



Anne Rabe

DIE MÖGLICHKEIT VON GLÜCK

## THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPINESS

Novel, 384 pp, March 2023, ISBN: 978-3-608-98463-7

© 2023 by Klett-Cotta - J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger GmbH,  
gegr. 1659, Stuttgart

**Stine is born in the GDR and grows up in reunified Germany. She is just three years old when the Wall comes down. But her family are deeply wedded to a system they cannot move on from, and to the belief that they have lived the 'right' life. In this wonderfully intelligent and clear-eyed book, Anne Rabe tells the story of a generation whose origins are an empty space.**

Stine is born in the mid-1980s in a small town on the East German Baltic coast, a child of reunification. She is too young to understand the change of system in the GDR, but her family's complex ideological views have an impact on the next generation. As her relatives hide the lost world behind an impenetrable silence, Stine finds herself asking questions she can no longer repress. Anne Rabe has written a clear-sighted and unsettling book with great literary power - a mixture of non-fiction and literature, knowledgeably researched and at the same time captivatingly beautiful. She traces the wounds of a generation that grew up between dictatorship and democracy, and explores the origins of racism and violence.

*»THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPINESS is much more than just a novel. It is a search for traces, a processing and analysis [...]: Rabe's novel is an impressive book about the connection between the private and the political, about a difficult emancipation, told with ruthless force.« --  
Letteratura. A literature blog*

*»In this literary powerful work, Anne Rabe sensitively illuminates the wounds of a generation that grew up between dictatorship and democracy. In doing so, she gets to the roots of racism and violence and presents an impressive, stirring portrayal of this time.« --Jessica Bradley, Westfälischer Anzeiger*



**Anne Rabe**, was born in 1986. She is a multiple award-winning playwright, scriptwriter and essayist. She served as a scriptwriter on the Grimme-award-winning series 'Warten auf'n Bus'. For several years she has also played her part in the collective effort to come to terms with the past in east Germany, through her work as an essayist and speaker. Anne Rabe lives in Berlin. **THE POSSIBILITY OF HAPPINESS** is her first novel.

## Sample Translation by Lizzy Kinch

Extracts taken from Anne Rabe, *The Possibility of Happiness*  
(chapter 1, 6 and 13)  
Klett-Cotta, 2023

### 1

*You are trying to remember.*

*There's the sea. The Baltic Sea with its grey, restless waves rhythmically driving ashore, never noiselessly. The harbour and the old warehouses. The shipyard cranes and the fishing boats. There are the renaissance waterworks in the market square — they say a drummer lives underneath, forced to beat his drum night after night in eternal damnation. The church tower without a nave, chiming every hour. The gloomy ruin behind the boardings, once another church, and there the narrow cobblestoned streets.*

*This corner is where the fruit market used to stand. Your aunt weighed bananas on a scale, and oranges. Opposite the kiosk, where her new boyfriend used to work and served you and mum chips and ketchup.*

*The road to your grandparents leads up the Russenberg, past the old barracks.*

*Russian women used to wear their fur coats out and about in the city, people tell you. But that was in the time when this street was still known as Rosa-Luxemburg-Straße and led to Karl-Liebknecht-Straße, which is what your parents say whenever they send you to fetch something from friends.*

*There is the first flat, without a toilet or bathroom, there is the second — three rooms plus a kitchen, bathroom and separate toilet. Opposite the playground, where the Nazis sat. Right there on the corner, aunt Sabine and cousin Katja's apartment. The living room full of ashtrays and the Barbie camper van and VHS tapes from the Polish market, which Katja's new dad brought her. How you loved the smell of smoked cigarettes when your aunt gave you an old jumper of Katja's.*

*Broom handles are sticking out of the sandpit in front of the kindergarten. Wrapped in ribbons tied in crepe paper. Hanging lilacs and balloons! It is June, Children's Day, and it's raining. From the low building you hear yourself and the others singing: Lovely, lovely sun...*

*There is the house that dad built. The tiny room without a key, that belonged to you.*

*The bed in whose darkness you sank.*

*There's your mum.*

*There's your dad.*

*There is Tim. Your brother.*

*(...)*

## 6

Apart from all the fuss with the flags, I barely remember the last birthday of the Republic. Nor was I at the demonstration in the market square. Lots of children were there, though. To protect against arrests. It was the biggest demonstration against the Socialist Unity Party leaders in north Germany. They marched to the front of the Stasi

headquarters and demanded an end to the horrors of surveillance. As a sign of peaceful protest, they lit candles in front of the SUP district leader's office.

Why did they never tell us what happened? Why didn't they talk about it at school?

