

BUNGALOW

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English Translation: Gesche Ipsen

Hanser Berlin

I was seventeen, we weren't allowed to leave the house because of an ozone warning, adults had the day off on account of the heat-wave, I always enjoyed it even though the radiation outside would have brought us to our knees after five minutes, skin blue and tears in our eyes. Shagging around the whole day with the curtains drawn and streaming *University Challenge*, a programme in which the best students at the top British universities have to answer questions about classical architecture or the structure of the endoplasmic reticulum or the sonata form and which was cancelled ten years ago, everything as usual, but I remember this day better than others.

My upper body is on top of the washing machine, Georg is standing behind me, I'm wearing the cardigan with horizontal stripes in which Maria normally takes out the rubbish, and can't help but think of the blood and bits of skin that remain hanging in the wool of merino sheep after they've been shorn, about how you hit sheep in the face to break their resistance. At that moment, Maria is lounging on the sofa smoking pot, the door is open. She's bored. So am I. So is he, though he's about to come. I turn around and push him away, which is neither intuition nor a perceptively controlled act of sexual inventiveness, simply an act of survival to which I have to force myself. He trips over his trousers, anthracite grey, which have double-piped pockets on the arse and are down around his knees. Then he smacks the back of his head against the wooden shelves. I put my hands round his neck and my thumbs on the bit between the collar-bones, where the throat starts. He passes out for two seconds. I'm kneeling on his thighs. Maybe I've killed him. When he opens his eyes again, he looks at me just as he did then, long ago, when I was eleven and said 'Hello' to him for the first time and realised from his expression that something about me interested him.

I didn't imagine that he liked not being able to breathe anymore. And I haven't done it again since. Choke him, that is. Would be like a piece of Black Forest gateau which he'd once politely told his aunt tasted nice, only to be served it every time he visited, for the rest of his life. It wasn't about a change in some kind of routine, only to make Maria turn off the TV because of us. She turned it off. We were satisfied. We were once again interesting to her, we were once again interesting to each other. They didn't want a replacement for the child they hadn't had in time. Honestly not. They didn't want my soul, either. A soul like that is far too unimportant. They wanted someone who played better than they did. Who was even more brutal. And I think I was that. More brutal. But not from the day I was born.

I'm writing this in a stack of notebooks which I found among the pile of antiquities on the beach. I am writing this for myself, I don't know who should finish reading this story other than me. I hadn't thrown my soul away on them, I'd sold it to them. Why does one do something like that, sell one's soul, why did I do it? Because they were different. So handsome and alone and as dangerous as wolves. Different from everyone, different from the suicides. They were panicking, I knew that. But they were too arrogant, too brutal, to react the same way as the rest of the world to the feeling of chaos and ruin raging everywhere, they didn't belong to this rest of the world standing with its abstract values terrified before an abyss that was hard to make out. In their eyes you couldn't read an aggressive 'Help me', which I saw in everyone else's eyes. Maybe you could. Maybe they only pretended to be different, maybe they didn't even pretend, maybe I just assumed they were different because I myself wanted to be different. I've paid a fair price for something I've received, although by now there's nothing left of it other than the comforting knowledge that they haven't killed themselves. Out of cowardice, I suppose. Because they're too cowardly. Or were. I remember it all. I woke up today with it all.

On days when there was an ozone warning we were only allowed outside after dark, Georg and I decided to go for a walk, Maria was still lying on the sofa, in her nightdress, on the green velvet. Was breathing in and out regularly, as is fitting for one who's having a kip. I sat down on the bench of the beer tent in front of the low-rise at the other end of the neighbourhood, while he went in to buy something. For the first time I had the feeling that I no longer looked to outsiders like I was just his daughter. They were in the process of dismantling spot lights and lighting rigs, which had been set up two days earlier all over the neighbourhood. The team of a Chinese documentary series, they were shooting something somewhere here.

