

*The Message* by Doris Knecht

English sample translation by Lucy Jones

The first message came on a Sunday in September. I was sitting on a bench in the shade behind the house, smoking a cigarette, my laptop balanced on my knees, without an inkling that this was when my situation would shift again, just slightly. Wolf was sitting next to me, scrolling through his phone and not smoking. He'd hated the habit since he'd given it up a few months ago and tried to convert anyone who still did it. I normally avoided smoking when he was around, but I'd been looking forward to this cigarette all afternoon and was trying to enjoy it, which was getting harder by the minute.

The message was in the inbox of my official Messenger account on Facebook. I have two accounts – one in my name and a private one in a name only my friends know. I can remember the yellow autumn light, the mild breeze and the hue of the sky above me. It was a warm greenish-blue, streaked with fading jet streams. Wolf and I had been walking in the mountains all day and now we were back home, pleasantly worn out, drinking wine together on the bench that stood next to the wall, and I felt that I would have preferred to be alone. I would have preferred to smoke, read my emails, look at the news, and scroll through Instagram and Twitter alone.

The message was sent by a faceless person called Ernst Breuer. I first wanted to delete it unread but then my curiosity got the better of me. Just as I clicked on the message, Wolf made a gesture with his hand, wafting my cigarette smoke away just very lightly.

I got up and said: 'Should I sit somewhere else?'

'No, of course not. It's fine,' replied Wolf with such an impeccable long-suffering look on his face that I moved to the other side of the bench anyway, wine glass in one hand, laptop in the other, and the cigarette that I was no longer enjoying between my lips. I could have just stubbed it out, but it was my lungs, my air, my life.

The message from the faceless person contained just one sentence:

*Do you know about your handsome husband's affair?*

'Trump, the idiot,' said Wolf, 'is going to start World War Three.' His forehead and bald patch were sunburned. I couldn't come up with the right reaction to what he'd said. It got stuck, half-processed in my brain, masked by a finely-grained, light-grey static. But Wolf didn't need a reaction.

'I'm hungry,' he said. 'Should I order in some food?'

'Okay,' I replied.

'Pizza or sushi?' asked Wolf. 'Or maybe Indian?'

'I don't mind,' I said, straining to say each syllable through the static.

'Then sushi,' said Wolf. 'Do you want to order?'

Wolf had just said that he wanted to order but never mind. I clicked away the message and tried to turn down the volume on the light grey static in my head. I said: 'Hold on I'll ask Sophie if she wants to eat too. She's not allowed to have sushi.' I stubbed out the remains of my cigarette in the dead soil of a flower pot next to the bench. I clicked away Facebook and opened Whatsapp. My stepdaughter normally lodged in my old student flat in Vienna, but now she was lying on her bed in her old room, the blinds half down, watching Netflix on her laptop and tapping on her smartphone. Her round belly added a grotesque bulge to her long, thin girl's figure. I'd checked on her shortly after Wolf and I had returned – 'Everything OK, sweetie?' 'I'm fine, Ruth.' 'What are you up to?' 'Whatsapping, watching *Modern Family*.' 'Well, that figures, ha ha,' – and now I was too lazy to go upstairs again. My Whatsapp chats with Sophie were wedged on my display between one with Simon Brunner and one with Iris who'd just sent me a photo of some vegan thing she'd cooked, which looked pretty revolting as usual. I clicked on Sophie and saw that she was online. *We're ordering food, want something?* A crow cawed at us from the neighbour's roof in that offended tone that crows have. I saw that Sophie was writing back straight away. A few seconds later her reply popped up: *thx, just ate* plus a heart-faced smiley. *OK!* I wrote back, added a heart, deleted both again, replied with a thumbs up and took a screenshot. On the bench next to me, Wolf arched his back.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

‘Oh, just my back,’ said Wolf. ‘It’s been playing up for a while.’

‘Dear oh dear. Poor Wolf.’

Wolf was still staring at his smartphone. I said I knew a good physiotherapist. Wolf said, oh, it’ll sort itself out. He wasn’t one for doctors – never had been, ever since I’d met him at university. Unlike me, he had managed to finish his art degree at some point and lived in Vienna in a flatshare, like back in the old days, only that his flatmates were half his age.

‘Sushi’s okay,’ I said. ‘Sophie doesn’t want anything.’

‘Right,’ said Wolf. I opened the menu of Sakura Palace. Wolf leaned over my laptop and pressed himself against my shoulder. He was too close to me, much too close. *Do you know about your handsome husband’s affair?* Yes, Ernst Breuer, I know about his affair, I’ve known for some time now. The question is: how come you know?

‘I’d like twelve California maki, and ...hold on ...yep, a large sushi plate,’ said Wolf. I added tempura maki with shrimp, a few spring rolls and two bottles of Japanese beer to my basket and sent off the order. Wolf said something about the situation in North Korea and carried on scrolling on his phone. I opened the screenshot with a Photoshop app, erased Sophie’s name and posted the picture with the caption *Modern Family* on Instagram, then watched for a minute as the hearts and comments from some of my seven thousand subscribers came trickling in. I read the message again. Not important. Strange, yes, but not important. Just an attempt to provoke me, and not the first. I clicked it open again, read it and answered: *Dear Mr Breuer, thanks for the info. Just keep your nose out of my shit and in your own. All best.*

‘Everything OK?’ asked Wolf.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I answered. I pressed send. Facebook replied in red letters that there was a temporary problem. *Click again to send.* I clicked again and the red error message popped up again. I opened the Messenger app and up popped the message but now there was no sender, just an anonymous Facebook user. I couldn’t answer the sender’s messages. There was no Ernst Breuer and never had been one.

