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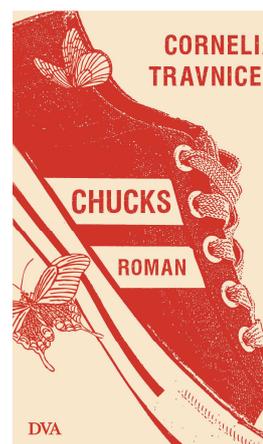
Chucks

[*Chucks*]

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Translated by Emma Grylls for *New Books in German*



Extract from chapter 1

The novel is called 'Chucks', the common word for Converse trainers in Germany and a reference here to the protagonist's brother. He died in his youth and the only remnant of him in the family home is his trainers, which still sit, hauntingly, in a wardrobe. In this English version, the trainers are referred to using the common English branding, 'All Stars'.

On long-life milk and the structural engineering of castles in the air

"From above, we can see down to individual molecules, through microscopes," said Tamara, "and from below we can calculate individual atoms. But in between, in that space in between, there's a gap we can't exactly classify. It's OK with one atom – and even with two or three it's not rocket science. But as soon as several atoms come together, then you've got a problem."

She reached for the dented can and downed the dregs of stale, warm beer in one gulp.

"And it's the same with people," I said, opening my can with a flick of the seal. I watched as the small piece of metal jumped on the ground once, before lying still.

That was four long years ago, and yet I can remember every word.

When I was thirteen – that disastrous age when everything suddenly falls apart and you are meant to fix it all with an Ikea manual and an Allen key – it was slowly becoming clear. My mother's eyes were tired every time she shouted at my father. My father was tired as soon as he came home, which he didn't do very often anymore. Most of the time he was away on

business. Not that there's anything wrong with fathers who go away a lot, but they should come back in a good mood and bring their families little presents and kiss their wives on the lips. My father never brought anything home, except for once, by mistake, when he came back with a stray pair of knickers in his suitcase. My mother took the case and placed it outside the door without saying a word – and then she pushed my father out after it. Suddenly we were alone. My mother and I in the house, my father and his suitcase outside, those All Stars still on the shoe rack. And the locked door on the first floor, the little bottles of white capsules in the medicine cupboard.

Tamara was what most people would call a dropout. No job, no money, perhaps some family, but she didn't talk about that. No ID, no age, a fight every now and then. Tamara was stupid because she did everything that an intelligent person doesn't do to their body. But she always survived. And when it came to me, Tamara was caring and affectionate. When I saw her for the first time, in the shadow of St Stephen's Cathedral, where the tourist touts were milling about in their white Mozart wigs, I had just turned fourteen. She asked me for a cigarette and I didn't give her one. Not because I didn't have any cigarettes, but because I'd always thought that punks are a bit like stray dogs: if you feed them once, you'll never get rid of them.

So I asked her if I looked like I had cigarettes and she said yes. While I was still busy trying to identify the marks of cigarette ownership on me, so that my mother wouldn't spot them, Tamara said she'd rather have money.

"You'd definitely just spend it on beer! Or drugs."

Tamara raised her left, pierced eyebrow and little creases appeared in the corners of her mouth. She scrutinised me, tilted her head to the side like an attentive dog and let out a low whistle through the gaps between her incisors.

"And what should I spend it on, then?"

"Dunno." I went to put my hands in my pockets and found none on my summer dress. One of the cafés caught my eye.

"Ice-cream, maybe?"

"Ice-cream?"

"It's a hot day."

“Will you buy me an ice-cream?”

What can you say. Shortly afterwards we were each holding an ice-cream cone, lemon for me and pistachio for Tamara. And I had always thought that only old people liked pistachio. All of a sudden I had a punk and was incredibly proud of it... after all, even Pippi Longstocking only managed a monkey.

Since the day my father yelled my mother's name for over an hour outside our house and pounded against the front door, first with his fist and then with the palm of his hand, everything was different. Not much – just like when you're cycling and it feels like the tyre is wobbling: you stop, bend down, but it doesn't look like anything's wrong. And it's not as if everything had been normal before that. But after what happened then, the word 'normal' became relative for us. My mother and I survived together, in silence, with that closed door on the first floor.

For the time being my father kept paying for the house and I kept living with my mother so that I didn't have to change school, while he rented a small bedsit near his work. He sometimes picked me up on Saturdays, to eat ice-cream, go to the zoo – things I was too old for, really, but I didn't tell him that. We went to the cinema and had a trip to the Prater once a year. Every time we got together he would spend a lot of money on me and chain-smoke, which Mum would have told him off for if she had been there.

