

# THE HAPPY SECRET

by Arno Geiger

sample translation

by Jamie Bulloch

There are dark secrets and there are happy secrets. My happy secret was that, for twenty-five years, I went on long treks through the streets of Vienna, exploring paper recycling bins for material that might interest me. I'm well aware this isn't normal, even though what I was looking for was perfectly normal, one of the few things everybody has access to: rubbish. All the same, anyone who voluntarily spends so many years engaging in such an activity must be a little bit crazy. I don't think I'm crazy, of course not. But the part of my mind which isn't crazy says there has to be a touch of craziness. A happy craziness, the crazy part of my mind replies.

Twenty-five years. Our society is a throwaway enterprise operating at full steam, generating a non-stop torrent of rubbish. Occasionally I would fish something out of this torrent, which every day surges past us as mightily as the Mekong. It was like catching water in a sieve; given the sheer volume of rubbish produced, the few items I brought home were comparable with the water that sticks in the holes of a sieve due to surface tension.

I've since abandoned this pursuit. But a quarter of a century on the streets, absorbed with what other people throw away, does things to a person that can't easily be effaced. For a quarter of a century rubbish was part and parcel of my life. Your personality can only remain independent from what it does for a short time. Anybody who every week for decades – so long as circumstances allow – engages in an activity which is usually pursued by society's outcasts, will find that this activity leaves its mark on them. My forays stamped me as much as a person as they did as a writer. And this is the best I can say about the matter.

Rubbish is a vast topic, not only a vast material resource, but also a vast cultural resource, a sub-section of cultural memory, a manifestation of a culture. Rubbish has the potential to supply entire neighbourhoods with energy. But it can fuel creative processes too. Because rubbish is what is discarded, and what a society discards tells us a lot about itself. Old urban moats and ditches that were once filled with rubbish are goldmines are goldmines

for archaeologists. They understand that what was thrown away says as much about an era as the most important work of art. In rubbish lies the truth. And eventually the truth will out: life is made up of chaos, confusion, filth and death. The most beautiful, perfect world is like a torrential downpour of muck.

I have devoted myself to the most beautiful, perfect world, which is the subject of this story. And I know that such a text, if it's well written, sounds better than it ought to. By stylising my experiences, by subjectively depicting what happened in the past and what is now being expressed in words, my story becomes a work of literature.

The man of the street goes into a building, enters a flat, sits at a desk and makes notes. By making notes about what happened in my life, the man of the street is transformed into a man of writing.

It began just under three decades ago. I was twenty-four years old, not seeking a job because I wanted to become a writer, and living in a building in Vienna that looked as if it were ripe for demolition. In this derelict building I lived in a derelict flat, thirty square metres in size, consisting of a cramped kitchen and a room attached that had to serve as living and dining room, study and bedroom. I shared the loo in the corridor with my neighbours.

Two years earlier my parents had paid a considerable sum of money on an illegal payment to the previous tenant for the sparse inventory of the flat, a common practice at the time in Vienna when there was a housing shortage. This investment was to be recouped by the extraordinary low rent and my willingness to be thrifty. The flat was in a central location, not far from the opera house. Here I had a place that was sometimes lit up by sunshine and sometimes by love. Another advantage as far as I was concerned was its direct proximity to the Naschmarkt with its cheap food and flea market on Saturdays. I could get everything I needed there, from books to pens and household goods to clothes.

To an outsider the flat looked depressing with its 2.5-metre high built-in cupboards my parents had shelled out for and the old bedspread. But to me it was home. I felt lucky to have this place and a door I could shut myself behind. I was often revising for exams and often writing a novel. I had a girlfriend, M., who made the effort to read what I had written, but usually fell asleep in the process. I noticed it if I was sitting at my desk and no longer heard pages being turned behind me. M. slept very quietly. If I needed something to read myself I would go to the flea market, returning with not one, but ten books. The future seemed so incredibly large and wide that I unhesitatingly bought ahead, being sufficiently obstinate to make offbeat choices over popular ones.

In retrospect, in the rush of days I have to admit that M. and I were children of the provinces, unsure of ourselves and hard working. We liked kissing and cuddling and mooching about, but couldn't keep it up for long. Moreover, when we kissed, cuddled and

mooched about we did it with concentration, rather than stamina like other people. We were constantly on the move, inquisitive, anxious to get ahead.

