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# Editorial

by Murat Sezi

Dear Reader, as I am writing these words, the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America is only slightly more than 24 hours away. Many of us have still not fully processed the reality that this man was elected the most powerful man in the world, and it remains to be seen which foreseen and unforeseen consequences this will have for the world as a whole.

For fans of the Star Wars franchise, the end of 2016 was also overshadowed by the untimely demise of actress Carrie Fisher, almost wholly known, albeit unfairly, to the general public for her role as Princess Leia. Though we do not have a piece that is dedicated to her in the issue, we found it fitting that she should grace our cover.

But there is another man's passing which I think worthy of mention: Richard Adams, best known for his children's novel *Watership Down*. In the issue, yours truly remembers the novel and reflects on the role it has played in his life.

If there is an overriding theme to this issue, I think it can be summed up in one word: loss. While Brian Koch writes about the loss of the America as he knew it, Daniel Krooß – as the title reveals – engages with the notion that loss is something which can persist and, ultimately, consume a person if they are not careful. Most importantly of all, Inga Zekl writes about losing her father and what he meant to her.

On a more positive note, Christian Weiß has contributed a piece about Nobel laureate Bob Dylan and showcases the creative craft lurking behind his lyrics. Though the award cannot be taken away from him, I am sure that

the proverbial jury will be out for many years to come on whether the decision to award the Nobel Prize for Literature to someone who is, in the traditional sense of the words, neither a poet nor an author was 'correct' or not.

In this lengthy issue, we also have contributions in the form of poetry by returning authors Jan Rölleke, the already mentioned Brian Koch and Henry Lyonga, as well as short stories by Maike Baumgärtner, Denise Breidenbach, Victoria Koberstein and Julia Gäbelein.

Furthermore, there is an anniversary to celebrate: The Red Brick Company is turning ten! Congratulations to organizer Dr. Lars Heiler and the many, many students who have been its bread and butter over the years. This semester, they are doing a re-run of *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, but do not let that dissuade you: If there is one thing the RBC is famous for, it is outdoing themselves.

Our last piece of content is an interview with author Dan Vyleta, who we talked with about his latest novel *Smoke*, the ins and outs of editorial processes, the uses of creative writing and a slew of other topics connected to life and literature. The interview was conducted by me and Katharina Debney, to whom I would like to extend my warmest thanks; to say that she assisted me would be a gross understatement.

Finally, I would also like to thank our sponsors Hanseatische Coffeebar and Schluckspecht, as well as Matt Emery and Christopher Forlini for proofreading. Thanks are also in order to our wonderful layout artist Rhea Eschstruth and Sophie Bachmann and Melanie Mendetzki for their beautiful illustrations.

Enjoy the issue,

Murat Sezi ■

# Red Brick Company Announcement

by Lars Heiler

Ten Years After – The *Red Brick Company*  
Are Celebrating their 10th Anniversary with  
Oscar Wilde's *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*

After 10 years and more than 20 productions the RBC return to one of their all-time favourite plays.

Lord Arthur Savile is a happy man: he is rich, healthy and about to get married to the sweet and beautiful Sybil Merton.

His situation changes dramatically when the eminent cheiromantist Mr Podgers foresees that Arthur is going to commit a murder at some point in the future. Shocked at the prospect, Arthur decides to do the gruesome deed before his wedding in order not to shed a dark light on his marital bliss.

Supported by his intrepid Butler Baines and a German anarchist couple, Lord Arthur sets about to fulfill his duty and kill someone. But who? And how?

ARTHUR: It's much more difficult to commit a murder than people think.

SYBIL: Oh, but darling, dozens of people do it every day who haven't had half your education.

ARTHUR: Yes, but those are the ones that are found out. I want to keep mine strictly private.

Oscar Wilde's murder story was turned into a witty and fast-paced stage play by Constance Cox. Interestingly, Cox changed the short story's scandalous ending when she adapted it in 1960. When we first performed the play in 2008, we followed Cox's version. This time, we are offering a third solution – we hope you like it! ■

## *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*

Dates: January 29/30/31 & February 3

Time: 8pm

Venue: K19

Student tickets: € 3

Reserve your tickets at [www.redbrickcompany.de](http://www.redbrickcompany.de)

# Not another Obit: Memories of Watership Down

by Murat Sezi

Illustration by Sophie Bachmann

“My Chief Rabbit has told me to stay and defend this run, and until he says otherwise, I shall stay here.”

- Bigwig, addressing General Woundwort.  
Richard Adams, *Watership Down* (1972)

*Bright eyes, burning like fire  
Bright eyes, how can they close and fail?  
How can the light that burned so brightly  
Suddenly burn so pale?  
Bright Eyes*

- “Bright Eyes”, lyrics by Mike Batt,  
performed by Art Garfunkel (1978/1979)

Before 2016 came to a close, there was a death which, perhaps overshadowed by the passing of actress Carrie Fisher, went somewhat unnoticed by the public. This was the death of English novelist Richard Adams, who died on December 24 at the age of 96. Given that I have contributed pieces about deceased authors who were close to my heart in the past, I found it fitting to write a piece on Adams as well. Until I hit a snag.

The nature of the snag is one of integrity, one of genuineness: Unlike other authors I have written about, I actually do not know a lot about Adams. Not that that is necessarily an excuse – a bit of research has never hurt anyone. However, this lack of personal relationship does prevent me from writing from the heart.

So why write about him at all? The answer is that his most famous novel, *Watership Down*, has a very special place in my heart. So, in lieu of an obituary, I would like to

use this venue to share some of my fondest memories of and connected to this book.

To be completely honest, it is very hard for me to put into words how much this novel – and the film that accompanies it – means to me: visceral-wise, it is on par with Lindren’s *The Brothers Lionheart*, Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Irving’s *The World According to Garp* and, lately, *The Fraction of the Whole and Quicksand* by Steve Toltz. And if you’re familiar with some of these novels, you can draw a pretty straight line from small child to slightly older child to teenager to young adult to slightly older young adult to adult. I have the suspicion that every reader has a story similar to this one.

By way of a quick plot summary: *Watership Down* is, in the broadest sense, a fantasy novel with an odyssey-quest-like structure; after being alerted to impending dangers



posed by humans, a group of rabbits escapes their warren to – literally – search for greener pastures. Along the way, they experience adventures, traverse different societies and best foes. Like all good stories, it is also deeply concerned with heroism and friendship. The novel also includes the stories the rabbits tell to each other about a mythological rabbit called El-ahrairah, who in the main story is represented by the group's leader, Hazel. The book draws on a variety of mythic sources, epic material and religious symbolism and culminates in a big battle in the course of which, in the romantic tradition, Hazel and his allies triumph and establish a new society.

My first contact with *Watership Down* was not with the novel at all, but rather with its movie version, which still holds up quite well by modern standards. I do not remember quite how old I was when I watched this seventies cartoon as a child, but I doubt that I was older than ten, and possibly significantly younger. The movie version is *extremely* violent as well as, indicative of the time at which it was produced, somewhat psychedelic, so if you have children, I cannot really say I recommend showing it to them before they're, say, twelve or so.

My second encounter with the novel came while I was going to school in the USA; the event in question must

have been in 1997, in the seventh grade during my first year there. At the school I went to, students were organized into so-called teams, which were sections of about 100 students who all belonged to the same grade and had labels like "lions", similar to sports teams. Each of these teams, in turn, had one of four homeroom teachers – one teacher each for social studies, science, math, and English.

During each semester there was a competition among the different teams (or among the individual homerooms of the teams – I can't quite remember). Part of the competition entailed each student having to complete a certain amount of reading for each quarter term, with the amount being determined by a specific number of points each student needed to attain. These points stemmed from values which were assigned to each book you could check out from the school library – they had big plastic stickers with the points value attached to the book jacket. After finishing a book, you would go to the computer lab, where you logged in with your student ID and then completed a multiple choice test: the longer and more difficult the novel, the more points you could get. *Watership Down* gave quite a few points, not as many as something like *Moby Dick*, but somewhere in the 40-50 point range, which was a lot.<sup>1</sup>

As the end of the term was approaching, we were toe-to-toe with another homeroom (or team). I, having delayed the ordeal until now, took my test on *Watership Down* on the final day.<sup>2</sup> I took the test and did very well on it, answering almost everything correctly. So when I strode<sup>3</sup> back into my homeroom and my social studies teacher Mrs. Forlani asked me how many points I'd gotten, the class erupted into loud cheering after I answered her question: We'd won.<sup>4</sup> The awkward German kid had pushed us over the top. Looking back on it, it really was a Hogwarts type deal, but instead of a trophy and a big dinner prepared by elves we got a pizza party.

Another memory, which is connected to the novel really only in the broadest sense, also stems from my teenage years. After my best friend had broken up with her boyfriend, I found it to be a pretty good idea to confess my love to her. Needless to say, I was rejected.<sup>5</sup> After going home, I put on Art Garfunkel's "Bright Eyes" – the song quoted at the beginning of this text and part of *Watership Down's* soundtrack – and bawled my eyes out.

Moving into adult territory, the final memory of the novel I want to share here is when I taught a course on fantasy literature at university and discovered the novel

entirely anew, discovering all sorts of things which had eluded intellectualization as a child: the mythology of the rabbits, the fact that every action they perform in it could actually be performed by a rabbit, the utopian/dystopian design of its societies... Both re-reading and teaching it was extremely enjoyable.

That is not to say that you have to be an adult to enjoy a children's book, or any novel for that matter. On the contrary: Paraphrasing the author Dan Vyleta, with whom we conducted an interview for this issue: It is quite rewarding to be able to read as if you were a child.

I hope I was able to whet your appetite for *Watership Down*. As for me: I am looking forward to reading the novel to my soon-to-be born son. So, despite the fact that I couldn't say very many nice or even substantive things about Richard Adams, and this text turned out to be more about myself rather than about him or his novel, I would heartily like to thank him for, directly and indirectly, bestowing all these wonderful readings and memories upon me. ■

1 I can still vividly remember being in the library and having the literary-educational equivalent to dollar signs flashing before my eyes when I saw how many points were awarded for *Watership Down*.

2 At this point, I had been living in the US for less than a year, so my English wasn't all that great yet.

3 Not exactly the appropriate word as I was a very shy teenager, but it makes for a better story.

4 It should also be pointed out that until this point I was wholly unaware that there was a competition going on in the first place.

5 There are a lot of caveats to this story, not the least of which being that I probably was not really in love with her. It has a happy ending, however: To this day we are best friends and, when I got married last year, she was my best woman.

# The Education of Bobby Zimmerman

by Christian Weiß

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is the noblest; second, by imitation, which is the easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.  
(Confucius)

Honored by the Prize Committee “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition,” the American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan received the Nobel Prize for Literature for the year 2016. Commentators are divided about the decision. Salman Rushdie said he was delighted by the announcement, expressing his excitement about the fact that the prize jury paid tribute to the widening of the definition of literature<sup>1</sup>. Joyce Carol Oates praised the “inspired and original choice”. Irvine Welsh could not quite accommodate himself with the decision, which in his view expresses “an ill-conceived nostalgia award wrenched from the rancid prostates of senile, gibbering hippies”.

Hippies, yes; the sixties and seventies, the heyday of flower power and make-love-not-war, people with long hair and no intention of joining any war. They make an easy target, especially because they have been ridiculed so often and stereotyped to uniformity. Call them hippies, beatniks, menace to the public order; this counter-movement that sprung from conditions that later generations

would (gratefully) not be able to imagine in their wildest dreams: the Cold War, the Nuclear Arms Race (and the impending threat of nuclear annihilation), Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis and twenty years of widespread silence about the holocaust, WWII, and the psychological consequences.

In his 1951 lecture “Virgil and the Christian World,” the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot stated that

A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation. He need not know what his poetry will come to mean to others; and a prophet need not understand the meaning of his prophetic utterance.

He was not referring to Bob Dylan, who in 1951 was only a boy of ten years, but the phenomenon of expressing what others have found no words for, of tapping the collective unconsciousness of a generation, which is some-

<sup>1</sup> This and the following responses have been collected at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/13/bob-dylan-wins-2016-nobel-prize-in-literature>.



thing that Dylan would also be credited with a few years later. And that was well before the “hippie movement” was in full swing.

But first, another generation had to feel the boot heel of pernicious denunciatory authorities. Singer and songwriters of the political left, like the legendary Pete Seeger (“Where have all the flowers gone”, “Turn, turn, turn”, “We shall overcome”), were blacklisted in the fifties and early sixties, their concerts unexpectedly cancelled and stage bans imposed. People of color were feeling the boot every day. These were the days of segregation and political oppression, “separate but equal” was the official political maxim in the southern states, from the iconic sink in public restrooms to the seats on the bus. September 1962: riots break out in sleepy Oxford, Mississippi. Federal and state forces fight against armed civilians. Two people die, more than 300 are injured. The reason? Former US veteran James Meredith, colored, wants to enroll at the University of Mississippi.

December 1962: Bob Dylan records a list of songs for his second album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, one of them called “Oxford Town”.

Oxford Town, Oxford Town,  
Everybody got their heads bowed down,  
The sun don’t shine above the ground,  
Ain’t a-going down to Oxford Town.

He went down to Oxford Town,  
Guns and clubs followed him down,  
All because his face was brown,  
Better get away from Oxford Town. (1. & 2.stanza)

Artistically, it is an easy song with a simple rhyme scheme and playful character, which contrasts nicely with the gravity of the theme. “Oxford Town” is an early example for what would be called ‘topical’ songs. This term raises the question whether there exists anything but topical songs and why this word became something of a worn-out label while romantic songs came to flood the music scene

and claim the status quo. By the way, at the same time the Beatles were launching songs like “Love Me Do”, “Please, Please Me”, or “She Loves You”.

“To be on the side of people who are struggling for something doesn’t necessarily mean you’re being political”, a matured Dylan would latter grumble into the camera for Martin Scorsese’s 2005 documentary *No Direction Home*. Well-chosen words from a man who refused to take sides long ago. The *Freewheelin’* song list also included other gems like the elegiac “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall”, the melancholy “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right”, a little song called “Blowin’ In The Wind”, and “Masters of War”. It doesn’t need much guidance to figure out the meaning of this one:

Come you masters of war,  
You that build all the guns,  
You that build the death planes,  
You that build the big bombs,  
You that hide behind walls,  
You that hide behind desks,  
I just want you to know  
I can see through your masks. (1. stanza)

...

How much do I know  
To talk out of turn?  
You might say that I’m young,  
You might say I’m unlearned.  
But there’s one thing I know  
Though I’m younger than you.  
Even Jesus would never  
Forgive what you do. (6. stanza)

...

And I hope that you die,  
And your death’ll come soon.  
I will follow your casket

In the pale afternoon.  
And I’ll watch while you’re lowered  
Down to your deathbed  
And I’ll stand o’er your grave  
'Til I’m sure that you’re dead. (8. stanza)

Pieces like this, ‘topical’ songs, others called them “finger-pointing” songs, simply poured out of the young Dylan. Another one, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” from his 1963 album *The Times They Are A-Changing*, marks the artistic development of the young songwriter.

In his autobiography *Chronicles*, he describes the effect of attending a small musical production of Brecht & Weill songs in English: “Within a few minutes I felt like I hadn’t slept or tasted food for about thirty hours, I was so into it.” Especially the “Pirate Jenny” got him hooked: “The piece left you flat on your back and it demanded to be taken seriously. It lingered.” Being the young songwriter apprentice that he was, Dylan began to look at the mechanics of the piece at once. “I took the song apart and unzipped it – it was the form, the free verse association, the structure and disregard for the known certainty of melodic patterns to make it seriously matter, give it its cutting edge.” Welcome to literary modernism. Though these recollections are subject to the retrospective imagination characteristic of biography and its limited credibility, it is not impossible to imagine the astonishment any young creative with a taste for folk rhythms would undergo while listening to these jangling lines performed. Of course, “free verse” is never completely free, least of all from metrical restrictions; The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory’s definition that it “has no regular meter or line length” is as close as it gets. If you take a closer look at such so-called free verse pieces you’ll find that they often depend on some certain repetition of metrical feet. Scanning through the stanzas of “The Lonesome Death of Hat-

tie Carroll” and listening to Mr. Dylan’s idiosyncratic performance, you will find a fair share of dactyls that provide cohesion where the line ends seem to fall apart.

William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll  
With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger  
At a Baltimore hotel society gath’rin’  
And the cops were called in and his weapon took from him  
As they rode him in custody down to the station  
And booked William Zanzinger for first-degree murder.  
(1. stanza)

...

In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel  
To show that all’s equal and that the courts are on the level  
And that the strings in the books ain’t pulled and persuaded  
And that even the nobles get properly handled.  
Once that the cops have chased after and caught ’em  
And that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom.  
Stared at the person who killed for no reason,  
Who just happened to be feelin’ that way without warnin’  
And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished  
And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance,  
William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence. (4. stanza)

The thing with concrete subjects is that they tend to reach a specific audience and invite very specific critique in return. The artist is held to his word, monopolized by interest groups and easily targeted. Soon, interviewers, fellow artists, and the public would appoint Dylan a high priest of the Cultural Revolution in the late 60s and early 70s. For an artist who relies on “experience, observation and imagination” for his creativity, this leaves little air to breathe. According to his autobiography, “if any one of those key elements is missing, it doesn’t work. It was impossible [...] for me to observe anything without being observed.”

So he withdrew for a while and returned as somebody else. But that’s a different story. First, he wrote songs like the condensed “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)” from *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965):

Darkness at the break of noon  
Shadows even the silver spoon,  
The handmade blade, the child’s balloon,  
Eclipses both the sun and moon  
To understand, you know too soon,  
There is no sense in trying.

Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn,  
Suicide remarks are torn  
From the fool’s gold mouthpiece the hollow horn  
Plays wasted words, proves to warn  
That he not busy being born is busy dying.

Temptation’s page flies out the door,  
You follow, find yourself at war,  
Watch waterfalls of pity roar,  
You feel to moan but unlike before  
You discover that you’d just be one more  
Person crying. (1., 2. & 3. stanza)

A song from the boundaries of song making: a surreal experience, a symbolist word painting, half rap-song, half incantation, breathless, stunning, ‘unsatisfactory’. As with all of the above-mentioned examples, it is well worth the few minutes of your life. If only to find out what the myth is all about. And to see, what language, if ‘properly distorted’, is able to produce.

P.S.: Many of the contemporary recordings from concerts, talk show appearances, or political rallies can easily be found on YouTube, now that they constitute ‘high art’. ■

# Interview with Dan Vyleta

by Murat Sezi & Katharina Debney

On December 13, 2016, we met with Czech-born author Daniel Vyleta. However, this short description does not do justice to his rich and varied cultural and linguistic heritage, which has included stays in Germany, Canada, the US and the UK. Daniel Vyleta has a PhD in history and currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham, England. Furthermore, he has published four novels: *Pavel & I* (2008), *The Quiet Twin* (2011), *The Crooked Maid* (2013) and *Smoke* (2016).

In the interview, we talked to him about his mixed background and the influence it has on his writing, the uses of creative writing, what it means to read as if through the eyes of a child and his latest novel *Smoke* as well as the editing process which accompanied it.

**Murat:** The question we'd like to start out with, although it's not really fit for print: How do you pronounce your name correctly?

**Dan:** Ah, well that is a good question and I'm confused myself [everyone laughs]. I say 'Veletta' these days. It's a Czech name. I think, in my whole life, nobody has pronounced it quite the way my parents would have, so...

**Murat:** So, can you talk a bit about your mixed cultural heritage and maybe also the influence it's exerted on your life and your writing.

**Dan:** My parents are Czech, they're 68 *emigrés*. So, Czech was the initial language I learned. My grandma was very present, she never learnt German very well. Czech was the language at home, but the moment you hit school, to some degree you shift into the host language, which was German for me. I learned English as a teenager, had a brief

spell in the States, and moved to the UK to study. I think the influence it exerts... For me, it's probably that I wasn't at home in German quite the same way, maybe, that you would be as a mono-cultural person.

**Murat:** As far as just the spoken language is concerned?

**Dan:** Ah no... I was obviously perfectly fluent and, I'm not talking about a linguistic deficit. But, I didn't grow up on German fairy tales, I didn't grow up on German songs, the language of family humor wasn't German. So it's more about an emotional commitment. If you're mono-cultural and you grow up in a language, it may take a great leap of imagination to transport yourself into another one relatively late in your life. It's possible, and people do so and to great literary effect. But for me, coming to the English-speaking world was... it was clear to me that there was an opportunity there; I felt at once that this is a language that could become my own in some unique way. And English

is generous like that, because there are so many Englishes, so you don't have to write yourself or speak yourself into just one very specific place. There's Australian English, there's Indian English, there's Irish English. There's this wealth of Englishes amongst which you can manoeuvre and within which you can carve out your own little spot. So, I think the multi-cultural nature of English helped in the process of adoption.

**Murat:** Yes, I mean, that's certainly true, I once met a man and he told me that English is perhaps the only language that's produced great literature wherever it went. So, no matter whether you're talking about India or Australia, it just doesn't matter. All these countries have a great national literature. I found really interesting what you said about mono-culturalism. So, I'm going to be a father in a couple of months and she [Katharina] asked me the other day, "Are you going to raise your child bilingually?" And I thought about this for a long time and I said, "No, I can't", even though I spent part of my childhood in the United States, it's the thing with the fairy tales, I can transport the language but I don't think that I can transport the feeling, the culture and all that, because the nursery rhymes and fairy tales I grew up with are just from a completely different culture.

