

Zsuzsa Bánk
Schlafen werden wir später
We'll Sleep Later

683 pages, Hardcover

February 23, 2017

S. Fischer Verlag

What are we going to do with this life now that we've already gone half the distance?

The writer Márta lives with her husband and three children in a large German city. Even though she loves her children more than anything else, she struggles every day to keep from drowning in her daily routine and to continue her work despite the challenges of her everyday life.

Her friend Johanna on the other hand, to whom she has been very close since their early childhood, is a teacher in the Black Forest and has no children. Instead of getting on with her doctoral dissertation, she battles the ghosts of her past: the husband who deserted her, a serious illness she has only recently overcome, the father who died at an early age. Johanna and Márta keep in close touch through letters and emails of great depth and candor. The correspondence comprises forthright reports on their lives and moving confessions; it reflects their very long friendship and insatiable zest for life. Both women know that they want more. But what are they going to do now with this life, half of which they have already lived? And what is life going to do with them?

ZSUZSA BÁNK

We'll Sleep Later

© S. FISCHER 2016

to be published February 23, 2017

Sample translation by Margot Bettauer Dembo

For Michael, Louise, and Friedrich

March 27, 2009 – 5:43 pm

Dearest Johanna,

This morning with our first early, much-too-early cup of coffee, Simon said if he were ten years younger and had three fewer children, he would have left me by now. A thrush perched outside the night-fogged window, tapping on the pane with its beak as if it were trying to warn us, to slow us down, to eavesdrop on us this spring morning and then quickly carry the news into her bird world from limb to limb, branch to branch, announcing it to thrushes and finches who would snatch at the news as if it were a worm: Listen, listen, here's the latest from 12 Koerber Street; listen, listen.

Simon said it in a tone of voice as if it were of no significance, as if it were something like: The weather is about to change; I'd better take the train instead of the car. And maybe that's why I didn't answer him, Johanna; maybe that's why I started taking the cups and plates out of the dishwasher and putting them into the cabinet just as on every other morning, putting the knives with the knives, the spoons with the spoons, acting as if I hadn't heard anything and consequently didn't have to give any sort of reply. Even though Simon's sentence has been pounding away inside me the entire rainy, long, much-too-long day, jolting me and driving me restlessly, unceasingly about like a prisoner in her cell, back and forth, kneading her fingers, twisting her rings, especially the one, especially that one ring. His words have been shooting through my tired head like wild, garish garlands of light, *like the colored arrows of a fireworks rocket* ever since they were spoken that morning in that narrow time slot while the children were still asleep and it was quiet in our kitchen, quiet enough to hear a wet-feathered thrush tapping at our window with her pointed beak.

Lori left just now leaving behind her Lori scent – a bit of L'air du printemps, flowers in a basket, the March rain on her jacket which suddenly washes away the hot days – a Lori mixture of the winter that's been shed and a shy, despondent spring. She came with a box full of forsythia and saucer magnolias from her garden whose blossoms had opened on their branches those first warm days with boisterous rapture and, to my way of thinking, pointlessly colorful. I sat next to tiny Henry sleeping on the kitchen bench wrapped in his light blue baby blanket, forgetting Simon and picking at splinters and watching Lori as she shaky-handedly cut the stems with our one sharp kitchen

knife and placed the branches one by one into the vase. Why hadn't I slapped Simon? she asked, in a tone of voice as if she just wanted to say something like, No, this knife doesn't cut well, but just look at the color of this forsythia. And it made me think that maybe she once did exactly the same thing, trimming saucer magnolias exactly this way, twenty, twenty-five years ago when her husband said over coffee in the morning, Dearest Lori, I'm going to leave you.

But what does that have to do with how old we are, Johanna? If everything were the way it supposedly is, oh, the way it really is, then Simon ought to be packing his suitcase and leaving now, not ten years ago, not tomorrow, not the day after tomorrow, but today, right now; at this very instant he ought to be leaving, at the latest tomorrow morning while I, still immersed in night, scarcely awake, stand in the doorway and watch him as with both hands he closes his suitcase packed with not many clothes but lots of notebooks, loose papers and little yellow Reclam editions, Kleist, Ibsen, Euripides; watch him as he shoulders his briefcase, reaches for his jacket and scarf, pushes open the door and walks to the gate without turning around, down the few steps to the street, then right to the bus stop because he's leaving the car for us, our rusty car full of crumbs, candy wrappers, and orphaned dolls' arms.

