

Interior Weather

Elke Schmitter

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

Elke Schmitter, born 1961, studied philosophy in Munich, was editor-in-chief of the *tageszeitung*, a staff writer for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and has been a *SPIEGEL* editor since 2001. Her debut novel *Mrs Sartoris*, the story of an extramarital affair, was translated into more than twenty languages. In 2015, the German literary translators' association [VdÜ](#) awarded her its [Übersetzerbarke](#) prize for outstanding services to literary translation. In 2016, Elke Schmitter curated the [forum:autoren](#) at the [Munich Literary Festival](#). She was Visiting Author/Max Kade Professor at [Vanderbilt University](#) in [Nashville, Tennessee](#) in 2018.

In three chapters set between spring and autumn of 2014, Elke Schmitter's new novel *Inneres Wetter* tells the story of the three siblings Sebastian (born 1964, law graduate, lives in Munich with Mora and their children Benjamin and Adriana), Bettina (born 1961, cultural studies graduate, lives in Berlin with Johannes and their daughter Sophie) and Huberta (born 1960, never finished her ethnology degree, lives alone and now on a precarious income in a village in Hesse with her dying dog Lizzy, volunteers with refugees). Schmitter explores their relationships, feelings, entanglements and also their family background, embedded in Germany's catastrophic history and its ongoing aftereffects.

Sebastian's wife Mora, originally from the former Yugoslavia, adds an outside perspective to the novel, at times almost romantic as she works away at the German mentality and its manifestations in the family she's married into. Her husband Sebastian, however, has fallen in love with his younger swimming coach Lena, of Polish origin; what will come of it remains unclear as the tension simmers between him and his wife.

Bettina too has found a husband – her former professor – who is not only attractive, charming and clever, but has also cheated on her on a regular basis. They lived apart for a year but are now back together.

Huberta, who envies Bettina Johannes but prefers women herself and yet would have liked to have a child, leads the hardest life of the three and drinks too much. As she gets older, however, she has grown closer to their father, now feeling relaxed about their relationship. That father, Georg Kupfer (born 1937), forged a career as a high-ranking lawyer in public administration and is now widowed. His wife and the children's mother died ten years ago, an instable woman, her sophisticated beauty charged with nervous energy. Georg has coped

astonishingly well with old age. His reflections on success and failure in their many forms, his retrospective of his own life betray humour, sensitivity and a rather late sense of composure. The passages describing him waking up on the morning of his 77th birthday are among the novel's most beautiful and impressive.

Georg's birthday party on 4 October 2014 serves as the novel's narrative fulcrum: the classic family get-together with all its pros and cons. The children arrange to come to the provincial town of Minden, where their father has retired. Their relationships are not free from conflicts, and thus the narrative tension stems from how the birthday will go, what will end up on the figurative table, and what won't.

The family story is cleverly and thoughtfully interweaved with the history of the Germans and their mentality, along with the urgent questions arising for the generation born in the early 1960s. The showdown: a restaurant and a bar in Minden.

Schmitter's writing is for readers of Siri Hustvedt or Rachel Cusk. Her aesthetic passion is the meta-level, subtle observations and psychological interpretations, with an eye – not rarely ironic or sarcastic – for tell-tale gestures. She gives us razor-sharp readings of erotic, family, societal and historical events and how they are interwoven – all of it in sparkling language of unconventional beauty.

Sample passages

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Every day, Mora makes the mistake of not simply closing the half-open door to Benjamin's room before she leaves the house. She straightens the rumpled duvet and shakes the pillow, then picks up the empty chips bag from the floor and reaches for the half-empty Coke bottle with the other hand, its lid rolled off somewhere; she won't look for it, she decides. She knows what she's doing goes against every ounce of parenting wisdom; she shouldn't make herself into her children's maid, especially not her son's, who she really doesn't want to grow up a macho. And yet she still opens the curtains and the skylights to let a modicum of fresh air into the room, which smells like a beavers' den. She's always thought of herself as fearless when it comes to people and their emotions, but for the first time now she notices a reluctance to plumb something obviously laden with conflict. She does what she does, not secretly but she wouldn't want to be watched. Nor does she want to talk about it, defend herself or analyse it. It's a kind of woe for which she wasn't prepared. By the time