*The new era arrives with lunch. 1990. When everything's over. The classroom at the very end of the corridor in the low-ceilinged kindergarten, just five-minute's walk from the flat with the separate toilet.*

*Matthias Reim's voice creaks out of a radio. "Damn, I love you, I don't love you..." As the country collapses around you, you all croon along in squeaky singsong: "Here comes Kurt, no helmet nor his belt", and just like Frank Zander you shout: "Enough! We want to dance!"*

*There are no cooked lunches anymore, instead food arrives in polystyrene boxes, that you peer inside curiously.*

*There are real Corny bars, strawberry flavour!*

*But the bright packaging doesn't contain what it promised. The cereal bars taste awful and you can't help but retch. But Frau Preussler, the kindergarten teacher, says you have to eat it up.*

*While the other children lie down for their afternoon nap, you sit in front of the cereal bar. It cannot be done. No matter how hard you try, it's too sticky to swallow.*

*But. You. Must.*

Everything changed, they say.

And it's true!

That summer I went with grandma Ursel and grandpa Arnd to McDonald's.

The new country tasted different, but the rules we had to submit to stayed the same.

*You better eat up if you put something on your plate.*

Anyone wanting to get into Frau Preussler’s good books just had to give her bad back a rub. And anyone rude or noisy had to lie down next to Kim, the ginger girl who wet the bed, during afternoon nap time. When it rained, we lined up in two rows in the corridor and sang: “Lovely lovely sun, come a little lower, make the clouds go away, O lovely lovely sun, how we want you to stay...”

My parents were members of the state-party, the SUP. So were my grandparents. I know that for a fact, and I also know that after the Wende they were members of the Party of Democratic Socialism, a successor party led by Gregor Gysi. At some point, when I was old enough and the upheaval was long enough in the past, they decided to tell me about it. It mattered to them that they only left the Party when — all at once — jobs were being handed out, and getting ahead was at stake. They didn’t want to just give in. Unlike some, they were no “turncoats”. They never told anyone which box they ticked every four years in the voting booth, but I knew they voted for the PDS.

“Turncoats” — a word I thought about a lot as a child. But I didn't dare to ask.

I imagined a long duffel coat, rotating in a circle. Always rotating. But what was the point?

When I was ten years old, that was in 1996, dad told me about the difference between socialism and communism.

We were sitting in our red Opel Kadett, in the carpark in front of the supermarket.

Summer heat. There was still no air conditioning inside the car. To let air in, you had to roll down the windows by hand. All the same, the Opel was really something. Shortly after the Wall fell, it had replaced our Trabi. It had seatbelts, a radio and a cassette player.

Mum was in the supermarket with Tim while dad and I awaited their return, stewing in the heat. I liked that people in the supermarket carried their shopping in paper bags without handles, just like in the American films I sometimes watched with Katja (she had video cassettes). The one good thing about going shopping. Boring. I preferred staying in the car and listening to the radio: “All the latest smash hits, and tunes from the 70s and 80s!”

“In communism”, dad began, “everyone is equal and everyone gets paid the same. Actually, in communism there’s no need for money at all. It’ll probably be abolished.”

Money wasn’t necessary in communism because everything belonged to everyone. So it was pointless piling up possessions or getting rich. Instead, people went to shops and just took what they actually needed. I liked the idea, but I couldn’t explain why. Maybe because it sounded fairer.

In communism, dad went on, dustbin collectors would earn as much as professors, bricklayers as much as architects. Because if you really thought about it, nobody is worth more than anybody else. How



could an architect build a house if there was nobody to lay the bricks for the walls? What would happen if nobody took the rubbish away?

“Class divisions were invented by the ruling classes,” dad declared.

On the radio someone requested the Macarena.

I nodded along, occasionally adding a *hmm*, but I didn’t know what he meant by “class”. I really wanted to believe him, and the part about money and people’s value made immediate sense to me.

*You remember that once in primary school — in answer to the question, what do you wish for? — you wrote about a world without money. A world without money, and world peace.*

“And what about socialism?” I asked him.

“Socialism is the early stage of communism. It’s what the GDR was.”

I knew we lived in the former GDR, and that I had even been born there. My red vaccination pass was stamped with a hammer and sickle. I liked the little red booklet and sometimes I took it out of the drawer, in which mum kept her documents, and ran my finger over the emblem. The wreath around the symbol of the SUP dictatorship lent solemnity to this testimony of my immunity against measles, tetanus and chickenpox. But I also knew that this vaccination pass came from a different time — that everything had once been completely different here, that my parents divided our past into the time in the East and the time in the West, that there were Osis and Wessis, that Wessis were

bad and Osis (including me) were somehow superior, even if the Wessis saw it very differently.

