

NEW BOOKS IN GERMAN

WAITING FOR THE FLOOD

SCRIBBLING

ONE

On a brilliant blue November morning, I decide to get rid of my child. Paule had been ready to do so a long time ago, and did, but it took me seventeen years, and the shock of realising that the three of us weren't going to make it, and that starting again wasn't an option. It nearly killed me before, but now I'm ready, I've made my decision. Nothing is going to stand in the way.

"Don't I have to go to school?" she asks as I wake her and tell her we're going away somewhere. She doesn't understand. It's not the holidays.

"Doesn't matter. You've got the day off", I lie, doing up the zip on the red suitcase with the wheels. "I want to take you to the seaside. To see the snow." She looks at me as if she were the grown-up and I were the child, then fixes her eyes ahead of her for a little while. She goes over to the window to check for snow. The sky is a lurid blue, almost green. A gust of wind sends some scraps of paper and a plastic bag billowing across the asphalt.

"It's not snowing," she says, resuming her curled-up squatting position on the bed.

"Exactly, that's why we've got to go up north. To the sea. It's snowing there." Short sentences. Clear sentences. No ambiguity. She stands up and pulls on her boots, then her raspberry red hat. "This jacket, Lio. Take your warm one, your green winter one." No questions asked, no resistance.

On the stairs she slips her warm, surprisingly soft hand into mine. She climbs into the car, fastens her seatbelt and sits waiting, quite still, for me to load up the luggage and get rid of the trash.

Monday morning, ten to eight. Drive, brake, shift down a gear. I feel around for the buttons on the radio and drum my fingers against the steering wheel. *Rexona asked women to use these jingle bells for a day so they noticed how much they move.* The voice of a hyper-enthusiastic and heavily accented Swiss woman, then tootling music. The travel news says there are jams and queues leading up to the Brüttisellen junction.

Everything has to change. We need to get to the motorway as quickly as possible, to the place she's going to stay. Where the snow is. By the sea. But. We're already stuck in the commuter traffic on the Quay Bridge. The Limmat is on my left, the dazzle of the lake is on my right, and behind me the girl is sitting up with her hair plastered to her head, looking out of the window over the water. Her contented face is glowing with delight at the novelty of the morning. She's not smiling. She trusts me.

Two swans and a fishing boat stick to the mirror surface of the lake, static like a child's collage in front of the looming mountains. Every peak, ridge and field of ice stands out against the white blue sky as if yearning for the touch of our inept city-dwelling hands, or to sink into our skin and bodies. I trawl for a station I can stand, then turn the radio off and follow Lio's gaze southwards. A few pale wisps drift upwards from a cloud that had built itself up like a hood over the Alpine range, and meanwhile the rest of the world stands still, without so much as a breath of wind to ripple the gleaming surface of the water. A blade of light cuts into her eye. A window has opened in the blanket of foehn cloud overhead.

Behind me someone leans on their horn and the Monday morning traffic creeps into motion again. I let the clutch bite and the car roll on to the next red light. A gust shakes the windswept, leafless plane trees by the banks of the lake and sends rapid wavelets across the surface of the water, turning it tin-grey, then ink-black, and crowning it with hasty foam peaks. Meanwhile the sky turns dusky dark. Exceptional circumstances. Wild foehn, tame foehn, dimmer-switch foehn. Meteorological anomaly, I think to myself. Grey up north, glaring down south. No wind and air like glass before the gales set in, before the foehn is shattered and the rain begins. A short-lived set of exceptional circumstances that lasts up until some inevitable change forces the reinstatement of normality, or – which is harder to accept – the exceptional circumstances themselves trickle through into the norm, and the perilous storm winds of change fell trees, rip off roofs and blast sparks out of hearths, setting the world on fire. The wild foehn whines and howls, whipping dry autumn leaves

into eddy currents, hanging a banner of dust over the street, and slamming shutters. With the unruliness of a freak. Before the foehn window has a chance to close, and my field of vision narrow onto the rows of houses that look like jagged stone, and the scree heaps in the faces of passers-by, I step on the gas pedal again and the old banger jumps forward, coming to a revving standstill again two car lengths on. Red light. Grey everyday. It was a bad idea to set off on a Monday morning.

