

Hartmut Lange

***The House on Dorothea Street* (Diogenes, 2013)**

Short stories, 125 pp

Sample translation by Sarah Pybus for *New Books in German*

Novella 3, pages 71 to 93

The House on Dorothea Street

I

The Teltow Canal, as mentioned, flows a good 25 miles through South Berlin from the Havel to the Spree, and – because it is a little too narrow – seems completely featureless, particularly to the east where it has to fight its way through the wastes of the lowlands. In the west, however, where it approaches the fault lines of the Havelland hills and before it flows into Lake Griebnitz, its shores are densely wooded, and the few houses directly by the water's edge have an idyllic, remote feel, as though completely inaccessible. But close by – although hidden – runs Dorothea Street, which leads directly to the properties on the shores of the canal, and it is here, in a villa surrounded by beeches and spruces, that the Klausens lived. The couple had known each other since school, had spent years getting to know each other's quirks and interests and, in the house on Dorothea Street, had found something that made them feel safe, that made them consider whether it might not be sensible to buy the place. The garden was overgrown, and the frontages would have to be redone. Large sections of rendering had flaked off to reveal hideous brickwork, but the façade, a curved wall with elongated windows, had a modern and elegant feel, almost a prime example of Art déco.

Admittedly, nobody noticed any of this, the villa being somewhat off the beaten track. The only way to get to Kohlhasenbrück was by car or by taking the bus that crossed the Teltow Canal every half hour, turning in a tight semicircle that served as the final stop. Behind that, to the north, began the woods, while in the south the Nathan Bridge afforded a view of the overgrown area of Kremnitzufer.

Gottfried Klausen worked for a national daily newspaper, and he took his job very seriously. His reports had to be clear and comprehensible, forcing him to do thorough research. His editors appreciated his exceedingly concise style, and because he could speak several languages they would send him abroad, for example to Rome or Madrid. Eventually he was asked to become the paper's London correspondent. He agreed, although his wife said that for the time being she would remain in Kohlhasenbrück or – to be more precise – in the house on Dorothea Street.

"There's no rush", said Klausen. "And if I like it in London and we find a suitable flat you can follow me later".

There was some discussion as to how they could bring their impending separation to as quick a close as possible. Klausen packed his bags, Xenia took her husband to Schönefeld, and their embrace in the airport terminal lasted somewhat longer than usual.

A few hours later, Gottfried Klausen arrived at his London flat. It would be superfluous to mention the exact location of his accommodation in the city on the Thames. It suffices to say that he had been allocated a two-room flat. He had, however, asserted his right to move to a larger apartment to be with his wife at some point, and was even prepared to pay some of the rent himself if necessary. However these words were not immediately put into action, and six weeks later Klausen was still living in the cramped flat, and the fact that he was forced to keep putting off his wife whenever they spoke on the phone did nothing to improve the situation.

And now, at the end of March, the infamously bad weather intensified Klausen's discontent – even though he had been prepared for it.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come here after all", he thought as he stood on a bridge and noticed how cold the wind felt on his face and how difficult it was to put up his umbrella in the rain that had set in.

Normally, when he got cold, he would go to a nearby restaurant, have a little something to eat, and then sit himself back in front of his computer. He did his work, and everything he noted down or edited and finally expanded into an article was destined for his newspaper. He wrote economic commentaries – that was his area of expertise – and there was no one in the editorial department who could report on the inner workings of the City of London as knowledgeably and comprehensively as he. He enjoyed it, but it was the same old routine, and he only began to discover what else the city had to offer when he decided to stop spending all of his free time standing on the bridge over the Thames. One day, Gottfried Klausen took up a recommendation to go and see the renowned Royal Shakespeare Company, and was astonished to watch a world unfold before his eyes that owed its existence not to facts and their verifiability, but that was completely arbitrary, a world that stemmed from the unreliability of outward beauty.

Because what *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* presented was, at least to Gottfried Klausen, completely unbelievable, and he was amazed by the man presented to him in colourful costumes with wild, vivid gestures, who claimed to love his wife unconditionally and yet refused to question in a rational fashion the infidelity ascribed to her.