Jon Bon Jovi roared so loudly that dad had to turn the radio off.

I looked out of the window at people pushing trolleys full of shopping across the carpark. The cars threatened to swerve suddenly into one another and scratch their paintwork. I imagined all these people tearing down the Wall a few years ago. Had they all turned their backs against socialism? Why? I didn't understand at all. What dad had just explained was nevertheless clearly right. It would be crazy not to want to live in a world like that. Work and food for everyone — instead of the threat of unemployment, which in the 1990s was as common as salt in the Baltic sea.

But dad knew why. People in the GDR weren't ready, he said. They hadn't understood yet that capitalism would only hurt them. All they could think of was themselves and their own advantages, and they were far too greedy. One day, though, when the war for resources broke out, when everyone realised never-ending growth was impossible, then socialism would return. People would fight again for communism and a more equal world. They would understand that you don't need twenty different brands of yoghurt, one will do fine.

From time to time I had wondered what the GDR was, and now everything was clear. It was the better country, the better idea. Its time would come.

I remember how much I had wanted a Free German Youth shirt when I was young. I dreamed of being a Young Pioneer. My mum

showed me how to tie pioneer knots. I would've marched up front, flag flying high, to celebrate the 50th, 60th and then the 70th anniversaries of the Republic.

So when I was older, I thought that obviously it had to be a dictatorship. When people are too stupid to do what's right and all they care about is themselves, you've got no choice but to force them! In any case, was a dictatorship like the GDR really a dictatorship? I was much more afraid of the Nazis who roamed the streets in the 1990s and by the 2000s had managed to find a way into the state parliaments in the East. In 2004, the far-right National Democratic Party of Germany won 9.4 percent of the vote in Saxony, and in 2006 they were elected to the Schwerin state parliament. I saw the Nazis as a real threat. Socialism, on the other hand, was just a good idea that hadn't yet been properly implemented.

(...)

## 13

I cannot wake up from the dark dream of my childhood.

When I dream it, bizarre twists and turns unfold in strangely familiar surroundings. People look completely different, but I recognise them behind their masks. I lose myself in familiar alleyways and sense immediately that I've been lost here before. In hindsight I recognise the signs that I'd once overlooked or ignored.

An example — mum calls and says I need to peel potatoes for myself and Tim. I ask how many. “Well, until the pot is full”, she snipes down the line.

I open the cupboard and see the different pots on the shelves.

Which pot? So many possible mistakes to be made.

I opt for medium and go to the larder where the potatoes are stored. I put two, three potatoes inside. Then another, but it seems so few and mum said I should fill the pot. So I add even more potatoes, filling the pot to the brim.

There are eight or nine potatoes, which seems a lot, but could also be not enough — another one goes in.

I don’t know anymore, I’m clueless, my anxiety rises, what if it’s too many? But mum said until the pot is full. So I peel the potatoes. When mum comes home and sees the full pot, I get slapped in the face.

“Are you a complete idiot, then?”

I’m furious for a moment, so I say, “I am not an idiot.”

And then she slaps me again, all of her strength landing on my cheek.

I run down the stairs into my room, so she doesn’t see me cry.

But when I’ve wept through some of my tears, I think — of course it was too many potatoes. I’m fourteen years old; I should know how to peel potatoes.

What’s more, I had seen the second slap coming and I didn’t defend myself, I just let mum’s hand smash into my face. So really, I was guilty. It could have hurt half as badly.

Another example — we’re on holiday, and Tim and I have hit the jackpot. Our parents aren’t making us go hiking with them, which

means we can spend the whole day at the pool instead. We've got everything we need, including suncream and ten Marks for chips at lunchtime, and maybe even an ice cream. I got my golden swimming badge just before the summer holidays, and mum sewed it onto my costume for the trip.

We like everything at the pool. The slides, the diving tower and the restaurant, where there's a pinball machine. A neighbour at the hotel even lets us have a few goes.

The neighbour's wife asks me if I've put cream on. My shoulders are looking a bit pinky.

I say, "I'll do it now."

But then off we run again. It's the best day of our whole lives. Timmi doesn't need any suncream — he's always brown, he tans as soon as the snow melts. And I don't want to have to wait the half hour for it to sink in.

"Let's do the three metre jump!"

I see the slide in front of me, the pinball machines and the diving tower. I have never been to such a perfect pool.

When we have dinner with our parents in the hotel, I can barely move. I'm sunburnt all over. In some places my skin has started to blister. The neighbour who saw us at the pool feels guilty. She should have insisted, but she does know a cream that works wonders... Mum rebuffs her harshly, "She won't need it!"

