

Domenico Müllensiefen: From our fires (Aus unseren Feuern, Kanon Verlag 2022)

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When I came out again with the welding mask, Thomas was screaming at Karsten: “The whole thing is complete nonsense. No one is going to die today. The sun is going to disappear briefly, and then it will be back again. Just think about it! And the moon is not being accelerated by light and racing toward earth. Maybe you should pay more attention in school!”

“Here’s the mask.”

“What’s the story with the beer?,” Thomas shot back.

“Forgot it.”

“Man, man, man!,” he said and went to get three bottles.

The case was now almost empty.

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When he came back, it started all over again. I put on the mask and looked directly into the sun.

“Don’t look directly into the sun,” Thomas said.

“Well where else am I supposed to look?,” I asked. My eyes hurt.

“Give that to me,” said Thomas, and took the mask away from me and held it with outstretched arms over his head: “This is how you do it.”

“I want to give it a try.”

It was Karsten’s turn.

“Why isn’t it getting dark?,” I said.

I looked around. The sun was now completely gone. Thomas and Karsten held the mask over their heads and tried not to look directly into the sun.

“Look. It’s not really dark,” I said. “It’s just like in the evening.”



And then the moon crept back away from the sun again.

“Now it’s going to crash!,” Karsten yelled.

“Idiot!,” Thomas said and put the mask down on the ground.

We toasted with our beers. Foam came out of my bottle, I tried to catch it and swallowed wrong. Thomas pounded me on the back, and I sprayed even more beer on my t-shirt.

“That wasn’t dark at all,” I said coughing.

“That’s like when the teacher says that the test isn’t at all difficult,” said Karsten.

“What are you babbling on about again?”

“That’s enough.”

“He’s just blathering nonsense today!”

“Let’s light something on fire,” I said.

“What do you want to light on fire?,” Thomas asked, already in a better mood. Thomas was always happy when he could light something on fire.

“Not a clue, but something big, something that we can look at through the mask.”

“Exactly,” said Karsten, and Thomas gave him a dirty look.

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I mulled it over, and then I had an idea. Thomas and Karsten thought it was a good idea too. They were excited about it, obviously. Every fourteen-year-old would have been excited about it, but not every fourteen-year-old would have jumped right on his bike and pulled it off. The three of us carried on the entire summer about the great idea that Heiko had. And then when summer vacation was over and school started again, the two of them didn’t think the idea was so great anymore. All of a sudden, they both thought that what we had done was really stupid. The kicker was that for once the two of them agreed on something and thought that I sucked.

Usually, we had to return library books on the last day of school. As I said, usually. But before vacation it was somehow forgotten, and now a week before the beginning of school everyone had gotten this letter that this year, for organizational reasons, this was now supposed to be done on the first day of school. Oh well, that wasn't going to work anymore. And then we were the only ones who didn't have any books with us. Everyone else had them with them. Only we three idiots didn't, and I, big mouth that I am, had told the two of them that for certain no one was going to bring their books. But nothing of the sort. One after the other, we were supposed to get out our books from the previous year. And of course, Karsten was the first one Ms. Dietzsch called on. When Karsten said that he didn't have a single book with him, the teacher immediately looked at Thomas and me and asked if we had our books with us. We shook our heads, and I had to explain in front of the whole class what had happened. And after class, we had to go with Ms. Dietzsch to see the principle, Dr. Rademacher. I thought that he would really read us the riot act, that he would get really loud and accuse us of all kinds of things. But nothing of the sort. Dr. Rademacher remained completely calm, let our teacher give him the whole story, took a few notes and then said that he would like to speak to us personally about the situation. Then he dismissed Ms. Dietzsch and looked at us thoughtfully.

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“I think that it would be a good idea if I talked to our parents. Heiko, would it be possible for your parents to come in this evening?”

I nodded.

“Could your parents perhaps make it as well, Thomas?”

Thomas nodded.

“And Karsten, you live alone with your mother, if I understand correctly?”

Karsten nodded.

“Certainly, you too can ask her if she would be able to join us? Perhaps everyone can be here tonight at 7:00pm? That would be good. And it would also be good, if the three of you joined us as well. I think that we’ll be able to get this whole thing cleared up,” Dr. Rademacher said, writing three short invitations for us to give to our parents and then sending us on our way.

“Boy, are we lucky!,” Thomas said , when we were out of his office.

Shortly before seven, my parents and I were standing in the hall in front of Dr. Rademacher’s office. Thomas and his parents, and Karsten and his mother were also there. My father read Dr. Rademacher’s sign out loud.