Adriana got her period she knew all about it, she was glad, and because it happened in Split her Nonna could even congratulate her and prepare a little feast for the occasion, and they drank a glass of sweet wine to her that evening. Nothing was embarrassing or unpleasant, they were in a stream of family warmth, part of a female clan that made Adriana proud because she was made of feminine strength, countless stories of secret engagements, births difficult but survived, love affairs of all kinds. This is different, though. This is her losing the creature she's tied to more tightly than anything else in the world; it is vanishing before her very eyes into threefold elusiveness, beaming itself up like Scotty – physically, mentally, and intellectually most of all.

Just a farce, of course, this disappearance, compared to the real fear she felt for him when he was convulsed by fever and no one, no doctor or nurse, could do more than look on in earnest and humility and label the phenomenon what it was: a statistically rare case, and limited to a certain age at that, but during that phase absolutely random in occurrence, like sudden infant death syndrome, untreatable, unpredictable. Back then she let nobody close to him, not even his father – on the contrary, she snarled at him to take care of Adriana, and she even forbade Sebastian from stroking or holding the baby, arguing that every touch might hurt him. Which, of course, did not stop her from taking his tiny hand in hers as soon as Sebastian left the room, a small, still padded child's hand, a starfish, as a Neruda poem put it, who ought to be forgiven all sorts of things for that line alone, even the spying stuff if it was up to her. It's incredibly difficult to find words for that kind of love, the kind that pressed against her ribcage from inside and brought her to the brink of suffocation with fear that this dark, tender-limbed creature – smelling of chamomile, paper and grain, nestled perfectly in her hand, smiling with subtle earnest like a Bellini infant Christ – that this creature might disappear to somewhere she could not follow. The hours and nights at his bedside, shrunk down in her memory to a millisecond's scene in a loop (which she saw from outside, as if she had merely dreamed it all), would have been the perfect time and occasion for metaphysical thoughts, but she couldn't manage it – as though she would invite death, open up a door to it, if she were to permit even the slightest hint of a question on how things might go on after its visit.

No, she did not find faith, but she did take vows in her own way by not budging from Ben's side, by repeating in whispers all the fragments of prayers and hymns that rose randomly to the surface of her mind like plankton from the sea of her childhood, by not smoking, neither eating nor drinking, and sleeping only sitting up, a pillow resting on the edge of his cot and the starfish always in her hand. The greatest sacrifice of all was, perhaps, not sharing a bed with this feverish creature whose contours had only been outside her body for a year now. The doctor had stressed it was not good for the overheating organism for her to get too close to him, with her body heat and nervousness, and any weight on the baby's light body should be prevented, be it merely a hand she might lay on him in her sleep. And so she had gone without embracing her son, not melding their contours together

again; that was her greatest tribute to the dramatic situation, but she had not gone without remaining physically linked to him at one place, with an umbilical cord of attachment in body and soul meant to make it impossible for death to snatch him away from her.

Her own father had previously passed over, as people say with such helpless vagueness, and she knew what she was doing in his last hours when she no longer went on touching him, unlike her mother, no longer tied him to herself. It didn't surprise her that he used the few minutes when she went to the bathroom at dawn, splashed cold water on her face, bought a coffee from a vending machine, smoked a cigarette to go with it in the parking lot. He used that time alone to unfurrow his pain-clenched, walnut-like face, to lay his hands, patterned by the hieroglyphs of decades of work in Dalmatia's vineyards, palm-upwards upon the soft, faded blanket and to take his last breath; he had unmoored himself, set off with a gentle thrust, secure in his old hand-carpentered boat barely larger than his outstretched body, and drifted out to the open sea.