To get away without being seen, Simon ought to have waited for night. Waited for that very late, fleeting half hour *when the moon is clear in the sky but its brightness is beginning to diminish*, when all of us, Mia, Franz, Henry, and I, would be sleeping soundly in the restless rhythm of our breathing, and dreaming, fishing in our most turbid, our clearest dream coves. Except that two seconds too soon, one of us would wake up and keep Simon from doing it.

Márta

March 28, 2009 – 11:09 p.m.

Dearest Márta,

The end of March and the wild geese are returning. This afternoon as I was bicycling home from school, they were *squawking, flying toward the stars singing* beneath Black Forest clouds. *Air-wedded to my sky*. Your words. Flying through a narrow band of blue in the direction of the Schwenninger Moos. Where the wild orchids will soon be blooming. Just imagine, I know about such things now. Where and when something will be blooming in the Black Forest.

The night has swallowed up my favorite hills. I ought to be in

bed. But I'll sleep later. Now I still want to twist a few more Droste-Hülshoff notes between my fingers. Grind up a few Annette particles. Maybe a word will emerge for me. Maybe even a sentence. Will fit itself into my chapters. Flowing into them as if it had always wanted to go there. I am trying to find out if the Bog boys (*Moorknaben*) and Heathland shepherds (*Heidehirten*) were intended as part of nature. Or as its adversaries, its opponents. Maybe its enemies. Man and Nature as one? Or two? Again I'm the sleuth. Again I'm collecting evidence, Márta. In the pattern of the signs with which Droste-Hülshoff has furnished Nature. Her Nature of God and of a gnarled beech tree. I wander in night shoes through her *valley gorge* with the *golden ribbon*. What has she left for me this time in the *slow-burning moors*, under the *smoke from the peat fires*?

That's what I wanted to write you before I go off. It takes too much strength to leave half of one's life behind. Three sleeping children, each in its narrow bed. A sleeping woman, inimitably curled up like a cat winding itself up among the pillows under the porous black of the metropolis. Simon won't pack his suitcases and bags. With all the things that fill his life. He will go on letting them gather dust on top of your closets. He will go on thinking up such sentences and saying them to you. He'll think up even meaner things and perhaps not say them to you. But he won't leave everything behind and begin anew in another place, in another life. After all, not that many other lives are waiting for him. Nor for us either, Martie.

Even I feel like chucking everything in. It's not just this tough, long winter. Four months of snow. Almost five. *The house all around me locked; and me totally alone in it*. For some time I've been wanting to do this. And concealed it from you. Concealed it in all my recent emails. But I feel like doing it every morning. Simply chucking it all in. When I go downstairs under my slanting roof. Walk barefoot across my red carpet. Open the shutters. Yet would rather leave the world outside. Invite only Droste to come in. At some point this moment catches up with us. Then it doesn't matter how much we pretend to be blind and deaf. Who could understand Simon better? I have no idea either what I should do with myself in the middle of my life – my half-begun life. With myself and all that I've put into it up to now.

And you? Do you have one?

Johanna

March 29, 2009 6:19 a.m.

Dearest Jo,

No, I don't have any, not on this icy cold morning that follows a night, a quarter of which I was awake, that breathed hoarfrost on our kitchen window as if inviting me to mourn for the winter - I'm not going to shed a single tear for it, not one; for me, too, it was so tough and long that it left me bereft of all ideas; my head has been picked empty and mowed clear like one of those crow-loving wheat fields on Fehmarn for which I long as soon as the days get brighter, as soon as they begin to reach into the evenings.

