

Roland Schimmelpfennig

THE LINE BETWEEN DAY AND NIGHT

S. Fischer Verlag

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»Sometimes there would be these rare evenings when I was sober and clear-headed, evenings when I could be certain of putting one step ahead of another, even though everything in my life had fallen apart.«

A fast-moving and emotionally charged trip through the chaos of contemporary life

In his third novel, Roland Schimmelpfennig takes us on a journey through all the fascinating facets of vibrant contemporary Berlin. This pulsating, cosmopolitan city is also a place lost between day and night – a city full of hidden depths.

Roland Schimmelpfennig, born in 1967, is Germany's most-performed contemporary dramatist. He worked as a journalist in Istanbul, going on to study directing. Schimmelpfennig's plays have been staged in more than 40 countries, to great success. His first novel *An einem klaren, eiskalten Januarmorgen zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*, published in 2016, was on the shortlist for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize.

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English Sample translation by David Tushingham

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She was floating in a white wedding dress on the green water of the canal. The young woman was floating on her back and there were roses in her hair. She was looking into the sky.

It was a cold spring day yet the whole city was dancing.

1 May, Berlin, techno.

Two helicopters were circling above Görlitzer Park, but they were flying too close together. What if they touched each other? What if they fell out of the sky onto the crowd of dancers?

Maybe there weren't two helicopters up there circling above us, maybe there was just one. It was possible I was seeing double because I'd been awake for over 24 hours.

Dancing next to me by the canal were a Colombian illustrator and a Croatian roofer and a Portuguese waitress and a Syrian IT specialist and an Indian girl with black and blue eye make-up who could breathe fire and a very tall, very thin bearded Russian who described himself as a mystic. The only one I knew was the Russian, Ivan.

They were all wide awake and dead tired at the same time and they all shared whatever they had: cocaine, MDMA, ketamine, speed, beer and vodka.

The sun was a silver disk and I wondered how that could be: it was as if the moon had blundered into the daytime by mistake.

I saw the young woman in her wedding dress floating on the water and I thought: everything's right and yet everything's wrong. A mirror ball was spinning in one of the trees.

In the past it had been me sitting up there in the helicopter in the sky above the city, above the park, above the canal and I know what you can see with the camera from up there: everything and nothing. You can see nothing but a mass of people by the edge of the canal moving in broad daylight to electronic music but you can't hear the music up there in the circling helicopter because the sound of the engine is far too loud.

The young woman in the wedding dress was floating down the canal on her back and looking into the sky.

Then a bird landed on her chest and started pecking at her, but nobody seemed to see the girl and the bird apart from me. All the ravers on the bank and on the crowded, narrow bridge over the canal kept on dancing as if everything was just as it always was.

Berlin has more bridges than Venice, Csaba once told me and Gianni had rolled his eyes.



– Infinity: what that's supposed to mean? the Croatian roofer said to the Russian mystic. Nothing is infinite, any child knows that. Some white powder went round.

Hello helicopter.

Hello Venice.



- Everything has a beginning and an end, said the Croatian.
- If everything has a beginning and an end, then there's no such thing as infinity, said the Syrian IT specialist. But infinity exists. It's a series of numbers.
- Infinity is a circle, said the mystic.
- Infinity is a line, said the Portuguese woman.
- Can none of you see that bird? I said, and the Indian girl asked: What bird, what kind of bird? And then the Colombian illustrator changed the subject: Does anyone know the story of the bird and the snake? No, said the Syrian: But does anyone know the story of the bee and the whale? Meanwhile the bird was still sitting on the chest of the girl in the wedding dress. The Indian girl with black and blue eye make-up took hold of my hands.

Has anyone called the police? I was going to say: Has nobody called the police, and then I thought: there are police everywhere here, I'm in the police. But I wasn't in the police any more.

I'd been in the police for 23 years but now I wasn't a policeman any more, I was awaiting trial.

Is anyone here a lifeguard? I wondered.

– Don't jump, said the Indian fire-breather who I'd only met a couple of hours before, at dawn under the railway bridge by the Holzmarkt, and she kept holding my hands.

I took off my clothes and jumped into the canal.

The water was ice cold.

The young woman looked into the sky and didn't blink once when I pulled her out of the water.

She was dead.

Her wedding dress slipped and I saw a tattoo on her left shoulder, a cornflower.

The music hadn't stopped, the glitter ball in the tree still kept on spinning and everyone was dancing. The dead woman in the wedding dress was now lying in the grass by the canal, the helicopter was now roaring directly above us and the siren of an ambulance cut through the music and was coming steadily closer.

– Let's go, said the Indian girl, who'd waited on the bank with my clothes. I'll take you home.

For a moment I thought that perhaps the Indian girl might not be an Indian girl, but an Indian boy, or both at the same time.

– What's your name? I asked.

I stumbled and I started shivering. My whole body was shivering and then we kissed, endlessly, somewhere in the street on the long way from Kreuzberg to Wedding.



Rays of sunlight streamed through the large windows of the old workshop. I heard a train go past outside. I couldn't remember how I got home. The Indian girl wasn't there.

I was alone.

I had nothing on.

I was not alone.

At the foot end of the bed I'd woken up on, a grey-haired man sat motionless. He had a grey-white stubbly beard and deep creases in his face.