She elbows her way through the half-open door with the chips bag and Coke bottle, and takes them to the kitchen, where she stuffs the bag in the plastic recycling container. Then she goes back again, past the coat stand hung at the moment only with her brown cashmere coat, the black rain cape and Sebastian's suede jacket, which she picked up the autumn before last, reduced at Loden Frey. At the time she was only buying things in the sales because Adriana was so uncertain of what to do with herself after she finished school that her parents were saving up for nothing, in a way, into that adolescent bubble of uncertainty and overextension that she had been spared, for lack of alternatives. Being grown up meant university, and university meant Zagreb, life could be that simple, and it was sweet; it tasted of herb cordial, of smoky, slightly musty grass, of Moldavian wine and Zoran's furred tongue swelling inside her mouth whenever they were out of other people's sight.

She climbs the seventeen steps of the spiral staircase again, too narrow for her as ever, just to close the door to Ben's room – making what she did there once and for all into a kind of hotel service, a discreet helping hand as though she were wearing a frilled white apron and cared about his privacy. And yet the opposite is true; at least, she's looking for a way to reconcile her shame, the cowering pain and her unconditional parenting convictions, and for the time being she can clearly come up with nothing better than playing her son's chambermaid while reassuring herself he does not yet have anything to hide. She senses, though, that this is a Sisyphean task; there's no way to prove something does not exist; not even God. 'Show me there is no pink hippo in the room,' Crósić had begun his seminar on epistemology, and although the light was so clear they could see the dust roaming the air in tiny particles, none of them could link up a logical chain that the professor would

accept. The fact that she didn't find anything today (and what might that be – drugs, a porn mag, a sticky tissue?) doesn't prove she won't find anything tomorrow; it doesn't even prove she didn't overlook something yesterday.

When she arrives at *La prima classe*, Daniela has just raised the electric shutter; she's running late but her streaked blond irreproachability looks as calm as ever.

'I'm leaving you a 300-euro float,' she says after breathing lightly against each of Mora's cheeks.

'They're predicting gorgeous weather, so perhaps the place will be spilling over with ladies looking for the perfect outfit for Lake Como.'

Daniela reaches for her handbag, a large cubic calf-leather model with a gentle pink tone to the inside of the straps, from last year's Longchamps collection; Mora has learned to notice such things.

'I'll be back at four. We've got two gorgeous Missonis in, I've just priced them up, they're out back, perhaps you could put them in the window, you know, with a hat and some jewellery or the new suede boots, you're always so good at that –'

And off she goes, dropping a big bag of dry cleaning into her black Mini, for which she's bagged a parking space right outside the shop window. Mora heads for the tiny crammed storage room and takes the two Missonis of their hooks, delicate miracles of bright thread, both size 10, a size that sells like hot cakes here in Munich-Schwabing. Their colours – ivory, turquoise, cherry red and a bold apricot – will lend a glow to the lightly tanned, well defined limbs of *La prima classe's* clientele and a smile to their faces.

She undresses the two dummies in the window – a white Chanel suit that has been there too long and a silk Ferragamo dress that seems too dramatic for a day as feather-light as this – and clads them in Missoni, swaps the shoes on the platform (Louboutins out, silver sandals and rhinestoned flip-flops in) and goes out to inspect how it looks from the pavement. From *La Strada*, Massimo waves over at her.

'Caffé, Signora Mora?'

She crosses the street and angles herself at the counter so she can keep an eye on the shop door.

She feels his courting smile more than she sees it, the enticing game going on between the two of them ever since she's been working for Daniela. Three years, too long for something in the making, but also too much for a flirt abandoned on not achieving anything, the way the Germans do, transforming enchantment into insult; something crude to be ashamed of. For the guests, he's Italian, but he's actually from the Adria like her – a man of the coast. The long evenings on the beach, the sunlight liquid in all colours, the horizon a stage for all that's alive, all that plays and parades and gossips on the seafront, including children and dogs as much as the fragile old ladies on benches, the businesswomen with their aperitivo, the roaming bands of youths, the old men strolling in pairs up

and down the promenade, hands behind their backs, apparently immersed in weighty conversation (and then it's about nothing but the price of fresh-caught prawns or the quality of this year's olives)... There'll never be a revolution on a beach, that much became clear to her when everywhere else around the country the protestors marched, against cuts, against the new reactionary decrees, against forgetfulness of history. Split remained the old panorama of jollity, the natural and yet constant alert and animated pleasure in the sun and the breeze, in the company of the same people in alternating formations; small-town but never constraining, for all eyes rested on the glittering expanse, the sea, the Mediterranean eternity.