He spoke of the suspicion of a tumour in his head. But last week it'd turned out to be just a shadow on the MRI. I asked why he only ever told me about such things afterwards, he laughed. He had a rash on his forearm. He rolled up his shirt to show me. I felt an overwhelming pity inside me, knowing that something was hurting him, a tenderness that coursed through every vein in my body, and it seemed to me as if I was someone I'd never been before but had always wanted to be, calmer than usual and the opposite of what they mean by the term 'teenager'. He drank beer, I ate

a Bounty because I was already too pissed. Midnight, perhaps earlier. We didn't talk, but just sat there, and I remember how in a moment of drunken megalomania I believed I was the only human being in the world who understood what love was, what sex was all about, definitely not about skill or fitness, not even about experience, but about something that had nothing to do with the process, nothing to do with whether you rip someone's clothes off their body or first chew at their earlobe in slow motion, only about this compassion that was exploding in my chest like panic and allowed me to become an above-average version of myself towards two people who were damn well worth it. Some people said about other people that they were good in bed, or bad. Some people talked about moody, jealous relationships, but the sex was so great, because he or she was properly good in bed, it seemed to me as if they were demoting what they called good sex to a justification for the fact that for years they'd endured arguments about how to correctly dispose of hair from a drain, or fought about whether you're still allowed to use a frying pan when the coating is slightly scratched, meanwhile it was the end of the world outside, a total idiot but very good in bed. I absolutely couldn't see how you can despise someone but still stay with them, only because they always make you horny and once came up with an original variation on the usual position while watching Netflix or in a plane toilet, one wasn't good in bed, nobody was. Everything really only hinged on self-abandonment, I thought, at least in that moment. A fathomless combination of self-abandonment and superiority, who gives a shit whether you can do the splits or can last a long time or are sufficiently at ease to get undressed in front of each other in daylight, who gives a shit, honestly.

Now I'm embarrassed by what I thought as a pissed teenager. Because the two of them were good in bed. They were better in bed than anyone else.

1

Georg's grandfather was the last German Lieutenant Colonel to be released from a Russian POW camp, nine years after the end of the Second World War, and at some point in his desperate sorrow started plaguing Georg with ever the same story of how he'd survived, so that's thirty or forty years later, air force, long-range reconnaissance, how he'd operated behind enemy lines and sometimes played the harmonica in his plane.

He had been shot down, only narrowly managed to save himself from the wreckage. Then he got to Siberia. In some kind of a railway wagon. In which most of them had already starved or frozen to death. But not him. He was clever and brave and wanted to survive. The guards found him too interesting to subject him to any arbitrary sadism. He had no prejudices, fell in love with Russia. For ten years there was nothing to eat but potatoes, at least that's what he said. He taught the Russians that potatoes didn't have to be mashed, you could do twenty other things to them. And it appears they thought it tasted good. And so the menu became a bit more varied.

Starting from the day Georg was born, he'd explained a whole lot to him about the war.

Georg said: 'Yes, I get it.'

And his grandfather said: 'You get nothing.'

Then Georg had to repeat everything he'd been told before, word for word. Learning the hard way. Georg built model planes when he was little. He thought of himself as quite competent in this field. His grandfather thought that he was more competent, after all he was a pilot. One of his many words of wisdom, defended to the death, was that nothing that isn't beautiful works.

'Planes that aren't beautiful: something's wrong with them.'

At some point Georg came of age. He moved to Berlin as a combination of late hippie and provincial punk-drummer, there are photos of him from that time in which he's gesticulating with Rio Reiser's electric guitar or shitting in some industrial magnate's front garden dressed as a Turkish cleaning lady. At the same time his grandfather began collecting empty yoghurt pots. Then he buried stacks of them in his garden, particularly in the sandpit. A total fixation. Everywhere there were nests of

accumulated yoghurt pots. They couldn't get him to say what he needed them for. Georg's mother cared for him for nineteen years. Then he collapsed from a heart attack, after shitting his pants in front of her eyes, while standing up, and then activating the flush.