Dessau, Berlin, Stettin. Like a wicked stepmother I'm taking the child out into the urban forest. I'll walk away slowly under some murmured pretence and then, inconspicuously, make a break for freedom, building up to a sprint. Or else I'll give the child away, abandon her, perhaps even dispense with her like an animal – a sick, decrepit creature. And then slip back into a totally normal life. With a vacuum in my brain - an impenetrable blackness. Complete mental silence. Then, if my ability to think hasn't been completely stopped-up, it will at least be overwhelmed by the prospect of a dull, dumb, monotonous, routine, everyday existence: an average life that wants and demands nothing, is simple. That's the kind of small, unremarkable life I want. No more marching to the same old self-pitying tune, no more secret, self-consoling martyr thoughts that say: 'this is a mark of the best kind of person'. But right now everything depends on speed. On keeping moving, driving faster and faster, making instantaneous decisions and executing them without hesitation, on being determined, on the kind of slick, unquestioned assiduousness that unites and is practised by everyone except the small, the ancient, and the stupid - like us. Instead though: jams and queues. A plastic bag drifts in the foehn, a red wave crashes through the town, and doubts, like ants, swarm my brain for cracks and holes in the certainty of my sudden decision.

This metal snake writhes like a gleaming ribbon over the bridge, over the constantly tightening and loosening tangle of steel cables attached to tracks: a dense cross-hatch doubled up by power lines and signal masts. My red Volvo stands still in the snake-like queue while beneath us local and cross-country trains hiss into, and lurch away from, the central station. We crawl away from the bridge and up the hillside towards the motorway. Cars change lanes impatiently as drivers muscle in to fill gaps as soon as they open, and dark armoured limousines hog the road. The oncoming vehicles stare back at us with gleaming white eyes: they too are a gridlocked metal worm. The facades of the buildings are rusty-black and their windows hold shutter lids half-closed. Even on this slow motion Monday

morning another world is making its presence felt with suppressed impatience, a rapid, speedy, bustling world to which I no longer belong. Because of her. Because of Lio. Before I knew it there was a child in my arms and I was falling out of that efficiency-driven, accelerated world of haste. At first, when I realised, I didn't let it bother me much. You stop paying attention to standards that don't apply to you any more – you don't even notice they're there. It's because of the child, this outsiderdom, I told myself at first. It's hard for a father who's trying to get to grips with motherhood. Who has to get to grips with it. Nothing was the same as before, nothing fit in with my old life. Nothing dovetailed gently into place, nothing was straightforward, especially not the daily routines into which all forms of cohabitation must fall. It was all there: everything from the changing table to the supermarket trips, the sleepless nights, the hours spent pacing with the screaming bundle, the puddles of sickly milk and poeey yellow nappies, the sweeter-than-sweet smell of her scabby little peach-fuzz scalp, and the unbidden advice brandished by red-and-white striped alpha-mothers. And yet none of it had anything to do with life as I had known it. As we had known it. In the few weeks she was with us, Paule had crashed and railed against everything, and eventually she put her foot down and left. I stayed and sat, tired and sweat-soaked, in the flat at night, holding the child's bottle to its lips and staring into space. The guy in front of me brakes, pulls out, moves in to the next lane, filters back in front of me and then brakes again, hard. I crush a few ugly words between my tongue and teeth. "What did you say?" comes a voice from the back seat. "Nothing," I say. I can see her smiling in the rear view mirror. For crying out loud, I need to drive. I smile back. Chimneys blow smoky plumes of burnt trash into the morning, and the sliproad winds its way over the carriageway on stilts, curving back on itself and getting lost somewhere beneath us. A horn beeps. Two women with bright white teeth, right behind us. They're gesticulating. The motorway broadens out onto four lanes, we start to move, but a closure in one of them funnels us back together, forcing us back down to walking pace. Lio is asleep now, mouth open. The women overtake us in a looping timewarp. The passenger points at us with a white tipped fingernail, says something to the one at the wheel, they both laugh. Behind the closed lane, machines with mechanical arms work the greenery of the central reservation, rooting around in the leaves of low hedgerows and giving off a compound smell of diesel and mown verdure. Eventually, we pass. Everything starts to speed up, I indicate, move out to the far left, and floor it. Polished

to a sheen, the landscape in front of me; creaky snoring behind me. I imagine life without her. Alone. A face in the crowd. A vague picture of inconspicuousness. I can't think of anything else. I will not take my foot off the accelerator until I can smell the sea.

