressing himself against me so that we are one, two bodies next to each other who do not belong to each other, I think, observing us, turning my head to the side and looking to see if I can see Jo above me among the

dancing people, but I can only see people shaking, whether out of joy or fear isn't clear. So I crawl away and look for the exit. I can see feet stamping the floor to the techno music, one kicks me in the ribs. I lie there flat on the floor and watch the feet – the trampling, no, the marching feet, I think, because that's all the feet are doing, marching in time while the hands at the top end of the bodies are held up straight to celebrate and march out of their everyday lives, as if on order, I think and feel my nose cave in. Techno, the march music which you can count on to trample an individual to death, music to be stupid to together, a technology for being stupid, the most stupid music people have ever made, techno will be the end of all of us, I think, struggling for breath, because someone is standing on my ribcage and starting to jump around. Hitler would have wanted to listen to techno and decree that the whole land listens to it, just like my former teacher. They must all have been listening to techno when they had their disinfected, standardised brainwaves, Götz too, no doubt a secret techno freak. Techno, I think, as the music swells and the gaps between stamps shorten, a music for intentionally feeble-minded people, who are no longer interested in anything, who no longer try anything, except for their techno prayer, I think and crawl forward under people's feet, collecting my teeth from the floor. I decide to try to sell them as pills, if my health will allow it. Every night this steaming white belly. On the black-painted walls hangs art made of ripped-out organs, which have been sealed in plastic bags. Night after night I see that two people meet at the bar and like each other.

What is that?

It's a glance from eyes that are really looking, maybe it's the way they feel the other person's jolt of recognition, it's the warm smell which comes from the other person's shirt after a movement and which they greedily swallow.

They barricade themselves off. To be completely safe, fluorescent colours are wrapped around the bar. Black ink is brought out and an agreement, because it has to be clear from the outset: I can't let you in. Something has been torn out of me and never built in again. Don't ask me what, ask my parents. I'm ready and willing to explain my whole complicated character to you here at the bar. In any case, you shouldn't demand too much of me and I promise I won't ever demand too much of you.

The two people behind the cordon quickly let each other know that while game for anything possible, there is this one certain thing which they are not able to do, and then they leave the belly and lie down together in a bed, which the next morning lies pale and stained underneath them, and cold, because one of them, as agreed, hurriedly exits the bloody room. That's how it is, that's what I have heard again and again from people screaming in pain, and that's what would happen to me too if I didn't always run away in time, to stop my heart from being torn out. And that's at the centre of this problem of hearts being torn out, I think. The belly you swim through is one big project to destroy hearts, a place where hearts are abused, torn out, left lying there, and then more of the same. Chalky faces go by, purple and wet, as I swim through the crowds and want to get out, to a neck, to Jo's neck, but I can't find him, only Patrick approaches me again and I look into his eyes, which I can pierce into a darkness, after which comes nothing else, and he tugs at my hand, but I knock his away and run off, swim on, further on for night after night through the belly whose exit I didn't find.