

Olivia Wenzel

1,000 Coils of Fear

352 pp., hardcover

S. Fischer Verlag, March 2020



'I have more privileges than anyone in my family ever had. And still I'm fucked I'm hated by more people than my grandmother can imagine. On the day of the German elections, I spend twenty minutes saying exactly this to try to talk her out of voting for a right-wing party.'

Olivia Wenzel

Olivia Wenzel, born in Weimar in former East Germany in 1985, read Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Practice at the University of Hildesheim and now lives and works in Berlin. She writes drama and prose and makes music as Otis Foulie. Wenzel's plays have been performed at leading theatres like Munich's Kammerspiele, Hamburg's Thalia Theater, Deutsches Theater Berlin and Ballhaus Naunynstrasse. Alongside her writing, she runs workshops for children and young adults. *1,000 Coils of Fear* is her first novel.

Translation: **Katy Derbyshire**

All rights reserved by S. Fischer Verlag GmbH

English Sample: Pages 39 – 50

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

I've just landed, but nobody applauded... it looks cold outside.

ARE YOU CARRYING FOOD?

No.

ARE YOU CARRYING MORE THAN 10,000 DOLLARS?

No.

AT WHICH ADDRESS WILL YOU BE AVAILABLE?

I want to decide spontaneously.

IT DOESN'T WORK WITHOUT AN ADDRESS.

Okay.

WHO SHOULD BE CONTACTED IN CASE ANYTHING HAPPENS TO YOU?

What's supposed to happen to me?

WHO IS YOUR CONTACT PERSON IN CASE OF EMERGENCY?

If I got run over by a random pick-up truck tomorrow and my grandmother received a dramatic call from the US, she'd have a heart attack on top, right there and then. So that's not an option.

Intense heart attacks! Brought to you by: your grandchild!

Instead, I'm giving Kim's name and number. My grandmother probably wouldn't agree, and Kim definitely wouldn't; she hates that her personal data doesn't belong to her.

SMARTPHONES, FACEBOOK, GOOGLE MAPS – ONCE UPON A TIME, THEY WERE THE MEGALOMANIAC WET DREAMS OF ZEALOUS STASI OFFICERS.

A sexy, sexy dream come true!

And maybe, I think suddenly, Kim hates me as well.

Sorry Miss, we have sad news. We've got your friend here in the hospital. You were mentioned as her emergency contact. She's in a very critical condition. Could you please help us find – hello? Miss, are you still there?

But maybe Kim wouldn't just hang up if something were to happen to me. Maybe she'd pause, think of me, worry. Maybe she'd pack her backpack in a mad rush, leave her flat and come after me. Maybe she'd be sitting by my hospital bed a mere 28 hours after that dramatic phone call from the US. I'd still be in a coma,

battered and bruised by the reckless pick-up truck, and she'd hold my hand. At some point, she'd start sobbing quietly, the odd tear wetting my IV drip, and outside the door a bunch of caring nurses would gather, women and men praying for me, for us, *Hallelujah*. Once Kim had finally calmed down and her tears were dry, she'd stroke my blood-encrusted cheek and whisper apologies, very quietly, almost soundlessly, her warm breath on my ear. She'd regret that we'd hurt each other. And then, at last, I'd wake from my coma and focus my one remaining eye on her.

DOES IT BOTHER YOU THAT THERE ARE SO FEW FILMS IN WHICH YOU CAN SEE MEN CRYING?

What?

ARE YOU RELIGIOUS?

WHICH FAITH DO YOU BELONG TO?

I don't belong to anyone.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IN?

Social relations.

ARE YOU UNMARRIED?

That sounds medieval.

DO YOU LIVE ALONE?

Yes.

WHERE DO YOUR CLOSEST RELATIVES LIVE?

I don't know, exactly.

ARE YOU VISITING FAMILY MEMBERS DURING YOUR STAY?

No.

WHERE DO THE MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY LIVE?

I don't have a real family, in the biological sense.

The lone wolf, far away from its pack!

That's not what I mean.

Out in the open – the adventure begins!

I come from a family in which the idea of travelling as far away from oneself as possible was romanticized to an inordinate degree.

WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?

I come from a family in which travel was always an unfulfilled desire. But not lone-wolf-like, more like...

YES, GO ON!

Picture this:

My mother: a young woman with bright blue hair and studded belts, a punk, trapped inside the GDR. A young woman who gets involved with an Angolan man in a small East German town where everybody knows everybody. A young woman who wants to be anywhere but here, who yearns excessively for her exit permit to be approved, shortly after 'the African' has to go back to his country. A young woman who envisions a life together in Angola, a life under a different sun, a life in freedom. But then, at age 19, only a few months after giving birth to twins: arrest, annulment of the exit permit, her psyche crumbling inside a Stasi prison.