**Dan:** For me, the interesting thing is that Czech, now, remains a kind of childhood tongue. So, on the one hand, it's incredibly familiar in the literal sense, but on the other, my facility is just not quite good enough to make it the language of deep emotional expression. So, English has kind of poured itself into that space and would be the natural tongue for me, for anything personal. And yet, for my wife and I (my wife's English, but speaks German fluently), there are things we switch into German for because they're funnier in German or because you can quote someone or because the phrase is particularly nice. And I like that. In a sense, I grew up with constant code switching, where you complain about something in Czech, but, because the word is simpler in German, or because that's the term a person you know used in a certain situation,

that's the term you use. Or you ask a question in one language and get the answer in a different one. I still enjoy this sense that one can be drifting between tongues. And because I've lived in the States, in Canada and the UK, and I've just been to India for a few months, I can hear this drifting in my own English, too. And though I know it confuses people, I actually kind of like it, this kind of drifting between different Englishes, different kinds of national contexts: on the level of accent, on a lexical level, even on a grammatical one.

I think I enjoy these inconsistencies in my own English because they show that I am not speaking with a frozen tongue. That sounds very negative, as though I am criticizing people who are not participating in this drifting. I don't mean it as a criticism, but languages can be frozen in the sense that, if you grow up in a very specific place, and have a very specific kind of dialect and sociolect, you're wedded to that place. Which on the one hand I think is great because it gives you this deep rootedness and, as a writer, it allows you to explore that place in very intense and personal and intimate ways, but at the same time all other tongues within the language itself may remain foreign to you. Whilst I feel that I'm in the opposite position, where I seek out spaces in my writing where I can enact some of this skipping between different Englishes. So, I'm looking for different writerly spaces [than native speakers], and there's a joy in that.

**Murat:** In the sense of an explorer or a gatherer or something like that?

**Dan:** Yeah, a collage-artist! There's that and there's the sheer joy of expression. There's a joy in the Canadian vowel shift, there's a joy in saying "South" [with a Canadian "ou"-sound]. And in India, you hear some really fantastic things, they just crack me up. And I think I have a very active ear for these kind of variations and I'm very happy to adopt and slot them into my English, so it becomes fun to travel through languages, as it were.

**Katharina:** Well, talking about traveling between worlds

and languages, when reading *Smoke*, but also when reading *The Quiet Twin*, I had the feeling that you choose rather oppressive systems, very locked-in worlds, socially but also personally. So, is that maybe the contrast to what you do in private life?

**Dan:** That's a good question. I mean, part of the answer is probably that you don't choose quite in that way. I'm saying it's a good question because it puts its finger on something I don't even particularly notice or think about. There's a linguistic interest there and there's an interest in finding humanity in your prison. The closed door, you know, the locked room *interests* me. For me, *The Quiet Twin* is a kind of *Kammerspiel*. It's an almost – I was close-reading Chekhov<sup>1</sup> as I was writing, so, there's something almost theatrical about it, in each little section there are two people in the room, talking...

**Katharina:** You could put in on stage, all you'd need would be three walls of a huge house and a yard in middle.

**Dan:** Yes! The book's about the retreat into the private and the sort of little freedoms that you build for yourself [within that retreat]. But also about the illusion of that: because you're a private person and because you can put up nice wallpaper in your prison, it's not a prison, right? So, it's about that, and, I think that you're right – *Smoke* has a bit of that, too. The school is a prison. And the society I describe is a prison, in the sense that it imprisons even the jailers, as prisons inevitably do. And again, it's the instinctual pitting of some sort of humanism against our most alienated state. That sounds very abstract... [everyone laughs]

**Katharina:** In *Smoke*, Britain is locked in; you're forbidden to travel. Is there a little bit of the Brexit discussion in that?

**Dan:** Well, it pre-dates the vote but I think - in terms of the writing process – part of it has crept in... Britain's an island, right? And I show that island mentality at its worst.

The book implies that the older generation [of the Britain I depict] was free to travel while the younger generation is not... Despite knowing better, I think we often revert to thinking of history as moving broadly towards progress. Right now though there are so many aspects of our culture that are anti-progressive. I was interested in this place where quite new kinds of repression already mask themselves as natural and timeless. That's part of the reason for the teenage perspective of the book, where the teenagers encounter a world in which the generation above has been allowed to do certain things, has had the privilege of travel and of seeing the world and, yet, because of the protected way children grow up, this quite recent law which shuts the country off from intercourse with other culture, is all they know: it's an absolute, it appears trans-historically true, the walls are up and always have been.

Another thing... The Brexit-vibe found its way into the book a bit more explicitly when I started to think: well, of course you don't *really* shut yourself off. I mean, this is the other basic truth of isolationism. Because you need a little wiggle room, you need the foreign expertise, you need the migrants, for your own economic success... So later in the book, I am teasing out of this strange dynamic: the people who built the walls are also the ones who built the little hatches through which the foreign can sneak in again. Because, as it turns out, they don't actually want to be shut off, they just want to control the process.

**Murat:** I kind of want to pick up on something you said a little while ago: Do you have a particular stance on authorial intention? Do you want us to read the novel with what you had in mind or are you against that? And what is your stance on the meaning-making process?

**Dan:** Well, first of all, I think that the magic of the novel, for me, is that it's a long form. Not just in the reading experience—though I think that is important too. For both reader and writer there's a vast difference between a 200 page book and a 600 page book. In terms of immersion, in terms of entering into something, getting lost in it. You

write a thick book over a long time, and you go through many stages of life during this time – in a sense, many different people write this book because you yourself are not static. So, to talk about a uniform intention sounds a little insane, right? Because you have many, many intentions. I take copious notes, some of which are quite practical: I must do this! Don't forget about that! And: This is a good line, use it somewhere! But a lot of it is a sort of active dialogue with the manuscript: What does this mean? Why am I doing this? Okay, this thing that just happened wasn't what I wanted, what are the implications? What are the political implications [within the logic of the work]? Am I writing something that is actually kind of distasteful to me [in what it implies about social interaction, or morality, or whatever]? So, there is a sort of struggle there, because things happen on the page that you don't expect, for reasons that are not quite clear to you. Some parts just appear on the page due to the logic of the scene that you're writing or because of the rhythm of the line, and then, once it's there, you look at it and it looks back at you. You could cross it out, of course, but there's a resistance to crossing anything out—if it's a good line, it's a good line and the artist in you recognizes it's a good line. So now, you have to live with that line. In other words, there are *intentions*, you're not a passive participant in the writing process and it's not the muse that takes you over and shakes you, but they take the form of a rich plurality of impulses. Books are, in Freudian terms, hugely over-determined; they have a great many causes. So, that's one part. You, the author, are not in straightforward charge of your manuscript. The other is that this is an overtly political book—which I did intend. And this has annoyed certain people.

**Murat:** Which is always good.

**Dan:** Well, it's good and it isn't. The thing is, I actually, quite deliberately, embraced a Miltonian strategy for the book. Basically, if you're an evil shit, you get a good line. And it's quite Shakespearian as well in the sense that characters get what are essentially soliloquies, which goes against all sorts of rules of literary realism. Either the

character gets a first-person section, where they are free to rant and self-declaim, or they simply dive into speech while talking to someone in a dialogue scene. And the characters who are most ideologically committed, make particularly long speeches. So, some of the book's politics, even political things I'm sympathetic to, are displaced into these quite dodgy characters, which for me is the whole point of the novel as a form. It's not a thesis. Rather, it's perspectival; many truths are held. Some may be uttered with great conviction and rhetorical flourish but you still have to ask who's uttering them and how that interacts with what's been uttered before by someone else. So, you end up staging 'opinionatednesses' (in the plural). And of course it's fun being opinionated about stuff, for an author as much as anyone, but the novel allows you to enter into the interesting experience of being able to juxtapose 'opinionatednesses' without providing any synthesis.

**Murat:** So, more in a Bakhtinian<sup>2</sup> sense?

**Dan:** Yes, when you read Bakhtin on Dostoyevsky<sup>3</sup>, I find those passages very inspiring. This letting of the leash, that Bakhtin describes, of letting the character run amok with

- 1 Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904): Russian playwright and short story writer. His works include *The Seagull*, *The Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya*.
- 2 Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975): Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar. Bakhtin introduced the concepts of dialogism and polyphony. With reference to Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin argued that he was the first author to not represent a monolithic, authorial world view, but, through his characters, many competing voices which communicate different world views. These concepts were later adopted and advanced by Julia Kristeva (born 1941) when she defined the concept of intertextuality.
- 3 Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881): Russian novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist and philosopher. His works include *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

some overheated idea they hold, while the author watches from the side-lines.

**Murat:** It's extremely funny that you should say that, because what I was just thinking about, there is this very nice essay by the late American author, David Foster Wallace<sup>4</sup>, where he reviews this biography-slash-literary criticism work of the foremost American Dostoyevsky critic, and somewhere late in the essay, he quotes three-fourths of the page, I don't know which novel he quotes from, and then he says basically, it's where a character delivers a very moralizing speech and so forth, and he argues that no modern reader would have the patience or understanding for it today, but that it means a lot to him. Personally, I found that interesting that you should mention that.

**Dan:** I love Dostoyevsky, I find him compulsively readable... I mean, yes, he has his routine gestures and his work is often over the top and its pacing is difficult for a modern sensibility—but all the same there's something freeing about his prose. You find it in other authors too, and I find it very heartening when they let go of certain kinds of *good taste*. My fear for the modern novel... perhaps we've moved away from this model by now, but my fear was that we were going to produce this very tidy novella-length thing, just very well edited and very sharp and conforming to good literary taste, side stepping all accusations of sentimentality, of moralizing, of being over the top, et cetera. And I find that approach just boring, just deeply boring, whereas I think what you find in someone like Dostoyevsky is not. His books are very messy, full of sentiment; they dip into sentimentality but then they do something, they move you to tears and you end up feeling a little foolish for crying over *that*. I think the fear of sentiment in novels is a fear of being manipulated which is a fear of a kind of fascism—of being told what to feel. The fascistic book produces a simple moral world into which you are injected, in which you are the heroic reader, running through it with the heroic protagonist at your side. Or something like that. But I think Dostoyevsky's books actually do the opposite, they move you and then make you question your

own positioning within the book. I also, for instance, love Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*. It's a book that rants about marriage and sex, in a manner that's just totally nuts. But the beautiful thing is that the entire frame of this book (and we happen to know that its ideas broadly correspond to Tolstoy's own ideas about marriage and sex, and that the book is one which his wife proof-read and corrected, which is also fascinating to think about), but the wonderful thing about the book is that it's framed as a story told by this funny-looking, funny-smelling old codger who sits next to you on your train, who is quite clearly a little mad. So, in other words, there is a subversive element to it right from the start, which you kind of forget about because you enter deep into the narrative. I like that kind of tension between what the book is saying and where it is speaking from, even if it comes at the price of a certain formal unruliness. I find the unease this mode creates far more interesting than something curated to the point of blandness.

**Murat:** It might also have to do with the entire awareness of the culture of advertisement and culture of, as they call it, post-truth that we've created. This sentimentality and aversion to sentimentality is really the key here, right?

**Dan:** If you asked me what one of my aesthetic problems was--one of the things I'm interested in doing with books—it is this: I think that it must be possible to write novels of sentiment that are not sentimental. And I think that, and if you read Foster Wallace, for instance, he's interested in this, too. He gets very impatient with the whole postmodern project towards the end [of his life], he was talking about the New Earnestness<sup>5</sup>, et cetera. I'm not sure if Earnestness is the right word for me, I think it'd have to be something more playful than that. Maybe a New Romanticism or something of that kind, but there must be spaces that activate the power of emotion in the reader without duping them.

**Murat:** Sounds difficult. But yeah, I completely agree.

**Katharina:** That would link to everything you've already

said, but whilst reading... First of all, is there going to be a sequel?

**Dan:** Yeah, there is, yeah.

**Katharina:** Good.  
[all laugh]

**Katharina:** I'm very relieved.

**Dan:** Where you annoyed by the ending?

**Katharina:** I was, I couldn't believe that it's over and I thought, if that's...

**Dan:** ... I think that qualifies for annoyed. [all laugh]

**Katharina:** No, no, no... Your style of keeping me on my toes and of sometimes not giving me so many different positions as a reader, by sometimes just leaving out entire histories of a figure. For example, what did Thomas really live through with his mother; he's a kind of foreigner, a kind of traveler between the societies and that is something that keeps me thinking even till today. And there's something, another quality, apart from you giving me these gaps, you know, where I just don't know how to... How is this going to continue, I mean, they just walk out, they've smoked up London. We don't know yet what's going to happen, but it's also your way of... You see, what touched me most was little Eleanor in her corset; she had to twist screws to keep herself from smoking. I think you use a certain kind of, I wouldn't want to say violence, but a certain kind of Victorian approach to bodies and also to these Victorian crime novels that touches me, although I could not say you're using sentimentality, it's more matter-of-fact. Is that something you use because it suited the historical basis or because it has a certain importance, a certain value for you?

**Dan:** I think the latter. The Victorians are crazy, right, once you start looking at them. Harnesses to stop you from do-

ing various things are as much en vogue as surgical interventions [against masturbation etc]. So, you essentially can't come up with any horror scenario that the Victorians did not already conceive of... What I mean is you will find a scientific paper on it, in defense of this or that process, written by some Victorian eminent scholar and in its own way, it will be entirely and chillingly reasonable. It's interesting, however, what you say about the horror being "matter of fact". It's almost like you are suggesting that I am poring the sentiment of horror or fear or whatever into a concrete object.

**Katharina:** Definitely.

**Dan:** Interesting. I have observed in myself a great and growing respect for the material world. How it encodes emotion, how just paying attention to a detail can sort of crystallize a constellation and bring out sentiment. Not by creating a "symbol"—something that the author strategically picks out to take on a specific "meaning"—but through pure observation. Maybe through a bit of what Peter Brooks calls the melodramatic mode. What he is thinking of is not a sort of melodrama where you drive home that something is dramatic by having fifty violins play in the background. When I sit in the cinema and a violin comes on, I just want to shoot myself. What Brooks means by the melodramatic mode is a mode where you spend slightly longer looking at a detail than you usually would: you pick it out and give it a certain weight. Not dishonestly—you don't distort it—you actually *look* at it. You

- 4 David Foster Wallace (1962–2008): American novelist, short story writer and essayist. His works include *The Broom of the System*, *Infinite Jest* and the essay collections *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* and *Consider the Lobster*.
- 5 New Earnestness, also called New Sincerity, is a trend in the arts which describes works that break with postmodern irony and cynicism.

may metaphorize it, but only in a way that creates a precise image, i.e. in a way that helps you *see* the object. If you sit there thinking, “Wow, that’s a nice metaphor,” something has already gone wrong. You have to think: I know exactly what you mean. I see it too. And I think if you do that well that object that you *picked out* can take on a tremendous kind of emotional weight very simply.

The process of writing is an interesting one in this respect. When I work on a novel, I put myself in my writing mode. It’s a kind of openness, a state of being where you go through the world and everything is interesting to you. You wait for the train and somebody who passes you is wearing their hat in an interesting way and... you *look* at that hat and at the gait of that person, you take note. You sit in a doctor’s waiting room and guess what, all of a sudden light switches have become interesting to you, you study the light switch in this dental practice because it’s different, you haven’t seen this kind before... In other words, you pay attention, because you need all this material for your novel and because you’re thinking yourself into physical spaces every time you sit down to write: you need to feel them and you have this sudden sense that the most ordinary object could take on this kind of quasi-magical quality. Like in the scene that you alluded to before, the one with the girl in the harness. Halfway through the chapter, there is an extended scene when they are drinking cups of tea and discussing ethics, revolution, and metaphysics. Of course you can’t be in an English household without drinking a cup of tea, and there’s something about the details of how you hold your cup of tea, how you forget about it while you are talking, how it’s still slightly too hot when you drink it, or how it’s gone cold: that’s where the human center of that scene is located. The cups of tea are a sort of counterweight to all the abstraction of their ideas. The truth or whatever it is that is interesting about that moment sits right there in that juxtaposition between the feel of the cup and the sort of lofty words that are being spoken. Not as an ironisation, nor because all the talk is ridiculous and only the tea is real, but because that’s where we live our lives, in that in-between, where we can both

embrace great abstraction and sit up all night thinking about lofty ideas—but when you get up from your desk, you find your back hurts. That’s precisely what novels can do, so... But sorry, I’m rambling.

**Katharina:** Oh it’s fantastic, I can still hear the creaking of the floorboards when Eleanor creeps up to Charlie, it’s, yeah.

**Dan:** Which brings us back to specificity, this time of experience. Ultimately, that scene only works if you, as a writer, have sat in a particular room with a particular floorboard that creaked. I really do believe that.

**Murat:** To have had the experience before?

**Dan:** Yeah, and not in some general terms (I have heard floorboards creak) but in a very specific way (the other night, when I was staying at my friend’s house in Sheffield...) Sometimes this specific recent experience ties back to a childhood experience, in other words, you notice the creaking floorboard now because there was a creaking floorboard in your house that you listened to a million times as a child and that has taken on an emotional power and that’s why somehow—and I really don’t know how—when you write it, it carries emotion rather than just being one of those details thrown into a novel because novels need to be full of details.

**Murat:** I just have so many questions. First, one thing, are you familiar with China Miéville<sup>6</sup>, the author. Have you read any of his...

**Dan:** I’ve read *Perdido Street Station*, which I think is very good. It’s over-crammed, but I have time for a literature that’s over-crammed. And there are some things in it which are truly unique. It’s a triumph of the imagination. And imagination is something that is vastly underrated by literary critics. It’s just so damn difficult to come up with anything new. So, yeah, I have time for China Miéville.

**Murat:** Because he's an openly... He's a member of the communist party.<sup>7</sup>

**Dan:** Oh, is he? He has a doctorate in sociology<sup>8</sup>, right?

**Murat:** And, what I was getting at, I mean, do you subscribe to any sort of political school? In that sense?

**Dan:** I'm...

**Murat:** Let me explain a bit: Do you want to convey some of that in your writing, to kind of, let's put in really big terms: Is there a Cultural Materialist<sup>9</sup> sense of history in your novels, maybe?

**Dan:** ...

**Murat:** Maybe the question is a bit bloated.

**Dan:** No, no, no, it's good ... You know, on the one hand, the answer is simply no, because I don't start with a concept and I think my instinct is always as much to subvert as to *present* something, a political truth, whatever. In that sense, I guess, I live in a world of many truths with a small 't', which don't always align. And that could be a very bad situation, this living in between non-aligning truths: if you're happy with this place, if it isn't an irritant to you. Because in that case, you're just incoherent in your thought, which can cause a lot of trouble. But, if you are wrestling with these various truths and their incompatibilities - which, I think, many people are - I mean, the truths of family, the truths of your personal life, the truths of politics, etc., then something more constructive is taking place. So many of these truths are dialogical, situational, etc., they are touched by the empirical, by a specific set of circumstances, in a very profound way that can't be shed. There is no abstract version of these truths, just specific ones. And if that's "true" then I would say my mode of writing, that subversion I talked about, is a good, a constructive mode. Because what we need to feel is a kind of discomfort, a sense of wrestling with, a questioning of "truth".

But let's get back to the question of my politics. When people asked me what I was writing while I was working on *Smoke*, my half-joking answer was a Foucauldian<sup>10</sup> children's book for adults. "Children's book" because it follows a sort of Dickensian<sup>11</sup> tradition, where you take an adolescent character and you structure the book like an adventure novel. And, hopefully, it makes you into a child as you read it. I felt it made me into a child writing it, which was quite pleasurable. And "Foucauldian" because it simply has a lot of Foucault in it, the self-disciplining of the body, the school as a prison or as a factory. People write about oppression very glibly, often through highly stylized fantasies of totalitarianism which have never existed and couldn't really exist, whilst, you know, one of the

6 China Miéville (born 1972): English fantasy author, comic writer and political activist. His works include *Perdido Street Station*, *Iron Council* and *The City & The City*.

7 Correction: China Miéville was previously a member of the Socialist Workers Party and is a founding member of Left Unity.

8 Correction: He has a PhD in International Relations.

9 Cultural materialists aim to recreate the zeitgeist of a certain point in history by analyzing its specific historical documents. Culture is understood as a productive process and, based on Marxism, cultural materialists analyze by which means certain powers try to inscribe certain values into canonized literary works. At the same time, the focus lies on unmasking the power structures by which certain forces try to transmit their ideology (e.g. the church, the state, etc.).

10 Michel Foucault (1926-1984): Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, historian and literary critic. He wrote extensively on the subjects of power and knowledge and how these are used as a form of societal control through institutions (e. g. prisons, clinics, etc.)

11 Literally, "Dickensian" means of or pertaining to Charles Dickens, his writings in particular. The term is employed when describing the style of a narrative work of art which is reminiscent of Dickens, i. e. his portrayal of poverty and social injustice as well as the satirizing of institutions institutional and the employment of social commentary.

things I was interested in (via Foucault) is that oppression inhabits a more Hegelian<sup>12</sup> space, where those who are the oppressors, the slavers are *also* not happy. Because they have taken on a role and that role has many benefits and they won't exchange it, they can't exchange it, it's impossible to even think of exchanging it and yet, there's a great discomfort in that role, and you have to cheat to escape the discomfort ...