“Dr. Rademacher, School Principal,” then he looked around the group and said: “So where’s the one who was here earlier, what was his name? “

“Scholz,” Thomas’ father said.

“Exactly, Scholz. Where’s he?”

“Wasn’t acceptable anymore.”

“What was the matter with him?”

“Persberg, just like before. Doesn’t get anything. He had to go. Was with the Stasi.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Dr. Rademacher was wearing dress shoes, my father always ran around in tennis shoes.

“Wonderful to see you,” he said and first shook the women’s hands and then the men’s.

“My office is a bit small, perhaps we can go into the teachers’ lounge?”, he said and led the way.

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“Now it’s our turn,” Thomas said to Karsten and me.

Mr. Meier cuffed his son on the back of the head and swore that we shouldn’t whisper. Then we were in the teachers’ lounge. Lockers lined the walls, there was a media cart, an overhead projector,

and lots of books. I sat facing the door. Above the frame there was a lighter rectangular spot as though a picture had hung there for years until someone had removed it from the wall.

“Have your sons told you why we’re meeting?,” Dr. Rademacher asked.

“They were fucking around,” Mr. Meier said.

“Well, I would say it exactly that way,” Dr. Rademacher said and was immediately interrupted by Mr. Meier: “So how would you say it? The idiots burned all of their books. My brat said that they even had grilled sausages over the flames. If that isn’t fucking around, then what is?”

“The folly of youth,” said Dr. Rademacher and continued: “But a serious one. With this offence these young men place themselves in the ranks of others with whom they should have nothing to do.”

“Goebbels,” my father said, and my mother jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

“Now, I want,” said Dr. Rademacher only to be interrupted by Karsten’s mother: “I can’t pay for any of this.”

“What can’t you pay for, Mrs. Albrecht?”

“The books, I can’t pay for them. I don’t have any money.”

“The issue here isn’t the money.”

“Of course, it’s about the money. It’s always about the money. I don’t have any. My husband left me. I have debts. 40 thousand mark!

“Mom!,” said Karsten.

“I don’t care if everyone knows! I am 40 thousand marks in debt. My husband blew the whole wad. First, he bought a Volkswagen Golf and then a Manta. And after that this stupid RV.”

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“RV?,” asked Dr. Rademacher.

“Yes, an RV. He bought an RV and thousands of porn magazines and films.

“Mama!”

“You all are old enough! He parked the RV in front of the Central Stadium and sold pornos, whenever there was a soccer game. And that’s where he met that whore. And then he was gone just like that. Just gone. But the debts I still have those, and I can’t pay for the books.

“Mrs. Albrecht, the issue here isn’t money.”

“Well, what is the issue?,” asked Mr. Meier loudly.

“I thought, I would speak to you about your sons’ ideas of values and morals. Money shouldn’t be the problem.”

“What?,” Mr. Meier roared, his face completely red.

“Mr. Meier, no need to turn up the volume right away.”

“I don’t have any money,” said Mrs. Albrecht, and Thomas’ mother took her hand.

Karsten looked intensely at the floor, and Thomas’ father really turned up the volume: “Where are y’all from?”

“I think, we should speak to each other formally!”

“You’re not an East German!”

“Excuse me?”

“In the East, we address each other informally. Where are y’all from?”

Dr. Rademacher fiddled with his tie. Then he said: “From the Siegerland region.”

“What?,” Mr. Meier roared.

“From the Siegerland region!”

“And where are we from? From the loser land region? Tell me, are you insane?”

“That’s the name of where I grew up. The Siegerland region is in North Rhine-Westphalia.”

“And you want to talk about morals?”

“Mr. Meier, I implore you to watch your tone.”

Thomas’ father leaned back, and he said: “Just wanted that clear up.”

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“Shall we continue?” asked Dr. Rademacher. My mother shrugged her shoulders, my father was silent, Karsten and his mother stared at the middle of the table, and Mrs. Meier said: “If I understand the situation correctly, your point is that we work through this with our sons.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Rademacher.

“You know, in recent years there have been a lot of your people who wanted to explain to us how we were supposed to live.”

“Mrs. Meier, I’m not trying to explain something to you. And I implore you, we are one country. One people.”

“We’re what?”

“Mr. Meier!”

“We’re what? We’re one country? Is that even possible? My country doesn’t exist anymore. It’s gone.”

“We are reunified!”