I thought I was better at writing than at living, but at the moment I don't know what else I should do with it - it sounds ridiculous, writing words down on blank pages, probing the world for images, listening for the right pitch, searching for words in order to lace together sentences and weave people into them for whom you'd search in vain in the real world; sentences glued together out of fragments, sewed together from scraps, made of a little you, a little me, a little Iambic, Trochaic, a little Simon, my father, my mother, my sisters, a little Lori, and whoever else gives up something and lets it fall, throws words into my paddock so that I can catch them and continue writing. Well, so I ask you, Johanna, I'm sure you'll know whether writing is a profession; be honest; tell me, is it one? Can you tell me, Johanna, is it a profession?

Mia asked me in her wispy sweet, slightly sticky, honeyed voice whether I had ever been something else, had done different work - the countless, endless possibilities of our lives - they exist in her clever little head with the uncomplicated free thought trails - as if this year I could be this woman, next year another, and in the year after that a completely different one, as if we could change what we are and want to be, as if we didn't have to commit ourselves, as if we could take a leap and keep experimenting anew with Life. Before - long, long ago in a Before in which you and I existed next to each other - I thought that too; I must have lost that idea and stopped searching for it. Now I have to make an effort to go to my desk, to rummage for words in the shoals of myself, of my I, of my mine, in the air bubbles of my Márta maelstrom; I have to wring every sentence, every word out of myself. *I'm sorry this letter is so grim. I'm living as if there were ants in my blood.* Before, far, very far back in that other Before, these things were easy for me, living, writing, breathing, sleeping - How can I, dearest Jo, how am I possibly to endure another forty-two years?

Your Martie

March 30, 2009 – 9:30 pm

Dearest Martie,

Catherine has a profession; that much is certain. She even has her own shop now. *Is as happy as a King and builds one castle in the air after the other.* I help out on Saturdays. Today again, from seven thirty until two. Catherine can't pay for any temporary help. Not with her nagging loan. Not with three children. Not with Claus, who dabbled at being a restorer, then as a musician. I never tire of recommending Kathrin. To students, parents, colleagues. To all who look as if they might buy flowers. I told Catherine that this is the best time of year to open a flower shop. When winter is fading. When it's coming to an end. Even here where we live. The shop's called The Secret Garden after Burnett's book. Only thing missing is the wheelchair in one corner. It's a little much for this Black Forest dump. A little over the top, But Catherine wouldn't be talked out of it. A new shop sign has been hanging over the door since Monday. The letters jump out at you from the shiny white wood. Spread colorfully around a large key. Before Catherine opens up in the morning, she shows me everything she has standing in the vases and pails. I can remember most of it. Wood hyacinths. Anemones. Forget-me-nots. Alpine Barrenwort. Yes, Alpine Barrenwort. To be honest, the work helps me more than it does Catherine. She manages to set my floating feet on the ground. In sneakers. Green ones, with red laces. They match my apron. She prescribes what my mind should be thinking during those hours, and what I needn't think of just then. Very beneficial, Marti. When the Black Forest sky has no blue for me. When the Black Forest fog settles heavily outside my front door. So that I can scarcely push it open. Whenever the cumulative Johanna bad mood crashes early in the morning in front of my feet. Bang!

Catherine brought the rose-colored walls along from our Hamburg days. Grass-green cushions on the bench in front of the high window to go with them. While you're waiting, you drink coffee. Looking out at a willow that lays its branches on the roofs of the parked cars. And will cover them in blossom yellow in the summer. Or you can watch the Flemish Giant rabbit nibbling carrots. Admire the spotless white fur the children all reach out to touch. Guess what his name is. In Hamburg this place would work, Marti. The little bell above the shop door wouldn't stop ringing. People would stand in line. To buy flowers, to pet Colin. To drink coffee by the window, looking out at the umbrellas and puddles in the asphalt. Searching for the

slivers of Northern Sky swimming in them. Your words. But it's in the Secret Garden that I can feel most strongly how far away the Hamburg Schanzen District is, with its hair barrette stores and its stairwells stinking of rat piss. Kathrin's store gives the impression of having suddenly landed somewhere. Far from its actual goal. Eight hundred kilometers too far south. Nine hundred? And so I too feel a little bit like that again. Misdirected, lost my way. Gone astray, lost. Gotten off too soon. Too late.

