

Ferdinand Schmalz

My Favourite Animal is Called Winter



The debut novel of the Bachmann Prize recipient Ferdinand Schmalz

The Viennese frozen food supplier Franz Schlicht is to fulfill a macabre wish. His client Dr. Schauer has resolved to lie down in a deep freezer to die. He tasks Franz Schlicht with transporting his frozen body to a glade. At the agreed time, however, the freezer is empty, and Schlicht embarks on a highly unusual search for the corpse during which he meets the crime scene cleaner Schimmelteufel, an engineer, who has walled himself in, and a ministerial official who collects Nazi Christmas decorations. In *'My Favourite Animal Is Winter'*, Ferdinand Schmalz takes us on an precipitous tour through Austrian society, which is whimsical, intelligent and full of wit.

'Schmalz not only has a good feel for the alleged fringe places and characters, but also for the spaces that contain the secrets.'

Sandra Kegel, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Translated by Bradley Schmidt

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Miss Mold Devil

It lies there as if extinct, that place. There between bushes and undergrowth, where even the grass withers several feet high, a triceratops stretches its three-horned head upwards. Its neck frills pressed into the shoulders, its mouth spread wide to roar. Yet nothing to be heard. No primeval sound that would pierce and shake marrow and bone. So it waits silently, that monster, perhaps because the predator is already lurking there under the trees, behind it in the shadows. The tightly-toothed jaws of a tyrannosaurus can already be seen between the tree trunks. Its small hands close to its body. Its killer look already directed toward its prey, it lurks, waiting for the moment when it could then sink its razor-sharp teeth into the flesh of the ornithischian. There is a gray scent of something scorched in the air now, as if a volcano had erupted nearby or a celestial body had fallen from the sky, burning, then burrowing into the earth. Almost inconspicuous this smell, which still tells of entire worlds perishing. A little further on, at the watering hole, is an overturned Stegosaurus. The back plates partly slammed into the mud, partly already covered with thick mold, which is also why Harald is standing around on the lizard's belly, armed with a scrubber. And Norbert now lets him smell that bucket with the chemicals, which they want to use in their battle against the microorganisms on the macro lizards. And scrubbing away now, it just spills out of Harald that with all the general disorder prevailing these days, that with the chaos that washes over you, as soon as you've turned on the television, or the device, that you still have to ask yourself, which is why he asks himself, "where does all this lead?" That's how he sits, at home in his apartment, in his recliner, which he purchased for the purpose of deeper relaxation, and stares deeper into the television, but despite his best efforts,

relaxation does not want to settle in. He, Harald, sits there quite unrelaxed and thinks to himself that all of this has not been normal for quite some time. Whereupon Norbert, who is now scrubbing the tail of the prehistoric giant, interjects that everything is also seems really abnormal to him. He, Harald, isn't alone, Norbert says. And he feels so tense, there in his relaxation recliner. He, Harald, doesn't feel completely at home, and then notices that he's not completely with it, even though he's sitting in his apartment, in his recliner, inside his body, he thinks. And yet not with it. And a thin layer of sweat forms between him and the artificial leather that covers his TV recliner. That he begins to sweat imperceptibly when this chaos pours onto him from out of the television. But Norbert, who still doesn't understand, wants to start going on about the heat wave and how everyone's drenched in sweat. That it's no longer bearable down there in the subway, where all those people who haven't heard of deodorant sit. But Harald sharply interrupts him, Norbert, cuts through the triviality, because they'd just been talking about larger correlations. And that, since he bought the climatic device, he's had almost arctic conditions there in his apartment. That what was coming out of his pores, what was imperceptibly separating him from the relaxation recliner, was something else. "Norbert, this is something more universal." And that he had begun to pay attention to these spells of drifting off. That he noticed it not only in himself, though. That he also always observes others who are not completely with it. And that even there, in Gitti's corner bar, where, when it becomes too uncomfortable for him in his apartment, he goes, that among Gitti's regulars he has covertly, but purposefully, started surveys that would unmistakably show him that this feeling of not being completely with it is part of something bigger. And Norbert now believes he's understood what Harald means, and nods at and repeats after him: "That's part of something bigger." Whereupon Harald takes the bucket and dumps the gush of cleaning water onto the lizard belly, which then flows along the lizard skin in rivulets, branching across the tile-sized pores, following gravity, through chaotic

tangle, until it finally reaches the ground, but only drop by drop before seeping into the soil.