Mr Meier stood up: “Okay, that’s enough. Where are we reunified? Where? Guys like you are out to get me. My businesses are tanking, because y’all have spread out here! And always with subsidies! Y’all come over here, make yourselves at home in our businesses, sell us crap, fuck our wives, and then you blather something about reunified? You blow me away. We’ll be reunified when the first East German is elected governor of a West German state! Until that happens, we are annexed, but certainly not reunified.”

“I expected a different point of view from you.”

“I don’t give a shit about what you expect.”

“Wolfgang!”

“Be quiet, Silke. This guy here wants to explain to me how I am supposed to live. Lots of others have already tried to do that. Right in this room! Scholz tried it.”

“What does my predecessor have to do with this?”

“You Westerners have never understood us,” Mr. Meier said and my father said: “What is this really all about? What is the problem?”

“What?,” asked Dr. Rademacher totally baffled.

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“What is your problem?”

“Your sons have burned books, Mr. Persberg.”

I looked over at Karsten and Thomas, they were listening to my father. Everyone was listening to my father: “Well, that’s not a problem.”

“I’m not going to pay for it,” said Karsten’s mother.

“Of course, it’s a problem.”

“Why? Who knows, whether they would have censored these books in three years anyway?”

“Why would anyone censor schoolbooks?”

“Because we’re Easterners.”

“Why would anyone censor schoolbooks?,” asked Dr. Rademacher.

“Because,” my father said and was interrupted by Mr. Meier: “What Persberg wants to say, you idiot, is that at any moment everything here can change. Who can guarantee for us that you’re still going to be sitting here in four weeks?”

“The state. I’m a civil servant,” Dr. Rademacher stuttered.

“We’ve already gotten rid of one state/country once, and we can do it a second time,” Meier said, and my father added: “Scholz’ fate, that could be yours too.”

“That’s what it looks like,” Mr. Meier said.

Dr. Rademacher said nothing, just like the others.

“Is that it?” Mrs. Albrecht asked after a bit. “I have to take care of my son. Alone, I don’t have a husband at home. He’s in your country.” Then she stood up, knocked once hard on the table, and she and Karsten left.

As Mr. Meier stood up, Dr. Rademacher said: “I can’t do anything about what happened here, but believe me, it has not gone unnoticed.”

“You can change it,” Mr. Meier said.

“How?”

“Go back to where you came from. And take the rest of your lot along with you. And when you get home, send our people back. **Pg. 54** They are missed!,” then he left the room with his wife and Thomas. My parents, Dr. Rademacher and I were alone.

My mother asked: “How much do the books cost?”

“You don’t have to pay for them, Mrs. Persberg.”

“Of course, we’re going to pay for them. We have never been in debt to anyone. And we’ll pay for Mrs. Albrecht’s books too.”

“I’ll send you a letter.”

“Fine,” my mother said, and we stood up.

Mrs. Albrecht along with Karsten, and Thomas and his parents were standing in front of the school. They were waiting for us, Mr. Meier was smoking.

“Whose idea was it?” he asked.

“Wolfgang!”

“What?”

“That’s enough.”

“No, it’s not enough. I’m not going to let myself be pushed around by any lackeys. Those days are over!”

“That’s enough now!”

“It was me,” I said.

“Persberg. Like father, like son.”

“What do you mean?,” my father asked.

“It means that your spawn is a bad influence for my son,” Mr. Meier said. Then he looked at Mrs. Albrecht and said: “And you, Anett, should think about whether you want your son hanging around with Persberg. He’s not a good influence!”

“What the hell?,” my father yelled and got in Mr. Meier’s face: “What the hell, Wolfgang? What do you want?”

“You are an opportunist, and always were. You made a deal with him, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“Are you obediently going to pay for the book? I’m not going to give that pig a single penny!”

“Of course, I’m going to pay my debts.”

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“You’re not paying your debts, you’re a brown noser. That was always your problem!”

“Rolf, let’s go!”

“I am not an opportunist!”

“Wolfgang, it’s time!,” said Mrs. Meier and tugged on her husband’s arm.

Mr. Meier turned to his son: “With him over there,” he pointed at me, “you shouldn’t waste your time. You can be certain of that,” then he took his son by the hand and let his wife drag them away.

Mrs. Albrecht, Karsten, my parents and I were left standing in front of the school.

“Are you really going to pay?”

“We can cover your part,” my mother said, and Mrs. Albrecht started crying. My mother wanted to comfort her and went over to her, and Mrs. Albrecht said: “I’ll do it. I’ll just do three more shifts at the gas station. I’ll pay it myself! I don’t need anyone!”