The man looked at me with sadness in his eyes.

In the corner of the room a snake was lying in a patch of sunlight on the old wooden floorboards.

Another train passed by the windows outside but this time the train seemed to be travelling backwards, the man with sadness in his eyes disappeared like the sound of the train and then he was back again, continuing to look at me wordlessly.

– How did you get in here? Who are you? I asked.

For a long time the man said nothing.

– The door was open, he said eventually.

– Who are you? I asked again.

– Someone pulled a young woman out of the canal, this young woman was wearing a wedding dress.

A train went past outside again and this time the train went both forwards and backwards.

– And then the dead girl is lying in the grass next to the canal, the pale sun shines down out of a cold sky, there are people dancing everywhere and these people don't stop dancing even though a young woman is lying there dead. How is anyone supposed to understand that? There's no understanding that.

The grey-haired man was wearing a dark, three-piece suit. For a moment he spread out his arms as if he was about to dance.

– Maybe those people think the woman's asleep. Maybe they don't even see her. The police arrive. An ambulance arrives. Nobody knows who the young woman is. Nobody misses her. Not one person. Nobody knows her name. And if no one finds out what her name is, she'll end up lying in an unnamed grave. And that would be the saddest thing imaginable. That would be the saddest thing possible, wouldn't it?

I tried to cover myself up, but I couldn't move. The snake was still lying motionless in the patch of sunlight, though maybe the snake was only my belt, and for a moment I thought that the man at the foot of the bed was me, but he was 25 or 30 years older than me, he was almost 60. He looked like a businessman, from somewhere in the South East maybe, maybe Turkey, maybe Armenia, maybe Syria, maybe from Iran or Iraq.

The man was silent. Silent for a long time.



– You got the girl out of the water. The girl has lost her name. I'd like to give the girl her name back. I want her to have a name again.

Everyone's got a name. Perhaps you can help me, the sad man said.

– I don't know who she is. I didn't know her, I said.

– Yes, said the man.

– I'm not with the police any more. I'm looking at six to ten years in prison.

– Yes, the man said again. I know. I know. And you talk to ghosts.

– I don't like ghosts.

– But you talk to them, and you walked from Kreuzberg to Wedding barefoot and half naked.

It was getting dark outside the next time I woke up.

The sad man at the foot of the bed wasn't there any more.

The Indian girl wasn't there.

The snake on the wooden floor was my belt.

There was a pistol next to my clothes. It was my own service weapon, a SIG Sauer P6, but that gun had been taken off me when I was arrested over a year ago, it couldn't be here. I closed my eyes and then I opened my eyes again and the gun was gone.

I got up, drank two glasses of cold water and showered for over 20 minutes in a tiled corner of the former carpenter's workshop. I dried myself off with one of the towels that had belonged to my father and got dressed. I put the radio on and juiced a lemon. I recognised the announcer's voice. I liked the way she spoke. The announcer spoke as if we'd known each other for a long time. She spoke as if we weren't strangers. She spoke as if we could be friends.

I stood alone in the old workshop with my hands trembling and listened to the voice on the radio. I should have been hungry because I hadn't eaten anything for two or three days but I wasn't hungry.

I downed the glass of lemon juice in one.

A bit later my hands stopped trembling. On the railway line outside the high windows of the workshop, trains went past. Some of them were local city trains, and some of them were long-distance trains.

The old workshop in Gerichtstraße where I lived had been my father's workshop. He'd inherited it from his father. Like my grandfather



before him, my father had been a carpenter. He died when I was 19. By then my mother had already been dead for a long time. She'd died when I was still a child. After my father died, I inherited the workshop and moved in there but I didn't become a carpenter. I joined the police.

When I left the workshop, my eyes fell on a small, thin slip of paper on the heavy iron door. It had been stuck there by a child, the daughter of the Vietnamese greengrocer on the other side of the street. She was called Vinh. The thin piece of paper that Vinh had stuck to the door was one of those little paper strips you find in Chinese fortune cookies.

»Unforgettable moments will enlighten your journey.«

This was printed on that narrow strip and next to it the little girl had drawn a tiny rabbit. The fact it was a rabbit was something only Vinh and I knew. Vinh was now studying at Harvard on a Maths scholarship. She was very bright.

When Vinh was still a kid who used to stand behind the till in her parents' little shop, she would sometimes give me presents of Chinese fortune cookies and when she was six or seven, she had adopted me, as she put it.

– You don't have any parents. I'm going to adopt you and later we'll get married.

Katrin, my girlfriend at the time, didn't like the girl. It was mutual.

I'd heard practically nothing from Vinh for a year.

»Unforgettable moments will enlighten your journey.«

That strip of paper had been hanging there on the door for years, but I'd not read what it said for a long time.

I ran down the stairs and crossed the old courtyard in the twilight.

On the railway line high above me another train was on its way through the city. Vinh's mother was standing outside her little shop over on the other side of Gerichtstraße. When she saw me, she waved excitedly towards me. She shouted something but I didn't understand what she said because a car was going past. I just waved back and kept going as far as Wedding station. A couple of dark clouds towered over the city in the evening sky. There was a warm wind blowing. It looked like rain, but for now it was still a beautiful evening. After a cold spring, summer was coming at last.