IS THIS A PITCH FOR THE NEXT CLICHÉD MADE-FOR-PUBLIC-TV MOVIE ABOUT LIFE IN THE GDR?

The problem with clichés isn't that they're not true.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM THEN?

Pretty often, they're true. The problem is that they only ever give you the same single perspective, over and over.

SO?

Picture this:

My mother: a woman who raises my twin brother and me as best she can but as if we're to blame for her life, to blame for her never getting out of the *blasted fucking country*, meaning sometimes East Germany and sometimes West Germany. Before 1990, after 1990 – she always has to stay. Her man is long gone, has a new family in Angola because the old one never came to join him back then, and always, there's not enough money, always, she's alone.

BUT DIDN'T SHE HAVE YOU TWO KIDS?

My mother today: a 53-year-old woman who can never get over her multiple confinements, or her son's violent death. A woman who commits herself to a mental institution and declares me dead too. An injured creature backed into a corner and baring her teeth for her entire life.

RABIES?

What?

YOU CAN DIE OF RABIES WITHIN 15 DAYS FROM INFECTION.

ARE YOU VACCINATED?

Against what?

AGAINST EVERYTHING THAT MIGHT BE A DANGER TO YOU.

That scar, that small embossed shape on my mother's upper arm and the arms of so many others born in the GDR. It used to fascinate me when I was a child. I

thought it was a miniature map of a wonderful secret land.

PERVERSE.

DOES THAT MEAN YOU'RE NOT IN CONTACT WITH HER?

She refuses all contact. I last saw her at the funeral.

IN WHICH INSTITUTION IS SHE NOW?

I don't know.

AND YOUR BROTHER?

What about him?

HOW DID HE LOSE HIS LIFE?

Lose his life. Get loose of his life?

OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS?

My father writes two emails a year from Angola. One of them always comes a day before our birthday, or now only before my birthday. He can't remember the correct date.

AND YOUR GRANDPARENTS?

My grandfather is dead, cancer, but my grandmother is still around.

WHERE IS SHE NOW?

Probably at home, in front of the TV. Or at the doctor's.

WHY SO DISMISSIVE?

Picture this:

My grandmother: loyal Communist Party supporter and proud mother of two daughters, proud in general and often because of her good connections (nylon panty hose and denims, West German chocolate and a vacation bungalow on the Baltic Sea every summer), proud of her pretty blond hairdos, proud of her striking beauty, of her above-average intelligence, proud of her daughters' beauty and intelligence. My grandmother: a vain teenager who longs for nothing more than to be an air hostess. In order to combine pleasure with profession. In order to travel to all over the world, in order to be able to go away without really being away. *Because of course, the GDR is great, it's my homeland, I don't want to actually leave.* To be an air hostess so as to escape her violent father. To be an air hostess so as to see more and be more than the stupid idiots from her town, to be an air hostess so as to find out what flying feels like. But then unfortunately never becoming an air hostess but instead a mother and later a secretary. Slipped disc in her mid-forties, unfit to work since then.

SO MUCH FAILURE ON THE MATERNAL SIDE.

Excuse me, is your family: a) cursed, b) just very unlucky, c) mentally ill or d) pretty

solid considering the circumstances?

My grandmother today: a cute, plump woman just over seventy who's afraid of flying and can't set foot in an elevator. A woman who loves the warmth of her heating pad. A woman who keeps dreaming she can fly and who can't speak openly to me, her irritable granddaughter, and certainly not about her other grandchild, the boy who took his own life.

WHY CAN'T SHE TALK TO YOU ABOUT IT?

WHAT ARE YOU KEEPING SECRET?

Nothing.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT THE WORD *HEIM*, HOME, IN THE GERMAN WORD FOR KEEPING SECRETS, *VERHEIMLICHEN*? OR ABOUT THE WORD *UNHEIMLICH*, UNCANNY?

No.

OR ABOUT THE WORD *GEHEIMNIS*, SECRET?

All the men in our family are dead or far away, the surviving women are damaged, each in their own way, and I can travel as often and as far as I like, even though travel never mattered to me. Even though I didn't need to do anything in order to be able to travel, apart from being born in the right place at the right time. I can even think about travel as a vacation activity, I can think, while travelling, about the self-determined, pleasant experience I'm currently having, while thousands of people are embarking on forced travel, which is being referred to with words like crisis and wave and influx.

STOP, STOP, STOP, THAT'S A DIFFERENT SUBJECT. CONCENTRATE. TRAVEL AS THE MAIN SUBJECT, LONELINESS AS A SIDE EFFECT. WHAT ELSE?