TWO

When Paule came back from Paris the child wasn't with her. I was sitting at my drawing board. I heard her open the front door, put down her key, disappear into her room and close the door. After a while I was struck by how quiet it was, and I thought it must have been because the child was sleeping. It was only when I went in some hours later that I noticed she was alone. That the child was gone.

Paule was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling.

"Where is she?" I asked. "What have you done with the child?" Paule didn't answer, and I looked around the room as though I might yet discover her in a corner or under the cupboard. Our child was gone, and although I felt I should have been afraid or concerned, what I actually felt was a dull tug beneath my breastbone – a feeling you could have called relief.

It was a cool May evening, and on the other side of the window there was rain. On the street below, Pink Cloud was walking up and down, rolling her hips. She was wearing her usual work clothes: a pink fake fur jacket, patent leather heels and fishnet tights. Hair from a blonde wig fell down over her shoulders. When her silver-grey umbrella had bobbed for the third time under the plane trees at the end of her walkway, I sat down on the bed next to Paule and took her hand, which didn't return my squeeze. Silence between us. The streetlamp threw orange strips of light onto the floor.

"Well, where is she?" I was startled at the new, threatening undertone in my voice. Paule was a stone figure carved on a sarcophagus, motionless and mute. Even her breathing was imperceptibly quiet, and in the silence of her unspoken relief I could hear the barely audible swooshing of her eyelashes as she opened and closed her eyes. Then suddenly: fear.

Starting at my coccyx I felt the level rise centimetre by centimetre, flooding my guts, lapping up to my lungs, filling my chest cavity, forcing itself into the narrow funnel of my throat and exerting unbearable pressure on my brain. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her

thin body.

“Say something, talk to me. What’s happened? What have you done?”

Paule wouldn’t look at me. She stared at the ceiling, and only a thin smile rippled in one corner of her mouth, nothing more.

Struggling to breathe I jumped up, threw the window open and leant out into the rain. Over the road people were moving about behind glass, gesturing and talking to each other, or to the fig trees they were watering. I knew them all from the view through the window, but we didn’t acknowledge each other in the street. Between the plane trees the wet tarmac glistened. Pink Cloud climbed out of a punter’s car and tottered uncertainly across the pavement.

Lio was four weeks old when Paule took her to Paris on the pretext of seeing friends. “Ones you don’t know.” On the pretext of getting distance. “I’ve got to get out of here.” She put Lio into the baby sling and turned her back to me so I could fasten it. “Do it up...” Now, a week later, she was back. Lying alone in a darkened room, saying nothing. I raced out and rifled through her handbag for her dog-eared diary. Loose notes and receipts rained onto me as I scoured the address pages for anybody who lived in Paris. I called three numbers with no luck. The first belonged to a man who claimed not to know her, and the second to a club or restaurant. The third just rang and rang until I hung up. But there was an address next to it. Pink Cloud’s hypnotic steps lulled me into a stupor which I had to tear myself out of in order to put my coat on and fill its pockets with the vital things: sketchbook, pens, Paule’s address book, credit card. Paule was still lying on the bed like a cadaver, staring at the plaster oval on the ceiling out of which three loose light cables dangled. Blue, brown, yellow-green striped. I turned away quickly, pulled the door shut behind me and left the house.

The night train to Paris didn’t leave until just before midnight, so I sat at the station buffet bar and ate a rare steak with a half-litre of Dôle. I downed the first glass in one, refilled it, and downed another until I felt the first signs of tipsiness cover my panic in a thick insulating layer of fibreglass. I ordered more wine, sketched a few figures and sank into ambivalence. The waiter was changing shift: quarter to twelve. I paid and raced out of there. On the train I wrapped myself up in my coat and fell asleep immediately in the overheated carriage. I woke several times when the train’s squealing brakes brought it to a stop, at a station or

elsewhere on the line, before it tentatively regained motion and speed. A few lights and neon-illuminated platforms punctuated the darkness of the night. The friction of the high speed train's racing thrust against the stationary darkness of the night, sparks flying past the window, and time trickling slowly to a standstill. My drunk face reflected in the window, then blackness again.