I remember every detail from the day I got on the number 2 tram at Schottenring to meet Tamara at Karlsplatz for the first time. I can picture the expanse of the sky: pale-grey but blinding. Sitting in my single seat on the old tram, I could feel the grooves in the wooden floor through the soles of my All Stars, which had worn thin. I pressed my nose against the glass, something mothers forbid their toddlers to do. What I saw reminded me of bleached pictures in an old guidebook: the Old Stock Exchange, the Votive Church, the University. The Burgtheater, the Rathaus, Parliament. The Volksgarten, the Natural History Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Heroes' Square. The Hofburg Palace, the Burggarten, the Staatsoper. This tram journey was a long, eerie sightseeing tour of Vienna, and the high concentration of splendour on this street made it seem like the city was boasting. Yet somehow it left a bitter taste in my mouth. As someone once said, Vienna looks so sad: all

those imperial buildings, but no empire to rule over it. And that was just how it felt to me, too.

Tamara hitched her baggy trousers up a bit and sank to the ground, crossing her legs.

"So what do we do now?" I brushed a few flattened cigarette butts to the side with the tips of my shoes.

"We sit down."

"Why?"

"Cos that's what you do, just sit here and drink beer and ask people for money."

As I sat down next to her and stared at the dirty ground, a girl with dreadlocks walked past. Her new pair of Adidas trainers were glacier-white, like snow before the Industrial Revolution. At that moment my thoughts turned to school, where the lunch break had just started. I mused on my empty stomach and the benefits of tuck-shop money.

Tamara produced a can of beer from the depths of her trouser pocket. We drank. I closed my eyes and leaned against the stone wall. Everything around me started buzzing and I forgot that I was hungry. At regular intervals the junkies went past us with their monotonous calls of "substi, substi", which were shorter at first and then longer again, as they moved towards and away from us.

"Doppler effect," Tamara snickered, and I wasn't sure if she was talking about physics or alcohol.

At some point in her life Tamara had attended, and probably even studied at, some educational institution or other. But if you asked her anything concrete about her life she was evasive. Sometimes she would mention quantum and strings and quarks and spins, and then her very light irises would go dark and she would screw her eyes together so that you could see her fine wrinkles, and tug at her hair, which stuck out in all directions anyway. It was sad how booze had seeped into her knowledge and created holes; now linking things up was an effort for her.

"Hand me the booze," she would say whenever I wanted to know something about her, "it'll be easier then."

But only one thing was easy now: taking whatever you could smoke, inject or sniff in some shape or form, and nothing better than that.

Everything is different now; now I am surrounded by certainty. Certainty is when you can pour milk over your cornflakes without sniffing it first to make sure you're not about to find lumps of rotten egg-white on your fibre. In the first few weeks at Jakob's, I still used to hold my breath and only breathe in again when the milk was in the bowl and the cornflakes were swimming in it appetizingly. Now, though, all my mornings start well.

I place my muesli bowl on the kitchen scales, which says thirty-one grams, pluck a single cornflake out of my bowl and put it back in the packet. The scales say thirty grams – exactly the portion given on the packet.

“Jakob,” I call out through the flat, “Jakob, we're running out of milk again.”

Cheerfully, I close the fridge door and switch on the kitchen radio. A reporter is interviewing our president, asking whether he ever showed a woman his stamp collection as a young man. He replies that when he was young he used to show off not just his stamps, but also his books and much more. Since that didn't get him what he wanted, the reporter asks whether he showed the stamp collection in question to his wife, as well, and the milk spurts out of my nose.

“Jakob,” I yell again, “I'm just nipping out to the shops.”

The thing that went to bed as Jakob the night before comes padding along the floor and pokes its crumpled face into the kitchen.

“Use a comb ASAP,” I say and jump up, just as the toaster dispenses its slices into the kitchen at random.

“Beautiful day,” I shout over the radio, “but we're out of milk already.”

Jakob shakes his head and drags his feet over the floor again until I hear the bathroom door close behind him.

Before his hair is even dry, there's a new carton of milk in the fridge. And a carton of long-life milk on the shelf in the tiny larder.

During my short absence Jakob has changed the radio station, and piano music is now rippling off the shelf and over the veneer of the cheap kitchen cabinets. Jakob is sitting in front of his breakfast with a broadsheet newspaper that takes up most of the table. That's my Jakob: traditional. As he turns the pages of his paper one corner keeps touching the strawberry jam he has spread evenly across his toast. The colourful, luminous jam weighs

down the paper. Every now and then I put fresh slices of bread in the toaster, and Jakob carelessly lays his newspaper on the table, right on top of the toast, and holds me by the hips from behind, laying his head at the base of my back. We remain in this position until the toaster propels the slices of toast into the air and I jump up to catch them. As we eat, we listen reverently to the piano music, as if it were a Mass – even more reverently, since no one is forcing us to – and are completely silent together, which you can rarely be with anyone. Just every now and then, Jakob asks me not to chew so loud, please, it sounds like I'm eating bubble-wrap.