He pushes the sugar bowl towards her, the classic metal model with the long flat spoon, like the one gathering dust in a corner at home. She shakes her head and smiles, as always. His repertoire of gestures, hers, the tiny performance they put on, never touching and never ending. A kind of intimacy to which there is no testament. If she were to be run over by a car today, he would find out only by chance – and even if he did, there would be nobody at the funeral with whom he could exchange a meaningful word. In the eulogy to her life, he would be subsumed under the countless people she simply happened to know, from dentist to newsagent, and no one, presumably not even he, would ever have any idea of what he meant to her, through his physical company; through everything she didn't know about him.

She sees a middle-aged woman standing hesitantly outside the shop window. Trench coat, black trousers, grown-out bob. She downs her espresso, brushes against the freshly ironed shirt above Massimo's lower arm, exchanges a glance and a smile with him, and then crosses the road.

'I'll be inside if you need any help,' she says in a friendly tone before she opens the shop door, and the woman does follow her in and immediately reels off the standard line of uncertain shoppers, but also of the spoilt: 'I'm just looking.' And yet she puts her very large bucket bag straight down on the Versace chair, a clear if unconscious signal of optimism.

'If there's anything you want to ask, or anything I can get for you from the window, just let me know.' Mora positions herself next to the register and checks all the channels on her phone. As though the children were still in the care of kindergarten teachers and babysitters, as though a call about headlice or a grazed knee might summon her at any moment. Nothing there. Nothing on her voicemail, no texts, not even a missed call since she spoke to Sebastian. No urgent matter that might command her away from what's going on: Mora at her job, which requires her to be present but not demanding, a kind of stimulating in-situ as a good example of how clothes maketh woman. (Although she knows, of course, that it's the other way around. The customers know it too; they just forget.) For years now, she has felt free to simply be in this place, her attention undivided, her tedium too. But now she can't do it. It has gone, that ability she was not even aware of until she lost it. It was

only to be recognized when remembered; when it was lost but still in the mind, as inconspicuous as it was delightful – like health itself for the unimpaired. Like breathing, like sleep. And it *was* nothing other than health, in its mental and emotional form: being in only one place and only one time, in this *here* and *now*, the material of all experience and all possible memory.

Perhaps she took the job because so little is expected of her here that she can continue the modus of being divided, the modus of all young mothers. She didn't go looking for it. At a birthday party for one of Sebastian's colleagues, in the queue for the desserts buffet, a very attractive, languid woman spoke to her, a role model for the perfection achieved only through never-ending work, through a never-ending chain of appointments with hair and nail stylists, beauticians, in thermal massage salons and other establishments of which Mora knew little more than their names. Daniela had spotted her with one sure-fire glance, *recognized* her to some extent: because Mora looks good but innocent, an elusive state for most women, but one which doesn't spark envy. She's androgynous, her age never quite clear; she has an earnest, almost dramatic profile and pouting lips; her skin is dotted with freckles, which soften the austerity of her appearance; she wears her wavy hair in no recognizable style, descendant of a world in which beauty is something natural, a quiet gift from the Gods to the wretched cursed with warts and moles, wrinkles and furrows and withering flesh. The customer takes a Ferragamo scarf from the small pile on the display cabinet of fashion jewellery, beaded clutches, keyrings and expensive phone covers, kept locked at all times. She drapes it over her head, looks in the mirror by the changing niche and sighs.

'What do you think?'

Mora immediately knows what she thinks but makes the effort to stand next to the woman, in the same light, and mark out a second's consideration.

'It's a lovely scarf. But I could imagine you in something a bit more delicate.'

Her first lesson from Daniela: Always use positive formulations. Never: It makes you look even bigger than you are.

'You're right,' the woman says, taking the scarf off and trying clumsily to fold the smooth, almost liquid silk back to the size of an envelope.