“Parasitic fungi. Does that ring a bell?” he, Harald, then asked after a long pause. And Norbert’s voice briefly cracks, causing a sound to escape from his vocal cords, uncontrollably, a sound that reveals something of the fear sitting there, deep inside Norbert, a fear he has to decide about on his own, alone, a fear that he might then have to carry responsibility for, that ties him to Harald, that escapes below with the swallowed sound. Which is why he tries to pull himself together again as quickly as possible. “Harald. I’d be lying if I did.” And he continues to clean energetically, as if he could scrub away more than the mold on this plastic monstrosity, while Harald, enthroned on the lizard for a fraction of a moment, enjoys this shame from which the hardest loyalty can be forged. And then he continues even more animatedly, already forgetting about cleaning. “There are mushrooms, parasitic fungi, which attack the nerve network of ants. If an ant gets infected by the spores of the fungus, it is hopelessly lost. Through the smallest cracks in the insect’s carapace, the fungus creeps into the ant’s body and pulls threads through its infected body into the skull. The fungus plants itself in the ant’s brain. And then the crawling animal shows the most abnormal behavior, seems distracted, because the fungus in the brain is controlling the insect, is controlling it already. Once the thread has taken over the helm in the head, it, the fungus, completely governs the will.” He, Harald, had gathered all this together from the Internet. “It forces them, the ants, as if it were their own thoughts, this fungus forces them to go to a selected place on the underside of a plant. In order to then bite into a leaf vein with the feeding tools, as if by remote control. Once it has reached this place, which is so advantageous for the fungus, the host body dies miserably. The mushroom mycelium, which covers the exoskeleton of the antlike fur, has its fruit body grow out of the cracks that appear in the ant’s head, so that its spores then scatter on the forest soil.” He, Harald, who now identifies the entire stegosaurus as a stage,

in front of which Norbert stands silently and astonished – he had watched a documentary on this subject, in which one saw the ants, infected by the fungus, break out of the arrangement of their tribe, in order to leave their community, isolated and doomed to death. Like the undead, they, the fungus-infested carpenter ants, then walk toward their pre-programmed end, which they themselves still believe is exactly what they want. That he, when he saw the fate of these little animals, felt strangely moved inside. Yes, that at the sight of the staggering disoriented little animals, he felt a strange attachment to their fate. As if this absurd natural phenomenon had something to do with this situation in which he had found himself at this same moment, in the television recliner, yes, with the situation in which our society as a whole found itself: “We’ve all got something stuck in our brains! Take a look at the faces of all those staggering through the cities. Look into the expressionless faces of all the zombie ants wandering through the streets. Look inside!” cries Harald, completely beside himself. Now overcome by his own emotion, he himself is completely reeling. And suddenly, Harald’s foot slips, slips away on the dino sculpture skin, the slippery slick surface, whereupon he and his body fall on the earth, remain motionless for a short time, until he first only lifts his head, slowly, until his gaze slides over the mud on the ground. In the middle of the mud, his gaze comes across sturdy footwear, in which two legs are inserted, the legs under whose nylon stockings a network of varicose veins and spidery veins branching out, which is now followed upwards by the Harald’s gaze, gliding over this denim skirt with the company polo tucked into its waistband. His gaze glides faster now over the Caribbean blue polo, until he finally looks, purely, into the face of his boss, that of Miss Mold Devil.

And now both of them, as if frozen. Petrified fossils. Harald, out of respect, which has now flowed out of him at the sight of her. But why she, the Mold Devil, doesn’t immediately glower at him in the worst way, as usual, when Harald messes up something like this, why she too pauses for a

moment, is because she too now looks down at herself, down at her body, is because her gaze also falls straight down and onto Harald, who lies in the mud at her feet. Her look falls on him or rather: falls through him. Sees the past in him now. In the mask of the present, the past now confronts her. Which is why she can't help but have to remember. And it must be said that such a look into the past is more complicated, by far. Because to look into such a future, really anyone can do that now. If they'd only spied the hopes and fears which live in the human being inside, then all the possibilities would fan out in between onto that which the look of providence can throw itself. Even if the coincidence still bungles into this future, there is nevertheless the possibility of the look of providence peeping in, already becoming more probable solely through this peeping in. And that's why it's called a self-fulfilling prophecy. But to look in the other direction, into there, into the past, where the past has been buried under the rubble of all times, there into the thicket, where no more possibilities open up, to look in there requires a view that drills through all the layers like an oil well. And just such a gaze is looking out of Miss Mold Devil and through the Harald, no longer seeing Harald lying in front of him, but him, Franz Schlicht, as he lay at her feet at that time. And while he tries, Harald, to get up again, out of this primeval sludge into which he has fallen, Miss Mold Devil also needs a few blinks to return to this now. And now, she says, her gaze still piercing as before, that she already sees, sees that there is still a lot to do here for him, Harald, and for Norbert. She had gathered an impression, of this initial situation, and what it takes to eliminate all the mold on the plastic monstrosities. A certain Mr. Andreas recently commissioned the Mold Devil company with the cleaning of the primeval giants here in this abandoned amusement park. As a result of an unfortunate death in a childless wing of the family, Mr. Andreas, an avid child, had undeservedly inherited a considerable sum of money with which he was able to take on this unpolished jewel on the outskirts of the city, i.e. in the best location for recreational activities of this