“Design something nice,” I call after Jakob when he leaves in the morning to sit in front of his drawing-board at his architecture firm a few streets away. Sometimes I blow him a kiss afterwards, but Jakob is a bad catcher.

Jakob's buildings are pushy – they push out in all directions and upwards and have no centre, like women frozen in complex yoga positions. Jakob frames each of his personal drafts in narrow, black frames and adds them to a growing exhibition in our hallway, of which I am the sole but frequent visitor.

“What you up to?” I ask him in the evenings, when he is still sitting in front of the computer and drawing.

“Building castles in the air, as usual,” he says. And even though I ask him this every evening, he never tires of giving me the same answer each day.

“We should do something some time,” I say in the evenings, when he is finally sitting with me at the table, “something crazy.”

“Bungee-jumping.”

“Hey, don't make fun of me!”

“Swimming with sharks?”

“Jakob!”

“Whatever you want!”

“How can people just come home every day and switch on the telly, go to the same bar every weekend and sleep till exactly 11 o'clock on a Sunday?”

“The bar's cheap, and you're perfectly free to sleep longer or get up earlier, it's up to you. Also, we watch new films illegally, so watching telly is actually really exciting and dangerous.”

“Jakob!”

“Oh, go buy yourself a dog.”

I throw one of the sofa cushions at him.

“Whatever you want!” he says again. “You’re unbelievable, you need a personal entertainer every day.”

“How can anyone be as content as you are! That’s what *I* find unbelievable!” I say, and mean it as an insult. How can anyone be like that.

Jakob is a born planner. And if he ever really were to build a castle in the air, I bet he would also draw up a plan for it to make sure it never collapsed. Sometimes I wonder where I come into his plan, how long he has reckoned on fitting me into his life.

Jakob is the only person whose dreams are structurally sound. That’s Jakob: sound. And I am tempted – once, just once – to stretch out my finger and prod him lightly, like a domino standing in a row. That’s what I like about Jakob: his tidy room, the orderly shelves on the wall, the full fridge. I like that he always knows how much there is and where it is to be found. And why. That’s Jakob, too: rational.

On probation officers and the smell of cow udders

My first memory of my brother: him throwing a building block at my head and me falling against him so that we both landed on our bottoms, giggling. I imagine that my fall was cushioned by a nappy. Over the years I threw plenty of building blocks at his head, shoved him into bushes and out of trees and often tried to persuade him to eat grass soup with soil dumplings, even though I couldn’t always have been certain that all the grass, leaves, berries and roots in it were digestible, never mind the bits of earthworm mixed in with the soil. He forgave me everything, and I him – he was my brother, that’s all there was to it, and my brother was invincible. He had never suffered anything worse than a few scratches and bruises. And when he once jumped from the highest point of the see-saw, hit the concrete paving stones and collided face-on with the rough plastered wall of the house, badly breaking his arm and grazing the right side of his face, my admiration for him grew even more.

Homeopaths think that if you just dilute things for long enough, they'll dissolve, and then only the goodness will be left. The less there is of what was there at the start, the stronger the effect. Things go bad when the concentration is too high.

When my brother was eleven and I had just turned seven, he was second only to Winnetou for me. The only thing that Winnetou had and my brother didn't was that long, black hair. My mother would never have let my brother grow his hair, but the colour could change. And so we went together to the nearest pharmacy and bought a packet of inky blue hair dye.

After the procedure my brother's head was black, as were my hands, several bathroom tiles, three towels and our entire bathtub. And also my mother's mood, judging by her expression. She withdrew our pocket money, which we had used to buy the dye, as well as the freedom that had allowed us to leave the flat unnoticed, and we weren't allowed to watch any television for three weeks, but all this failed to dampen our joy over the successful project. My father just laughed, which probably earned him a punishment too. My brother's white face glowed underneath his black hair. I had never noticed how pale he was before.

He was a few shades paler when he went back to school after the summer holidays, aged thirteen. I thought that this must be something to do with becoming an adult. Just as it must also be why he played less with me and went to sleep earlier every day. His bad grades at school were becoming even worse and my parents didn't think this had anything to do with becoming an adult. Apparently his performance had dropped even in PE. The teachers advised my parents to keep a close eye on his development and to seek professional help if necessary. My parents kept a close eye on his development throughout the autumn.