'Don't worry, I'll do that later. We've got a scarf from Dior here' – Mora deftly fishes it out of the pile – 'that might be just right.'

Second lesson: Always name the brands. A code of its own that boosts the customers' self-esteem.

She unfurls the flimsy, woven square of wool and silk in mid-air, sending it trembling in waves and setting its tiny graphic pattern in motion. 'It has clear colours perfect for you, but it won't weight you down.'

The woman tries it on and smiles straight away. Even in her trench coat and practical shoes, she now looks like a person ready for something celebratory, something soon to occur. She tugs a little at it, takes it off, looks at the price and puts it on the counter next to the cash register.

'I'll take it, definitely. And now I'll have a look at your dresses.'

'You'll find everything you're interested in on this wall,' says Mora. 'We've arranged the Italian and French sizes according to fit. Are you thinking of something for every day, or is it for a special occasion?'

'Oh, I don't know, the scarf's so fabulous, maybe I'll find something to go with it...'

She doesn't want guidance now; strengthened by Dior, what she wants now is to make a discovery that reminds her of the woman she'd like to be, a woman she decides against in front of her wardrobe every morning. About half of all her customers, Mora estimates, buy clothes they'll presumably never wear. A wardrobe full of what-ifs for scenes that exist in their imagination, their glamorous props sold on again in shops like this. The price expectation all the higher, once the hand-embroidered top, the ruffle-waisted silk dress, the black gown with the sinful neckline haven't ended up changing their lives.

Daniela insists on Prosecco in the afternoons, always at hand in a silver bucket on the little table next to the Versace chair. 'Take your time,' Mora says, and goes into the back room to inspect the tiny fridge. She takes three bottles out of the box and refills the two ice trays; there are only three cubes left in one of them, which she empties into the sink before she runs fresh water into the moulds. The freezer compartment urgently needs defrosting; the ice crusts crunch as she squeezes the metal trays into the crystal-lined hollow.

When she comes back to the main room, the woman has gone. In one glance, Mora sees that the whole pile of silk scarves is missing. Her heart makes a tiny leap and then she herself leaps to the door, locks it, runs to the street corner, looks around, runs back again to the corner of Hohenzollernstrasse, but doesn't spot a woman in a trench coat with a sensible haircut and a large bag dashing along her way. Her breath freezes as she feels a fountain of rage rising, perhaps also of fear; so now it's happened, for the first time. She'll have to make up for the loss; after all, she left the woman alone even though Daniela warned her against it on her very first day. I'd like to rely on my instincts about people, my experience – that was about how she'd put it – but I've learned that's a mistake. When we're advising customers, psychology and intuition are our capital, but they're no use when it comes to spotting a shoplifter. Some women make a business out of it, others might really want just the one item that they can't afford – and then there are some who are compensating for who knows what in their lives by stealing from us and maybe donating it to Oxfam. I saw a beach dress in there from here when I went in to donate a few things. A Liebeskind, from that season, imagine that.

She walks back slowly, past the so very well-kept fin-de-siècle buildings, sees Massimo alone at his counter, returns his gaze, opens the door. I need a grappa, she says, I've just had my first shoplifter.