At the market office on Kettenbrücke, which I passed almost every day on my way shopping, were a large number of bins, including several containers for paper. One day I came across five banana boxes full of books, left here for recycling. A coincidence. Or is that just how it seems? Coincidence, perhaps, isn't the right word, because I was so enthralled by the entire city that my eyes were always open. This sort of thing was bound to happen sooner or later.

From the underground station I hailed a taxi to take the boxes back to my flat. Once home, my heart was pounding as I lifted the lids. I can still hear that particular scraping sound the boxes made. I remember Felix Dahn's *A Struggle for Rome*, Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* and a catalogue of posters for Joseph Beuys exhibitions, which still occupies a narrow space on my shelf. 'Show Your Wound!'

That day I got an inkling of the potential that public bins can harbour. And every time I passed them afterwards I would peer inside the paper bin. With astonishing regularity I spied things I reached to take out: books, photographs, magazines and newspapers. For me the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was an object of value.

The spark is to the loaded rifle as opportunity is to inclination. Why only look in one paper bin, I thought, when there are thousands of them across the city? And so it was that I strayed from the right path, heading off at random into a realm of dirt and lacking in decorum. I got into something that at first proved to be lunacy, but later a good thing.

When you're young everything is as simple as knives and forks, grass on the meadow, a pigeon on the roof. I thought nothing of trudging the streets, dressed in my oldest pair of jeans and a heavy-duty jacket, and occasionally putting a couple of books in my rucksack. As I wandered through the city I reworked the two novels I'd written in my early twenties and

which I knew by heart. Or I allowed a lethargic voice in my head to grumble about the past and future. Or I silenced the voice by reciting poetry.

To my mind this walking was healthy, spending several hours in the fresh air with a slightly raised heart rate. All the bending down, diving into the containers and turning to my left and right to see if anyone was approaching from behind was good for my back. Sitting at my desk left me stiff and lopsided.

After about four hours I returned home exhausted. M., who'd moved in to my flat, making it even more cramped, greeted me with a stern look. She had long, very glamorous eyelashes and strikingly dark eyes.

'You look like a bandit chief,' she said.

'Oh really?'

'It's just embarrassing.'

Admittedly, the clothes I was wearing could have no claim to elegance. At the end of one of my sorties I would usually appear in a dreadful state, as filthy as a pig. But this wasn't the only reason why M. didn't like my expeditions. We were middle-class children from affluent western Austria, not far from the Swiss border where not only the grass is rich. It never ceases to amaze me how everyone is bound to their past. By rummaging around in things that others had thrown away I was flouting the conventions of my background. Where M. and I came from people had a basic need to keep up appearances. Sticklers for tradition were preferred to those who disregarded it. And in truth the Viennese were only slightly better in this respect. The attachment to etiquette that I came across in Vienna, which was almost Chinese in its fastidiousness, didn't exactly encourage the breaking down of barriers.

When, to change the subject, I pulled out a volume of poetry by Sergei Yesenin from my rucksack, M's curiosity was piqued too. I read out the poem printed on the cover and she raised her glamorous eyelashes.

‘I can’t believe someone’s thrown that away.’

“And yesterday through veils of mist / I saw as the bush did sway / the moon, the red steed / harness itself to our sleigh.”

To avoid any further discussion I nipped into the shower, which was shoehorned in at the back of the kitchen. Afterwards I devoured four or five rolls with the salami sent to me regularly by my mother. Then I sat at my desk.

I enjoyed my sorties. I liked walking for hours and the unpredictability of what I would discover. Every outing was a mystery to begin with, a latent secret: what will I find this time? Something fantastic? Or nothing at all? I was also thankful that these forays helped keep my head above water. I was on the verge of finishing my studies and broadly aware that my decision to become a writer was fraught with risk. By writing, I was embarking on a game without knowing the rules. All I knew from reading biographies on the subject was that this game reserved special punishment for the losers: utter failure. And so I worked with the good intentions of a young person who knows their efforts will go pear-shaped if they don’t do their best. But I felt uneasy, anxious even. It was all the more reassuring, therefore, that besides my summer job as a technician at the Bregenz Festival I now had a little sideline in Vienna too.

I was astonished how often I came across large volumes of books, stamp collections, historical securities, old comics, old car brochures, prints and posters, some of them valuable which I took to the auction house. To sell the less valuable items, three times a year M. and I would set up at the flea market. And so I was able to remain without responsibilities, without obligations to a boss, independent and free to write.