But again, books aren't written from a single impulse like that... It will say in my notebooks somewhere: Ah, a Foucauldian children's book, brilliant! But then you get absorbed in something entirely different and for months while you're writing this book, all you're thinking about is mother-daughter relationships, or the experience of being a teenager, that sort of fury at being infantilized by your parents. You're thinking about that, or, you know, you get lost in the physical, and everything abstract about the book goes out of the window for two, three months at a time and resurfaces only when you edit. Whole months when you're literally just absorbed with streets and distances in London; what is the texture of this brick, how does this machine work? What's the emotion in the room as these two people meet? So, you really bring it down to the empirical, experiential level, and then you look up from the manuscript and think: Holy shit, this is totally Marxist<sup>13</sup> [laughs].

**Katharina:** *Smoke*, though. What gave you the idea for, not the novel, but smoke as a thing?

**Dan:** That I have a straightforward answer to. You will be happy to have a short answer for once! Which is: It's from *Dombey and Son*, the quote I put up front in the book. I literally read the passage and thought: Okay, this is genius! Where Dickens basically says: Well okay, let's look at this slum and imagine you could make disease visible in the air above it, which is a very mid-19th century kind of idea in the sense that the Victorians were obsessed with clean air and good ventilation. If you could make it visible, then you could see disease creeping up the hill to the houses

of the rich. And then Dickens (or Dickens' narrator) says: and now imagine you could make the moral disease of this place visible and he literally describes it as a kind of *smoke*. And because he's using a medical analogy, he's thinking in terms of infection. And, it's this that really put its hooks in me, because it's one thing to say: vice is visible, the unruly desires of your animal self visibly express themselves. It's another to say: it will creep out of you *into the body of others*. It runs counter to our entire modern way of conceptualizing the self as this sort of isolated, insulated being. So, I read it, and I thought: yes, that's very powerful and it carries an anxiety, a social anxiety but also an anxiety about physical violation and, like all anxieties, it carries underneath itself a desire. You're afraid of it, but really you want to be *touched*. And into that space, that's where I wrote *Smoke*. Essentially, it describes a group of people who are afraid of this thing, smoke; it is dangerous and bad and shameful—but they discover they also want to be touched. And the school, the harness, social norms: these are all artificial attempts to separate us; they keep us from touching.

That was pretty brief, right...

**Katharina:** Why, well, that's just a tiny question, but why were they not infected by smoke under the earth, in the mines?

**Dan:** Well, that's a...

**Katharina:** ...Just out of interest...

**Dan:** Well, I have whole charts in my notes about the physics of smoke. And I decided there was something about coal dust and its ability to *bind* smoke that was interesting. I was living in Durham<sup>14</sup> when I wrote those sections, which is mining country...though the mines there were closed down by Thatcher in the 1980s. I visited a mine and heard various people talk about the experience of mining, and all that stuff combined when it came to writing the chapter. And then, too, there's something about the expe-

rience of going underground... Above all though, I was trying to work out what might work as a physical filter to smoke and cold dust seemed to be a pretty good solution.

**Katharina:** It caught me, because I found that that was the turning point when I, as a reader, understood that smoke is more than just the sin or the bad thoughts or the bad feelings that you share with others, or even hatred that would come out as incredibly dark smoke, but it has, what you said, this, this side of something you'd like to share, of something very personal, something very intimate.

**Dan:** The chapter functions as a kind of rebirth within the book (though this too wasn't something I was really aware of while writing). The protagonists go into the earth and they emerge as different people. The chapter is also slower, in terms of its pacing. It's funny, I had a lot of conversations with the editors; they complained that this chapter was slower than the others. But I never had a problem with the slowness. The chapter is a kind of pause. Nothing really happens but everything sort of happens in that chapter...

**Murat:** What does the term *fantasy* connote to you?

**Dan:** As in a genre description?

**Murat:** Whatever you want.

**Dan:** Ideally, it denotes a kind of childhood quality in us that we should never lose, which has to do with the child's ability to slip the potentiality of magic into the ordinary. As in: you know you're a perfectly rational person and of course monsters don't exist. But all the same, *objectively*, there's a growl coming from under the bed ... So it's an ability to see the magical potential in the ordinary which is also, I suppose, the idea of the melodramatic mode we talked about earlier. There the magic resides in looking more closely – at an ordinary object or a gesture or a movement.

As a *genre*, fantasy can be many things. It can be very conservative and set in its ways, to the point of being, you

know... racist, nationalist and all the rest. I think part of its conservatism actually resides on the level of form. There are such strong assumptions about how fantasy has to be shaped and look—unlike science-fiction, which is a genre that encourages a certain level of formal experimentation. So, it'd be good to have a literary take on the fantasy genre but you have to really look hard for good examples of this... And much of it, when you find, turns out to be science-fiction, really. I recently read some M John Harrison<sup>15</sup> and I'm not sure I would like his politics or him as a person but when you read him you get the sense that, okay, there's someone here writing fantasy, but really what he's doing is sweating out some personal disease. Which is usually a good sign, because it's obsessive, and a little sick—which is to say, it makes for good literature. If there was more of this, of turning fantasy into a genre that is an expression of something personal, where the style runs away with its author, when you look at the sentences and think, where the hell does this come from--I think the genre would be the richer for it. But you know that's not the fault of the word fantasy, that's a quirk in the evolution of the genre.

**Murat:** I agree. Most fantasy novels stick to a certain formula, whereas the interesting thing about science-fiction,

12 Hegelian means of or pertaining to the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and his philosophy in particular. What Mr. Vyleta is referring to here is Hegel's master-slave dialectic.

13 Marxist means of or pertaining to the German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his philosophy. With regard to the novel, the term Marxist refers to, for example, the inclusion of socio-critical commentary pertaining to economic and/or social inequality.

14 Durham is both a city and county in North East England. As part of the industrial revolution, coal mines became the county's main industry until the 1970s.

15 Michael John Harrison (born 1945): English author of fantasy and science fiction.

as you said, there's no way to predict endings. There's just nothing there, anything can happen. I just want to hear your take on – for a couple of reasons: First of all it's part of my PHD thesis, but that's not important right now, but I get the sense that there is a growing interest in the so-called big contemporary authors, whether it's Kazuo Ishiguro<sup>16</sup>, who has recently published *The Buried Giant*, or China Miéville, or one of our favorites, Susanna Clarke<sup>17</sup>, who wrote *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, where you have this kind of mixture of history, but it's also invested with a very strong fantastical element and I got kind of a similar vibe from *Smoke* as well.

**Dan:** You know, not that I'm writing anything similar aesthetically or otherwise, but I was thinking about Kafka<sup>18</sup> while writing *Smoke*, about the power of literalisation. A man feels like vermin, so he *becomes* vermin. And you know Kafka has a few other pieces that work the same way. 'In the Penal Colony', where there's the tattooing of the prisoner, where his crime is tattooed onto his body: that's also a literalisation. After all, life or crime or punishment all do write themselves onto our bodies. And this kind of literalisation to me is another gateway to fantasy. It's precisely that childhood act of 'I'm gonna take this a little more literally than it was intended by the adults' and then you hold up that mirror to their world precisely by being over-literal ... So yeah, I think you may be right, there is a growing interest in this type of fantasy and I would love to see it expand. Because there's a sort of childhood element to fantasy that opens something in the reader, the adult reader: the child starts reading the book along with you, over one of your shoulders as it were, which I think is the perfect way of reading any book. Which brings us back to emotion. Unless you're immersed, I mean in that sort of hungry child 'I need to read another page' way of being immersed, unless you're hooked, with that level of greed, I don't think you're really opening yourself to a lot of the things that are interesting about the book on an intellectual and a conceptual level. And while other genres do this type of immersion effectively, too, I do think fantasy has a certain power there.

**Murat:** I mean, capturing the reader as if they were a child, I think we can all remember when we were 8, 9, 10 years old and you would read a novel a day or two, you know, eventually you reach that point where you just don't have the time to do that anymore because of other commitments. But until a certain age, if you're a reader, you just read as long as you can stay up, like you said. I would like to get back to something completely different which you said quite a while ago, about the whole publishing business and everything being so clearly edited and so forth. What is your, maybe, let's do this as a two-part question, what is your stance on the entire publishing process nowadays and also, and this would be the second part, about creative writing, the teaching of creative writing as an institution – which we don't really have in Germany – but which of course exists in the UK and the US.

**Dan:** What exactly are you wondering about in terms of the publishing process?

**Murat:** Basically, how does the communication take place, are you placed under any restrictions, how often do you have to compromise, that sort of thing.

**Dan:** I've been very fortunate, all in all. In various books, there has been resistance to certain things [on the level of plot, structure or phrasing]. In almost all cases I've basically said: that's how I want it and there's been a respect for that on the side of the editors. The publishing industry is interesting in that people working in it are very talented, very hard-working, have a deep love of literature. I think the industry itself is... bizarre. It's an endless search for the super-mega-bestseller. As a result the marketing departments of the big publishing houses have a lot of clout. And that can distort what they can buy, and then, if you're unlucky, pressure might be exerted on what you're producing. It depends a bit on who you end up with. With *Smoke* I was very lucky because my editor in the States is the editor-in-chief, the actual *publisher* for the whole imprint – so there's really no one he has to answer to. Which is very fortunate because then you only deal with one per-

son and their take on the work. And sure, we had different opinions on certain things. He edited the manuscript very thoroughly and I accepted many changes as well as many pieces of advice.

Speaking more broadly about the industry as a whole, it's gone through several crises. I think in Britain it's been harmed tremendously by books no longer being subject to any price control. You can sell them at any price you want. Amazon has hurt the industry massively, just because they have too much clout, and because their pricing policy is a more or less deliberate attack on the whole existence of publishing houses. Publishing houses are flawed institutions, but Amazon have no plausible plan what to put in their place. The editorial process is an important one, after all. Like many types of artistic production, writing is a very solitary. And there has to be a point where the dialogue enters into the process. Out of the loneliness of writing, you emerge into a dialogue with the editor, i.e. someone sympathetic, to whom you can articulate certain things. Not necessarily because you expect the editor will simply utter some sage piece of truth that will solve all your problems with the manuscript, but because the dialogue itself may help you find something new and important. In the silence of our own heads, I think we often can't find it.

As for the teaching of creative writing: It's an established tradition in the US, it's a growing tradition in the UK. I think you have to be clear about what it's for, what it does and what it doesn't do. I think if you do creative writing as part of a literature BA, it's a very good way to teach students to see literature differently. It's brilliant at teaching people how to read, because they become aware of the book as a series of choices made by a person and realize: Oh yeah, Virginia Woolf could have written this quite differently. And, of course, you see the impact of writerly choices very directly if you are experimenting with them yourself, in a classroom situation. So, it makes sense to me to involve some production of literature in the study of literature.

It's a little different on a Master's level and on a PhD level. Like so much teaching, your goal is really to put people in the way of things. You're increasing the chances that a

student hears that piece of advice, or reads that book, or has that hour-long conversation that will catapult his or her writing to the next level that will change their aesthetic parameters. This happens because you're embedded in a community of writers, because you have time to devote to the craft, because the person teaching you is existentially involved in writing themselves, because hopefully these teachers have a high level of sensitivity towards your project and are able to say: you want to read this or to give you the odd piece of feedback that is transformative. But as I said, this is actually not all that different from other types of teaching. Reading and learning happens in the library, it doesn't happen in the two hours you sit in the classroom. The two hours in the seminar crystallize something, they help you organize your week and things may be said that are very important, and of course there's a social aspect to learning. But all the same the actual learning often takes place in the gaps, in between class, and it takes place because somebody said something that's motivating or in-

- 16 Kazuo Ishiguro (born 1954): Japanese-born English author. With his novels *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *The Buried Giant* (2015) he has explored science fiction and fantasy territory.
- 17 Susanna Clarke (born 1959): an English novelist who is notable for her 2004 debut novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.
- 18 Franz Kafka (1883-1924): Born in what is today the Czech Republic, Kafka was a German-language writer and is widely considered to be a central author of the 20th century. His writing style mixes the real and the fantastic and is further characterized by surreal and/or absurd situations as well as existential angst and alienation. Further, his writing style is what would be referred to as fantastic in the 'traditional' sense; the example Mr. Vyleta cites here stems from *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*) in which the protagonist wakes up to find himself transformed into an insect, something which is never resolved or explained in the text. This concept of the literalized metaphor (as Mr. Vyleta says, he *feels* like vermin and he *is* vermin) is a technique often employed in fantasy literature.

spiring and you therefore downloaded all these essays and read them and suddenly they changed your view of things or have enriched it.

So, in that sense I think teaching writing is not entirely different from teaching other complex arts... I mean, if you run a cookery school, are you really saying: everybody who graduates is going to end up running a Michelin-starred restaurant? Nobody can guarantee that. There's a lot of stuff involved in getting published after all, some of it has to do with fortune and some of it to do with ... I don't know whether "talent" is the right word because it's such a mixed bag, there's an aptitude on the level of the line, an aptitude on the level of narrative architecture, but it's also bloody-mindedness, stubbornness. It's how you react to failure, it's how you deal with doubt and all these things. If you do a creative writing degree, you'll likely be a much more precise reader and a much better editor: it does those kind of things. But it's not a silver bullet, it's not a sure-fire way of getting you published. That's just not a good way of thinking about it. I think it is a specific kind of literary education.

**Katharina:** Could I take one step back to the mirroring ... That fantastic element in *Smoke*, I kept on thinking about that. The potential it has, maybe you could agree or disagree, is that you had to create a history which is so near to our history that we know of. I mean, smoke is

being integrated into the Bible, into politics, into national thinking and, what it does to me as a reader, as you said, it brings me back to being this child – *maybe there is a monster under my bed*, maybe the world as I see it is not quite as real as I think it is. And, I think, the effect it had on me is that it throws me back into thinking very differently about what I believe to be my world and my history, for example. It shows me something about humanity, about how easily things can be constructed and believed as unmovable, as the true core of things, and so, easily, with just one element - the smoke - which logically has to be thought through, this entirely changes. Would you agree that there is a potential there that you might not or that you could not achieve in a similar manner when not using something that we would, from our position now, claim as not being real?

**Dan:** I think that potential exists. Essentially it's like saying: If you want to rethink the real, the best starting point may not necessarily be to look at the real. Perhaps it helps that you are not entering the world of this book with the weight of your own world and this weightlessness may help you engage with its themes. As you were talking, I was thinking of Guillermo Del Toro's<sup>19</sup> film about the Spanish Civil War.

**Katharina and Murat:** *Pan's Labyrinth*.

**Dan:** ...Which is quite a powerful film about the Civil War, but embeds it in the world of faerie. When violence explodes in it, it's absolutely terrifying, and very contained, very controlled. And, again, you're watching it with a sort of dual gaze... your primary thought when you go to the cinema to see it is not: this is going to be a political lesson about the Spanish Civil War. So when you walk back, you are free to think about Spain, about fascism and about violence, and about childhood, about the terror of the night, which means there is a certain power to the film that comes from connecting the emotions of the childhood nightmare to the political nightmare of the war. Some people have been talking about *Smoke* as a book of horror, which I don't particularly like, because it's not a genre I particularly read. But I think horror as an emotion, that thing we have slumbering in us, primordial fears, those are interesting of course... If they're sleeping there like curled up ugly dogs, and, if you, as a writer, can poke them awake a little bit, that might not be a bad thing....

**Katharina and Murat:** Thank you!

**Dan:** Thank you guys. That was a great interview. [everyone laughs] Now you have to cut all the nonsense out. ■

- 19 Guillermo del Toro (born 1964): Mexican film director, screenwriter, producer and novelist. He is best known for the film *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006).

# American Dreams Revisited

by *Brian Koch*

As the sun slowly started its descent into the Pacific Ocean, I was walking along the promenade. While, to my right, the grunts of sea lions filled the air, I saw the old wooden, picturesque houses of Monterey on my left. It was a peaceful Southern California evening and the air was enriched with a hint of salt. It had been almost ten years since my last visit. Back then, when I was a young idealist, I had subscribed to romantic ideas of the American Dream, freedom and adventure. This time, I was older – maybe also wiser, who is to say – but still an idealist, a more embittered idealist perhaps. Ten years ago, I had not yet been exposed to the works of influential American writers and I had also not completely found myself in music yet. This time it was different, and I had walked in some of my idols' metaphorical footsteps, looking for something I could not even name precisely.

I watched the seagulls flying over the houses of what had once been called Tortilla Flat, down to the pier and into Monterey Bay as I strolled without purpose. It was hard to believe how fast time had gone by and how, only two weeks before, the plane had landed in Seattle.

Isn't it amazing how something beautiful can be contrasted with something incredibly tedious? As I was waiting in line at the US Border Protection counter, I started looking around the room and scrutinized my surroundings: dozens of people of all religions and ethnicities, clumsy and tired from an eleven-hour flight from Frankfurt to Seattle, rigorously observed by security personnel. Everything is bigger in America, I thought – starting with the police officers who seem a lot more muscular than those at home and whose equipment reminded me of a counter-terrorism commando out of a Hollywood action movie. So much had changed since the events of 9/11 and I felt a little sympathy for a country in which freedom is still such an important everyday issue. It must have been

hard to sacrifice that freedom of all things in order to provide an illusion of safety.

"Your passport, please! Put your thumb on the scanner...now index, middle, ring, pinky...thank you, have a safe trip." The young woman's voice sounded as bored as I felt while my fingers were scanned on the slightly sticky surface. She superficially examined my passport, handed it back and waved me through the narrow aisle towards the exit. Seattle Airport was huge and thanks to Al Qaida you could not leave without loads of paperwork to be filled out for different institutions in different places, on the plane as well as on the ground.

Two hours later, I was finally on the road. Since I was deliberately traveling without a smartphone, numerous maps and travel guides filled up the cup holder area behind the main console within minutes.

I had a late lunch at a small diner, served by a very friendly Native American waitress who was freaking out over the first foreign customer of her young career. She was incredibly happy to tell me a little about her hometown and instantly reminded me of what America had always meant to me and my family, regardless of negative media coverage: hospitality, opportunity and discovery on the open road.

Before I knew it, I was on that road again. My plan was to travel southbound on the old Pacific Coast Highway, far from modern Interstates with only a few large cities along the way.

As I had traveled on American soil before, I knew that you were able to just keep on driving. The road would never end and something would always appear. A gas station, a motel or a restaurant could always be found within reasonable distance. At least this part of the American myth had been true so far and I was anxious to see more of the country I had not been able to explore for so long.



But there was one more thing to do before I could let Seattle vanish in the rear view mirror. I looked at the city map which had a small red circle on it from the previous planning process at home. The hour was getting late, but it didn't matter. It felt like my duty to reach the location that was marked by the red circle and so I started to fight my way through Seattle rush hour.

In the suburbs, I had to stop several times in order to ask for more specific directions, only to earn various condescending looks and remarks for my old-fashioned way of travelling:

"Don't you have a phone, man?"

I thought about the waitress again while an irritated gas station clerk used his cell phone to help me find my way. What contrasting impressions I had just experienced within such a short time.

Around sunset, I finally reached the cemetery, and there was just enough daylight left. A discreet mausoleum could be spotted at a small distance from the other graves. Its walls consisted of portraits and quotes of the deceased. The entire construction seemed very respectful to me, not exaggerated as with other famous people's final resting places. Eventually, when I read the inscription on the bottom, I started to feel a little sadness rising from the heart: James 'Jimi' Hendrix 1942-1970. One week before boarding the plane, I had celebrated my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday – an age that good old Jimi, buried beneath my feet, had never been destined to reach.

In Germany, reports of racism and police brutality had dominated the news for a very long period of time, not only in the United States, but also the country I call my home. However, Seattle's most famous and influential son might forever remain a young African-American guitarist with a big dream. Thinking about that felt like a glimpse of hope in a seemingly unfair world and put a smile on

my face.

Two weeks later, almost a thousand miles down the road, I strolled down former Cannery Row in Monterey, feeling like one of John Steinbeck's long gone characters. A memorial park with statues and informative plaques had been constructed in the center square to remind everyone of Monterey's various contributions to world literature. Many of the old warehouses had been restored and new businesses had been set up. Although I was surrounded by restaurants, bars and souvenir shops, it seemed to me like the people of Monterey had tried to capture the charm of old times.

I watched a band set up their equipment on the promenade and approached them curiously. None of the musicians was older than twenty-five and I spotted at least three different ethnicities. The skinny, tanned California surfer boy wearing cargo-shorts and sunglasses turned out to be a true cliché with all members of the group. I introduced myself and we started talking about music for a while.

"Man, it's a crappy business! We play the promenade 'cause it's the best gig we got in this town. Tourists' pay's not good, but alright – what else can you do..." one of them told me.

"Screw it! It's not important as long as we can play at all, right?" another one added.

I wished them good luck and handed them a few dollars before they had even started playing. Good grades for effort, I thought. There they were, people of different backgrounds who would eagerly work together on an almost impossible dream. At least I was not alone with my idealism and the picture of America I carried around in my metaphorical pocket. I admired their attitude and went on, wandering and wondering again.

It had not always been like that during my journey.