Do you remember the flower shop near my Hamburg apartment? Where you, with your fat Mia Molke tummy, almost fell down? Where they let you sit behind the counter drinking herbal tea? Until the color returned to your face? While they tied up bouquets that looked like a Black Forest meadow in July. When the rain moves on and the sun gives us all that it has to give. When I pick hyacinths and anemones out of Catherine's vases and tie them together, I think of that Hamburg shop in which I bought flowers back then. When I felt that they should stand on my table and show me that far outside the city such things were growing. Far from houses and *fence-seams*. Your word.

Just imagine, the people smile when they see my bouquets. Really, Martie. They look at them and they smile. A thought steals in then. That I can't get rid of. Can't chase away. That shoots through me like one of your light garlands. When I put twenty, thirty Euros into the cash register for a bouquet. – The thought that I should not have become a teacher. And that's a bad thought, Martie. A very bad thought.

With love,
Yours,
Johanna

March 31, 2009 – 7:04 a.m.

Dearest Johanna,

I wish I could stop by at the Secret Garden, I would order a bouquet from you, from you, not from Catherine; it should be violet, a little blue; I would take a cup of coffee, sit down by the window and wait with Colin in my lap until you had tied it up, until I could stick my nose into the middle of the violets and lilacs and breathe in deeply, or what else is growing and blooming just now *at the Tannenbühl in the middle of the forest?* I envy Catherine because while you two are having tea, you can bemoan those fresh-from-the-night dreams, then the old

unforgotten, eternally recurring dreams, before you put carrots into a bowl, and Kathrin hangs out the little bell, opens the door, and lets in the chilly damp, cloud-decorated rain heralding a moody March morning. How crazily, how inexplicably crazily our paths through life keep winding and crossing! Why, dearest Jo, did Catherine end up in the black forest near you; why not me?

But I'm not complaining, no, I'm not grumbling, I'm not reproaching you. Today I'm happy and light, not weightless, but light; yet almost without weight because I was able to write yesterday, at Lori's place, sitting at her old studio table of cherry wood that you can hardly see because of the countless paint splatters Lori has scattered on it over the years and which distracted me and drew me away to strangely ramifying greenish yellow streets, into fine red blind alleys, while Henry meanwhile was being taken for a walk by Lori in his stroller or being admired on her living room carpet which he's spit up on pretty badly. I had peace, Johanna, peace and quiet, do you understand? I reworked two stories, one of them *The Other Room (Das andere Zimmer)*, which you've been waiting for and which in this blessed peace I've declared nearly finished, Henry's cries behind closed doors, *faint as distant thunder*, peace and quiet, three times, one after the other, peace and quiet; I didn't have to bother about anything, except nursing Henry when Lori knocked on the door every two or three hours and handed me my wailing child. In spite of the trembling in Lori's hand that she will probably have to live with, there was warm food, celeriac, meat, parsley potatoes, and to start with a clear soup, small, open sandwiches as usual because everything always has to be done quickly, because none of us has the time to make soups, certainly not soups – not the nanny, not Simon, not me. We didn't leave till around midnight, Simon picked us up late, just in time for me not to have to think that he'd forgotten us, Henry and me, simply preferred to forget us.

On the table in front of my coffee cup there are invitations from several countries where *Große Fahrten* is to be published this summer, all of it, or half, or just tiny excerpts in a collection, all clearly set forth. Norway is among them, my faithful Norway, and Sweden; I only have to accept. But I'm still hesitating; I can already hear the voices on the telephone: Márta? Your child's been screaming for hours, he's been screaming ever since you left! I still don't have any idea how it would all work out: from the plane to the hotel, pump the milk with that torture machine so that it doesn't stop flowing, speak, read, and keep

your eyes from closing even though by ten o'clock at night I feel like nothing so much as closing them because of all those nights shredded by Henry's wailing – my constant "I'll sleep later." But I have one image, Johanna: I steal one minute for myself, and from somewhere another one, so that I have two minutes in which I can sit in the azure-blue summer air, just by myself, vain, self-absorbed – and above me for me alone, the fabulously immense northern sky – with teensy-weensy me beneath it.

Martie