My fault.

And it was. It wasn't as if I hadn't packed any suncream. It wasn't as if I hadn't been reminded. It wasn't as if I didn't consider myself to be highly intelligent otherwise.

At night I try to think the pain away and lie on my tummy, so that only the skin protected by my swimming costume touches the mattress. It's impossible. At breakfast the next morning, I ask if I can skip the hike.

My skin is red like the apples in the breakfast buffet. You can already see pus amassing in the blisters.

But mum's look interrupts me before I can show her my shoulder.

I ask Tim if he remembers the spinner. The clothes spinner? Down the phone, Tim takes a slug of beer. I know it makes him look like dad.

He doesn't want to remember, I think not for the first time, as there's no way he could have forgotten the spinner.

In the new flat, the one with the bathroom and the separate toilet, Tim and I shared our own room. It had fold out cupboard beds and when we had to tidy up, we'd throw all our things in and quickly snap them together. My cousin Katja had taught me this trick; she was a year older than me and knew all the tactics. We also had a washing machine. A real one, but with no spin cycle. We therefore had to load the sopping wet laundry into the cylindrical spinner in portions. When it was plugged in, the vibrations began as soon as you pushed the locking lever down over the plastic lid. The engine gave the small barrel a hard shake. We both had to hold the spinner down with all our strength, otherwise it'd leap off the chair in circles and the water (which we collected in a bucket) would spill out across the bathroom floor. If you lay across the spinner, your whole body tickled. Timmi was laughing and so was I — spinning was our favourite chore.

Boom. The bathroom door flew open. "What's going on?" Timmi let go in shock and the spinner slipped from my hands. The water

missed the bucket, but I quickly let go of the lever to stop the power. Mum angrily yanked the plug out of the wall.

“Now you’re both going to have to get a smack,” she said and left the bathroom.

We each stood at a sink and waited.

I said to Tim, “You’re not allowed to cry. Otherwise she’ll be happy.”

When mum returned, my brother was the first to be punished. Tall and soft, she started slapping his backside with her hand. Of course Timmi let out a howl immediately. He was only three and didn’t know how to control himself properly yet. I wanted him to stop and stared at him sternly. He tilted his head back so tears and snot ran down his throat and he choked, which only briefly interrupted his crying. As soon as his breath returned, the tears set off again. Only when mum let up did he stop.

“Do you understand me now?”

Tim nodded and ran out of the bathroom.

“Blow your nose!”

I will not cry. I. Will. Not. Cry.

I held onto the sink with my hands and leaned my head on it. That way I could cover my mouth and be careful not to smash my teeth against the porcelain. That terrified me, because it’s so painful.

Mum hit me. Harder. I wasn’t crying. She hit harder and harder. At some point this child had to give way. Mum hit me until she couldn't anymore.

It was pretty stupid of me, really. If I had given in earlier, it wouldn’t have hurt so much now.

She didn't ask me if I understood her.

“All I remember is the constant smacks on the head. The crack against the back of my skull. I can still hear it.”

“Me too,” I say, instinctively raising my shoulders and tensing my neck to counter the blow.

“Go on, smack her head...” I know Tim's hand is flying through the air on the other end of the line, and then his tongue clicks as his hand meets the imaginary child's head in front of his chest.

*Mum says, “Go on, smack her head.”*

*She's sitting opposite you and dad is next to you on the bench at the kitchen table. He's about to lash out with his right hand. Tim keeps eating. He is sat between mum and dad in the corner of the bench.*

*“Go on, smack her head.”*

*Your hand slipped. Again. The spinach fell on your dress, and who's going to have to wash it off?*

*You said, “I didn't mean to.”*

*“Would've been impressive if you had,” he says.*

*You don't look up, you try to wipe the spinach off your dress.*

*“Leave it alone, it'll make it worse.”*

*Crack, dad has lashed out. Thwack, it hits your head. Crack, thwack.*

*“Stop touching it. Take it off!”*

*“It wasn't on purpose...”*

*Something presses against your chest, taking away your ability to breathe and speak.*

*“You have to soak it.”*

*Crack, thwack. One more time, because you don't want to listen.*



*Tim has finished eating, jumps on mum's lap and shouts:*

*"Back scratch!"*

*You still have to finish your food. With no dress; soon you'll wonder if it's worth undressing before dinner.*

And yet I can remember afternoons with apples in puff pastry. Skiing or, best of all, when all four of us went to the beach and dad flung us about in the water.

Birthday cakes, family parties, holiday camps.

It looks beautiful on the outside, but once I step inside, a dark labyrinth unfolds before me. It has no exit.