Karsten petted her arm and was tearing up. He pleaded with her: “Come on, Mom. Let’s go home.”

My parents and I were alone. We said nothing. That night when I was lying in bed, I could hear my parents talking again. First, they were quiet, then louder, and in the end all hell broke loose, and I couldn’t fall asleep.

I thought that I would have everything behind me now, but at the breakfast table I was informed that I was grounded for four weeks, was not allowed to get together with Thomas or Karsten, had to help my mother with the housework, and wasn’t allowed to bring home any grades lower than a C. Then I had to listen to something about Goebbels and book burnings in German history and something about Erich Kästner. I didn’t say a word to the two of them about how there was a completely different mood in Dr. Rademacher’s office the previous day. I was, for that matter, not **Pg. 56** sure how serious the two of them were and wanted to talk to Thomas and Karsten about it.

But that wasn’t going to happen. They were completely avoiding me. One after the other they said to me that their parents had forbidden them to spend time with me, and so I was left standing alone on the schoolyard not completely understanding why.

Shortly before Christmas the two of them would finally talk to me again. They always stood on the schoolyard as far as possible from me, and I watched Karsten play with his Gameboy and Thomas watching him.

It was that way every day. It would have never been like this earlier. Thomas never would have left Karsten in peace for five minutes and couldn't have stood watching him play. And now? Thomas stood next to Karsten grinning like an idiot and sometimes you could hear him cheer when Karsten had reached a new level, and Thomas even patted him on the back.

I didn't know how I was supposed to deal with it. Both of them were my only friends in school. I didn't have anything to do with anyone else.

For months I stood around alone on the schoolyard, always waiting for the bell to ring and the next class period to begin. Standing around alone during a couple of recesses would probably have been okay, but continuously was just plain shitty.

I couldn't do anything else but stand around. I could have stood next to the girls, joined the group around Mandy Krause. But that would have been super stressful, since if there was someone who wasn't allowed to hang around with Mandy Krause, it was me. She was the queen of the schoolyard. She was beautiful, always got good grades, she was perfect. She stood with her friends in the middle of the schoolyard. Right in the middle! Nothing could be further away than Mandy Krause, and I knew that if I were to stare over at her again and again at some point **Pg. 57** I would have gotten into it with the soccer guys. Because who, if not the soccer guys, would have the right to stare at Mandy Krause and her friends. Certainly not I.

But it didn't work. I stood on the edge of the schoolyard, and whenever I wanted to look at something, my glance always had to pass over the middle of the schoolyard. It was absolutely unavoidable. Whenever I would first look over at the idiots from the B class and then want to look over at Karsten and Thomas, my glance had to pass once over the entire schoolyard, and I couldn't always just close my eyes or look at the ground when I was turning my head. And so time after time my eyes got stuck on Mandy. I saw how she ran her hands through her hair, I saw her thong underwear peeking out of the back of her jeans when she bent down to get something out of her bookbag, and I saw how

she smoked and wondered whether that would be something for me. There's an idea. I would start smoking, and then I could stand in the smoking area by the bicycles. Once I got there, they would initially treat me like a foreign body, but nevertheless like a body.

"What inspired Persberg to join us and to smoke? What's he really trying to get away with? We've been standing here forever, and we've also been smoking forever, and now he comes over here and thinks that he can simply join us? Where has he been the last two months? Wasn't he always standing around on the edge of the schoolyard? Alone? How dare he do that? What is he smoking anyway? Ernte 23? Oh well, if that's the way it is. Not everyone would have the courage to do that. So he can stand over there by Phillip first. He smokes Schwarzer Krauser, hand rolled. And if he gets along with Phillip, let him join us. But then he should already be smoking Marlboro or at least West. Main thing, not Luckys. That would be no way to make friends here.

So ... what did Mandy smoke? It wasn't that easy to find out which brand was hers. Even though she was the only one who dared to smoke in the middle of the schoolyard.

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But I couldn't see which brand she had. Whenever she pulled a cigarette out of the pack, someone covered her hand to give her a light, and then just when I thought I would finally be able to see the pack, she suddenly had a silver case. She must have a boyfriend. Someone had given her the perfect present: a cigarette case. I was the freak from the edge of the schoolyard, and she was Mandy Krause.