Early in the morning I shook myself out of the cushions, glugged a hasty coffee in the Gare de l'Est and ran with my coat over my head through the pouring rain to a taxi driven by a gigantic black man. Quickly and without thinking I started speaking to him, holding Paule's address book out for him to see. He nodded and drove off. The whole of Paris was glistening in the rain. The taxi wove its way through the morning traffic past the Grande Arche de la Défense, and eventually turned off into a tree-lined suburban street where the grounds of walled villas stood cheek by jowl. The car stopped and it was time to get out. The street had expired, it had stopped raining, the air smelled like a mouldering graveyard and the birds were hesitantly starting to sing again. I watched the taxi drive away, get smaller, indicate, turn, and disappear. In front of me stood an ivy covered wall, an iron gate with a rose arch, and a multi-storey slate-tiled house hidden behind some trees, which despite its oriels and little turrets managed to give off a sinister and unappealing air. In order to compose myself, to waste time that I didn't have, and moreover because I couldn't help it, I squatted down, took out my sketchbook and sketched a few panels:

ESTABLISHING SHOT: The Patriarch dabs at his mouth with a damask napkin and throws it onto his sauce-smearred plate.

TITLE: LA BOURGEOISIE

CAPTION: PARIS, SPRING 2010

PATRIARCH: LOUISE! CELINE!

PANEL 2. Close-up of the daughter of the house, a young girl with a dour expression. Behind her a downcast servant.

LOUISE: OUI, PAPA?

PANEL 3. Louise and Céline haul the overweight Patriarch out of the room.

PANEL 4. Together they throw him over the balustrades down into the hallway of the villa.

Patriarch: ARRGGH!

FX: SNAP. CRASH.

PANEL 5. Louise and Céline are poised with carving knives over the Patriarch's body. A pool of blood under his head.

Patriarch: GROAN!

PANEL 6. The women each gouge out one of his eyes.

NEW PAGE

PANEL 1. Night. Outside the villa. Light falls into the garden from an open back door. Céline and Louise emerge carrying a rolled-up carpet which is sagging in the middle. The Patriarch's slippers protrude from one end.

FX: HOIIK!

PANEL 2. Night. The villa gardens. Moonlight. A compost heap in the foreground. Louise and Celine hurl the carpet, with the body in it, onto the compost. (...)

Dark treetops, soft smoke, birdsong.

The gate opened silently, revealing a garden with a weeping willow, and underneath it a pond lapping at its banks.

ESTABLISHING SHOT. A girl lies on her front on the sun-warmed banks, her thin black pigtailed dangling over her shoulders into the water.

TITLE: PAULINE

CAPTION: MUNICH, SUMMER 1976.

PANEL 2. The girl's reflection quivers and her face becomes a hideous distortion. A goldfish crosses through below the surface, while deep down waterlilies wind their gungy stems around each other. Willow leaves blow like confetti over the thuja-scented water, and drift into reflected bands of cloud.

"Qui êtes-vous?" A strained, high-pitched voice. I span around and saw a woman with gigantic breasts standing on the steps up to the front door. Her hands were clenched in her

apron pockets. In remnants of schoolboy French I communicated that I had come to collect the child. *Afin de l'emmener*. An infant, un nourrisson, had gone missing, and I had come to reunite it with its mother. Nobody was in, came the gruff reply. The owners of the house had gone away and I should see that I did the same. She went back into the house and slammed the oak door shut behind her. A few moments later I saw her standing by the window, watching me. I retreated a few steps, but instead of leaving the grounds I slipped behind a boxwood tree and watched in return until I saw the white apron disappear. I scurried back out again and crept around the building looking for an unlocked back door or half-open cellar window. Whose house was this? The sign on the front door simply said 'JB'. How did Paule know them and why had she handed the child over to them – a child she hadn't wanted at first but then, later, had been determined to keep? In the year and a half I had known Paule I hadn't learned much about her, other than she came from somewhere in the mountains and had a mother there with whom she no longer spoke. We had always been too busy playing our all-night games of flit and chase to talk about anything other than the two of us, the adventure of our love, and our insatiable desire. We had tumbled into one another, and in the commotion of the present, past and future had been wiped out.