Only a few days earlier, I had suffered quite a shock realizing how once cozy and beautiful San Francisco had fallen victim to tourist exploitation and Silicon Valley snobbery.

I had traveled America in a car, with a map and a pinch of good luck. It may not have been riding the rails or sleeping in the car, but to me it was the closest thing possible to the way Jack Kerouac intended. In San Francisco, I had planned to walk in his footsteps and revisit the liberal sleepy city by the bay after ten years of absence.

The digital age had conquered the city. Huge companies had settled and after the housing crisis that had been triggered by the Bush administration, many people were not able to pay for their own homes anymore. As I walked through the outskirts of colorful Chinatown with people shouting at each other in languages I could not understand, I saw an armada of homeless men and women. From previous experiences, I knew they were harmless, but their sheer appearance made me sad. One of them held up a cardboard sign that simply said “rent too high”; another one swayed on the sidewalk with eyes as glassy as the bottle in his hand.

“Got some booze, man?”

I walked on towards the harbor on the foot of Telegraph Hill, but only a few places seemed to have survived from the times when Kerouac had roamed these streets. Down at the pier, the smell of commercial waste changed for the worse. It was overcrowded with tourists, circling in its presence like flies over a piece of foul meat. Therefore, I changed my plans. This was not my San Francisco anymore. I was reminded of a William Faulkner type of character, feeling betrayed by unknown forces, robbed of an idealized past. The only silver lining I saw was how the increased number of tourists implied a decreasing number in global poverty. At least I had these thoughts in retrospect. With the tourist-infected harbor in sight, as selfish and hypocritical as it could get, I just wanted *my* old Frisco back...

Thankfully, in other parts of town, change had not hit as hard. For years, I had dreamed of visiting the small district close to the Golden Gate Bridge in which the 1960s social revolution had been celebrated so vividly and in which rock music as we know it today was once taken to new levels after it had been passed on from the British Isles: Haight Ashbury.

The district was named after its two main streets, whose crossing formed the center of this part of town. I adored the narrow streets, the old, wooden, Victorian houses, the

small coffee shops and stores, although they were already compromised by the modern skyscrapers in the distance. Indeed, for a moment I was able to imagine Kerouac and Ginsberg hanging around these corners with me. The colors were garish, the music was omnipresent and the people were weird – in a good way. Gift shops distorted the overall picture a little, but that was alright with me. Compared to the commercialism at the pier, I was happy to walk through this small oasis of non-conformism.

“I realized either I was crazy or the world was crazy; I picked the world – and of course I was right”, Jack said to me in my head. I agreed.

It was hard not to be critical. Remnants from the Bush-era, reports on racial prejudices, severe social inequality and election campaign euphoria for an uneducated blither were increasingly difficult to ignore, even for me. A pickup truck ran by and the stolen *great again* slogan caught my eye. At the same time, I was listening to the band playing in the distance on the beautiful promenade while the last rays of the red sun accentuated the silhouette of the nearby lighthouse perfectly. I could not help but wonder about all these contradictions. The metaphorical impression I started to create was one of a sophisticated beautiful woman marrying an ugly, grumpy and ignorant lout. Was it possible that this soil was simply two-faced, like the Roman god Janus? Could there be a corrupt side in the mean streets of state capitals surrounded by idyllic beauty in other places – or maybe even two Americas?

“Power does not corrupt”, John replied. “Fear corrupts – perhaps the fear of a loss of power.”

In that moment, with thoughts of Jack, John and Jimi, and their ideas of America and the idealistic hopes and dreams it may or may not accommodate haunting my mind, there was no other explanation. I knew the search was not over. Jack had taught me how the road can never end. There were more places to explore, more idols to follow. I imagined travelling through the Midwest or along the East Coast next time, in search for Bob Dylan’s and Bruce Springsteen’s America. Some of my idols might not have liked certain aspects of the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States in which I had tried to find their paths – but from my current point of view, there was not much need to make things *great again* in the America I was sat watching the sunset in at that hour.

“When the power of love surpasses the love for power, man might achieve true greatness”, Jimi concluded.

Suddenly, it all made sense to me... ■



Denke in den kalten  
Tagen an Deine Liebsten

Vergesse aber auch  
nicht Deine Nächsten

Und mache allen  
eine kleine Freude

Jeder braucht etwas Wärme in der kältesten Zeit des Jahres



Deswegen macht  
**Meyerbeer Coffee**  
mit bei



**Suspended Coffee Germany**

...einer für Dich und einer für mich!

Bestelle eine Kaffeekreation für Dich  
und für jemanden, der  
sie sich nicht leisten kann!

Auch Du kannst heute noch etwas Gutes tun!

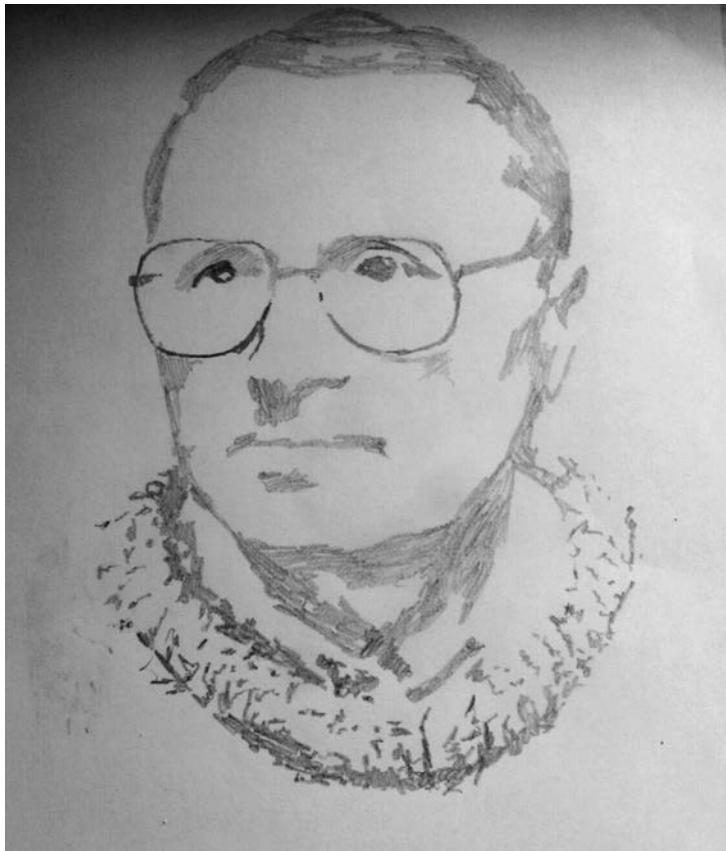
Wir freuen uns auf Deinen Besuch!  
Dein Meyerbeer Team



# Dad

*by Inga Zekl*

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Gone forever  
Thou art lost  
Yet very much here  
DAD!

## Dear readers,

As much as I deeply searched my brain for this edition, I failed to come up with a poignant, and maybe kind of trendy, subject.

I humbly ask for forgiveness.

This year has not been my best one; I am stuck in an event and yet fail to really liberate my mind and soul, my creativity and motivation.

I lost my dad.

It was not sudden, but any idiot who tells you it is easier when you are prepared – screw them!

It never is easy when you are confronted with the very uneasy subject of death, the loss of somebody dear, the passing away. Whatever word or expression you choose, the result remains the same: somebody is gone! You can never ever again talk to this person; you can never ever again listen to this person, just GONE!

At the age of seventeen, I went to France on a study trip from my school and at the Fontaine de Vaucluse, I bought a gift for my mum and my dad.

For my mum, it was a piece of handmade and hand-coloured paper – something Fontaine de Vaucluse is known for – with a poem entitled “sourire”, smile. This exquisite souvenir still hangs in our hall and receives its share of sunshine every day, very fitting to the title.

Right next to it, nearly hidden, my father put his souvenir. A sheet of beautiful and handmade paper with a poem that made him smile at the time.

You see, I had my fair share of heated discussions with him being kind of a stubborn und headstrong person...

The English translation of this originally French poem

would read like this:

At the age of six  
Dad knows everything.  
At the age of ten  
Dad knows a lot.  
At the age of fifteen  
We know as much as Dad.  
At the age of twenty  
Dad does not really know much.  
At the age of thirty  
We could ask Dad what he thinks.  
At the age of forty  
Dad does know something.  
At the age of fifty  
Dad knows everything.  
At the age of sixty  
If only we could ask Dad what he thinks.

Apparently, this poem amused my father a lot because he, known for making unwanted presents disappear, found a place for this poem right next to the door of his study. And every time any of us visited him in his study, his refuge, we would see this poem and smile, just a little bit.

You see, the funniest thing is, my dad could never ever remember how old we were – there are five of us kids. So some days, before our birthdays, he would very quietly ask us every year, “How old are you turning this year?” just to assure us that he had known for sure.

This year’s birthday was the last with my dad still alive. I spent it on the road, getting some medicine for him and

bringing it to the hospital. Five days later, he was home for his birthday, his last one, and the last time we as a family were together, all of us. He was home, but he was not the person we had known for all our lifetimes.

For you, Dad, this was the right time to go and who am I to lament the fact that I have to spend the rest of my life remembering you?

But what is the most important, the most precious thing to remember? Your ability to enjoy. You see, my dad was a very hardworking person. Having five kids and being a teacher, having a house and a very big garden and being an author never really gave him much opportunity to take time off. So when he did take time off and just relaxed, this was a moment of peace that anybody who witnessed it would relax just by watching him.

In the evening of hot summer days, he would gently put his feet on our garden table – no offense to good behaviour – and you could see that he was happy and content with a day's work. And even then, very often he would say, "I think I'll head up into my study, just for a while." or "Well, I think I'll just water the xy-plants again." And off he went. Often whistling, sometimes singing, always good-humoured. Of course, even he knew how to explode but this was like a thunderstorm, short and freeing in the aftermath because the air was fresh again.

Through my dad, I got to know Wagner. He was a good tenor and liked to chant Lohengrin and Parzifal.

In the autumn, when the leaves of our walnut tree would fall, he was a tireless sweeper of leaves in our yard. Any of you who knows walnut trees will know that this is no small feat. But he loved the changing colours of the

leaves of the trees, the colours of the apples hidden between those changing leaves, the geese travelling in a V-formation and hearing their distinguishable cry. One of the first books he read to us children in late autumn and in the winter was *Nils Holgersson*.

He hated winter. The older he got, the more he hated it. It was cold and dark. November was hardest. In December, there are all the lights that are put up for Christmas. That made it easier. And January is the beginning and the coming of the new light. But with his growing years, something else grew, too. His patience when he was peeling apples for the family members that were around in the afternoon. The apples he had picked himself in our garden merely weeks before. And picking he did until his diagnosis with cancer. At the age of seventy-five, he still climbed into trees less fearful and more apt than most men at twenty. So the winter. My dad was never a fan of being inside too much, but what helped was his desk and his work as an author and translator. In January, shortly after my own birthday, there was his birthday, a day he always seemed to suffer from more than enjoy it. Being the centre of attention never was his forte. He enjoyed life itself and needed no special occasions to do so.

With the beginning of spring you could see that he began to breathe more freely and began to enjoy life again, a bit like Demeter who looks forward to seeing her daughter Persephone again in summer and who starts embellishing every corner of the earth for the arrival of her beloved daughter. Like that he seemed to greet the sunlight and the longer growing days and the not only skin – but even more heart-warming rays of warmth deep in his soul.

So it seemed fitting but no less sad that it was in the month of April that my dad was buried. Buried in a beautiful graveyard where there are trees as big as the trees in his beloved forest, a place where everything is peaceful. Even if I know that nothing of him is left in this very graveyard, it is nevertheless comforting to know that his body rests in peace where his soul would have done the same while living. The task for us is now to remember him, my dad, as the wonderful person he was, not without flaws but so dear and peaceful and soothing as anybody might imagine a human being to be. ■

# The Norm

*by Henry Lyonga*

*"I feared for my life, so I fired the gun"*

He was scared,  
So, he shot me dead.  
Dead.  
Dead.

*He stands, holding a Gun over ME, and yet he is the scared one? He is afraid of the power in my BLACK, the strength in my BLOOD, the valor of my SKIN, my never-ending hope for FREEDOM. Freedom, where are you? Justice, where are you?*

I, African-American.  
He, a Police Officer (White)  
Cloaked in white supremacy, privilege and hailed a hero.  
He walks free,  
While I plead for mercy,  
In a pool of my own blood,  
As I take my last breath.  
Why?

*Thank you, to all the fallen STARS, Fallen from the skies too soon. Gone before your time, that glass ceiling you cracked open, shall grace US with rays of Freedom and Victory. ■*

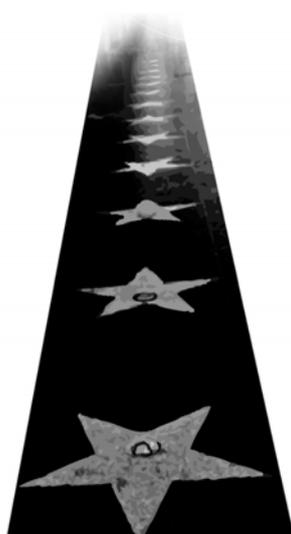
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# Hollywood Boulevard

*by Brian Koch*

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Crowded streets in the city of demons in disguise  
Sounds of phony chatter, like machine gun fire  
Concrete stars on the ground, descended from the skies  
Lost souls waiting in line, the sirens pull them under  
California sunlight scorches hope inside their weary eyes  
Neon light armadas dazzling young idealist minds  
Stripped by the sunset and the merciless sands of time  
A change of the guard, from decadence to crime  
Musicians play on corners, hookers on the roadside  
Subterranean creatures arise in the shadows of the night  
Like fast notes at a concert, clueless people passing by  
Victims of their own ignorance, living the big lie  
Industrial waste from factories of broken dreams  
In the city of angels nothing is ever as it seems ■



# Two Poems about waiting for something

by Jan Rölleke

Illustration by Sophie Bachmann

## In Time

The inconceivable force  
to which we all have to bind  
our hopes and dreams.  
The one constant connecting all mankind,  
on whose preset paths and streams  
we must run our course  
without knowing to which goal their twists  
and turns may lead, if such a thing exists.

What ripples do we create?  
Can we even cause them?  
And, if any, will they survive?  
And time and time again  
we wonder: Is everything we thrive  
for lost to time and fate?  
The answers will only be exposed  
after the journey's close. ■

## Out Of Time

The world and all of space  
obeying, lawfully, unchanging.  
Then one small cogwheel falls  
out of place,  
disconnecting  
you from the flow of time and stalls,  
your thoughts, sparing none,  
until your mind revolves around only one.

One, that keeps you holding on, what for,  
you might not even know.  
Minutes, days and months go by.  
You were here the day before,  
you're still here today,  
you'll be here tomorrow.  
You will still be here,  
waiting. ■



# Ivory

by Kristin Politycki

He saw her. Everyday. Passing by. It was only six o'clock in the morning, but he was already standing by the window. Usually, he tried to stay in bed as long as possible. But one day - it happened. Totally unexpected, as things happen sometimes. It was on a Tuesday or on a Wednesday, he didn't even remember, when a great storm brewed outside his safe walls. The rolling of thunder had woken him and he had heard raindrops slamming against his window, which he kept tilted through the night. He knew he'd have to get up to close it completely or the magazines on his desk might get wet from some drops. The wind was already blowing quite hard through the little gap he left open to get some fresh air, slightly rustling some papers lying around. So he had to get himself together that day and make the effort to close it, though it was only six o'clock.

The very moment his tired hands reached for the dusty window, he saw her. She was standing at the bus stop, wringing out her drenched hair. Ebony black curls that had gotten stuck on her pale bare arms. The way her clothes were soaked and stuck onto her body revealed her curves to him. She was pouting, looking down the street. This glued him to the

window, which he had forgotten to close by now. Only a few seconds had gone by when, suddenly, the girl seemed to be looking in his direction. Maybe he had been caught observing her. Her black eyes seemed to undress him down to his bare bones. For a moment, he thought he saw disgust in those two black holes staring up towards him. But there was something else. Yes, the longer the moment went by, the clearer it became to him. There had been something more in that glance he had gotten from her. Ever since that moment, he called her Ivory. It was that day that made him get up that early every day. Six o'clock in the morning and there she was. His Ivory. Oh, how many worlds had he just built in his mind for that one woman. In his heart. Standing near the window, a cup of coffee in

his hands. Waiting. Yesterday she smiled. Another day she seemed to dance to whatever she was listening to on her blue metallic headphones, which matched the tight top she was wearing. Today, she was talking on her cell phone and he wondered who it was, being lucky enough to have that number and talking to her that early in the morning. What a wonderful morning that must have been for that particular person making her laugh like this. But she never



seemed to take notice of his daily habit again. Not that he wasn't very careful, hiding to the side of the window. It was such a pleasure to watch her. To absorb that girl in all her crazy moods with all her crazy looks. Her face, her long flawless hair, and these legs that seemed to go on and on forever just to end in such bountiful curves. The grip on his mug tightened. He assured himself again - there was nothing wrong with that. Sometimes a slight feeling of guilt crept up his chest. He felt like a stalker. Kind of ...dirty. But that wasn't true. Not at all. Why not enjoy the fact that she presented him with so much to look at and dream about?

After all, he had always been the quiet one. In his family. In his tiny circle of friends. Everywhere he had ever been to, he had always been the quiet little boy. A shy little mouse, like his father kept calling him. Laughing like he had just made a great joke. Maybe once too often. Or maybe twice. Once too often for him to gather up the strength today to go out and ask her what it was that made those tears run down her sweet pale cheeks. Of course, his hand was lying on the jacket that had been thrown over his chair, ready to grab it and run out the door and rescue his lady. The need to put that thing on and go out that damn door and run down those fucking stairs and just ask her. To just ask her if he could offer some help. Be a man, he told himself, be a man. Just this one time. Just grab those little hands and make them stronger. His angel seemed so devastated. God! He didn't even know her!

Ten minutes. Ten painful minutes. Then, as usual the bus arrived. She entered. He could catch a glance of the bus driver, probably asking her, offering help, for she seemed to smile at him weakly. Then the bus drove away. His hand loosened from the jacket he had grabbed. His chance was gone. He waited. Every day he waited. He waited at six am, he waited at five pm. He waited for her. That was all he did. All day. And now his chance was gone. He already knew it when he saw her step inside the bus. It was like something in the universe had changed for good. First, days went by. He kept dwelling on the moment he had seen her for the last time. Always mulling over all the possibilities there might have been. Making up conversations that could have been. And more... Weeks went by. But his lady was nowhere to be seen. His beard had grown. His hands were shaking in the morning, and he was hardly able to hold his cup. The coffee was out so it was just a cup of tea that morning, with a tiny little shot of course. The emptiness that he thought had disappeared after that day Ivory had looked into his eyes slowly started to crawl back into his heart. It seemed to hang in all corners of the room again. Waiting. But somehow it was heavier, darker than before. Thicker, even. It slowly dropped from the ceiling covering up more and more of him. Covering his body, his face, his shoulders with little black spots. At first he felt the pain burning, but with every pang of this loneliness he had become more and more numb. He was aching to see that smile again. Craving to talk to her.



His past had never been as gentle as Ivory had always seemed to him - talking to that lucky friend, mother, brother or ... Damn whoever had been on that phone. Whoever it was wasn't such a waste of a person as himself. No one laughed like this with him. Ever. "You fearful little mouse", a voice inside reminded him. Again and again. Something inside his chest just broke more and more, bit by bit. "Our tiny, scared little mouse likes being alone better. In his tiny little hole, watching the world from afar." The laughing face of his father flashed behind his eyes. Nothing had ever seemed nearly as beautiful and inevitable as her in all her presence that seemed to enlighten the whole street outside his window. But now he only saw his father standing before him, biting his lower lip, clicking his tongue and then burst into laughter. Together with his brother. The voice of the girlfriend, or one of his brother's many girls rebounded in his head, loud and clear: "Indeed, your brother is strange. Ha ha, one of a kind. You really didn't overdo it when you said what a strange little brat he is!" His father patting the girl's shoulder. The thoughts came more frequently day by day and he couldn't brush them away anymore. So he buried his head in the pillows. Never able to silence the voices, "Little mouse, crawl back into your hole!" He tossed and turned. "Tiny, scared, little mousey mouse ha ha!" Life made no sense at all, so he got up in the afternoon, even later than before. Everything had changed. He woke up as tired as he was when he went to bed. The love he made to himself might have

pleased his bodily desires for just a little moment, but left his heart even colder each time. He sat in his little kitchen hearing the rumbling of the fridge as if there was something that thing had to tell him. But that dead thing had about as many stories to tell as he had. So the desert of loneliness opened up its demanding mouth with its sharp bloody teeth again. To eat him up. To swallow him whole, just to throw him up again and chew him even harder to soften his will to stay alive even more. He had to admit he felt more fragile with every day. The silence kept growing louder - every morning at six o'clock. He rarely went outside all his life. But for the last few weeks, he didn't go out at all. He just stayed in his hole with the voices, by the window. He was certain the walls had come a tiny bit closer every time he turned around as he was breathing more of that lingering tar into his tired lungs. "Tiny little mouse in your tiny little hole!" The words crashed hard against his forehead. Thrown from the inside as he saw red dropping to the floor. The floor that would swallow him anytime soon. He could nearly see it open up. Yes! He was sure there was definitely a black hole in the floor opening up for him. A deep black hole and he was attracted to it.