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His children would be astounded at the erosion that had gone on behind his carefully tended façade. The infrastructure has to function, he heard himself saying recently, to his own surprise, when Manfred presented his oldest son's failure (divorced, third retraining programme) as a lament with an overtone of self-righteousness. Biographies don't. Life's botch-ups – essentially the stuff of literature, when patiently described – why should they spare him and his family? Walking past the cafés and greengrocers on the way to the bookshop, past stout men untiringly moving their prayer beads between their fingers as their sons race along the roads in souped-up cars or crowd around shisha pipes in special bars practicing collective brain-shrinkage, he is filled less with law-and-order suspicion and more with mute paternal empathy. The town where he first went to a cinema – taciturn Mia by his side as excited as he was when his hand crept over to her, when his tongue explored her mouth and caused a warm wet explosion – that town exists just as little now as those men's gardens in Anatolia. Their villages back in Turkey too are turning into ghost homes, inhabited by the last old folks and brought to a short and fearful blossom every summer. For him, the few places where his soul trots into a joyful recollection, less of an event than of a physical state, those few spots suffice; he never sees himself from outside but he feels, from inside, the experience-hungry boy he once was, the lad who roamed rubble and building sites like a backdrop of an unfamiliar past and shared seats on the bus and church benches with evacuees and expellees. He had decided after Dorothea's death – a last blind sigh in the midst of a collection of machines glowing in the night like a penny arcade – to turn his back on the city they had lived in since their three children had been released into stuttering independence, where he had become an esteemed member of the civil service, all the way to a note on his retirement in the newspaper. That choice came as not much less of a surprise to him as to his descendants and friends. It happened inside him, as he was watching an old noir movie at the cinema the day after the funeral, Jean Gabin in a car repair shop; oil-stained hands, greasy vests, stubbly-bearded proletarian faces. On the way home, the city centre decorated for Advent, a nocturnal spectacle flashing ceremoniously like a kitsch exaggeration of the intensive care ward, in amongst it all couples arm in arm and cheerful tourist groups, stolidly affluent. The black-and-white film of his youth, the gaunt faces determinedly forsaken, the earnest of the mighty churches of soot-blackened stone shooting up to the sky, abruptly seemed the fitting surroundings for the last phase of his life, a phase he could not envision – which pleasantly surprised him. Tennis, museums, educational travel and dinners with other couples

in decent but unpretentious restaurants, a French conversation course for the upcoming tour of the Loire chateaux: the strike by the red-brown organs below Dorothea's diaphragm had put a stop to all that. Kidney failure, the bleary-eyed doctor explained – not older than Sebastian but more spontaneous, blessed with Franconian cordiality – was hard to see coming. The fact that the fist-sized, bean-shaped fellows bowed out without prior notice, after decades of hard grind breaking down alcohol and moderating medicines – pacifying, stimulating, for sleeplessness and migraines – amazed him less the more he learned about them, as he surfed medical websites in the nights that followed, a toxic whiskey and an equally heinous cigarillo at hand. There might have been help for her in this life, had her social coordinates permitted an emotional collapse. But her disturbance, instead, had something insect-like to it, a restless, directionless scuttling, fumbling and prowling on the surface of a fruit that was intact externally, yet rotten inside. As the children grew older and no longer needed bedtime rituals, no longer wanted to make wobbly lanterns with her for the Saint Martin's Day parade and preferred to do their homework with friends than under her unrelenting supervision, she felt she didn't have the strength to go on convincing teenagers of the value of Latin vocabulary for later life. And yet she had no talent for contented laziness. The nameless horror of an untended childhood was too great to make out its contours. It had long since grown into an autonomous atmosphere and seemed to captivate her only in tiny moments – preparing to visit a museum, which had to be read about first, or putting together an outfit for a party. Diligence, perfection: those were the coordinates that gave her support and drive in one, and created everlasting motion, a sinister perpetuum mobile with a dwarfish pendulum swing. In a less comfortable era, she would have become a woman in black who picked through pulses, knitted or weaved, her hands occupied in an even back and forth, which we now know puts the two halves of the brain into harmonious vibrations and thus creates an unspecific pacification without blunting the senses like the droplets and tablets she took on the advice of ever-changing medical consultants, combined after darkness fell with martinis or sparkling wine. Thus, in middle age she made an elegant impression, controlled by day, with a fondness for iridescent material, shiny or sequined fabrics that swaddled her traumatized soul like a sumptuous suit of feminine armour. The murder of a kind and even good-looking young man like David Haines, only a few years older than Sebastian and on a path like the one Huberta wanted to take – by the side of the needy, those abandoned by all gods – as it was just reported on the news (not including the horrific images but using words that hinted at the merciless butchery): his first thought on hearing it was of her and his relief that she could no longer find out about IS, Boko Haram and those other gangs of bloodthirsty madmen. Unlike him, she had seen evil (or he had looked away; muscular, surrounded as he had been by church bells, vegetable patches and resourceful women who smelled of earth, coal and soap), and her metaphysical Meccano had loose screws from the beginning. And while she seemed to trust her

