

# *Schöffling & Co.*

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*(chapter 5, pp 182-193)*

*Boris*

Endless, the levee. Endless, the dead straight path. Endless, the whirring of the bicycle tires on the asphalt, the whistling of the wind in their ears and the high, bare, immutable blue of the sky above their heads. Endless, the blazing hole of the sun, the shimmer of the heat over the fields and the cruelty of midsummer in the afternoon, when the greasy coating of sweat, dust and sunscreen begins to drip from their faces onto the handlebars and each revolution of the pedals climbs with a stab into their calves and farther upward into their tired thighs and sorely chafed bottoms, when their tongues stick to the roofs of their mouths with thirst, and their gastric juices turn their throats sour with hunger, when they can no longer go on, no longer want to go on, and yet pedal on with clenched teeth and foreheads obstinately lifted into the midday blaze, constantly passing by the puny shade of the poplar groves, also passing by the squares of shade, overgrown with stinging nettles, below the walls of abandoned farms, passing by the swampy riverside forests with their bloodthirsty insects and even passing by the picnic sites on the side of the path, most of them with benches and tables located under tall trees and besieged by noisy excursionists, always passing by their hunger, their thirst and the wish, nearly pedaled to death, for undisturbed togetherness, always heading toward the one, distant rest stop where they're finally going to eat, drink, relax, bathe in the river and sleep together, endlessly riding along the levee and passing each other by.

This part of the Loire valley is a wide plain with forests in the south drying up gray in the heat and boundless cornfields in the west, their leaves rising dust-colored into the sun and, only at some points, where a sprinkler system is set up by the path, waving heavy with grain in the artificial rain. There they jump off their bikes, stand on the wet asphalt redolent of summer storms, extend their hands into the air and giggle like children in anticipation of great fun. When the sprinkler jet hisses toward them, they thrust their faces into it, open their mouths wide and, overarched by a tiny

rainbow for a few seconds, dart their tongues in and out at the cool drops sparkling in the sunlight.

At one point, in a particularly abundant shower, they lean toward each other laughing, take each other's faces in their hands and lick the water from each other's lips, which taste of salt, of sunscreen, of the spicy peppermint lozenges they're constantly sucking to keep their mouths moist, and of the companion's breath that has not been drunk in for a long time, a taste that reminds them of bygone days and fills them with regret. Then the young men fall away from each other, hop onto their bikes and ride out into the sunburned fields where they, under their damp clothes and in the memory of the redemptive kiss in the artificial rain, sweat even more than before.

Endless, the levee, the dead straight path. The river endlessly far away, hidden behind national highway embankments and the dried-up sand beds of its branches, which traverse the land, desert-like. Only at times does it come very near, rolling wide and lined with sandbanks and islands into the torrid plain and filling the air with that unmistakable smell – of fish, putrefaction, and sweet, nutrient-rich water – that clings to all rivers in which a little life can still be found. The national highways recede, villages and towns crowd onto the banks, medieval arch bridges span the river, the sky competes with the color of the water and the sparkle of the sun on the rapids, and he points into the air and cries: Look! And his companion nods and gives a wave of his hand. Then the road curves away, the river vanishes again behind the levees, embankments and the deserts of its branches, and they sink back into their pedaling and staring and silence and sweating.

Endless, this distance, his frustration, his dissatisfaction, his mistrust, and the fear that Boris could leave him at any time, his senseless thoughts of separation, and his longing for a remote, indeterminate horizon on which the sea will appear after a week in which, by his reckoning, they must cover seventy kilometers a day under the scorching August sun – the sea, where everything must surely be different, better with Boris and him, even if he doesn't know what's supposed to get better and if things can ever be at all different and better with someone like him; at the latest the sea, by his reckoning, must finally transform the distance into nearness and love; the sea, he thinks every minute, pedaling doggedly, is the goal.