"Tiny mouse!" Voices grew louder as he drifted closer and closer to it with every draining beat of his heart. Closer and Closer. Red. Dark. Red. Black.

He waited. Every day at six o'clock in the morning - until his lights went out. ■

# Written Words

by *Maike Baumgärtner*

When her father walked into the room, Seannah drew a shuddering breath. They hadn't seen each other in so long that she had started to remember him differently, younger perhaps. That was it, she thought. When they were apart, she liked to remember him as he had been, tall and strong and with at least a little more hair, the man who had pushed her swing set rather than the fragile version that now walked back into her life. Maybe it was the photographs, she wondered as he assessed her just as thoroughly. Pictures freeze a moment in time and have the quality of making something even more real than what you saw in front of you. Her dad hesitated and so she took another half-gasped breath and stood up. I'm an adult, I can do this, she silently chanted to herself as she approached the gray man in front of her. He opened his arms, and Seannah stepped into them, inhaling the dad smell she had missed for so long.

"Hello, my darling," dad said with a wry smile.

Seannah blinked back a tear and pulled him further into her kitchen. Usually, it was a bright, comfortable room. She had deliberately painted it shades of yellow, and it normally made her smile. Today, everything that used to lift her spirits was hidden behind a curtain of grey. Behind her dad, a thin, pale woman stepped into the kitchen.

"Hi, Aunt Pat," Seannah whispered as she was enfolded into the scent of lavender.

Seannah both loved and hated that her aunt kept using her mother's favourite perfume. No, that was unkind, she thought as she tried to shake off the thought. It had always been both their favourite, but for Seannah it would always smell of mum.

The three of them walked over to the kitchen table. It seemed to shrink with what was unsaid.

"Nathan-," Aunt Pat began, but with a hint of his former authority, he stopped her in her tracks.

"I know it's time, Pat, I know. Before, I just couldn't-"

Seannah suppressed her tears and reached out to put her hand on her father's. Her own fingers started to show signs of aging, but compared to her father's wrinkled, spotted hands they still looked young and smooth. She held on more tightly to give her father the courage he needed. Pat's down-to-earth voice interrupted the silent exchange:

"The police said it was an accident, we all know that. It is time we started to believe it."

Of course, Pat tries to be the voice of reason, Seannah thought.

Of the two sisters, Pat had always been the sensible one, the one who did everything right and in the right order, too. Her older sister had been the crazy, spontaneous one, the artist, the vagabond. Until she had met her dad, Jane had told Seannah one day.

"When you meet a man like that, you have all the adventure you need right in front of you."



## Take Six Carrots

Seannah had tried to make that her motto ever since, but so far she had gone through a long row of Uncle Joes and found them lacking in adventure. Poor guys, she thought as a smile worked itself into the corners of her mouth. She named all boring men after Aunt Pat's husband, who was a nice man, really, but-

"You brought it, though, didn't you, Nathan?"

Her father reached into the front pocket of his jacket and put 'it' into the center of the table. There it was, a small white square that contained the last words his wife had ever written. He could see where the felt tip pen had worked itself through the paper when she had hesitated or firmly dotted an i or crossed a t or-

"You haven't read it?" Pat pressed on.

She tried to reach for it, but Seannah caught her hand like that of a child trying to reach for a forbidden cookie. Pat looked at her with shock. Seannah felt guilty for her firm reaction.

"Just a few minutes more won't hurt."

Pat leaned back and stared at the folded paper. Her sweet older sister had had her problems, granted, but this couldn't be what Jane's family was so afraid of. After all, it had been Jane, strong, fun Jane who had taken her to a club for the first time, who had hidden her first hangover from their parents and had shown her...more. That was it. Pat was ordinary – reliable but unspectacular. Jane had been more. And she refused to have a scrap of paper tell her otherwise.

She looked at Nathan, poor old Nathan. He hadn't moved on one bit. And she blamed the piece of paper. Ever since he had seen it in the box that contained Jane's belongings, he had fallen into a deep hole. Losing a wife was bad enough, but if this was what he feared, it meant that she had left him behind deliberately.

Nathan was immersed in thought as he recalled Jane's laugh, the way she picked the olives out of her salad and put them on his plate without losing track of the conversation. Her chatter was what he missed most. She was interested in everything and everyone, but never nosy, never mean, except if a piece of gossip was just too juicy. She savoured it just as she did her favourite steak, a mountain view or running around in the snow with their little Seannah. For the first time, he saw more than the box of what she had left behind when he remembered her, more than the blue coat with the coffee stain or her lipstick or her lucky key ring that had not done her any good when she had crashed against the tree.

He looked at Seannah, the grown woman who would always be his little girl. She swallowed, then met his eyes. At this moment, it became crystal clear to her that he couldn't do it because he was not like mum. Not like her. With jittering hands she took the paper that had worn thin and rough from the many times her father had handled it. She felt Pat's and Nathan's intense gaze on her and held her breath. She knew that whatever the note said, she couldn't change it. It was not in her power to change the past, but she was the one who had to close this chapter.

Straightening her shoulders, she slowly unfolded the paper. The table creaked as Pat and Nathan leaned forward. And then she read aloud:

"Beef stock, potatoes, carrots, onions..."

Her voice died away.

"Groceries. For my favourite stew," she said, still stunned.

She looked up at what was left of her family and saw the tears pouring out of their eyes and felt the water running down her face as well. But as their tears passed their cheeks, they mixed with wide smiles. ■

# The Dark and the Brave

by *Julia Gäbelein*

*Illustration by Sophie Bachmann*

The old mansion was haunted. That's what everyone said. Horror film material and the perfect place for a dare; big and with many floors and creaking steps down which someone might have fallen to their death. Who knows how many people had taken their last breaths in there.

Nobody had dared to set foot in it for decades, until now. The two girls were fascinated and excited, rather than frightened, as they walked up the hills of the forest that kept the mansion out of the sight of passers-by and out of their minds. When the building came into sight, both of them smiled.

"I wonder if we'll find skeletons in there," whispered one of them.

Silence fell over them again as they took their last steps towards the entrance. They grabbed each other's hands and slowly walked up the stairs to the wooden door. One of them knocked, the other one laughed at the politeness that had no recipient, and kicked the rotten wood until it gave in and showed them the inside of the house. What they saw was no surprise to the girls: dust that had collected on other layers of dust and a darkness that gave you a feeling that you might not be alone after all.

The two girls explored the ground floor, too worried

about the old stairs breaking to allow them to investigate the other floors. As one of them eyed what she believed to be a wardrobe, but uncertain of it due to her limited vision in the darkness - no flashlights for the extra thrill - she suddenly noticed that her friend was not by her side anymore. Just as she wanted to call her name, she heard a high-pitched scream. Horrified, she ran to the back of the mansion, where it had come from. Every nerve in her body was alert and her mind painted all the pictures of every horror film she had ever seen.

But when she saw her friend standing by the window in silence, the bloody reds and blacks were gone, and when she noticed what her friend was looking at, they were replaced by all the colours of the rainbow. There was a garden there, the most beautiful garden both of them had ever seen. The grass was bright green, dotted with colourful flowers, bumble bees and butterflies buzzing and flying in the sun. The sun. Right there, just in the back of this mansion, the sun was shining as brightly as it does on the warmest of summer days.

The girls laughed and ran outside, knowing now that whenever they were brave enough to face the darkness, they would find light. ■



# Joy

by Victoria Koberstein

I am stupid. So stupid. Stupid I am. Nothing more stupid could possibly have happened to me. I hate my stupidity. My recklessness. How in this world could I be so damn reckless? Irresponsible. So unbelievably stupid.

I wasn't worried when I didn't get my period on time. It's normal, happens from time to time. Nothing to fuss over. Especially since Sam and I had been more than careful concerning protection. "The last thing we need in our late teenage years is a damn child," I always said when he was almost too excited to care. But we did care, both of us, every time.

In my mind, I went through every single event of the last two months, trying to recall any lack of caution - drugs, drunkenness, sleep deprivation, sheer lust. I couldn't remember anything out of the ordinary. Well, there was this one night at the pub, an old friend from middle school had organized a class reunion and the later the night went on, the more things got out of control, but I wasn't too bad. I asked Sam to come join us, but he laughed and said that he "couldn't give less of a f-." "Okay, thank you! Thanks for your kind refusal. Always good talking to you." And I hung up. I did get closer to Nate later that night, a former fellow classmate, but nothing happened. I was just upset and frustrated, not desperate.

I also remembered one girls-night-out; all of us got wasted, blacked out, but we took care of each other. We always do. I went home with Chelsea that night and slept in her step-sister's bed. When I called Sam to pick me up the next morning he said he couldn't be bothered. I remember walking to the bus stop and throwing up in a trash can. But that was it.

This thing is fooling me, I thought, staring at that second blue line. No way. No way is this possible. I shook it, hoping for the line to magically disappear. It didn't.

So I went and bought another one. This one showed a smiley face - and that was when I started crying. Why do the people who invent these tests presume a pregnancy is always something to smile about? What is this smiley supposed to tell me? Something positive? It's not positive at all. It's a negative test, actually. A very negative pregnancy test.

"If I got pregnant before the age of 21, I'd have an abortion," I once said over dinner. My mother dropped her fork, clanging on her plate.

"Excuse me?"

"I wouldn't want to have a child when I still am one myself. I just know I wouldn't be able to care for a baby, let alone raise it decently."

"It seems like *I* didn't manage to raise *you* decently."

"Mom! What's the matter?"

"What do you think Jesus would say to you right now if he heard you?"

My father came in. "If he heard what?"

"She said she'd have an abortion," my mother said. I hadn't thought about Jesus for a second. Stupid me.

My dad sat down, concern written on his forehead.

"When we go to church on Sundays, do you ever listen? I mean, do you hear? Can you hear what is being said?"

At first, I thought he said it in a humorous way, but regarding his facial expression I was soon to realize he didn't.

"Do you know that every human being is made by Him? Every cell, every nerve, every heartbeat is created

by our God?”

I nodded my head. I did indeed know. I have been taught this ever since I could think. I also knew that I hadn't even developed a substantiated point of view on the topic. I had just said what I thought, without expecting any response.

“Ending a human's life, no matter how old or small it is or if it's being carried in a womb, means interfering with God's plan. Destroying something our Father has created. It is murder. Abortion is murder, do you understand that?”

I nodded again.

“Really?” he asked, his eyes open wide.

“Yes, Dad.”

And I understood.

“I'm pregnant,” I said when he opened the door. There was no point in holding it back.

“Stop it!” he said.

“I'm not joking, Sam. But maybe the pregnancy test is, because it's smiling.”

I held it right in front of his face. It took a moment until a half-cheerful smile left his lips and he raised his hands above his head in a twinge of desperation.

“It can't be mine,” he said, dead serious now, and turned around. For a moment, I thought he'd kick the door closed behind him and leave me outside to deal with it myself, but he left it open and walked into his apartment. I stepped inside.

“Well, it can't be anyone else's, either,” I said, following him into the kitchen. “So can we please talk about this? Calmly?”

His arms were still raised above his head until I tried



to touch his waist. He grabbed my wrist painfully hard and then pushed me away.

“Sam, please, I’m just as messed up as you are. I need to talk to someone. We need to talk this through.”

“It’s not my child!” he yelled, grabbing me by the shoulders, shaking me. “It’s not mine.”

“He doesn’t believe it’s his.”

Chelsea stirred her coffee. With her long fingernails she could hardly hold the spoon. I’ll never have nails that long once I’m a mom, I thought.

“Well, is it his?”, she asked.

“Are you kidding? Of course it is! Has to be.”

“Why aren’t you on the pill?”

„My parents don’t want me to.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Yes, that’s exactly what they keep telling me.”

“Do they know yet?”

“No.”

“Do they know you’re seeing Sam?”

“No, not really.”

The reflection of cold, white light from the tiles blinded me. Sightless, I tried to find my way, having the urge to vomit. I tripped over something and while I laughed at myself, my spew had already arrived and flowed along the outside of the bowl. A little puddle built up and I couldn’t do anything but lay down right next to it on the floor. I was about to drift into sleep when someone hammered against the door.

“Are you okay?” It was a male voice. I didn’t know where I was. Was I drunk, or just sick? Or sleep-walking?

“Can you open the door? Please open it. I’m worried about you!”

I crawled towards the door on my knees and when I looked up to reach for the handle, I saw that there were names and hearts and dates written all over it in different colors of permanent marker. This wasn’t my bathroom door. I wasn’t at home. I looked down at myself. I wore a black dress. When I managed to open the door, I saw big bare feet on concrete and heard music in the distance. I

looked up slowly.

“What the hell are you doing there?”

I blinked multiple times when I saw a man in front of me I didn’t recognize.

“Get off the floor!” He grabbed me and lifted me up and when we made eye contact, I saw that it was Sam. He was furious. His lower jaw was in a tense position.

“You are disgusting,” he said and let go of my arm. I looked down at myself. My pyjamas were covered in vomit. I was at Sam’s apartment. It was his bathroom. I wasn’t wearing a dress. There was no music. And I wasn’t drunk. A lot worse - I was pregnant.

“Congratulations!” the gynaecologist said, smiling. “You’re 8 weeks pregnant.”

“Wow,” I replied. Why is she smiling? Why are people smiling when they hear I’m pregnant, except the father of my child? Why is it a thing to be happy about? I’m sure the doctor herself wouldn’t be as happy if it was her daughter getting pregnant at the age of 18.

It’s only those who have nothing to do with it. Those who don’t have any responsibility for this little human once it leaves my womb. For them, it’s all fun and games. All cute and exciting and a miracle of nature.

I just called it *little human*. And that’s what it is, it’s a tiny little human on this ultrasound monitor. Well, technically just some cells, but they’ll turn into a baby. A real one. A real human.

The doctor looked at me, still smiling, expecting some other reaction than just “*wow*”.

“That’s... some big news. I should probably tell my parents.”

The days got shorter, winter came closer, the little human kept growing inside me. My tummy still wasn’t big enough to force me to actually tell my parents.

Sam had suggested “getting rid of the baby“. And although - may Jesus forgive me - I had given it a thought, I had already started loving it when I first saw the little white bundle of cells on the ultrasound picture. “It’s a girl,” I was told on my third visit. No way I’d get rid of her. Disre-

garding Christian beliefs, disregarding Sam, disregarding my future, disregarding anyone's point of view. I wanted to keep the baby. I was far from being able to imagine myself as a good mother, the way my mother was, but I was willing to try. The thought of it had started to make me happy.

"I've been thinking about Joy."

"What?"

"For the baby. Her name. Joy."

"Why the hell Joy?" Sam asked.

"Because so far everyone has seemed pretty joyful when they heard about her."

"Well, I wasn't joyful. And stop pretending that it is already a real person you're talking about."

I sighed.

"So what do you think about the name?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care about your baby's name?"

"I don't even think it's my baby, Lexie!"

"We've talked about this."

"No! No, we haven't. You've talked about it, you've been trying to convince me, but the only person you've convinced so far is yourself."

"So, Joy it is then."

"Fuck you."

Joy it is then.

Studies show that women are much more likely to get pregnant when having sex with someone who is not their routine partner. Women also control their menstrual cycle and the time of their ovulation depending on whether or not there is a chance for infidelity. Subconsciously, of course. And one out of ten men raises a child that they didn't father biologically.

When I googled if there's any possibility my partner is not the father of the child growing inside me, I read exactly what I didn't want to read. The scientist Robin Baker, among others, has pursued multiple studies and written several books on the topic.

These are just theories, I told myself. Studies that don't apply to me. You can't trust in what people write on the

internet anyway. Or the stupid fake studies they pursue. Or the stupid books they publish. Or stupid biology.

However, I didn't cheat on him. I would know, right? I would know for sure.

Right?

I smelled a mixture of whiskey, coke, blood and men's deodorant. I couldn't see anything. The whiskey and coke must've been spilled on my clothes; I could taste it in my mouth, too. The blood was either menstrual blood or a nosebleed, I couldn't really tell. It smelled like iron, anyway. And the deodorant wasn't Sam's. That I *could* tell. I assumed it was a corridor I walked down, it was too dark to actually make out where I was. My heart pumped as loud as the music blasting in the distance.

I heard steps behind me. Someone followed me.

"Hey!"

I tried walking faster but lost balance and fell against the wall.

"Wait! I'm sorry!"

I stopped. Hands grabbed my shoulders. The deodorant smell got more intense.

The hands wandered up my neck until they held my face.

"I shouldn't have –"

My legs got weak, my back slid down the wall and as soon as my body hit the floor, I woke up. The room was as dark as my dream, except for some light rays from the street lamp leaving dots across the wall. My pyjama pants were wet. My water broke, I thought. I felt for Sam's arm and shook it.

"My water broke!" I panicked, "Turn the lights on!"

He got up, bumped his foot on the bedpost and hobbled to the light switch.

Red. The whole sheet was red, and so were my pants.

"Oh my god!" Sam held his hands in front of his mouth and started retching.

I've lost the baby. "I've lost the baby!" I screamed and started crying hysterically.

I sat up, pulled my pants down and spread my legs. Then I felt for a fetus until my hands were covered in

blood. I couldn't feel or see anything. There was nothing but blood on the mattress either. No baby. I touched my tummy. It's still big, I thought. She's still in there.

"She's still in there!" I yelled for Sam to hear, while he vomited in the bathroom.

I had a cyst in my placenta, which is why part of the latter detached from the uterus and caused the bleeding. I had to go to the hospital for a week, and that's how my parents found out about the baby. They weren't happy, but they weren't mad either.

"You've successfully ruined your future," my mother said, shaking her head. I could tell she asked herself what she had done wrong and I wondered if she remembered our conversation about abortion.

When the doctor came in, she looked up swiftly and asked: "Is the baby okay?"

He nodded and she sighed in relief.

"It's going to be a girl, Mom," I said. She took my hand. "Her name is Joy."

She started smiling while a tear ran down her cheek.

My nightmares reoccurred consistently, a slightly different version every time. And the bigger the baby grew inside me, so did the doubt that Sam was her father. My subconscious was trying to bring something up above the surface. Something I've been successfully suppressing. These dreams weren't just a coincidence, they were trying to tell me something, and with each dream the message got clearer.

"I mean, is there anything you girls didn't tell me? Anything I don't know about?"

"You know, we were all pretty shit-faced that night," Lucy said. "We remember as much as you do."

"Come on, we got a taxi that brought all of us home, so at least one of you must've been pretty clear-headed," I said.

They all looked down on their phones or around the room, none of them looked me in the eyes. "There must be some photos, right? You always take photos on nights out.

Maybe they'll help me remember."

"I didn't take any," Chelsea replied a tad too quickly.

"It was about half a year ago, Lexie, who keeps pictures on their phone that long?"

"Well, you do. You've got screenshots on there of conversations with your boyfriend from 2014, just so you can bust his ass once he does something stupid."

"Fine, maybe I do, but I don't have any from that particular night. I'm sorry. I can't help you solve that mystery. None of us can."

Now they all looked at me, partly nodding, partly feeling sorry for me.

Somehow, I didn't believe a word they said.

Joy Emerson Whitaker was born on March 3rd 2016 after fourteen of the most horrible hours of my life. I wanted to die. I shouted it at the midwife, shouted through the whole hospital.

"I wanna die! I'll die now!"

"Oh, you ain't going nowhere, young lady," she'd said, her hands inside me, feeling for the baby's head. She was right, I didn't go nowhere.

Sam missed the delivery. He'd said all the blood would make him throw up. He'd stopped being honest. Had stopped telling me that he didn't want to be there because he knew the baby wasn't his. During the last month of my pregnancy, he'd just let me be. There was no point in arguing anymore, we'd already argued for eight and a half months. Violently, sometimes.

I thought he'd leave me. I was ninety percent sure he would. And I think he was ninety percent sure he wasn't the baby's father, but still there was this remaining ten percent. This little bit of hope, ten percent of hope in me that my daughter wouldn't have to grow up without a dad, and ten percent of uncertainty in him that maybe this little human really was his. It was what kept us together, hope and uncertainty. Ten percent.

Although I was taught to believe in God, not in biology, I couldn't hesitate googling what happens to your brain during a blackout. Apparently, we aren't able to

make short term memories any longer, due to alcohol, drugs, medication, whatever it is you need. Our brain is only able to recall long term memories, which is why we can get very upset during a black out about something that happened years ago - and not remember a thing the next morning. There is simply nothing there in our brain to remember. No memories have been made, a state of mind that we don't even reach while sleeping.

So there's nothing there. And still, I feel like there is. The weird dreams, the feeling that something went wrong. Deep inside my mind, there are some neurons that are constantly working, trying to connect information, trying to figure things out. And I feel like I've gotten to a point where I just want them to stop.

"That's hilarious," Chelsea said, pointing at the laptop screen. It showed a picture of Joy sitting in a bathtub, her dark brown hair in two little pigtails, tears running down her chubby baby cheeks, mouth wide open, screaming.

"She's teething, you know."

"She's so cute. How old is she now?"

"Eight months."

"Wow, time's flying by. Why didn't you bring her with you?"

"Left her at my mom's, so you and I could talk about grown-up stuff. I'm sick of diapers and follow-up milk and all that. Sam's gone crazy since the whole teething thing started."

"How crazy?"

"He just can't handle it. Too much for him. I'm scared he might shake her if I leave them alone."