daughters to do anything not at her disposal, bravery and a calm assessment of risks, optimism and creature-like serenity, even a positive sexuality (she was not the slightest bit bothered by the pill, which they both got hold of by mysterious means, while the question of whom Bettina would dedicate her supple virginal body to plunged him into suspicion and flights of indignation), she orbited her young boy from his very birth (performed behind pale-grey soundproofed doors, demonstrating how unwanted his paternal participation in this everyday miracle was) with pre-emptive concern. She could interpret a nosebleed by Sebastian as the treacherous harbinger of a catastrophe, while Huberta's stocky, unhappy adolescent figure seemed at most an insult to her own ego, and Bettina's glorious pallidity, her blithe, affectionate radiance was taken for granted, not worthy of protection. Sebastian was her 'project', a magical lantern of peaceful heroism, with alternating images of unprecedented talent and public recognition in the near future, or nearly near. He is more amazed now than then that his youngest child never collapsed under the pressure. Back then, his duty-bound attendance at school concerts and graduation ceremonies was threaded through with inner considerations, in which everyday ministry life continued undisturbed but he registered, at least, that Sebastian was not made for the stage. His awkward juvenile body sought to be unobserved, while Dorothea sought in vain for a sign of joy on his pale, expressionless face when he bowed to accept the applause, a sad little Lord Fauntleroy. Perhaps he himself was too accustomed to the melancholy of their damaged family to expect more from his only son; although that generation, in historical terms, had won the lottery with a bonus on top. Things had moved onwards and upwards, on and on, the economy and the coddling, and the Cold War was really a blessing, at least if a person was allowed to perform their little tricks on the right side of the curtain.

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Mora lets the front door close quietly, so as not to disturb Ben's holy sleep, and opens the door behind her seat to deposit her handbag and basket of food for the journey. She puts her trench coat beside them, neatly tucked together, and takes the map from him, which he has folded up again, no longer in his memory as the irregular, dark yellow consolidation of lines, on the margins of which she makes her contribution to the perpetuation of humankind. He switches on the satnav and enters his father's address, which she reads to him from her phone.

'Six hours, ten minutes,' he says. 'Fifteen minutes less than yesterday, probably because of the holiday.'

'That's do-able.'

It's not clear to him whether she means to reassure him or herself, but he accepts the marital consolation willingly.

'It won't be much worse tomorrow, I assume. And anyone wanting a nice weekend will be heading in the other direction anyway.'

'Come on, it's not that bad.'

He's so stunned that he chokes the engine and the car stops with a jerk, still on the tarred drive.

'Last time you said you'd had enough of East Westphalia! It was the eel-smoking house next to the petrol station, you remember, that was the last straw.'

'Whoever makes the local development plans must be blind or corrupt, or hate the place. It's a mystery to me how they can make such a mess of the whole area,' she admits. 'But the countryside is beautiful, like in the folk songbook my mother gave us that time. Kind of – what's that Christmassy word?'

Girls in red aprons with Heidi plaits, little boys in short trousers playing outside a windmill, behind them rolling hills in pastel tones; thoughtful houses in a valley with a meandering river.

'“Fair,” perhaps,' he suggests. 'But that was heavy-duty Nazi stuff, “Fair maiden” and all that.'

He starts the car again and mutes the satnav to stop the beatific woman's voice from explaining how to get to the motorway.

'Are you sure that's right? Adriana wrote a paper about it once, and it turned out a lot of what we call Nazi stuff actually isn't, they hijacked it – like the housing estates for workers or the songs from the Wundervogel movement.'

'Wandervogel,' he says, sounding more irritated than he means to. 'I think,' he adds, 'they were actually pretty progressive, one of those alternative education things with naked swimming and back to nature, maybe like those Tolstoy disciples in Russia, but anyway, not fascists at all.'

'That's a relief. And we won't have to go to the Hermann Monument either.'