Engel constantly rides ahead, Boris following behind at some distance, about two or three hundred meters, because Boris – in contrast to him, who only stares obstinately at the road while counting the revolutions of his bike's bottom bracket – contemplates the flowers on the side of the path, the birds in the bushes, and the bumblebees, intoxicated by summer, reeling from blossom to blossom, and in so doing falls back farther and farther, so that Engel, when at some point he finally does look up from the street and back over his shoulder, no longer sees his companion, who he thought was riding in his wind shadow the whole time – an error, as it now turns out, which deceived him with a vague feeling of nearness and security. Alarmed, he jumps off his bike, stands in the stunted shade of a blackberry or elder bush, and waits anxiously several minutes for Boris to appear again around a bend or at the summit of a slope.

But then, at noon on the fourth day, in the center of Tours, at the third Loire bridge, where according to the bike tour map they have to turn left, Boris stays vanished. The city already announced itself several kilometers back with industrial parks, concrete apartment blocks, and wasteland churned up by excavators. The bike path ended in a traffic circle and merged onto the shoulder of the national highway, then the shoulder ended too, the national highway became a four-lane road, the traffic got even heavier, and each look back became a more life-threatening maneuver for Engel, who as always rode ahead; when Boris yelled something about the directions to him shortly before the city limit, his glance over his shoulder sent him careening and almost falling under the wheels of a tractor-trailer. Then he gestured to Boris with a sign meant to indicate KEEP GOING or STRAIGHT AHEAD or UNDERSTOOD, pulled his cap brim down over his face, his shoulders up to his ears and the collar of his T-shirt over his nose as protection against the exhaust, shifted into the fastest gear and began to count impatiently the ramps onto the bridges, under which, on the right-hand side, the Loire now forced its way through a narrow gravel bed enclosed by walls.

According to the street signs, the third bridge, at which Engel abruptly brakes, leads into the center of Tours. There, as they discussed many kilometers before the city when they rode side-by-side for the last time, they have to get water and bread; they ran out of water during the arduous uphill after Amboise, and they devoured the

bread, down to the dry crust, already at breakfast. But I, thinks Engel, jumping off his bike, can buy neither water nor bread; without water and bread, he thinks, I'll soon go to the dogs, will die miserably in the gutter or squat on the side of the road and stretch out my hand for a little water and bread, because Boris, who still fails to appear after five, ten and even fifteen minutes, is carrying the valuables: cash, credit cards, passports, and, sensibly, both cell phones are in Boris's handlebar bag.

In Boris's handlebar bag, thinks Engel, contemplating the reflections of the sun on the cars' bumpers, are all my belongings; all that I have and am, he thinks, is in Boris's handlebar bag, my whole future in that handlebar bag, my whole life in Boris's hands; and he hops onto his bike and rides on the wrong side of the road back to the last bridge, then weaves between the bumpers and exterior mirrors to the bridge after the next, then rides on the grassy median strip through flowerbeds and daisies back to the soot-black viaduct that, not counting the highway bridge, he thinks, has to be the third bridge on the riverside road at which they, according to the bicycle map, which is affixed to Boris's handlebar bag as well, have to turn left into the center of Tours.

There, he thinks, they want to buy water and bread, withdraw money, and treat themselves in the shade of a café terrace to a cold lemonade and one of those delicious little cakes to which Boris is now already so addicted that he can no longer pass any patisserie by. In the center of Tours, he thinks, sinking wearily onto the crossbar of his bicycle, he wanted finally to overcome the distance, make good on things he'd neglected to say over the last years, and apologize for the theatrical escape attempts, exasperating scenes of separation, and days-long boycotts on talking with which he punishes Boris for his outbreaks of rage after little everyday sins like dishes not cleared away, house plants not watered and lamps carelessly left burning; he wanted to apologize above all for his compulsive infidelities, tolerated by Boris only with gnashed teeth, and for the missed professions of love, remorse and faithfulness, which Engel always composes in his head while still in bed with his lover, but then, back in the arms of his companion, never utters or no longer considers necessary to utter, because he believes that Boris has long since forgiven him his two-timing, scarcely has he turned his apartment key in the door, just as Boris always, again and again, forgives or appears to forgive him his escape attempts, scenes of separation and

boycotts on talking. And that is why he now wants finally to tell him here, in the center of Tours, that in spite of all the quarreling he does love him, Boris, at the bottom of his heart, or will try to love him in the future somehow differently, somehow better, in any case with more warmheartedness and compassion and attentiveness.