"Would he do that?"

"No. No... I don't know."

Silence broke through.

"I'll go get us a cup of tea," Chelsea said after a while and stood up.

"I'd prefer wine, if you don't mind."

An approving glance, then she left the living room. I stared at Joy's photo. Oh, how much did she *not* look like her dad. Her little brown curls would be the cutest thing on earth if both of her parents weren't blonde. And blue

eyed. Her eyes were green. She didn't even look like she was *my* daughter. This mysterious man must've had damn dominant genes.

I caught myself chuckle. I didn't know what to believe anymore. And I'd given up trying to find the truth. Or maybe I knew the truth, I'd just given up ascribing meaning to it.

While I heard glasses clink in the kitchen, I opened the photos-folder on Chelsea's laptop. For good old time's sake. Even more folders appeared. "Cancun 2015", "New Years 2014", "GoPro Videos", "Tennis Camp", "Nights Out, Lights Out". I opened the last one, grinning about the title. There were countless pictures of our friendship group, selfies we took while preparing to go out, videos of us, half drunk, half sober, one of me dancing. Oh, what a body I had before I pushed 6.5 pounds out of it, I thought. I scrolled further down, smiling. I had some really good times back in my youth. One picture attracted my attention while I skimmed through the little thumbnails of the photos. We all just look for pictures with ourselves in it, don't we, little narcissists. This one had me and a guy in it. I double clicked so it covered the whole screen.

Her dad. I looked in the eyes of Joy's dad.

I reopened the picture of her in the bathtub, then back to the other one. Again. Green eyes. Brown hair. Facial features. Again. Again.

No doubt it was him. The man who'd taken his chance to rape a young drunk girl on a club's toilet. The father of my child. The answer, the missing puzzle piece. My hands started shaking with rage.

I wore a short black dress, my eyes were dark red and narrowed. A miracle I had still been able to stand. I held on to him. He held a joint in one hand, the other one was raised in the air. He had bare feet. The date said May 14th 2015. I wondered if it was taken before or after he abused me.

What a stupid way to find out. Stupid. So stupid. Stupid I was.

"Finally tell me what happened that night, Chelsea," I yelled. "And don't you dare lie to me!"

"I don't know... I didn't know what happened between you two. We were all just having a good time, minding our own business, and then there was this group of boys and..." she was about to start crying, her voice cracking, "You didn't think of Sam and neither did we. He didn't treat you well anyway, he never did and he still doesn't."

"So you thought he deserved to be cheated on?"

"No. I thought you deserved to have a good time. He seemed nice. You felt sick and he went to the bathroom with you. I didn't know what you two were doing, none of us knew. I thought he was just holding your hair or something. And when you got pregnant, I still thought it was probably Sam's. I had no idea. You have to believe me!"

"You thought it was *probably* Sam's?"

„Lexie, you were dead drunk, I don't even know how in this world this boy got you pregnant. I just didn't think about it."

"I can tell you how he got me pregnant, he had sex with my lifeless body. That's how."

Chelsea started crying. I was far from crying.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"So when did you first think about it?" I continued.

"I don't know... Probably when you asked us about details of that night. When you smelled a rat, we smelled it, too. But we didn't want to upset you, we never knew for sure."

I looked at the picture of Joy on the laptop again.

"I said don't lie to me. You all knew for sure." I paused and watched my friend, who was now sobbing heavily. "We all knew for sure, didn't we, Chelsea?"

I remember the first time Sam expressed what he felt for me. He sneaked into my parents' house late one night about three years ago. I'd left my window open for him - exciting teenage things - and he climbed inside and lay down next to me in my bed. I noticed he was high.

He'd always been subliminally violent; aggressive, to be honest. The way he pushed me or grabbed me sometimes or put his hands around my neck. Squeezed. It was his way of seeking bodily contact. Because it was the only kind of bodily contact he'd ever experienced growing up,

I assumed. Whenever I had asked about his parents he said "Fuck them," and immediately grabbed me and hurt me somehow. Like he'd been conditioned. Like he had no choice. Stimulus - reaction. Bell - drooling dog. Parents - pain.

He couldn't control himself and, for some reason, that was what attracted me to him. I'll fix him, I thought. Girls like to think that way. It's what we want. Out of all the girls in this world, we want to be the *only* one who gets through to him, the one who fixes him, makes him a better man. The one whose feelings he wouldn't ever hurt. The one who saves him.

"I don't know what love feels like," he said at some point that night, "I've never had a feeling that made me think - this must be love, this is what they're all taking about."

He fumbled around with my shirt, then pulled me into his arms even tighter. He smelled of ice tea and cigarette smoke. He hummed a melody, then he started singing, rather to himself than to me. "What is love? Baby, don't hurt me, don't hurt me, no more." He sang it softly and slowly, whispering, like it wasn't a 90's pop song but a lullaby. It made me cry.

When he fell asleep and his grip loosened, I got upset because I thought my feelings for him were much more intense than his feelings for me.

There's usually that slight imbalance in a relationship, one who's got to stretch a little, one who's got to bow down a little. And I, being young and egocentric, didn't ever want to be the one who has to stretch.

When I woke up he was gone.

Days later, when I cleaned my room, I saw a crumpled piece of paper under my desk.

I kneeled down to grab it, then unfolded it and read:

*Even though I don't know anything about love, I think the feeling I have when I fall asleep next to you is as close as I'll ever get to loving someone.*

I parked the car in front of Sam's apartment. Joy was in her baby seat in the back. She was asleep.

I could just leave him, no explanations, just pack my



bag and leave. He probably wouldn't even mind. He'd be relieved, maybe.

Or maybe he wouldn't be. I *was* the one who fixed him, after all, as much as you can fix a man. I loved him the way he needed to be loved. I still do. And if he really wanted to, he would've already left me.

I could tell him that I found out what he knew all along. That the baby wasn't his, that I got so drunk one night and that I didn't even remember cheating on him. If that's even cheating, I don't know. Probably.

He'd presumably hurt me and he'd hurt Joy, too, or spit on her and call her a bastard. He'd mortify her in some way and make me watch, shout at me: "Look what you made me do."

Then, he'd get that photo from Chelsea and somehow find the boy and beat him to death. He'd get locked away for years. It was a horror scenario I span out in my head. Whether it was realistic or not, I didn't even want to find out.

No, the truth was definitely out of question. Sometimes, truth does more harm to people than it does good. Quite often, actually. In this case, it would cost us everything.

I looked at Joy in the rear-view mirror. All I wanted for her was a good life, a safe childhood, a family she could rely on. A family, in the first place. I never wanted to raise a child on my own without a father. It was my worst nightmare. Still is.

"What am I doing? What am I doing? What am I doing?" I asked myself and rested my head on the steering wheel. Should I let Sam be one out of ten men to raise a child he didn't father? Should I leave and let my daughter grow up without one?

I took a coin out of the car's dirty ashtray. Someone told me that when you have to make a hard decision, you have usually already decided on one thing or the other in your subconscious mind. All you need to do is throw a coin and observe how you feel about the outcome. Am I happy it's tails? Would I want it to be heads? Do I feel relieved or burdened?

Heads for stay, tails for leave. I flipped the coin, then caught it but kept my palm closed. Heads or tails. I looked down at my hand, then opened it slowly.

Heads or tails.

Heads.

Or tails.

Or truth ■

# His Last Chapter

by Denise Breidenbach



## February 10

Reluctant to break through countless shapeless barriers of sleet and fog, the sun had finally given up and was now hidden behind the towering layers of grey that lay over the city like an ugly blanket. One can only assume that most Bostonians would have preferred to stay tucked in their beds and surrender to the darkness of this gloomy morning. Nevertheless, the office buildings around Boston Harbor were already buzzing with restless activity. The first cups of coffee had been poured, weekend gossip exchanged by those who had the time to do so, secretaries rushed to meeting rooms with dangerously high piles of more or less important papers, computers and radiators were switched on.

At 9:18 a.m., Phyllis Logan pushed the button for the elevator on the ground floor of the office building in which she had been working for thirty-five years now. Clad in her usual flowery, washed-out cardigan that she knew her colleagues had been making fun of ever since she started wearing it, she waited for the metal cage to carry her up to the insurance company on the twelfth floor. At 9:31, she was sitting at her desk, checking the e-mails that had arrived since the previous day, sorting them by relevance for her immediate superior, Mr. Fowler. She greeted her co-workers with the usual distanced, but warm-hearted cheerfulness. She wrote memos in her crooked handwriting that leaned slightly to the left. She left stains of her coral lipstick on one of the thirty anonymous coffee cups

from the little office kitchen which was cluttered with heaps of plastic boxes containing the pre-packed lunches of her younger colleagues. At 9:41, the phone rang. Phyllis picked up the receiver and answered the first call of the day. She fingered the little gold chain around her neck absent-mindedly, waiting for the caller to speak. And speak he did. The words could not have been more unusual. It was as if they lingered in one half of her brain after she had heard them, but the other half seemed to refuse to deduce their meaning from them, the thoughts getting stuck in the myriads of mysterious crevices and corridors inside. Something inside Phyllis Logan went as numb as it had never been before. Perched on the very edge of her swivel chair, the woman who had never provided anyone at Fullerton with any reason to take particular note of her, who had never called in sick in thirty-five years, who kept her desk tidy and the customers satisfied, ran as fast as she could to the Managing Director's office at the far end of the twelfth floor, with a sickly green hue on her wrinkled face.

## January 12

*"And I don't want the world to see me, 'cause I don't think that they'd understand,"* the singer of the band whose name Jonathan kept forgetting shouted pathetically out of the car

radio, increasing his already sweltering anger to a degree that made him curse out loud for about the sixth time today. It was Friday, alright. He had managed to get through yet another week of banal inquiries and spilled coffee at the office without losing his mind in front of everyone, alright. Now, he was on his way home for his well-deserved weekend and had got stuck in the traffic on the street he took every day, but whose name he cared about even less than everything else, alright. But to be surrounded by the annoyed drivers that seemed to close in on him, and hearing the lyrics of a song that for once he wished he had written himself was too much for him. “*If everything’s made to be broken, I just want you to know who I am.*” Damn true, he thought as he rummaged in the glove compartment for the cigarettes he kept hidden there. Everything is fucking made to be broken, he thought, and what’s more, I seem to be the only one who knows. He knew he was being bitter. He knew he was being just as pathetic as the voice blaring out of the radio. And he really could not care less.

Thirty minutes later, Jonathan pulled into the driveway of his home in the suburbs. The home he had so laboriously worked to finance, to maintain all these past decades. If I were a character in a story, he thought with the furrowed brow that had become his trademark during the past few months, I would laugh out loud at myself and not stop for a long time. A white-collar with a home in the suburbs, complete with a white garden fence and a second upstairs bathroom. He suppressed a sigh and went to pick up the mail, then unlocked the front door and passed the silent kitchen. His wife did not seem to have come home yet. Her absence relieved him, and he directed his steps down the stairs into the basement and unlocked the door. “What’s this new habit of yours, locking the basement door and always taking the key with you?” Maureen had inquired a few months ago in the nosy and controlling tone he was so familiar with. He answered her with as innocent a smile as he could manage, “Why, darling, it is a secret, a surprise... you will see when the time is right.”

The room was dark and uninviting, but Jonathan preferred to light only the lamp on the desk next to his computer. This was where the world could not see him. Not the traditional man-cave in some random American suburb, but his, quite simply *his*. A space for him to let his thoughts roam free, release them from his mind, to watch them curl up in the slightly musty air just like the smoke of the countless cigarettes he had smoked down here. A refuge from the world, its noise, its demands, its preoccupation with possessions and competition and restlessness. Tonight, however, Jonathan did not turn on the computer. His work was finished. The envelope he had brought downstairs with him was a silent witness of the previous months. He opened it with hands that, for the first time that day, did not tremble. A notification from his editor, who asked him for his feedback on the enclosed draft for a press release concerning a new book. *Confessions of a White-Collar* by Alex Sanders. As his eyes scanned the title, Jonathan felt his heart beat a little faster, a little stronger, as if it wanted to encourage him. So they had indeed printed it, it would indeed go on sale at the end of the month, he and everyone who wanted to would indeed be able to buy and touch his work. He put the envelope on the desk, made a mental note to call his editor on Monday, and sat for a while in the cozy light of the desk lamp, enjoying for the first time in years a moment of the purest and most unlimited satisfaction.

### January 20

“Oh Dad, *do* get a hold of yourself already,” Ethan said impatiently. For a brief moment, Jonathan thought he had seen his son roll his eyes and felt the urge to start an argument, but decided against it. He and his son were sitting in the lounge at LaGuardia Airport in New York City, waiting for Ethan’s flight to Amsterdam, where he would spend the next semester. They had ordered coffee

and sandwiches and passed the remaining half-hour by chatting idly about this and that. At some point, Jonathan had been forced to admit to himself that life as a parent whose children were grown up and had moved out was different in many ways, that on some nights he had no idea what to do with himself. Of course, he should have known that his twenty-year-old son, who saw the world as a promising, exotic playground and his life whom all doors were open to and who had not experienced the resignations that come with adulthood, would laugh at him. "Seriously, Dad," Ethan said, now trying to sound conciliatory, "You're not the only one who's getting old and bored. Why don't you find yourself a hobby? Do some charity work, learn a new language, whatever you feel like doing. As long as you don't start writing books or something like that," he laughed. Jonathan felt an invisible whip descend on him. There he sat, feeling like the most foolish man on earth, offended by the words of his son who did not, and *could* not, understand what was going on in his mind. He pushed the thoughts back to the dark depths of his brain and his feelings back into the hollow space of his stomach where they had come from. "You're right, son, I'll think about it. Thanks for listening, though."

On the way back home, alone in his car, Jonathan replayed the conversation in his head. Maybe he should get hold of himself, move on, try to fix things instead of focusing so much on his inner life and in the process distancing himself from others, as he had done in the basement these past few months? Try and fix his marriage? Socialize more often with the other men of the neighborhood, join in with their baseball games and barbecues? Ethan, of course, did not know about his secret. Nobody did. Six months ago, a few weeks after Ethan and his younger sister had moved out when Maureen descended into a downward spiral of moody gloom and, ultimately, total silence, Jonathan had cleared the basement and started to spend long hours there, in front of the computer. Possibly due to what the average self-help book would have termed "an

inspirational voice from the inside", he had sat down, not quite knowing why he was doing what he was doing, but it felt more appropriate than anything else. It filled the silent hours of the evening, took his mind off the long days in the office. He had experienced a new sense of being on his own, of being able to think freely during those hours downstairs, locked behind the door, away from the world, and had found that he liked it a lot. Before, there had always been something to do, to wait for, to celebrate. The restless nights when the children were but perpetually crying bundles of soft skin and fragile little limbs. Then, later, little feet exploring the house, first teeth, the daily trips to and from preschool, then, with what felt like absurd speed, school, cars, proms, vacations. All these things had dictated the rhythm of his life. And Maureen? She had managed the household, taken responsibility and decisions off Jonathan's hands whenever and wherever she could. She had gone back to working for a big magazine with its headquarters in Boston as soon as the children had started school, and was in charge of the literature section. Classic Maureen. Always in charge, always in control. Every month, she delivered her verdict on the latest books, from novels to short story collections and poetry, and most people thought she did a marvelous job. A job that was not financially rewarding in any way, but that obviously satisfied her desire to escape her role as a mother, to be useful, to spend her time with something she loved doing. Jonathan was not at all familiar with high-minded literary traditions and notions in general, but Maureen's merciless comments on the works and lives of others that materialized monthly on the pages of the magazine never failed to remind him of the sharp edges of her character, the way she cold-bloodedly attacked and stung those around her. Jonathan could not help but laugh at the thought of his wife, with whom he had not exchanged more than an absolute minimum of verbal communication for several months now, reading *his* work. He entered his house, still chuckling at this absurd thought. For a brief moment, his

eyes met those of his wife, who was obviously surprised to see him in a state she doubtlessly interpreted as happiness. They smiled at each other for less than a heartbeat, not saying anything, and then went their own ways, silently agreeing that the gulf of estrangement between them had already grown too big to be transcended by smiles.

### February 3

The impossible had happened. The *Confessions of a White-Collar* had, only four days after its official release date, found its way onto Maureen's bedside table, where she liked to keep the books she was currently reading, as well as a worn red notebook in which Jonathan had sometimes seen her record her impressions on whatever she was reading.

How Maureen, of all people, had come across his book, which sure was nothing but one out of many new releases of that month, remained a mystery to him. Upon creeping into bed, which he still shared with her due to some misdirected sense of duty and, possibly, a desire for the warmth of a human body that he himself was not even aware of, he had noticed the book on top of the pile on her bedside table. It was impossible to mistake. He knew the jacket well enough and had stored a box containing approximately 50 copies in his basement, for some sentimental reason he could not explain. Maureen, looking at him piercingly through her reading glasses, had seen him flinch and raised an eyebrow. Jonathan worked hard to keep up his countenance, pulled up the sheets and wished her a good night, even forced himself to kiss her on the cheek this time.

Now, he could do nothing but wait for her verdict. He was sure that something, though he knew not what precisely, was coming towards him, and he could not stop it. The basement, for once, had lost its appeal to him, so he had taken to spending more time around the house and

garden after work, busying his hands and mind with other things. But the fact remained that Maureen was reading his book, and there was nothing he could do or say about that. He had the strange feeling that his secret was out, and not out at the same time.

### February 9

#### Afternoon

Maureen stepped out of the mall, plastic bags in hand, waiting on the sidewalk, trying to square her shoulders despite the weight of the groceries in her bag. That is what you get for being a modern woman, she thought bitterly, as a passing car splashed the lower part of her pants with mud and water from one of the many puddles that are so symbolic of New England. Oh, how she hated this place, this odd mixture of stiff traditionalists and ambitious egoists. However, she was also afraid to have become one of them. She walked across the street, eager to reach the car and finally get home. Walking through the crowds of strangers, passing women who looked annoyingly radiant and youthful despite the awful weather, Maureen was more aware of her own appearance and status as ever. Close to her fifties, two children, a home in the suburbs. A man who was repaying all that she had sacrificed for the family, all her attempts at cooking, socializing, education and homemaking, yes, even her youth – even if that was the biggest cliché of all – with silence, distance, a locked door behind which he hid from her. Maureen threw the dripping plastic bags carelessly on the passenger seat. She raised her chin to look into the rear-view mirror. Maureen had made inquiries with a few literary agents she knew after having finished what her husband called a “book”. As much as her husband had overestimated his writing skills – she thought his work a collection of sentimental, pseudo-funny, half-fictitious collection of short stories, all with the same aim of discrediting people who simply

tried to make a living in the offices of the city – he had underestimated her network of people and knowledge. She knew precisely how much of the narrative was autobiography, had worked her way through it during sleepless nights, with her husband peacefully snoring next to her. These past few days, he had even attempted to talk to her more, to show some sort of affection, to reestablish a bond that had long vanished. She did not know whether to admire him for having managed to publish his work or to simply explode, go on screaming for days and rage at him endlessly. How could he dare to expose her like that? In his narrative, he had depicted her as a dreary and boring person, more like a thing he was tired of, wished to get rid of. Also, he seemed to take a certain pleasure in detailing more or less brief romantic encounters in elevators or elsewhere. Pretending to be the macho he had never been and would never be. Maureen snorted at the thought. There was only one thing she knew, and that was that something had to be done. Show him who was in charge. Destroy his selfish pride. She took her cell phone from her handbag. The clock showed 4:30 p.m. After she had checked the glove compartment of her car, making sure what she had put there a few days before was still there, she typed a text message, her long nails clicking softly on the screen of the phone. She started the car.

### Evening

Jonathan had been more than surprised to receive such a message, but willingly obliged, packed a few things into his car and went to meet her at the place his wife had suggested. “*Meet me at Black Rock Point, 8 p.m. Got something to tell you. Waiting for you by the big oak. Remember?*” He did remember. Black Rock Point was a spot on the Nahant peninsula, with a few rocks reaching out into the sea, and in happier times, they had often taken the children to the beach to play and enjoy the scenery. He wondered. Was this a sign that after the past few days, during which he had cautiously but constantly tried to appease her, to try

and rebuild what had once been, she was making a move towards him?

His trembling hands grew sweatier with every mile he drove. He had never been good at handling surprises, had always cherished the stability of his job routine – selling insurance, fixing what needed to be fixed for his clients, acting as their partner to assist them in rebuilding their burnt down houses or repair their damaged cars. He did not know at that point how pointless all concepts of security were, that they were and would never be more than mere illusions.

He reached the parking lot behind the entrance to the beach. Before he left the car, he took one last look back at the back seat where he had put the box containing the books. Recently, he had cleared the basement of all his papers and the computer in an attempt at reestablishing the old order of the house and closing the chapter of his life he had devoted to this space. The past few days, he had felt oddly detached from his previous self that had clung so much to this space, decided it was finally time for something new, and for some reason abandoned most thoughts of writing. Getting hold of himself, just as Ethan had suggested. Jonathan smiled at the memory as he walked around the wet, firm sand of the beach and put on the leather gloves Maureen had given him for Christmas. Maybe everything was going to be alright in the end. He could see his wife in her red coat and walked up to her. He was unable to read her face. The wind was blowing her dark chestnut hair across her cheeks and nose, and he thought he could see a lonely tear escaping from her right eye, but it was too dark to be sure.