"Instead, he would rather take her life, despite her tearful assertions of innocence", thought Gottfried Klausen, although the actors' performances had indeed been impressive.

Returning to his apartment, he dialled Xenia's number, letting it ring and ring, as he knew that she had a habit of leaving her mobile in her handbag.

"She won't hear it if she's in a different room", thought Klausen and decided to try and reach Xenia on the landline, despite the additional expense.

But there was no answer there either. So first he took a bath, intending to try again later. Once in bed, however, he found he was too tired, and didn't see the need to conduct a long conversation at such a late hour. He, Klausen, had stuck to their arrangement, and if something had prevented Xenia from being there ...

"It doesn't matter", he thought. Then, at quarter to twelve, there was only the sound of his regular breathing.

Everyone knows the atmosphere that surrounds a sleeping person. It is alien, and yet everything remains as normal: There the furniture that, once the bedside lamp has been extinguished, casts its shadows; there the uncovered window that provides just enough light to lend contours even to the bare walls; and beyond the window an endless sprawling world which, perceived by nobody, seems enchanted, forlorn, like a world apart, and even the moon rising above the city's roofs fails to validate its beauty. And if the person still sleeping were for some reason to suddenly wake up with a sigh, perhaps due to an uncomfortable position or bad dream, and, his hands seeking purchase, were to sit up on the edge of the bed, then it would be possible for the contact between two worlds that belong together to be lost for a few moments.

"Where am I?", thought Gottfried Klausen, and "What time is it?", and "Why hasn't Xenia called?".

3

"We need to start looking for a flat to share. I've got my eye on something", said Gottfried Klausen as he drank his coffee the next morning. "It's a three-room flat on Gower Street. It's light, has modern furniture, leather chairs and sofas everywhere. The built-in kitchen is a bit small, but it's got everything we need, and the bedroom leads onto a balcony. The rent is £3000. Not too expensive", he said, pointing out, however, that he would have to sign the lease in the next couple of weeks.

Xenia was hesitant. She expressed her regret that they had not been able to speak the previous day, although she did not explain why, and when he tried to make her understand how difficult it was for him to be in a strange place, in a city requiring acclimatisation, to be always alone, she agreed with him. They arranged that she would fly to London as soon as possible to look at the flat Klausen had selected, and by the following Sunday the time had come.

Heathrow airport offers unparalleled levels of confusion. Every day it plays host to an inconceivable number of arrivals and departures, and the wide and apparently endless halls always seem hopelessly overpopulated. Klausen stared at the display showing the status of the Berlin flight; he had another three quarters of an hour until he needed to be at the right gate so as not to miss Xenia's arrival.

"She only has hand luggage and won't need to wait like the others", he thought, and asked a member of staff for the exact location of the gate he was seeking.

A short while later he stood at the counter of a cafeteria, trying to understand the tannoy announcements, which seemed somewhat distorted, although this was perhaps merely a product of the excitement he felt. But one thing was clear: The plane had landed, and as the first passengers walked through the customs area, Klausen positioned himself amongst the waiting semi-circle so that he could wave to his wife as soon as he saw her. He held a bouquet of violets. He was still standing there twenty minutes later.

"Maybe it's taking longer because she decided to bring her suitcase after all", he thought, and finally, when the gate was closed, and the light went out in the customs booth, finally, he took out his mobile phone.

He remained calm, still wondering what he could say to his wife in the event that she had run into difficulties. First, he wanted to know where she was.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

But it was not Xenia who answered. It seemed to him to be a male voice, and Klausen did not give himself the chance to understand what it was saying, quickly snapping his phone shut again.

As he travelled back to his flat, he left his phone unanswered, despite its constant ringing. A glance at the display would have been enough to find out whether it was Xenia, who had every reason to explain to him why she had not landed at Heathrow despite it having been agreed. And it was entirely possible that he had been connected to the wrong person when he had tried to call her in the airport.

“That would explain the man’s voice too”, thought Gottfried Klausen, trying to fight off a flash of displeasure. “I have nothing to complain about”, he thought. “And it would only be right and proper to consider Xenia’s wishes for once. I know how much she hates to leave the house on Dorothea Street unattended. And is it really necessary”, thought Klausen, “for us to rent an expensive three-room flat here when, who knows, they might send me somewhere else?”