But it's no longer going to come to all that, he thinks, now it's once and for all too late for all that, he thinks, for in the center of Tours, shortly before the third bridge, at which they should have turned left on their way together to the sea, Boris, he thinks and thinks until the roar of the traffic turns only this one inconceivable thought over and over in his head, has run off once and for all with my entire life in his handlebar bag. At the ramp onto the third bridge, Engel asks the vegetable salesman shoveling potatoes into paper bags if he's seen a man on a bicycle, very blond, very good-looking; the salesman shrugs his shoulders. A man, very good-looking, on a bike, he shouts into the door of the patisserie at the fourth bridge where Boris perhaps quickly bought a little cake. A very good-looking man, he gasps finally, back at the third bridge, into the ear of the young police officer who redirects the traffic because of an accident, grins at Engel and says: Thanks, you too.

A bicycle rider, lithe, lissome, with a Roman profile, comes around a curve from the right and almost makes him fall off his seat. Engel curses the fellow from behind. Behind, he thinks, following blindly behind such a fellow, Boris, the dog, simply turned off – just as he, Engel, not in the center of Tours, but in the center of Cologne, on the way from work at the pub, also sometimes simply turns off and rides behind a guy, a lithe, lissome guy with a Roman profile, through the center of Cologne until he loses sight of him at an intersection, or the object of desire stops somewhere, chains up his bike, and vanishes into a house, into which Engel would like to follow him, into his apartment, his kitchen, his bed, simply following him into a new, different, perhaps better life, into a new, different, better so-called love relationship, lived by him, Engel, with less escape attempts and scenes of separation and boycotts on talking, but instead with more warmheartedness and compassion and attentiveness. A relationship in which I could freely utter *love*, he thinks, that thorny, untenable word that can be thought, written, felt always only in the subjunctive, in the mode of possibility – and not only utter the word, but also actually live it, as a result

and expression of a self-explanatory, self-nourishing love relationship, in which it's not that I *would* feel warmheartedness, but that I *feel* it; not that I *would* have compassion, but that I *have* it; not that I *would* show attentiveness, but that I *show* it. A love relationship in which I even *clear away* the dishes and *switch off* the light behind me, and *water* – not *would* water – the house plants.

Have you watered the plants, asks Boris, when he stands in the door of Engel's room late in the evening after a long work-day with conferences, war with parents, and a class barbecue. Damn, the plants, says Engel, looking guiltily at Boris. He cleared away the dishes, cooked dinner, switched off the lights behind him, the rest of the time sat over his writing stuff, forgetting about the plants.

I'm simply not handy with plants, thinks Engel, staring after the fellow on the bike, not handy, as they say, with living things in general, not even, he thinks, with the most primitive, those without thoughts and feelings, which consist only of water, cellulose and chlorophyll, and therefore demand from my hands neither support nor tenderness nor consolation nor all the other complex and complicated attentions for which my hands, he thinks, in dealing with the most complex and complicated living things, human beings, are tied, or simply missing.

For where hands should be for holding Boris and caressing Boris and consoling Boris and clearing away the dishes and switching off the lights and watering the plants for Boris – and he raises his swollen, sunburned hands blackened with chain grease – where hands should be there are in truth nothing but deformed, stunted lumps, numb, useless stumps; and he again looks down the road into the center of Tours. There, he thinks, and balls his hands into fists, the guy chains his bicycle to a streetlamp and enters the house into which Boris follows him, perhaps thinking he's finally getting away from the stunted hands of his companion, finally getting away from this stunted and mutilated relationship, finally getting away from Engel and following the fellow into his apartment, his kitchen, his bed, simply following him into a new, different, better life with a new, different, better love. I'm simply not handy with love, he thinks, feeling tears of rage rushing into his eyes, neither with love of human beings nor love of plants, the simple pouring of a little water into the soil of the yucca palms and rubber plants and weeping figs that stand all around the apartment and sprout and shoot in Boris's hands, just as he, Engel, also

blooms in Boris's hands, and not only my cock, he thinks, but also my inner and innermost depths, for Boris lavishes care and nurturing on anything and everything about me and in me – and although he always lends me his hand, and has lent me his hand countless times to help me out of intensive care, down from bridges and out of the deepest valleys of despair back up again into life, in his hands I nonetheless literally go down, just as the leaves of the yucca palms and rubber plants and weeping figs have up to now always gone down in *my* hands.