“I know about everything, Jonathan. I know it all.” Maureen’s voice cut through the air, loud and clear, almost sharper than the gusts of winds that cut his face with bitter coldness. He should have known, he thought in hindsight, that something was not right. She never used his full name, neither did anyone else. They all called him Jay, in normal circumstances. “Alex Sanders? Did you re-



ally think *that* was a clever move? You fool,” she snorted. Almost unnoticeably, Maureen put her hand in her coat pocket. All the while, she laughed into his face, degrading him, mocking him. And suddenly he knew what was up. The next second he was looking into the mouth of a slim black pistol he would have never thought his wife would possess. It dawned upon him that nothing was going to be alright. There would be no happily-ever-after, no secret evenings spent in the comfort of his home. Something had to be done, and quickly.

## February 10

Interstate 95 was calm in this part of the country, as it ran through valleys that seemed to get more secretive and calm with every mile one passed towards the Canadian border. A passer-by would have seen the usual picture: a few trucks, a few cars here and there. The morning sun emerged shyly from behind a mildly cloudy sky not solid enough to imprison it.

How he had made it this far without being found out, the driver of the red car stopping on the gas station near Houlton, Maine never knew. Maybe it was because he had covered his tracks so cleverly, at least in his view. The gun the police was going to find next to Maureen’s body would only carry her own fingerprints. Naturally, they would think it was suicide. How very tragic.

He got out of the car at the last possible stop before the Canadian border, stretched his legs, rubbed his tired eyes and went inside for a cup of coffee. He returned with a steaming cup of coffee and sat down in the driver’s seat again, leaned over to open the glove compartment and reached into it. The object in his hand was a dark bundle

of hair that fitted smoothly into his hand. He caressed it with a knowing and mournful look, knowing he had transgressed a point of no return. But there was one thing that remained to be done, he reminded himself. Never leave a task uncompleted. First rule of business: Do not disappoint the people who rely on you. Under no circumstance.

He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and took out his cell phone. A few seconds later, a voice as familiar to him as the order of the numbers he had just dialed answered. He imagined her, sitting at her desk, a coffee cup smeared with that hideous coral lipstick next to her. “Good morning, Phyllis. Jonathan Fowler speaking. I won’t be coming back to work. Please do me a favor and cancel all appointments.” He waited for a reply, but Phyllis remained silent, waiting for more instructions. A silence he had grown to hate, docile and passive. A silence he had surrendered himself to more than a thousand times, letting Maureen take over his life, make decisions for him, take away his sense of self. He made one last effort to speak to Phyllis in a controlled manner, but his words were infused with gall and venom this time. “Oh, and Phyllis. You can do me another favor. Quit that job, throw away that cardigan. Do something worthwhile while you still can. That’s all.”

Later that day, Jonathan threw the phone out of the window while crossing a river on a bridge. He looked at his books. They were still there, safe on the back seat. He had enough money in his coat pocket to see him through the next ten months or so. There was nothing more he needed right now. Feeling light-headed, he turned on the radio. As if it had been haunting him, the stupid old song was playing again. This

*Everything’s made to be broken... ■*

# The Persistence of Loss

by Daniel Krooß

Illustration by Melanie Mendetzki

*For Uli, my old friend. Glad to still have you around.*

“How beautiful the notion that we create our own personal catastrophes and that it is the creative forces within us that are instrumental in doing this. Here our creative impulses lie in ambush at the side of our lives, ready to leap forth and kick holes in it – holes through which inspiration can rise. We each have our need to create, and sorrow itself is a creative act.”

Nick Cave, *The Secret Life of the Love Song*

## Solitude

As he released the cork from its bottle the poorly lit room was briefly filled with a plopping sound that lingered only for an instant before being swallowed by complete silence again. He then poured himself a glass, took a sip and spit out little pieces of the cork. He stared halfheartedly at the corkscrew on the table and saw that the cork had cracked.

Simon shrugged. He could not really recall the last time he'd had a drink. It must have been at least four years. Eve had always despised it. But that did not matter now.

The red wine ran heavily down his throat. He shook himself and lit a cigarette. As he took a deep drag he could hear that voice again, a distant echo of her screaming. He shivered. He knew that he was supposed to feel sad, cry perhaps but there was nothing but a constant state of numbness, of tiredness. Tiredness. In all those years in which the only emotion he had known was fear, he had

never realized how tired he had grown. But now that she was gone it came crushing down on him, a paralyzing and delirious state of tiredness.

He refilled, lit another one and decided that he should put on some music. As his hands wandered through the dusty collection of records he noticed that the alcohol was already having an effect on him. He smiled. He had almost forgotten what being tipsy was like and to his own astonishment he felt the warmth that overcame him as being quite welcoming. He smiled as he pulled out Tom Wait's "Closing Time." They used to listen to it all the time in their first months of being a couple. He hesitated for a moment. "What the hell!" he thought, released the vinyl from its worn out cover and put it on. He sat down by the speakers, closed his eyes and let the music take over the room. 1, 2, 3, 4. His heart pounded heavily in his chest. 'Funny

how music can just take you back to places,' he thought. He smiled and as he let the music sink in he was, for the first time, overcome by a feeling of sadness. Followed by anger. As *'I hope that I don't fall in love with you'* hit the second verse he jumped to his feet, pulled the vinyl from the record player and threw it across the room, causing it to hit the wall and come down with a splattering sound as it split into pieces.

"Well you ruined Tom Waits for me!" he yelled out into the empty apartment. "Bitch!"

He started laughing at his own stupidity and stumbled back to the couch.

He refilled, lit another one and started to cry. The room was taken over by the grotesquely honest cacophony of Simon's anomalous sobbing and the record player's needle scratching endlessly on the rubber mat that was supposed to hold a record and that gave it its purpose. He was overcome by the sudden but aching need to call her, knowing all too well that there was no one waiting on the other line to pick up.

When he finally fell asleep, the bottle of red wine was empty and the ashtray on the couch table full.

"How do you feel today, Simon?"

Simon shrugged, fondling the stripes of his hoodie, showing no intention to actually make the effort of looking into Dr. Maine's eyes.

"I'm okay, I guess."

"That's good," she said.

For the first time he looked up. "She must have been a very attractive woman once," he thought and wondered what she was like in private. Did she live a married life with children just like everyone else? Or could she, really? Listening to all these nut cases all day just to come home and face the everyday problems of a common teenager must be a very challenging contrast to handle.

"You know, I took your advice and went out with people again."

She nodded, smiling with approval.

"So how was it?"

"It was weird..."

"Weird?"

"Yes. Very weird."

"How so?"

He scratched his head, sighing.

"Well, I felt like I haven't really existed in the last five years. Or at least not really in this reality. In fact, I felt like I had just moved out of the reality I had known for the last years and moved back into the old one I had all forgotten about, except that the moment I stepped back into it, it all came back to me at once. It all felt so very familiar, like nothing had changed even though I wasn't a part of it for the last five years."

She nodded.

"And is that a good or a bad thing?"

"It's good. I think."

"You think?"

"I do. Yes. You know I was so afraid to face these people. After all, I had basically just disappeared from the surface of the earth, avoided all contact – they hadn't seen or heard from me in years. But it didn't seem to matter one bit."

"That's very good then!" Dr. Maine said cheerfully.

"Yes. I guess it is." They sat in silence for a minute, but while he felt like he was making progress in coming to terms with the last few years, he still found it difficult to maintain a conversation for more than a few minutes.

"So did you tell them?"

He immediately welled up.

"No," he said, shaking his head. Dr. Maine nodded.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it is a very difficult thing to talk about and I have no idea how they'd react."

"Isn't that what good friends are for?"

"Perhaps, yes. But then again, no, I sort of doubt that. There are certain things you just don't talk about."

“What kind of things?”

“Well, these kinds of things! I mean, you just don’t talk about trauma.”

“That is the first time I have ever really heard you use that word to describe what has happened to you.”

Simon sighed.

“Well it is, isn’t it?”

“Most certainly so, but you’ve never really seemed eager to put it so bluntly before.”

“Well it is a really tough thing to admit to yourself!”

Dr. Maine nodded.

“It really is. Especially as a man.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you never really hear about your everyday traumatized man, do you? As far as we’re concerned, traumatized men do not exist! The war hero with a gunshot wound is the closest thing you’ll ever hear about a traumatized man, but that’s about it! As if you don’t feel alone enough when dealing with your shit, no, society completely neglects your existence!”

“You seem angry,” Dr. Maine said with a calm expression, allowing not a glimpse into her thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” Simon said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Don’t be,” she said. “Anger is good, it’s healthy. And I think you have every right to be angry, Simon. Please go on.”

### **A young man covered in blood that was not his**

The flashbacks had become more vivid. At first they came only during the night, but soon they started hitting him in the middle of the day and he would not be able to shake them off. This inability frustrated him deeply and, in a way, he felt as if his sanity had reached an unstable state that no longer differed much from that of the person he had spent all those years with. He tried to deaden these feelings in every possible way. Drinking became a very

frequent activity in these days, as it offered some comfort and seemed to present almost no inhibitive threshold, a narcotic of social acceptance, even more so for someone in their early twenties. He was very well aware that he was holding on to a slippery slope. And he hated how his self-pity served him as a justification for his actions, but he seemed to lack any compromising option which could help him through these emotions and he wasn’t yet ready to face them without it.

But he soon had to realize that there are certain things which cannot be escaped. It was a night like any other. At the first sign of his mind wandering to a place he had no intention of visiting he had poured himself a glass of wine. But something wasn’t quite right that night, because the minute he started to feel the effect of the alcohol, the emotions seemed to become stronger.

“No...” he whispered.

He shook himself, poured another glass, finished it without setting it down and then poured another.

Her screaming rang through his ears like a siren and just like that he relived it all again and it hit him like a monstrous tornado crashing into a house on a fragile foundation.

He was drawn back to his first encounter with the pale girl with dark black hair and a pink streak, him in his washed out Tom Wait’s shirt, wild long hair and a joke of a beard he did not know how to tame, letting out a clumsy “Hi!”.

He remembered their first date, their first kiss and the first time they slept together. He remembered noticing her scarred body, he remembered her crying. He felt the weight of her head lying in his lap, felt his heart racing when she told him about her father’s abuse and remembered telling her that they could make it through it, not so much lying to her as he was lying to himself. He remembered his first panic attack, a boy at the age of seventeen collapsing in the middle of gym class. He felt the unease of lying to his parents. He saw himself taking care of her

new cuts, his hands shaking in terror, and felt himself throwing up. He remembered her yelling and him justifying his every move, unsure of what was asked of him. He remembered her cheerfulness and all the beautiful moments they'd spent and saw himself defending his actions instants later as she raged in anger. He felt himself lying to himself that those good moments would make up for the rest of it. He remembered celebrating Christmas with a family he had had no intention of meeting in the first place and how their cheerful appearance perplexed him to the core. He saw himself noticing that her stories grew more and more contradictory each and every day. He was drawn back to Eve standing with a knife to her throat threatening to kill herself if he'd leave and how he just stood there, paralyzed, unable to grasp even a tiny spark of a clear thought. He saw himself pleading to her needs in a sober routine, sweeping blood from the floor without wasting a moment to think about it. He remembered losing all sense of time, and how the image of himself in the mirror frightened him more and more each day, a young man with no dreams and no confidence, trapped on and having to steer a boat with no steering wheel.

"Stop," Simon pleaded sobbing, lying on the couch and knocking over his glass of wine. "Please stop."

He was drawn back to the devastating guilt he felt whenever he caught himself wishing that she'd just get it over with.

"It was one of the worst nights of my life... I just couldn't make it stop."

Dr. Maine looked patiently at Simon.

"And how did it stop?"

"It didn't really stop, I lay wide awake until morning, I never fell asleep."

"Did it stop then?"

"I guess. I just took a shower, got dressed, went to work."

Dr. Maine nodded.

"And how did you feel that next day?"

"I was a mess! I felt so... disenchanted. Everyone and everything just went by. When I got home that afternoon, I just lay down and fell asleep, must have slept for twelve hours straight."

"Does it help if you keep the light on?"

"Doesn't really make a difference I think."

"So it's not the dark that frightens you?" Simon thought about that for a moment, then shook his head.

"No. That's not an issue. These flashbacks, they come and go without a warning. I think that's what irritates me most about it. I feel like I have no control over them." Dr. Maine nodded.

"That must be very frustrating."

"It really is."

"So how have you been feeling since? Any more instances you can tell me about?"

"Just one."

"Tell me about it."

"Well I was buying groceries and was suddenly drawn back to a huge fight we once had when I came back home with the wrong kind of milk. She was completely furious that night, throwing dishes at me and-"

"Hold on for a second. What do you mean by the wrong kind of milk?"

"I don't even know. It had something to do with animal testing or the wrong kind of feeding procedures or who knows what. You must understand that by then she was mostly at home all day. So she would read something on the internet and all of a sudden we couldn't buy this, or we couldn't do that. She'd get really obsessed with stuff. Of course, those things could change within a few hours. I never really knew what was coming."

Dr. Maine calmly made a note.

"So how would you react in these situations?"

"Well, at first I actually tried to discuss these things, but I soon learned that the consequences weren't really worth it. At best, she would make me sleep on the couch,

at worst she'd lock herself in the bathroom and threaten to kill herself because I didn't take her seriously."

Dr. Maine sighed.

"I know," Simon said, shaking his head. "I know."

"And how did you deal with that particular flashback?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It was okay. It really wasn't that strong. I'm afraid of those that are. I mean I know it's only been two months since she's been gone, but I sincerely just want to forget about it all as soon as I can and live on. I certainly don't want to relive it all again."

"You know that this is going to take some time, Simon. Don't put yourself under too much pressure by being impatient."

"I know all of those things, I really do, but they don't help."

"Would you like me to prescribe for you something to reduce the impact of these memories?"

Simon shook his head.

"No," he said. "I have to learn to endure these emotions when they overcome me. I understand that now."

## Fundamentally Lonesome Blues

Simon could feel himself drifting away. He was among a group of joyous freshmen in a crowded pub celebrating the start of a new era. Bonding, drinking, enjoying themselves - Simon found it hard to keep up.

"Simon! Just the man I was looking for!" As Clive put an arm around him, Simon forced himself to smile.

"Let's have some shots!"

"I'd rather not," Simon replied.

"Come on! Don't be like that. We're freshmen! We should celebrate!"

Simon shook his head.

"I'm good."

"Come on, Simon!"

"I said no," he said, shaking his head.

"Why are you so uptight, Simon? I'll show you a good time. I promise. I have a feeling that that is exactly what you need."

Simon grinned.

"You're a real pighead, aren't you?"

"Don't blame me if I am!"

Simon laughed.

"Alright, how about some beers instead? Is that a compromise?"

"Now we're talking!" Clive said, padding Simon on the back. "Let me get those for us."

"No. Allow me!" Simon said, standing up from his chair and heading towards the bar.

As he made his way through the crowded pub he realized how tired he felt. Attending these kinds of activities was exhausting him and he often wondered whether it was really worth it to force himself to meet with these people he felt unable to talk to, even if the alternative meant sitting alone at home trapped in his own thoughts. The feeling of solitude felt the same nonetheless. He had come to understand that he was undergoing a process which would take time and simply did not follow a real linear trajectory. But Simon felt that this awareness was much more a source of a frustration than help.

"You're a different kind of fellow aren't you?" Puzzled, Simon searched for the source of that question and found it in the grim smirk of an old man sitting alone at the bar.

"Don't worry," the man said, chuckling. "I was by no means trying to offend you."

"I don't feel offended," Simon said. "I'm really just wondering what you mean by it." The man took a sip of his beer and offered Simon the seat beside him. Hesitantly, Simon sat down.

"Give this young man a beer," the man said to the bartender.

"You really don't have to..."

"No please! It's my pleasure." Simon nodded.

"Thank you," he said, as the bartender put down the pint in front of him.

"Don't mention it," the old man said. "You're more of the thoughtful kind, aren't you?"

Simon smiled.

"I guess," he said.

"I thought so," the old man said. "So what the hell are you doing here? You cannot honestly tell me that you're enjoying yourself with those people! All you want is to be alone right now, don't you?"

Simon felt caught. The man smiled triumphantly.

"Are you about to give me the what-doesn't-kill-you-only-makes-you-stronger-speech?"

The man shook his head.

"What kind of advice would that be? You can read that on a fortune cookie! You also didn't ask me for advice to begin with."

Simon nodded.

"I'm glad we can agree on that then."

"Do you ever feel that it's a bad thing you're different?"

"What makes you think I'm different?"

"Please! I can tell. And I really don't want you to think that it's bad thing. I'm guessing you've seen stuff that those other kids haven't."

Simon gulped. He was starting to feel very uncomfortable, afraid that the man would force a conversation on him that he had no intention of having.

"Don't worry, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," the man said. Simon blushed.

"I know it's not that easy. I know that you feel that there are things that you simply don't talk about and you know what? You're absolutely right about that!"

Simon sighed, for the first time looking up from his beer and looking straight into the old man's wrinkled eyes.

"You really believe that?"

"Absolutely! Because there are so few out there that will actually understand. And you're going to have a hard time finding those that do. Why do you think I talked to you?"

"I really don't know..."

"Why you and not some of the others kids you're hanging out with?"

"I honestly don't know!"

"Well I was right on the case about you, wasn't I?"

Simon smiled, unsure of what to say.

"Fellow sufferers get the hang of finding each other over the years." The man chuckled.

"You know these other kids, they really make me sick! You may think that I simply envy their airiness but that's really not what it is. People seem to know nothing about their emotions, let alone those of others. They simply never learn how to confront them! And that's exactly why you cannot talk about those things – the empathic inadequacy! We live in a highly affluent society that doesn't lack of anything but we're raising an army of people who are empathically illiterate!"

Simon shook his head.

"Don't you think your judgment is a little unfair? I mean, I see your point and I absolutely confess that I've had that fear of talking openly about some things, but isn't that just a healthy way of protecting yourself? How could I expect them to listen to my troubles if they have no context to them whatsoever?"

"But isn't that a shame? That in a society like ours we cannot talk openly about these things?"

Simon lit a cigarette, shaking his head.

"I don't know, I still believe in the basic goodness of human nature."

The man gave a sarcastic chuckle.

"Ha! And how's that working out for you?"

Simon shook his head.

"I guess I never really thought about it that way."

"But you've felt alone with your emotions and fears, haven't you?"

"Of course."

"You see, I really think you shouldn't. We shouldn't live our lives in a manner where we don't feel capable of openly

talking about our emotions, no matter how dark they are - it's not healthy!"

Simon began to feel very sad for the man and started to notice just how messed up and powerless he looked. He imagined the man sitting alone on that very same bar stool night after night, hoping to find that one stranger to talk to and coming home to an empty apartment afterwards. As the man began to weep, Simon gasped.

"I've really seen it all," the man said, shaking his head. "Honestly, when was the last time you really had a completely honest conversation? You only open up a hint and you can already see the terror in their eyes. Well maybe sometimes I'm just too damn tired to drink it up and swallow back the pain."

"Look, I really don't want to be impolite but I kind of have to get back. But if you ever want to talk..."

"Don't worry about it!" the man said, waving his hands. "Sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable."

"No! Please don't think that," Simon said. "It was a pleasure, really."

"The pleasure was mine," the man said, holding out his hand. As Simon took it, the man drew him closer and put an arm around him.

"Don't ever let anyone tell you you deserved that," he whispered.

"What do you think he meant by that?" Dr. Maine asked.

"I really don't know," Simon said, scratching his head. "But it made me feel so sad."

"What about it?"

"I don't know... His sadness seemed so terminal... It seems like he never found a way out of his sorrow and has simply given up. And I really don't want to end up like that! It made me wonder. Can you actually reach a state where you're starting to enjoy sadness? He seemed to enjoy picking me out of that crowd for sure. He didn't seem to be bothered by his sadness, he seemed to embrace it!

And then again, I'd highly doubt that he'd consider himself to be happy."

Dr. Maine nodded.

"What do you think bothered you most about that situation? What thought did you find so depressing?"

"The solitude, I think. Here's someone who is truly alone and he has given up all hope for it to change. Someone who feels so fundamentally misunderstood that all he has left to trust in is his own cynicism."

"And you're afraid to be in that position one day?"

Simon starting shaking.

"Well, to be honest, I'm afraid I'm in that position right now! Am I being fair to those who surround me? I really don't know. I mean I force myself to these meetings but I find them utterly exhausting. I cannot imagine myself opening up to any of them because I cannot possibly imagine anyone to understand! Is that fair? Of course not. So I shut myself in instead."

"So why don't you, Simon. Why don't you open up?"

## When anger shows

"Aren't you entitled to go a little crazy after all these years?" Clive asked as he handed him the tumbler of bourbon.

Simon shook his head.

"I guess."

"No! Don't guess, drink up!"

Simon lit a cigarette and did as he was told.

"There you go! You know, you should really learn to shut your head off every once in a while."

"That is really good advice! Thank you very much! What would I do without you?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Of course I'm being sarcastic! What kind of stupid advice is that?"

"It's great advice!"

"And how exactly do you expect me to shut my head

off? How would that even work?"

"Just look at me! I do it all the time!"

"I see all these years of finishing school have really paid off..."

"What was that? You want to say that again?"

Simon chuckled as Clive handed him another whiskey.