'Is everything really okay?' Wolf asked.

'Yeah, just another stupid message from a troll who's trying to wind me up,' I said.

'Saying what?' asked Wolf, who was always interested in the dark side of humanity. He liked reading every serial killer book he could get his hands on and was fascinated by films that showed people dying in obscenely bizarre ways. I really would have preferred to be on my own.

'Oh, nothing important,' I said. Nothing important, just a group of words in a virtual mailbox, nothing real. My husband is dead, so fuck you, Ernst Breuer.

After Ludwig died, I'd thought that was the maximum that could happen to a person. I'd felt safe. I'd survived my husband's death – nothing worse could happen. At least that's what I thought back then.

'When are you going to be in Vienna again?' Wolf asked.

'Don't know exactly,' I said. 'Probably when Sophie has her baby. She's staying here for the time being. She's registered at a nearby clinic.'

'How long to go?' Wolf asked.

'A few days,' I said.

'Exciting,' said Wolf.

The message slowly drifted out of my consciousness. I was used to this kind of thing even back in the early days of the Internet. Guys would see me on TV, where I presented an art show until it was cancelled, and they'd send me letters or postcards with verbal abuse or love poems, or both in one. I threw most of them away unopened and I passed the scariest ones on to the producers who disposed of them. Later, I received emails, written in the heat of the moment, hurriedly sent off from Gmail accounts, and in the meantime, on Twitter, I regularly blocked the worst stalkers who harassed me, the vilest verbal abusers, and users who threatened to rape me. I'd thought it would slacken off the older I got, but it didn't. Or only marginally. I'd got used to not taking messages like these seriously, like all women who were even a little in the public eye. It was just part and parcel of being a woman, and if

you stood up for yourself, it only got worse. Not for the men who you stood up to, but for the women who dared to stand up for themselves. I was used to it. I didn't take it seriously.

There were far more important things in my life. My husband had died three years ago, and I was still tackling the problems he had solved in the past. My grief for Ludwig was mixed in with vitriol after I found out just after he'd died that he'd had a lover – something I'd never even suspected. Then there was Sophie, who was about to give birth to a baby whose father she didn't want to name. My fifteen-year-old son Benni, who was still living at home, struggling at school, grieving for his father and feeling guilty about his death. Then there was my older son Manuel, who had moved out a few weeks earlier to study in Amsterdam and evidently had a new boyfriend. My garden was in danger of choking with weeds because I didn't take enough care of it. A deadline for a film script was looming and it had been much too long since I last saw my father in the nursing home where he'd lived for years. It was only later that I noticed that there was a *now* and a *then*. Back then I still thought that I was the architect of my own happiness and could control, influence and avert anything that happened to me, except for illness, death, natural catastrophes and fatal accidents. Back then I still thought that I, unlike others around me, had my life under control because I was stronger, smarter, tougher and more resilient than they were. Perhaps I was too, but that didn't help – on the contrary. Strength and independence are like a red rag to a bull for some and they want to take you down because of it. They want to show you that you're not as strong and independent as you think. And they start testing their strength against yours without you noticing it. And then you notice it.

I had told Johanna about the anonymous messages as soon as they'd started arriving. I'd received three more via Messenger, and they had become increasingly harsher, more abusive, hateful and threatening. We met at Billy's Bar, our local for years. Johanna, as always, had a clear-cut opinion on the matter.

'Jesus, fuck it. You're always getting crap like this, aren't you.'

'Yes, but how does he know all this stuff? Or she? In the last two, the sender's names were female.'

‘It’s revolting, really, like someone has read your Twitter or Facebook posts, taken a long shot and just brushed up against the truth by accident. Don’t let it get to you! Forget it! Have another wine! Of course you’re going to have another wine! Billy! Two more glasses of the red Veltliner, please! And some peanuts, Billy, please! Forget it, Ruth. Remember when the guy with the bloody pig’s heart came to the radio station and made the porter call you down to reception so that he could give it to you personally?’

‘Yeah, oh my god, I’d totally forgotten about that. He was just a harmless nutcase in the end though.’

‘Exactly, a harmless nutcase, just like the man writing you these messages. Or woman.’

‘Yes, you’re probably right. I can still remember his name. He wrote to me for a long time. What was his name again?’

Johanna and I had been best friends since we were eight. We’d gone to school together, and later had phoned every day when I’d been studying, and she’d been training to be a physiotherapist because she wanted to do something with her hands and was in a rush to earn money. She’d had two children from two different men and perhaps because of all the conflicts that had caused, she’d retrained a few years ago as a family therapist.