We have to, he says, following Boris from the study into the kitchen and from the kitchen into the living room, we have to change something in our relationship, treat each other differently, he says, take better care of each other; and he watches as the parched soil of the rubber plant drinks the water that Boris gives it. We should take a trip, he pleads, travel to the sea, from now on, he thinks, holding out his stunted hands to his companion, do everything differently and better. Then Boris seizes his arm, bends him over the withered weeping fig and says: The plants, Engel, just the plants, just that. Then he pushes him aside, snatches the watering can and goes into the bathroom, where Engel hears the water rushing out of the faucet into the can.

Can't you count, Boris gasps, coming around the curve and jumping off his bike, this here – and he gestures with his hand toward the river – is the fourth bridge! Engel looks with befuddlement at his companion. His face is streaming with sweat, with a blue-violet mark on his forehead testifying to a very high degree of stress, strangely white lips and eyes in which Engel believes he sees fear and reproach. He knows this look, which initially, when they were getting to know each other, so clear, so bright, so life-affirming, lifted his, Engel's, spirits, and which now, in my inner emptiness, he thinks, has grown hard and dark – an emptiness of which Boris, before I came into his life, knew nothing and perhaps also never wanted to know anything; I never know, he hears Boris say in his mind, whether when I come home from the school you'll be lying in the bed of some strange guy, in a sleeping pill-induced coma on the couch, in a pool of blood on the floor or dead at the bottom of the Rhine.

This is the third bridge, says Engel, removing his sunglasses. His voice sounds strained; the crushing feeling of abandonment that hounded him up and down the riverside road in a panic for a half-hour in search of his companion still binds his breast like an iron band. The highway bridge doesn't count, he adds defiantly. What

highway bridge? Boris asks. For a while they stand there, listen to the roar of the traffic, breathe the exhaust-filled air with winded lungs, and stare ahead. You're crying, says Boris, and strokes his cheek with a dirty hand. That's sweat, replies Engel, brushes Boris's hand away and, since nothing better occurs to him, hops back onto his bike; anyway, I pedaled through half the city on your account. On my account, repeats Boris, and Engel can't tell if that's meant in agreement or as a question.

He looks over Boris's shoulder to the river, in which the city sky, gray and lackluster, is reflected. Then Boris grabs him by the chin, turns his face toward him, and comes so near that Engel can smell the sunscreen on his skin, the peppermint breath and the stale and bitter odor of all the silently forced-down doubts, worries and injuries of the last years. Look back, Engel, says Boris, and strengthens the grip on his chin, just look back now and again; then we can't lose each other! Engel turns away, puts his sunglasses back on and points down the boulevard. In the next patisserie, he says, I'll get you all the cakes you can eat. But then, replies Boris, grinning, I'll get so heavy that the rest of the time you'll have to ride behind me and push me along! Ride behind you? Engel draws the gassy air into his lungs; for the first time after this endless half-hour, which, he thinks, was perhaps the loneliest yet of my life, he dares truly breathe again. Never! He laughs, and feels, as Boris nudges him in the shoulder, the iron band flying off his breast.

In the center of Tours, in front of the café terrace of a patisserie, he hears Boris calling something to him from behind. He wants to turn around, but sees at the same moment out of the corner of his eye the tractor-trailer threatening to run him over, and gestures to Boris with a sign meant to indicate KEEP GOING or STRAIGHT AHEAD or UNDERSTOOD. Then he pulls his cap brim down over his face, his shoulders up to his ears against the noise, and the collar of his T-shirt over his nose as protection against the exhaust of the giant truck, and pedals. To the sea, concludes his travel diary, is another three hundred twenty kilometers.

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