He also felt it reasonable that he himself should board a plane to be with Xenia whenever his work permitted, even if only for a weekend, and as he stood in the stairwell and managed to reach Xenia – “finally”, he thought – the apology she offered to explain her behaviour had already become superfluous.

“Don’t worry about it”, said Gottfried Klausen. “After all, it’s my fault. I was the one who insisted you come to London. And it simply wasn’t convenient”, he said, explaining how, whatever the cost, he would put his urgent work to one side and fly to Berlin as soon as possible, and how important it was for him to finally stand on the Nathan Bridge once again.

4

Klausen spent the next few weeks completing the upcoming editorial pieces and reports as quickly as he could. In this way, he hoped to accrue as much time as possible for a longer stay in Kohlhasenbrück, and once he had finished checking and correcting all his pending publications and had handed them over to the secretary, he requested a week’s holiday.

“I’ll discuss all the details with the editor-in-chief in Berlin”, he explained.

The plane ticket was already in his pocket.

On the evening before his departure – this time he wanted to dispense with a taxi and travel by train from Paddington to Heathrow – on the evening before his departure he hoped for a few hours’ sleep. He drank another glass of whisky, went into the bathroom, and closed the window to shut out the smell from outside. As he went into the bedroom – the windows he opened here much bigger – he noticed an odour reminiscent of burning. It seemed to be nothing dangerous, nothing in the immediate vicinity. The view over the rooftops was clear, even the horizon showed no signs of

clouding, and yet Gottfried Klausen decided to shut everything up again, an act he found difficult, accustomed as he was to sleeping with the windows open.

The next morning he returned to his computer, sorted the correspondence no longer requiring his attention, filled his suitcase with his gifts for Xenia, and as he arrived at Paddington, not fifteen minutes from Heathrow, he heard someone shouting something to somebody, and immediately Klausen understood what they were talking about: A volcano had erupted in Iceland, and nobody could say where the wind would send the ash cloud, and until this could be established, there would be no flights over England.

Strange, the sight of the overcrowded halls with barely a movement from the waiting masses. As though the crowd, sitting on their suitcases, the benches, the chairs in the cafes, were prepared at any moment to storm the check-in areas, and the loudspeakers seemed thoroughly pointless, repeating the same message over and over. The speaker asked for patience, pointed out the exceptional circumstances playing out thousands of metres above them, and when the flight to Berlin was finally cancelled, Klausen was disappointed, but hoped that he would manage to get a seat on a different flight - perhaps not right now, but as the day went on. He wanted to notify Xenia, who would surely be on her way to meet him. So he dialled her number. However just like last time it was not Xenia who answered but a man; and this time Klausen – who did not hang up as before – had no trouble understanding what he had to say. To be more precise, the man wanted to know who was calling, and as Klausen stated his name and insisted on speaking to his wife, he heard a whispering in the background followed by suppressed laughter, and there could be no doubt that it was Xenia who seemed to be finding something highly amusing.

Then there was silence, during which Klausen hoped he was mistaken and that Xenia would come to the phone as he had after all requested. But nothing of the sort occurred.

5

The eruption of the Grimsvötn volcano was much more violent than anticipated. The ash cloud rose almost 12 miles above the crater, and now everyone was waiting to see whether it would drift to the north west or south over the Atlantic, if only the wind were favourable. In Iceland the ash covered everything, while in England its presence was felt only in the closure of the skies.

This occurred to Gottfried Klausen too, standing at his office window, and he marvelled at the fact that he had realised at all. He had felt numb ever since returning from the airport. The obvious course of action would have been to clear things up, one way or another. But he refrained, perhaps because he feared a repeat of previous events.

“It was a man’s voice, and when I asked to speak to my wife, she laughed. What possible explanation could there be”, thought Gottfried Klausen.

Had Xenia really allowed someone to use her mobile, someone with whom she was so familiar that they had been permitted to enter the house on Dorothea Street? And who knows, perhaps the two were not in the corridor or the kitchen when Xenia laughed at her husband’s call, but in the

bedroom! And perhaps Klausen's marriage with this woman had been so false for so many years already that he had not noticed her infidelity?