"Come on. Let's mingle!"

Simon followed Clive through the narrow alleys of shouting students occupying the uncomfortably overheated living room. Exams were over! Time to celebrate. Again ... While Simon still tried to adjust to the overstimulating mixture of smells and sounds, Clive had already fixed him another drink.

"Oh dear," Simon mumbled and finished his whiskey.

"Just let go tonight," Clive said and handed him the glass.

"What's in this?" Simon asked, sniffing the drink.

"Don't mind it. Just let go!"

Simon would not quite recall the events of that night, let alone put the few things he would remember in order. He remembered standing silently in the midst of people, remembered laughing. He remembered smoking, lots. He remembered always holding a calming safety weight in one hand that mysteriously always seemed to refill without him making any effort. He remembered an argument.

Clive watched in amusement at his friend turning more drunk by the hour, Simon making sharp comments to random people, sniggering over his own jokes. He curiously observed Simon excitedly talking to a cute blonde. He almost spilled his drink when he saw that Simon was about to snap.

"Fuck..." Clive murmured.

"Of course you never hear about a man being abused. You're thinking of a male victim, you're thinking of a man with a gunshot wound! Believe me, oppressed men exist, and so do female oppressors. And it's just as horrifying as

it is the other way around!"

"What kind of men would they be? That's just stupid. It's not in the nature of men to be oppressed."

"Here it comes! So what exactly is the nature of men in your opinion?"

"Being abusive assholes!" Simon fought hard to stop himself from screaming.

"You see what makes it tough to be a man in our society?"

"Tough!" She shook her head.

"You see, while the image of women underwent absolutely necessary changes and adjustments over the years and is hopefully still changing for the better, the image of men did not quite move along with it. There is no nature of men! Because the image of men got fuzzier at best. It's about time for men to emancipate and redefine their role in a post-feminist world. And maybe then you'll hear about those oppressed men whose existence you so carelessly deny. Because perhaps then they'll actually have a place to speak up!"

She crossed her arms.

"I don't like you," she said. "You really are just another misogynistic asshole, aren't you?"

Simon shook his head in anger.

"How stupid are you?"

Simon felt an arm on his shoulders drawing him out of the crowded room, into the hallway and onto the street.

He remembered a long walk home.

"You've become obsessed, Simon. You've got to be more careful, people are starting to think you're really just not a very pleasant guy to be around."

"She started it!"

"It doesn't matter! You're allowed to have these thoughts, hell I'll even admit you're making some pretty decent arguments, but you've got to be careful who you're sharing them with! I mean you basically just completely ran over that poor innocent girl!"

"Poor innocent girl, my ass!"

Clive broke into laughter as he watched his friend throw up.

“To be honest, I have a hard time making sense of this friendship,” Dr. Maine said with a blank expression.

“I don’t know, he’s just a different kind of mess I’d say. But he’s just as fucked up as I am.”

“I’ve told you before, Simon. Don’t use that kind of language in my office.”

Simon nodded, turning red. His sessions with Dr. Maine had gotten to a point where he was no longer sure that the woman could give him the help he needed to move forward. She’d somewhat started to embody the image of a mother he feared to disappoint. It made him uncomfortable and it seemed to put more pressure on him than it released.

“I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean by mess?”

“Well he’s obviously had his experiences with – I don’t know – emotional abysses? He might even seek them, for that matter.”

“I cannot quite follow.”

“I think he’s the kind of guy that gets bored quite easily. He’s not afraid to confront emotional triggers. He welcomes them. And here’s why this relationship somewhat makes sense. We might be different from one another, but we also have an understanding of each other that runs deeper than with most people you meet.”

Dr. Maine made a note, but Simon felt that his words did little to lighten her mood and seemed rather unsatisfactory.

“So how are your studies coming along?”

He shrugged.

“Could be going better, but I get stuff done.”

“Good.”

“Still, I find it very hard to stay focused on something for more than an hour or so. I pass the exams, but that’s about it.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“What do you think? Not too well. But what can I do? I keep on, I do my best. That’s all I can ask of myself right now.”

Dr. Maine shook her head.

“Your studies are important, Simon. If you want to be an architect, you’ve got to try harder.”

“Don’t you think I know that?!”

“Don’t yell, Simon.”

“Well seriously! What should I do? What should I focus on here? Do you really think anyone out there gives a shit that I’m depressed?”

“Language, Simon!”

“No! You always have to function and function and function! Why are your grades so poor, Simon? Why didn’t you do that project? Why didn’t you make this and that! Because I’m not well, you idiots!”

“Simon...”

“Because I cannot just keep up with everything else when all I yearn for right now is just some kind of stability!”

## Fake Empire

Simon smiled benignly as he watched Clive put on his usual show.

“Thank you lovely!” he said as the waitress put down their beers. He winked. The waitress smiled as she walked away.

Simon laughed.

“What is it with you and waitresses?”

“They bring me beer, Simon! It’s a natural attraction!”

Simon shook his head.

“Idiot!”

“Why?”

“Come on – you’re making a fool of yourself!”

“No, no, no! I’m just having a little fun, that’s not mak-

ing a fool of myself.”

“Of course not! Perhaps a hint too overly confident in doing... well, whatever it is you’re doing, though. Don’t you think?”

“Simon. Listen up. Make a note – this is important. The most significant lesson I’ve mastered is this – are you ready?”

“Just go!”

“That I must above all things love myself!”

“Wow. You really are the fortune cookie of the narcissistic Bukowski fuck-ups, aren’t you?”

“No! That’s not narcissism, that’s healthy confidence!”

“I see.”

“And as for the Bukowski thing: I neither fancy nor admire the Bukowski lifestyle, I simply live it! And it’s good!”

Simon let out a hearty laugh.

“Drink up!” Clive said.

“That’s your answer for everything, isn’t it?” Clive finished his beer and signaled the waitress to bring them another round.

“I’m starting to wonder whether your cynicism has become some sort of self-defense mechanism.”

“You think so?!”

“Yeah. And you know, while I think it suits you, and, well, one may even find it a little charming at times, sometimes – sometimes I just really wonder whether you take me seriously.” Simon laughed.

“Since when do you care what people think of you?”

“Not people – you! It hurts!”

Simon paid the next round.

“Well, I do take you seriously. Cheers.”

“That’s a relief!” Clive grinned as he took a sip from his beer. “Are you aware that we’ve already known each other for two years now?”

“Shit...”

“You missed our anniversary, asshole!” Simon laughed.

“Sorry. Were you expecting flowers?”

“See? That’s what I mean!”

“What?” Clive shook his head.

“So what’s next?” Simon asked.

“Strip club!” Clive yelled out.

Simon was still shaking his head when they entered the small venue, unsure of what was expecting them inside. A year ago an evening like this would have been unthinkable for him, but during the last couple of months it took less and less convincing to go along with whatever Clive had in mind for them. He simply went for it.

They paid the horrendous entry fee and entered a large room which they found almost completely empty. They were the only visitors that night. Simon instantly felt an urge to leave the place. Clive turned to him, shrugging his shoulders. They ordered a round of overpriced beers and took a seat. Two scantily clad ladies sat patiently by the bar.

“So what now?” Simon whispered.

“I don’t know, I guess we just wait.”

“You guess?”

“Yeah,” Clive said, nodding. Simon stared at him, blankly. “What?”

“I don’t know. I kind of assumed you’d done this before.”

“I have not. What’s the difference?”

Simon shook his head.

“None.”

“Look, just let it happen. They don’t expect you to partake! At least we’ll get a good story out of it.”

“It’s always about good stories with you, isn’t it?”

“Of course. What else is life about? You just want to be stuck in a routine? That’s not you, Simon. That’s not us. You know, you expect more from life than this and you haven’t found it yet. We need these stories because they make us feel alive!”

“Yeah, for an evening. You know very well that those feelings don’t last.”

“Shut up. Show is about to start.”

The lights were dimmed and one of the ladies from the

bar entered the stage. They sat awkwardly cross-legged as they watched her unfold the few layers of clothing she was wearing in a weirdly overexcited dance performance to Lou Reed's "Wild Side." Simon looked into Clive's bright smile and couldn't help but smile too. Something seemed fundamentally surreal about the whole scene. The woman finished her performance with a skillful back flip, letting down her panties in the act. When she left the stage they clapped their hands, unsure of whether or not that was the expected reaction.

"That was something," Clive said. Simon nodded with a clumsy smirk on his face. They sat in the bright light for a couple of minutes before the second act began, awkwardly scraping off the labels their beer bottles.

As the petite Asian woman elegantly undressed to the rhythm of an electronic ambient tune, Simon suddenly felt very nervous about what was going to happen next. Clive giggled like a school girl throughout the whole performance, clapping with enthusiasm when the act was done.

"I preferred the blonde one," Clive said as the lights turned on again.

"Second one had more grace," Simon said, shaking his head.

"Grace? She's a stripper, you idiot!"

"They're people, too!"

Clive laughed.

Simon leaned towards Clive.

"So what exactly happens next? They seem to be the only dancers in here."

Clive just smiled and indicated to Simon to turn around. The two ladies approached them with bright smiles. They sat down next to them.

"Well aren't you a handsome fellow!" the Asian woman said, stroking Simon's arm.

"Thank you," he said, a bit embarrassed. "How the hell do you make small talk to a striper?" he thought.

The woman just looked at him, smiling patiently.

"So..."

"So?"

"How did you end up here?"

"You seem tired today, Simon," Dr. Maine said.

"I'm sorry," Simon said, not looking up. "I'm still a bit hung over, to be honest."

Dr. Maine put down her notes, sighing.

"That is not acceptable, Simon!"

"I know," he said. "I know. I'm sorry, the evening kind of got out of control yesterday."

"Does that happen often?"

He shrugged.

"And how does that make you feel?"

He shook his head.

"It doesn't make me feel anything."

"You've got to explain that, Simon."

"Well it does, for that moment. But it makes me feel so numb the next day. It's a circle. That feeling of nothingness you carry with you the whole week turned off for one evening. But you wake up and it's there again, that emptiness. And it's worse."

"You're expressing some very dark thoughts here, Simon."

He shook his head.

"I'm well."

"You don't sound well."

"No, I really am. I'm just having one of the less good days. That's all."

"What is it that you're missing, Simon?"

"I don't know. Purpose? Isn't that what we're all looking for? Purpose is everything. And you know, sometimes I really wonder whether it is really so healthy after all, or merely a reason for me not to grow up. There seems to be an almost infinite number of options for nearly everything and, to be honest, sometimes I just find it a tad overwhelming. How can I ever know for sure that I made the right choice? And I am completely aware of just how much of a privilege that problem is, but you know what?"

It doesn't help!"

Dr. Maine nodded.

"So what do you intend to do about it?"

"I don't know. But that desperate need for entertainment, for distraction – it's got to stop."

"I agree."

They sat in silence for while.

"I think that perhaps it is time for you to talk about some of the things you've avoided talking about until now."

Swallowing, Simon looked up.

"You never talked about what it was like for you when you found her, Simon."

## The Persistence of Loss

*Three years earlier*

As Simon watched himself knotting his tie with a blank expression, he could not quite shake the feeling that the man in the mirror was not him. He washed his face, buried it in a towel and looked up again.

"Who have I become?" he thought. Shaking his head, he turned off the lights and left the bathroom.

"Are you ready?" his mother asked as she met him in the hallway.

Despite the fact that he was not quite sure whether there actually was a right answer to that question, he nodded. No one said a word during the drive to the cemetery. Simon was numb as he sat in the backseat, his head leaned against the window, his eyes closed. Afraid to witness the scene that was awaiting him, his mind tried to wander to places that promised an illusion of comfort. But Simon felt unable to hold on to a single thought, as they seemed to draw away before he could make a clear picture of them.

They stepped out of the car, entered the small chapel and sat down in the back. From the front row Eve's father turned around and stared deeply into Simon's eyes. The

man nodded. Simon swallowed.

The ceremony felt like an endless torture. The words that aimed to help those left behind did nothing of the sort. Every single word served as a slapping reminder that this was indeed real. He just desperately hoped that it would all be over soon.

Eve's father ordered him to come to the front when it was time to carry the coffin to the grave.

Simon stared tiredly into the man's watery eyes as he met him upfront.

"I'm sorry," Simon said, sighing.

"Yeah, me too." The man didn't remotely resemble anything Eve had described him as, but whether the man was the devil or the loving father in pain Simon looked at right now, Simon had no intention of finding out.

They walked in silence. Simon did not cry that day. He stood silently as they lowered the coffin into the ground, the constant sobbing of Eve's parents aching in his chest.

Though some part of him knew very well that none of this was his fault, he couldn't quite get rid of the painful thought that he had failed her.

"What now?" he thought. Simon closed his eyes.

## Sad Songs For Dirty Lovers

"I like the new place," Clive said, nodding approvingly. He took a seat on the couch.

"So how is the job?"

"It's alright."

"No regrets?"

"No. The structure helps."

"How so?"

"Gives your day a purpose."

Clive nodded.

"Don't you get bored?"

"Not yet." Simon lit a cigarette and poured two glasses of wine.

“Didn’t you expect a little more from life than this?”

“I don’t know, Clive. What do you want me to say? I needed to change something, and I’m good now.”

“That’s good. I’m happy for you then.”

Simon nodded.

“There are a couple of things I’d imagined otherwise. Sometimes you just have to accept that there is a different path you’ve got to take. And that’s alright.”

Clive took a sip from his wine.

“So how’s the dating life?”

“I don’t know. I try to be a part of it, you know, get myself out there. Kind of find it difficult to actually keep up interest though, to be honest.”

Clive laughed.

“I can imagine.”

“So how are you? How were your travels?”

“Insane! I’m glad to be back home though to be honest. There is always something exciting in Asia, no matter where you are and who you’re with. It just tires you out after a while.”

Simon smiled.

“Never thought I’d see the day that you’re actually tired of something.”

“Me neither!” Clive said.

“So. Where are we heading tonight?”

“Actually, I’d kind of prefer to stay in, if that is fine with you.”

Simon laughed.

“Sure.” Simon put on some music and sat down next to Clive.

“So what’s going on with you?”

“Not much. Still waiting to hear back from my applications. There aren’t many PhD openings at the moment, though. Could still take a while.”

“Does that frustrate you?”

He shook his head.

“Well, a bit. But what can you do, really? I’m sure something will come up eventually.”

Simon nodded.

“I’m sure it will.” He finished his glass and refilled.

“I met this girl the other day,” Clive said. “I can’t stop thinking about her.”

Simon raised an eyebrow.

“Tell me more.”

“I don’t know, what can I say? She’s kind of challenging. She didn’t buy any of the shit I usually pull.”

Simon laughed.

“Well, finally!”

“I got a date with her nonetheless. And it was excellent! We actually talked about stuff. None of that awkward date small talk – we actually talked about something.”

“So when are you going to see her again?”

“I don’t know. She lives in another state. It’s kind of difficult to find time for one another.” Clive lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

“It’s killing me! I can’t get sleep because I cannot stop thinking about her.”

“Holy crap, Clive! You’re in love!”

“This is what that’s like? That’s terrible!”

Simon chortled.

“Sometimes it’s got to hurt a little,” he said smiling, patting Clive’s arm.

“So what did you do about it? I mean back in the days when you were still all romantic and stuff.”

“Is that actually happening now? Is it actually you asking me for advice about women?”

“Come on! I’m desperate here!”

“Oh god that’s adorable - I think I’m going to throw up!”

“Don’t be an asshole!”

Simon smiled.

“How about some romantic gesture?”

“Like what? Buy her flowers?”

“No. Anyone can buy flowers.”

“So what did you do? How did you confess to your first love?”

Simon hesitated.  
 “Promise you won’t laugh?”  
 “By my mother’s grave!”  
 “Alright,” Simon said, sipping from his wine. “I sang her a song.”  
 Clive fought hard to keep himself from laughing.  
 “Like what?”  
 “*Baby I love your way?*”  
 “Peter Frampton? Are you fucking kidding me?!”  
 “I was sixteen. I wasn’t exactly at the height of discovering music or any type of culture yet.”  
 Clive chuckled.  
 “Guitar?”  
 “Ukulele.”  
 “Did it work at least?”  
 “Nope.” Clive burst out laughing.  
 They were about to finish the second bottle of wine when they listened to the recording of their haunting duet performance of Sinatra’s “Something Stupid.”  
 “Not too bad,” Clive said with glassy eyes. “Damn, you’re really not that bad of a singer.”  
 “Told you so.”  
 “Should I send it?”  
 “Do it!”  
 “Frank Sinatra? Are you sure?”  
 “Yeah! I think that vague mob attitude fits you rather well.”  
 “Fuck you! I’m doing it!”  
 “Do it!”  
 “I’m really doing it.” Clive sighed. “Oh fuck, what did I do?” He shook his head, put his phone on the table and lit a cigarette.  
 Simon chuckled.  
 “I’d really kill to have that feeling again.”  
 Clive smiled, nodding.  
 “Would you do it all over again?”  
 “You seem much calmer lately,” Dr. Maine said, smil-

ing approvingly.

“I am,” Simon said nodding. “I don’t know. Things just don’t bother me as much as they used to.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Simon. It’s been a long way.”

“I know.”

“Well, there is something to discuss, Simon.” Simon nodded.

“Sure, what is it?”

“I’m afraid I feel that our therapy is coming to an end.”

### **What are you doing for the rest of your life?**

Smiling, Dr. Maine put down her notes and folded her hands calmly in her lap.

“We’ve still got ten minutes left, Simon. What would like to talk about?”

Simon, replied with a smile of his own and let himself sink deeply into the leather armchair.

“I really don’t know.”

“You know, you may find it hard to believe, but it’s always a bit weird for me, too.”

“What is?”

“Well, you’ve been coming to see me for almost five years now. We’ve been through a lot together. I’ve been doing this job for almost twenty-five years now, Simon. And you always know that with every patient you may eventually hit a point where you feel like you can no longer help them. But it’s never easy to actually accept that.”

Simon nodded.

“I believe that.”

“Please know that you can always call and make an appointment if you feel that you need to talk to me.”

“I will.” Again they smiled. They sat in silence for a moment.

“Tell me about this date of yours, Simon.”

Simon shook his head.

“Well you know, I’ve kind of given up on happy

endings.”

“I don’t believe that one bit!”

“No, really. But I know that I’m the problem. I just find it so difficult to trust anyone.”

“It’s as much about trusting yourself as it is about putting your trust in someone else, isn’t it?”

Simon nodded.

“Perhaps. I don’t know.”

“You’ve got to stop worrying about the possible outcomes. The self-fulfilling prophecies, Simon. We’ve been there before.”

Simon smiled.

“I know.” He sighed, burying his face in his hands.

“What is it, Simon?”

“I don’t know. I mean I’m aware of these things, I know what I should be doing differently, but I really just can’t bring myself to do so. Still, I find it more and more difficult to justify why I’m not with someone, as much to myself as to others. I mean, the people around me see a man in his late twenties that won’t commit and wonder what is wrong with me. But I’ve really grown tired of trying to explain it to them. How could I possibly describe the torture I undergo every time I actually come to admit that I do find someone interesting and the insane struggle I have with my inner self before I actually consider pursuing her? I’ve grown accustomed to talking about myself as someone that has just come out of a difficult relationship, but that was five years ago! Sure I’ve been on dates, but love or desire played very little part there. I used to be so naively romantic and you know what? Sometimes I really miss that guy! Because he wasn’t so damn afraid of making a complete fool of himself if he felt that he must. I laugh about that guy now. But it leaves a bitter-sweet taste in my mouth whenever I do think about him. I really long to have that feeling again, but I’m also so deeply afraid of it. You’re absolutely right! It’s as much about trusting myself as it is about putting my trust in someone else. And I wonder: will I one day meet someone that makes me want

to put aside that fear? Because, hell, I kind of want to. I want to meet her. And when I do, I want to have the guts to go up and talk to her and say: Hey!

What are you doing for the rest of your life?” ■



## Imprint

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Universität Kassel  
Institut für Anglistik / Amerikanistik  
Kurt-Wolters-Str. 5  
34125 Kassel

**Coordinators:** Matt Emery, Christopher Forlini  
**Editors:** Daniel Krooß, Jan Rölleke, Murat Sezi,  
Christian Weiß, Kristina Weissbecker  
**Contributors:** Maike Baumgärtner, Denise Breidenbach,  
Katharina Debney, Julia Gäbelein,  
Lars Heiler, Victoria Koberstein,  
Brian Koch, Daniel Krooß, Henry Lyonga,  
Kristin Politycki, Jan Rölleke, Murat Sezi,  
Christian Weiß, Inga Zekl  
**Illustrations:** Sophie Bachmann, Melanie Mendetzki  
**Cover:** Sophie Bachmann  
**Layout:** Rhea Eschstruth

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**E-Mail:** [Blank.student.np@gmail.com](mailto:Blank.student.np@gmail.com)  
**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/BlnkStudentNewspaper](http://www.facebook.com/BlnkStudentNewspaper)





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The background is an abstract watercolor composition. It features a mix of vibrant reds, deep blues, and bright whites. The colors are blended and splattered, creating a textured, organic feel. The reds are concentrated in the upper left and top center, while the blues dominate the lower half and right side. White splatters and highlights are scattered throughout, adding contrast and a sense of movement.

*Blank congratulates  
the Red Brick Company to  
10 years on the stage!*