In class, I couldn't find out which brand she preferred. She didn't smoke there. But she did always fill a piece of paper with doodles. Every class period. While everyone else was writing down what was on the board, Mandy was always drawing on her paper. With her left arm, she shielded her paper in the direction of the aisle, and her hair fell like a curtain over her half of the table, so that from where I was sitting, I couldn't see what she was drawing. That she wasn't taking notes, that was clear. Because she was using all the colors available for her drawings.

Once I was lucky. The girl sitting next to her showed her something, the two of them put their heads together and whispered to each other. As she did that, Mandy dragged her left arm over the desk, her sheet of paper slid down and sailed directly in front of my feet. I looked once around the entire classroom. No one but me had noticed. I let my pen fall on the floor and grabbed the sheet of paper and stuffed it in my backpack without looking at it. After class, I made sure that I got home as soon as possible.

In my room, I pulled the paper out of my backpack and carefully smoothed it out. It was a picture of the Frog King. The frog with his crown sat on a big golden ball and grinned.

In December I finally got my chance. Mandy and her friends weren't there, so I snuck over to their spot, picked up one of her cigarette butts and inspected the stub closely. F6! Well, I'll be damned. An East German queen! And exactly this filter she had had between her lips.

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Suddenly something started clanking next to me.

I looked up, the custodian was standing next to me, and barked: Hey, you! Boy! You need to clean up all these butts!"

"What?"

"I said: Clean up the butts."

"Which butts?"

"These right here!", he said, and picked up one of Mandy's cigarette butts and held it under my nose.

"It wasn't me!"

"Yeah, so what?"

"I don't smoke."

"Nonsense!"

“Why should I clean them all up?”

“You don’t have anything else to do,” he said, and put a bucket in my hand.

“I’m not cleaning them up.”

“Oh yes you are! I’m certain of that,” the custodian said, patted me twice on the shoulder and turned around. As he was leaving, he casually scratched his butt.

I was done for. The whole schoolyard had seen what had happened. And at the school gate Mandy just showed up with her girlfriends. If I were to start gathering up the cigarettes now, I would be the school idiot. If I didn’t do it, the custodian would chew me out even more.

“Heiko!,” I heard Thomas call me. I saw how he was waving me over to him.

“I’m supposed to clean up the butts.”

“He doesn’t get to tell us what to do,” and he really said “us.” He didn’t say “you.” He said “us.” He meant “us.”

“But that was the custodian.”

“Just let him try. His wife works for us in sales, and my father has her on his short list. Just let him dare to try to tell us what to do,” Thomas said and gave a furious look over to the custodian. Then he took the bucket away from me and threw it right across the schoolyard. A big clatter. I saw, Mandy standing with her girlfriends in their spot smoking and looking over at us. And if there were any school kids who hadn’t been paying attention to us, they were now looking at us too.

And the custodian had heard the clatter too. He turned around. I stood next to Thomas, who had put his arm around my shoulder and nodded briefly to the custodian.

The custodian turned around, swore “you little shits,” and then disappeared into the school building. Karsten said: “Finally did it.”

“Did what?”, I asked.

“This one level in Pokémon. Stupid water monster. Ah, Heiko. What are you doing here?”

“You missed the whole thing, didn’t you?” Thomas snapped at him and knocked the Gameboy out of his hand. The batteries flew out of it, and Karsten ranted: “I didn’t save anything. I hadn’t saved! Now I have to do it all over again!”

“He’s driving me crazy with his water monster. Do we want to light something on fire tonight?”

“No books,” I said, and Karsten, who was picking up his batteries, said: “A garbage can. We’ll torch one of the garbage cans from the Leipzig Transportation Services. I’ve always wanted to do that.”

Then the bell rang, and it was time for Physics. That afternoon we torched one of the garbage cans from the Leipzig Transportation Services and drank Reudnitzer that I had stolen from the basement party bar.

“Totally awesome to light one of those cans on fire,” Karsten said, and Thomas nodded.

“Maybe we should destroy an entire stop sometime. That would be hilarious.”

The fire warmed our faces, and we silently nursed our beers.

Once again, there were the three of us.

Übersetzerin:

RACHEL HALVERSON, Ph.D.

she, her, hers

Director, School of Global Studies

Professor of German

College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences

School of Global Studies

ADMIN 314

rhalverson@uidaho.edu

<https://www.uidaho.edu/class/mlc/faculty-staff/rachel-halverson>

208-885-8995 | 208-885-5221 (Fax)

875 Perimeter Drive MS 3174, MLC/University of Idaho | Moscow Idaho 83844-3174 | United States