This death caused a lasting anxiety in Georg, he was now thirty-eight years old and sitting on the underground without a ticket. The day before his wife had explained to him why she loved him, because of his eyes which were too close together, he looked like a jackal, she'd realised this while watching a documentary about animals of the steppe, which they'd shown on her flight to São Paulo and ended with the jackal being trampled to death by a herd of zebras. Georg was wearing white jeans, he didn't know me yet, but I'd already known him for ages. In a few years we would surrender our will and appear as beaten, helpless humans before God. The pattern of the plastic seats was ugly, the West was going down, haphazard splotches of colour on red. A nuclear family was sitting across from Georg. The man was twice as old and fat as his wife. He lifted his child onto one of the cross-bars running along the carriage, so that it could spend the rest of the journey dangling from the ceiling. Polo shirt, undercut, nine or ten years old. The mother drew the boy's attention to a Labrador puppy lying under the seat next to her, then to army footage on the passenger TV. Split screens, in which a 40kg drone travelled along its runway. The drone was ugly, of downright stupid proportions. Ten-metre wingspan, instead of the cockpit only a door to the weapons bay, wide open. She asked the child whether he knew what you called these machines. He started contemplating the operation of unmanned fighter planes, as if talking about a computer program that was helping the Pokémons in his video game to track down dust clouds or rustling grass. Something pulsed in Georg's heart. A stabbing pain. At first he took it for revulsion, then for a weakness, his own, admitted at last. He hadn't been able to stand more than seven days of his national service, and after that he'd wiped pensioners' arses with continuing disgust, twenty months' civilian service, eighteen years ago. On his first day a paraplegic woman had, in an attempt to jump from the sixth floor, gotten caught on the way down on some wrought-iron balcony, the neck broke, the resistance tore flesh and tendons and skin, she opened like a neglected rag doll whose head had been torn off by a child in anger. Twice he had to rescue people from the flames of burning storeys, because the elderly wouldn't stop using candles to defrost their fridges. By now he believed that he understood himself well enough to know that, in the Second

World War, he wouldn't have hidden anyone who was being persecuted, let alone protested, but would, released from all social ties, have been deemed shady and done so-called deals with both sides. He had an ever-sharpening image in his mind, of himself as a kind of double agent who at the end of the film has to be more painfully slaughtered than everyone else. He left the underground at a station at which he'd never before gotten off, one of those themed stations which star architects had created in the seventies. Through various gaps in the tiles, glass inserts were supposed to recall their previous use as bunkers, during the war. The doors of the underground train closed, and for an instant Georg saw the family through the glass. The woman was letting herself fall into her husband's arms, backless top, the child yawned. Georg was scared. He lost himself for two minutes in the trance-like development of new seduction strategies, what he saw reminded him of the exhaustion that follows depravity, of blood, of the moment in which the lasciviousness in a girl's look gave way to ordinary, offended meaninglessness. Of the helplessness of young animals. Of his wife. Of the line rapped by Jay-Z some time ago: 'I got a main chick, a mistress, and a young bitch. Forget it'.

Halfway up the steps that led back from the subway into the city, what blew into him wasn't a wind, but a warning that emergency laws were looming on the horizon, he had begun to despise the Earth's surface like other people despise Hell. Had he already known me well enough in those days, I would have classified his condition as a mindfuck with regard to an age that nobody had learnt how to handle, not self-pity, rather paralysis plus shock, flamethrowers, humanity was basically an utter obscenity, that part of humanity to which he belonged fancied an Argentinian fillet steak and went to Umbria on holiday, the other part was poor and bored, and that's the one to which I belonged, we were spears of damnation, myth, history, silence, transformation, Moscow, Rome, Paris, Berlin.

The tarmac was murmuring the crudest absurdities into Georg's ear. Some of it even in Saxon. 'Go home,' and suchlike. Total drivel.

At this particular moment I was at home, near my mother, who was lying in her own puke and sobbing. Or outside or at school or in a wood in which there were stones with phenomenally lovely markings, I could talk to them all summer long.