We sent each other texts several times a day, chatted about things that had happened, asked questions, and exchanged gossip, or photos of places we were or things we were doing.

‘Sounds to me a bit like a jealous lover, by the way. Now that you mention it,’ Johanna said.

‘Norbert! His name was Norbert. The guy with the pig’s heart. What?’

‘I said it sounds to me a bit like a jealous lover.’

‘You mean... Ludwig’s affair?’

‘Well, now that you mention it.’

‘Although it’s weird for her to get in touch now, after all this time.’

‘Yeah, but she knows everything, so if you look at it like that...’

In the three years since my husband's fatal accident, I'd hid from the spotlight and concentrated on my family – my two sons, my stepdaughter, myself, and the pain Ludwig's death had caused. First, the pain had been pure, but then it was sullied and stained when I found out about his affair, because of which he may have been planning to leave me. But that wasn't entirely clear from the emails I found on his computer.

'Let's talk about something else,' said Johanna. 'About your son's therapist.' She grinned. 'You have a weird thing for therapists, I've just realised.'

'He's not Benny's therapist anymore, as you well know. Hasn't been for ages.'

'OK, OK. So, how's it going with the Swiss guy?'

'Oh Simon? I think I should call it a day. Sophie needs more help at the moment, now that Molly's here.'

'Of course. You're a—'

'Don't say it. Apart from that, you know she's my stepdaughter. We aren't blood relatives. So.'

We didn't talk anymore about the messages. We talked about what it was like to have a baby around again. We talked about my relationship or, as it seemed at the time, my ex-relationship with Simon. We talked about our children, about Benny and Manuel and Diego, Manuel's new boyfriend, who I'd only seen in photographs. We talked about Johanna's daughters, who weren't planning on moving out. My best friend was probably right about the messages. She was a psychotherapist after all, and I trusted what she said. I forgot about it for a few days and then Johanna sent me a Whatsapp, and Wolf phoned me, and both of them told me that they'd also got a strange message, about Ludwig cheating on me, and how he'd wanted to leave me for a long time, and that no one else wanted me either, the false widow that I was, even if that's what I wanted the most. I was shocked and could barely react. She wasn't only attacking me personally now but dragging my friends into it too. *What's going on?* Wolf asked, and I played it down. *Oh, it's just Ludwig's lover. I told you about her, remember?*

The messages carried on all winter and into spring too. Always from different senders with different names. At first, the names were male, then female, sometimes normal names like Edith, Sabine and Christa, and then more exotic ones. Accounts were opened via Messenger and then deleted straight away. Fake accounts without profile pictures that I couldn't reply to and couldn't be followed. The person simply materialised, out of the blue, to abuse and hurt me. Then they disappeared again leaving their insults, vicious lies and the secrets they knew about Ludwig and me. And then, in spring, secrets about Simon Brunner, who was also mentioned. I tried in vain to shield myself against the fear and uncertainty they caused.

At some point I began to compare the messages with each other, putting them side by side to examine them in an almost forensic way for similarities and differences. What had been sent before, what was different, what was new. Other people were also receiving the messages by then. First Johanna and Wolf, and then other friends and acquaintances called to tell me they were receiving strange messages: Iris, a friend who I'd met years ago in her computer store when I'd bought a cable and we'd got chatting. My sister-in-law Wanda received one and her husband, Ludwig's resentful older brother Bernhard. She passed it on to me with a nasty, spiteful comment. In the end, the woman also wrote to some of my clients, which was especially unpleasant because I knew that some of the half-truths and lies would stick, and also because I had no idea who else was receiving messages and not telling me. I slowly became familiar with their tone, style and aggression. The shock gradually wore off. I was still afraid that I didn't know who was sending the messages and why, but I was afraid in an increasingly familiar way. I already knew the turns of phrase in the messages, braced myself against the hurt, and new details about Ludwig and me that no one else could have known.

Johanna was probably right about the theory she came up with early on – that the woman Ludwig had been having an affair with was probably behind the messages. Being able to connect them to a real person made the whole situation less threatening. As if I could control her, although, in fact, I couldn't. It made it possible, at least in theory, to observe her, to approach her. But I wasn't entirely sure and my trust in people was bruised in a way that could only partially heal. Because if it wasn't

Ludwig's lover, who was it and who outside of my circle had access to this information? No one. And if it wasn't a stranger, then it was someone I knew, and knew well, so it seemed. I ran through my circle of friends in my thoughts, over and over again. Perhaps him? Or her? No, it can't be. No, it wasn't possible. It had to be that woman.

Perhaps she'd also found out about Simon and me and wanted to destroy what she thought was my newfound happiness. To break us apart. To torture me with the past, with stories and lies and half-truths about my dead husband that I couldn't check up on and, most importantly, couldn't discuss with him. What she seemed to want was for me to try and find out how much the man I had been married to for almost two decades had abused my trust. She wanted me to get bogged down in grievances, and she succeeded too. I tortured myself with images of her together with my husband. I didn't know this woman, but she too had lost in love and did not want me to be happy finding a new one. And because of the things that she knew about Ludwig, or said she knew, I was in no doubt that it could only be Valerie Adler who was behind these messages. My husband's lover.