He can't blame her for playing the old game of Spot the Nazi in her own way; he started it, after all, almost exactly twenty years ago. There are long since new candidates for this dubious pleasure, but they're so obvious or so threatening, perhaps both at once, that neither of them have picked up on them.

'We only did it once,' he reminds her, 'to get it over with, and because it's the only non-religious tourist attraction for miles around.'

They've now reached the motorway slip road and he accelerates the old work-dirtied station wagon to a vibrating ninety km per hour. After all these years it still feels like bumper-cars, that exciting queasy feeling until you get the first bump and realize mid-collision that it's not as bad as you thought. Just that there won't be a collision here, just that nasty buzzing in the body when the engine passes a hundred and then a hundred and thirty, until you get used to it and forget the danger – unless a heavy vehicle pulls up alongside and you can't just drop back because then you'd be looking up its enormous exhaust pipe for a humiliating quarter of an hour.

‘Why did he even move there, have you ever understood it?’

He tries to remember; surely they must have talked about it at the time. But so many strange things happened in the year after his mother’s death, which ripped a hole so abruptly and incomprehensibly in the family fabric, that they might not have had the strength to register this mystery as much as they ought to have done. Far behind him, a silver-grey Mercedes approaches at breath-taking speed, its lights on full-beam, jagged on the outside like a monstrous insect as fast as an arrow. He puts his foot to the gas pedal again, feeling his ankle in his slip-on shoe, and speeds past a red Golf with a Baby on Board! sticker, in which a young woman with a ponytail as frazzled as straw is moving her mouth like she’s singing or making a call on a hands-free device while a chorus of dangling mascots makes her view of the motorway into a puppet theatre. He’s always amazed that kind of thing isn’t banned. As soon as he sees her behind him, her mouth still in motion – either she has a lot to say or she’s listening to her favourite song, he’d bet on Justin Bieber or Adele – he adjusts his speed to hers. They form a small secret column of sensible hundred and forty-drivers, nothing in common with the macho idiots in the next lane along.

‘He used to live there, between about fifteen and twenty, I think.’

For now, driving is shielding him from her. The tension will lessen and at some point, they’ll be closer than he’d like in their mobile cabin; as irritated, sleep-deprived and filled with dark forebodings as he is.

‘That must have been pretty terrible, in that bombed-out town.’

He has to do his sums again; sort the crooked numbers of his parents’ biographies into the right place in the great tableaux of history, equally odd and unrhythmic, 33, 39, 45, 49, 61, Bettina’s birth and the Berlin Wall, and then, three years later, his own appearance on earth. Huba got an even number, though it doesn’t look like it helped her to get anything done.

‘The early fifties were a time of new departures, though. The pictures of women sorting through rubble, the ones you might have in mind, they’re from the forties.’

The sky is an unearthly blue like a hand-tinted photo, the surrounding countryside as tidy as if waiting to be filmed. Often, on moving trains as well, the insight burrows into him that this beauty is an optical illusion. Seen in vomiting close-up the grass verge, lush and verdant when driving past, was nothing but a thin-fibred slice of the world back then, littered with chewing-gum wrappers, stones and insects. Insects whose descendants have almost died out; he doesn’t remember when the windscreen was ever as sticky with miniscule corpses as at their stops at the petrol station, where Huba, the least squeamish of them, would wipe them off with determination and energy, dipping the blue rubber-tipped blade over and over into a plastic bucket of blackish soup.

‘He was young,’ Mora says next to him, as though she could barely believe it herself. ‘Do you remember the anecdote Adriana told when she got back from her school trip to Paris? About how

Napoleon asked an old woman on one of his marches what the best year of her life was, and she said, 1789, Emperor. And when he asked why, with all the hunger, the revolution, the guillotine, she said: I was seventeen.'

'Great thing to hear when you're seventeen.'

That comes out gruff as well, somehow. The surprise that she'd be coming along was not without a sense of guilt; only then had he realized how relieved he'd been by the prospect of two days alone in the car – alone with his reluctance for the family and the process of weighing up that has long since become a mere ritual, with no hope of a conclusion. He hangs in the balance, an uncomfortable and melancholy state but clearly preferable to what comes after a decision.