kind. That there is a luck in misfortune, this thought, which arises every time into his consciousness, if he thinks of Uncle Adalbert and his abrupt end, he frightens away with the conception that it, luck, only via this indirect path of all the children, who may make a pilgrimage into his recreational park, that this luck will reach him, if it first maybe makes many child souls happy, it will return to him. And because the ghost of Uncle Adalbert keeps gnawing at his conscience, he throws himself even more energetically into the preparations for the reopening of the site, driven by Uncle Adalbert into that madness that one is familiar with thanks to many people in the children's entertainment business. And that's why everything here has to be spick and span, imbued with a deep cleanliness that makes it shine like new again. Which is why these two cleaning experts, Harald and Norbert, Miss Mold Devil's most loyal subordinates, carry out the mold removal task in the most thorough manner, freeing all the dinosaurs from their moldy encasement. And while now Harald has also pulled himself up from the mud, she intends, the mold devil, she will, since her presence here is hopefully no longer necessary, because nevertheless the two would manage alright on their own, she goes back into her office first.

As the morning slowly draws to a close, she, Miss Mold Devil, sits back in her company headquarters, at her desk, and hits, hits the tuning fork hard against the knee again, her knee, that she is set into vibration with this blow. The metal now vibrating silently in the air over the knee. Whereupon she puts the tuning fork now on the desk, the laminate table, between all the invoice stacks, between orders and applications, presses on the cover layer that this laminate layer now taking on the vibrations also now ends up vibrating, and also the chipboard under it. Each chip in it, the chipboard, resonates now with in the frequency. Four hundred and forty Hertz. If it, the desk, now lends the tuning fork the sound body, whereby, once each particle has contributed its

share, the concert pitch now becomes clearly and distinctly audible. And she thinks to herself, in the sound in her ear and still the quiet pain in her knee, she thinks, the Mold Devil, that such a blow, that the force with which she banged the metal of the tuning fork against her knee joint, first makes this harmony possible, which now crumbles into all corners of her workplace. That this blow only seems to unbalance everything, that it audibly aligns the room to a sound that now hovers in the middle. And she continues to think within herself that even the most beautiful chamber tone cannot do without a beat, which unfortunately hurts. That the vibrating underneath, like a second vibration, a deeper frequency, that there is also always this pain resonating. And that someone always has to lend his body. That pain, like the concert pitch, also needs a sounding body, which you have to lend to it. And now she raises her arm above her head, so that it is cut into strips by the light that falls through the blinds. She strikes out. And with all her strength she hits the tuning fork once again, against her knee, so that the pain inside her resounds shrilly. Leans back in her chair, the ergonomic one, which gives way, tilts backwards. And pain and thinking high frequency now there within her. The whole body crossed by waves that break on her inner walls. And now she presses the round end of the tuning fork in between her red lips, on this gold tooth at the top right, so that the sound of the fork is transmitted. And from the jawbone, in which the gold tooth is anchored inside, the chamber tone bores itself in, purely into Miss Mold Devil, until finally all vibration erases itself. Resonance catastrophes, there inside her.

The “Mold” moniker came only with the time, the Devil was already there. Even if everyone knows her today only as Miss Mold Devil, because the sign stands there at the entrance to the company – hers. Emblazoned at the entrance to the small property behind the railroad embankment, bathed in neon light at night, the sign, written on it: *Mold Devil. Multi-Purpose Cleaners*. From here, a small fleet of cleaning crews sets out every day, which she has built up over the years. Looking out now she, where

thoughtless silence still reigns, looks out onto this forecourt where three company vehicles are parked. And for a moment she is struck by a pride that she almost no longer recognizes. She sees him again, Franz Schlicht, before her eyes, this inner one. Sabine Teufel – which means devil – started small, as they say, cleaning alone, for hours on end. At doctors' offices, lawyers' offices, in kindergartens and brothels. But when fate unexpectedly gave her an opportunity to become the entrepreneur she is now, when it carelessly threw her this chance, then Teufel grabbed it, she took fate into her own hands with all her might and shunned no pain, no matter how loud it was. Has attached the Mold and became entrepreneurial from that point on. At that time there was no company sign yet, but a small advertisement in a free newspaper.

And again, a vibration. Not followed by a chamber tone, it's vibrating on the desk now. And she grasps herself, Miss Mold Devil, at the temples, because this pain echoes through the inside of her body once again. And once again, even more urgently, almost like a percussion drill, her cell phone vibrates on the laminate table. And a name lights up on the display. It says "Kerninger" in big letters. And reluctantly she reaches for the thing, flips it open and speaks a short, breathless "What's going on?" into the phone. In order to listen in then, purely into the line, which in reality is no line, she already knows that these are only waves, high-frequency oscillations, which carry now from outside via the air and into her cell phone these sounds, which she heard now clearly as the voice of the Kerninger. Massages her temple in circles, where the resonance of all the vibrations is concentrated right now. Listens to him there on one side and circles with her fingertips on the other, until finally no more vibration carries the voice of the Kerninger through the air to her ear, and she now says briefly and succinctly: "Don't touch anything. I'll come over. Leave everything as it is. We'll get it clean again, cleaner than before." At the small sink, she tosses back two painkillers. Then she goes out into the shimmering heat wave.