A few days later, Gottfried Klausen once again sat in the theatre, and once again the performance was of *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*.

*It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
It is the cause ... Put out the light.*

Did he really want to listen to this for a second time? Did his marital problems really mean that he wanted to watch the murder of a defenceless woman and perhaps even applaud at the end, simply because the actors had managed to lend conviction to such an insane undertaking?

"No", whispered Gottfried Klausen, and around the end of the fourth act, when it became clear how tasteless it would have been to stay, he rose, forcing his way down the fully occupied row. By the cloakroom, after he had retrieved his coat, he decided to go to a pub to think over everything that had been troubling him recently.

“Put out the light.”

The invocation played over and over again in Klausen’s mind. He grew agitated, asked questions that nobody could answer, or gave advice for which nobody had asked. He dictated texts to his secretary, only to scrap them again.

People began to notice the increasingly slapdash nature of his research, the way that he began examining the private affairs of MPs, and lastly that he had become solely interested in the shift in mood on the streets of London at this time of year, despite being responsible for reporting on the City of London.

Gottfried Klausen mused upon whether anyone had ever tried to discern the outline of Big Ben after the onset of dusk. Or whether anyone knew how much the London weather would obliterate the surroundings, leaving one struggling to find one’s way. It was as though things had withdrawn beyond recognition, Klausen wrote, and it was completely understandable that his colleagues in Berlin, despite the esteem in which they held Gottfried Klausen, could not accept this without comment.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you sending us this rubbish?” asked the editor-in-chief after reading the text.

“I have to get away from here”, declared Klausen, in a tone that seemed strangely determined.

The telephone call lasted longer than usual. First, Klausen explained that he had been unable to take his holiday due to the volcanic eruption.

“And maybe that’s what’s bothering me in London. I need to get out of here”, he added. “If you can’t acquire a taste for a place, you’re on your own. You get to know yourself and that comes as an unpleasant surprise, let me tell you.”

The editor-in-chief spent a while longer trying to advise him, for example on how to keep oneself entertained by the Thames even in the rain, something of which he had personal experience. But whatever he suggested, however hard he tried to promote the city’s merits, Gottfried Klausen insisted on leaving London as soon as possible.

“OK”, said the editor. “I’ll see what we can do. But where do you want to go?”

“I really don’t care”, replied Klausen, suggesting that he could first fly to Iceland to see for himself the Grimsvötn volcano that had brought Heathrow to a standstill. “There must be a blanket of ash over everything”, he said, and thought that it might be worth writing a report on it.

And the house on Dorothea Street? Was this not the place with which Klausen had felt a connection for years, and for which he had felt increasing affection? And would he not have had every reason in the world to take the next available flight to Berlin, rather than Iceland – to be more precise to Kohlhasenbrück, the area in which the number 118 bus struggled to turn on the bumpy road? And was it even possible, given previous developments, that Gottfried Klausen could turn up there again as if nothing had happened, at the very least to collect his personal belongings?

What happened in the end we do not know. All we know is that, thanks to the ongoing and unseasonably warm weather, the chestnuts began to blossom on the shore of the Teltow Canal, and that standing on the Nathan Bridge, it was difficult to make out the house – brightly lit as always – through the treetops. Anyone who knew the property would know that the upper floor housed the bedroom, two smaller rooms and a bathroom, with the kitchen on the ground floor and next to it the living room with the fireplace. Now and then there would sound a peal of female laughter, and its originator, whoever she may be, should not feel too secure in her position. Because it was entirely possible that sometime, not by day, but by night, another car passed by and someone made their way to the entrance. He had a key, it was his home, and so he had every right to do what he thought necessary:

“Put out the light!”, he cried, and a little later, another door was heard to close and the lights in the house on Dorothea Street were extinguished. The house was submerged in darkness.

Diogenes Verlag AG

Foreign Rights · Sprecherstrasse 8 · 8032 Zurich, Switzerland

Tel. +41 44 254 85 11 · Fax +41 44 252 84 07 · info@diogenes.ch

www.diogenes.ch