Why loneliness?

WHY DO YOU BITE YOUR NAILS?

When we were kids, our mother would sometimes go on vacation without us. Once, she spent two months travelling around French Guyana and Suriname. Our grandfather was in hospital at the time, which meant our grandmother's life was on hold. So a friend of our mother's, Melanie, looked after us. Melanie's partner, a moderate neo-Nazi, was there as well sometimes. When dinner was ready, he liked to call my brother and me to the table; he'd yell through the entire flat for us *coffee beans* to hurry up and come to the kitchen already. When my mother came back from her vacation, it was the first time her nails weren't bitten to the quick, the skin around them unharmed, that's how good she had felt while abroad.

SO SHE DID TRAVEL AFTER ALL.

WHERE TO?

She'd be sad for days afterwards, every time, because she had to come back to Germany.

AND YOU?

I have more privileges than anyone in my family ever had. And still I'm fucked. I'm hated by more people than my grandmother can imagine. On the day of the German elections, I spent twenty minutes saying exactly this to try and talk her out of voting for a right-wing party.

Intense heartaches! Brought to you by:

Your grandmother!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?

While I pack my wheelee case for my trip to the US, I experience some interesting feelings. Maybe because for a moment I can ignore the baggage my mother, my grandmother and my brother stuffed their shadows into. Maybe because I'll soon be travelling with a different kind of baggage. I think there's nothing more liberating than being anonymous.

THERE'S NOTHING LONELIER THAN BEING ANONYMOUS.

DO YOU REALLY THINK TRAVELLING HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH FREEDOM?

Maybe. But maybe my pre-emptive nostalgia ahead of travel is exactly the same nonsense my grandmother and my mother fell for.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

My family?

WHERE YOU'RE FROM. WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

At the end of the day, it's like this: I'm on a rooftop terrace in New York, I've had two glasses of red wine and I feel relaxed and grown up. And then, at the end of the day, I think:

In New York, I walk along Fifth Avenue and eat a banana without giving it a second thought.

Suddenly my heart starts pounding, I swallow several times and look out over the city. No wind blowing, no dog barking. I'm alone, my face feels cool, the lights of the skyscrapers flash in the distance as if sending me a message in Morse code.

What is it? I ask out loud, and I feel the too-fast pounding of my heart, *Come on, what?* My heart has been racing like this for weeks now, more and more frequently, especially at night. I've got into the habit of compulsively listening to my heartbeat before I fall asleep. Years ago, a doctor told me a rapid heartbeat often had psychological causes, namely, fear and anxiety. Fear of what? The

skyscrapers won't tell me. *Something is heading in my direction, I know it is, I think and belch silently.*

YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A BUSTLING METROPOLIS AND YOU BELCH SILENTLY. Do the people in a city of thirty million bustle more intensively than in the Thuringian Forest? Do I have more in common with the people in New York than with those in the Thuringian Forest? Why do I feel so comfortable here? At the laundromat, on the streets, in the Mexican food place. The only place I don't dare to go is church. I'm worried they might smell my atheism for miles against the wind.

FOR MILES AGAINST THE WIND, COME OFF IT.

A few years ago, Kim said she'd seen a diagram that showed I come from the most areligious place in the world.

WHERE IS KIM NOW?

In Berlin.

AND WHY DO YOU FEEL SO COMFORTABLE HERE AND NOT WITH HER?

In New York, I walk along Fifth Avenue and eat a banana without giving it a second thought.

EXCELLENT!

THE THREEFOLD PROBLEM WITH BANANAS.

Let me explain:

1. Eating a banana in public as a Black person: racist monkey analogies, *oogah oogah oogah. Ouch.*
2. Eating a banana as an East German – the banana as an allegory of the inferiority of beige East Germany to the golden West. The banana as a bridge to prosperity, exotic fruits as a symbol of economic supremacy. *Jeez, those dumb East Germans queued for hours for them when the Wall came down.*
3. Eating a banana as a woman – blowjobs and all that. The banana as a penis analogy and a tool of sexism. Insecure pubescent teenagers traumatizing other insecure pubescent teenagers. *Do a deepthroat, heh heh heh. Heh heh heh.*

In New York, I walk along Fifth Avenue and eat a banana without giving it a second thought.

And afterwards I realize: That was a moment just now that others call freedom.

In New York, I stand on a rooftop at night and stare nervously and cluelessly at a skyline I know from movies and postcards. And afterwards I realize: That was a moment just now that others call future. In New York, I think of my brother and miss him less than usual. And afterwards I realize: Like this could be good.