I found the never-ending supply of postcards, envelopes and small office equipment pleasingly useful. I no longer used paper I’d bought to print out my texts, but stuff I’d found, business paper from Strobach & Pötscher, which I had tons of. When he saw the piles of

paper in my flat Herr Klimsza, our immediate neighbour and a baker, said, ‘With that lot, Arno, you’ll be able to write all the way to the Central Cemetery.’

I read an insane amount, literally reading what chance dropped onto my desk. I would do my outings on Monday mornings and I almost always found something. When the following Monday came around I’d often read it all.

From the market I carried home Argentinian pear crates. Small and made of pallet wood, they could be stacked to make an ever-expanding bookshelf. M. and I cleared out one of the very tall built-in cupboards and gave it a name: Business. In it we stored the banana boxes with the books destined for the flea market.

When M. and I counted the money on the evening of our first sale, it turned out that we’d made six thousand schillings – about six months’ worth of rent. Through the lens of the financial opportunity this had afforded me, it was if I’d discovered a pharaoh’s tomb. The word paper comes from papyrus. The pharaoh had a monopoly on paper. The root of the word paper roughly means: *what belongs to the pharaoh*.

Half a year later, at our second sale, we took twice as much. M. and I jumped for joy. We sold according to gut feeling, by guesswork or simply at random. If in doubt we sold things cheaply because there was no internet; these were different times, hard to believe now. Our gut feeling was often wrong, which stimulated business. In any case it was more sensible to sell a book cheaply than carry it back home. Why bother? We could always count on more supplies.

On the way home it was a doddle to push the sack truck I’d borrowed from our neighbours, the Klimszas, as the boxes piled on it were almost empty. Even the books we hadn’t sold were lighter in the sun, the covers curling up as the paper was so dry. The sack truck rattled and hopped slightly, which would have been unthinkable in the morning when the entire load had been so heavy.



I like the expression ‘easy money’. It matches the physical feeling I had going home after twelve hours on my feet, all that sun and dust. Muscles warm, everything pulsating. M. and I were carrying money pouches that my siblings and I had got as children for our holiday with the Naturschutzjugend, the youth nature conservation organisation. Over the course of the day these pouches around our necks got every heavier from all the easy money. Whenever I think about it I can feel the chafing of the leather strap around the back of my neck.

We stowed the empty and half-empty boxes in the cupboard called Business. After a shower we went over to the Klimszas and put the money we’d earned in a large ceramic bowl, a so-called Weidling. As we gleefully counted the cash it felt as if we could dive into the Money Bin like Scrooge McDuck. Afterwards Frau Klimsza served up roast chicken with potatoes. I was terribly hungry. And later, when we were all talking over each other in front of the television, I almost nodded off with exhaustion.

But in bed M. and I kept chatting:

‘That man who bought the illustrated Edda – did you see his face? He was thrilled!’

M. helped me with these sales and kept my secret to herself. All the same she still had her reservations; my forays gave her the creeps. I didn’t feel great about them either, although I took care not to mention the topic, sensing there was something grubby about my activity: you don’t go rummaging around in other people’s rubbish. It was also likely that my bandit’s garb actually looked scruffier than I was willing to admit. After all it’s easy to find your own scruffiness quainter than other people’s. Whenever M. said I looked like a tramp – my God, a boy with your intellect! – I was ashamed. I felt I’d damaged the expectations I had of myself socially. Coming from a family that hadn’t gone to university, I was about to graduate and found it hard to ignore the conventional ideas about how a young person with academic honours should behave. Secretly I also thought that spending part of my time in the gutter

was a sign of downward mobility. By the social standards of the time anybody doing what I did was branded and belonged to the dregs of society.

Interestingly, my activity wasn't illegal but taboo. Sometimes taboos are totally harmless, like picking your nose and eating it in public. People occasionally feel more ashamed of being caught enjoying a bogey than running a red light. A taboo delineates the boundary of what is acceptable. But this boundary isn't given precise definition, nor is any there any prescribed sanction for its violation. It is merely a matter of decorum.

During my outings I often encountered people in authority, none of whom took the slightest exception to what I was up to – such behaviour was all part of city life. If, like Vienna, you aspire to be a global metropolis, you have to put up with certain things – a global metropolis isn't a barrack square. But had I disclosed to my parents that I spent half a day every week delving through the paper waste of this world, my mother would have been, I assume, unhappy; my father, I assume, disappointed. Both had to spend a lot of money to put their children through higher education. And now this!

Oh, well. Sacrificing admiration allows an increase in freedom. This is true in many areas of life, including writing, of course.