When we had the first proper snowfall, I took my brother by the hand and ran to the park with him. For a moment we stood in front of the white expanse and watched our breath rising like steam. I shoved a handful of snow down his coat collar and ran into the white, screeching, with him behind me. Only when we were wet and our clothes were covered with frozen crystals did we stop, breathlessly, and throw ourselves into the snow. I could see his stomach rising and falling – quickly, like a young dog. It was a Saturday and

strangely quiet around us. Then I was startled by a rattling noise. My brother's body had started to shiver, and his teeth were knocking together so fast that it seemed like his jaw was vibrating.

A year later I watched as my mother regularly put my brother in the car and drove him to the doctor. To begin with I wanted to go too, because of the little sweets you got from the receptionist. But my mother was not taking him to our family doctor, that old man with fair hair that was slowly getting bits of grey mixed in with it, whose surgery never smelt like doctors but like simple wood and salt instead. She was driving him to the Vienna General Hospital, that giant building where you got lost the moment you reached the entrance.

"Punk shower," yelled Tamara's ex-boyfriend. We were sitting in the Resselpark. Mishearing him, Tamara shook her can of beer and snapped the seal, and I ran for cover. White foam spurted up through the air.

"For fuck's sake, stop it!" yelled her ex.

"Whatever," Tamara said and licked the foam from her fingers.

"The deodorant! I meant the deodorant!"

Our entire group smelt of beer and Lynx Africa. The beer stains on my clothes cooled quickly and I shivered. It was my first autumn on the street.

"Great," I said, "just great!"

"Calm down," Tamara shot back, "it'll dry out soon enough."

The boys, who always did the shopping, came back with three large cartons of yoghurt in different flavours. We stuck our plastic spoons in the carton and there was a scramble for stracciatella, "Tamara, you always scoff everything", a lump of yoghurt landed on the ground and someone stepped in it with their shoe, leaving a skid mark. I mulled over whether you could base a decent diet on beer and yoghurt... it seemed as if you could live off that for at least a few years without showing any bad signs of malnutrition.

"I need a haircut," announced Tamara, who was still eating noisily, "right now."

That was Tamara: impatient.

After eating I cut her hair on the sides with my nail scissors, just leaving it long on top, and the whole time Tamara was ruminating about how pointless it really is to carry dead hair – 'cos that's all it is, you know – around with you.

All winter we took the tram in a circle, going round and round again and again. Tamara would wear my mother's pink gloves and I'd wear a hat that used to belong to my father. We hogged the front seats of the carriage and drank tea with rum from a thermos flask that my mother was missing. At night I would come home late, sometimes secretly bringing Tamara with me, letting her crash on my floor in a sleeping-bag and, later, in bed with me. My mother said nothing about it, although I often heard her going up and down outside my door, whispering the same words in a never-ending conversation with herself.

In the summer we waited until the parks finally closed so that we could have the children's playground to ourselves and not be driven away by swarms of anxious mothers. Tamara's ex was the tallest of all of us, so he would stand against the wall of the Augarten and give us a leg-up. We climbed up and reached down to pull him up until he could grasp the edge of the wall with his fingers. Then we were all over. In the last light of the day we saw the deserted lawns lying there, trampled patches where Frisbees had been thrown during the day. The towers in the Augarten at sunset. We ran to the playground, sat on the roundabout and smoked. In the dark the glowing tips of our cigarettes spun round in circles until we felt sick.

In the middle of the night our group expanded as we were joined by some Germans.

"Got a beer?" I was asked by a guy whose T-shirt seemed to consist entirely of large holes.

"Sure," said Tamara and passed him one of her cans. The guy was only half-conscious; he had already passed out and was starting the party for the second time now.

I stole a glimpse of the tattoos on his arms and legs and wondered, as I always did, how anyone could afford that from just bumming around. So many punks had nothing – they carried nothing on them, apart from a few hundred euros under their skin. But no one can take that away from a person. Someone gave me a bottle of schnapps. I took a swig and coughed. Someone else slapped me on the back with the flat of their hand, hard, twice.

"There, better now?"

I nodded, with tears in my eyes.

"Yep."

I raised the bottle to my lips again. And now it's my memory that seems to consist of nothing but holes. All I know is that I was standing there, with one forearm resting on a tree, the other on my knee. A large hand grasped my stomach, held it, lifted it up, and I vomited for ages. Even when nothing more was coming out, I couldn't stand up straight. In my head, a feeling with no background, nothing to anchor it in a memory. I didn't have a point of reference – like when you wake up after a dream but no longer know what it has stirred up in you and why. My dream was colourless, with fast transitions. The feeling of a kiss on my neck pursued me through the night.

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