Finding all the doors and windows locked, I sprang without hesitation up the steps and rang the bell. Nothing moved. I rang again and again, my finger glued to the button, until I heard shuffling steps approach. A key turned, and before the door was open a crack I threw myself against it and stormed in. The fat woman flew backwards, putting her arms out behind her and landing on a cushioned chair. Her nose was bleeding and she screamed. I found a tissue and offered it to her, but she shrank back and screamed again. So I left it on her apron, which was now flecked with red, and raced into the darkness in search of the child. Up staircase after staircase, taking multiple steps at a time, softly over deep-piled carpets and through opulently furnished rooms. Striped silk wallpaper, pastel bedclothes, nut-brown wooden furniture. Almond 16-1432. Scrupulously tidy, devoid of any personal touches that might have betrayed who lived here. Swarovski crystal trinkets, candle holders, pearl-embroidered cushions and an alabaster orchid in a porcelain pot. No sounds, no people, no sign of life. An over-heated bathroom with dark tiles and golden chrome fittings, bowls of petals with no scent. Everything straight out of a show home catalogue. Yet another bedroom leading into a tubular changing room lined with walk-in-wardrobe doors. And then

another door into the next bedroom, and so forth. No way of getting back to the landing or finding a staircase down. Instead, decorative floral motifs and pieces of Biedermeier furniture with striped upholstery, floor-length valances hanging from the windows and the view of the garden to which my eye keeps returning, with its weeping willow and its fishpond. Finally, a room filled with duvets and pillows wrapped in plastic, with mattress protectors, electric blankets and yet another door. Another room, empty except for a silk tapestry depicting a hunt – a deer being chased down by dogs. Its eyes swivel as it throws its head and antlers back. Behind the heavy velvet curtains I can still see the garden, and the pond and willow too, except now there is a hunched shape moving hurriedly across the gravel path, carrying a bundle. Lio! The window will not open, so I beat the pane with my palm, but the acoustics of the overdressed room baffle my despair, and the woman doesn't seem to hear. She disappears around a corner, and I bolt back through every room, every chamber, running circuitously from space to space. I end up in a carpeted corridor with a staircase leading up. I bound up it and land in another passageway leading to yet more rooms – offices – where faint department store music emanates from invisible speakers. I try every door but the rooms are all locked. More corners, more corridors, until finally I see light. Daylight. I sprint to the window and realise I'm not on the third floor, as I had thought, but the bel étage. I smash the window with my foot, clear the shards with my sleeve, and jump out.

I followed the path behind thuja hedges and through an overgrown neighbouring plot to a footpath leading through a tunnel of thick vegetation. It wove its serpentine way headfirst into the dark greenery and wound up in front of an old tool-shed with a mouldy door. The mustiness of mouldering compost. I knocked and then hammered on the locked door, shook the handle, which broke straight off, and kicked the wood, which for its part did not give way. I circled the shed, trying to see through its grimy window, and was poised to smash it too when I discovered the trapdoor. I opened it and crawled through. Breathing heavily, I found myself shading my eyes with my hand as though this might help them acclimatise to the dark. The room was damp and cool. I could make out the enormous shape of the woman in front of some kind of coffer or large travelling case. She was bent over the chest with her back to me. But when she stood up in surprise, I saw her hands were empty. A moustache of dried blood still clung to her top lip. I pushed her aside and saw my child lying

on the floor of the chest. Her arms and legs were outstretched, the corners of her mouth drawn downwards, and her eyelids like thick cracks, screwed shut. Had she stopped breathing? I went to pick her up but the fat woman, who had roused, threw herself between us. As she raised her arms I smelled her acrid, cleaning-lady's musk.

"Give me the child. I am her father." I said it for the first time. Her father. Son père. It sounded bizarre, evoking Catholicism and canings and elm leaves rustling over weather-beaten graves. The woman said nothing and made for the child instead. I grabbed her shoulders and forced her to look at me. Then I said it again, I started to explain, felt uncomfortable, tried other formulations, and floundered. Paule, my wife – another totally alien phrase – had gone... the child needed medical attention, all the way from Switzerland, night train, high-speed, as if any of that would help. The woman tried to get away, I kept talking as we wrestled, in German once I'd run out of French, but I had the feeling she couldn't understand me anyway, didn't want to, and she started cursing, having managed to get free, I shoved her away from the chest, reached Lio, touched one of her tiny fists, which was icy cold, lifted her out of the chaos of nappies, tubes, bottles and blankets around her. The child wasn't moving, and kept her eyes screwed shut.