



((pp 9-17))

There was a quality of light he knew from back when he was a boy, that for many years thereafter he only ever would come across in the platform hall of his hometown railway station, and even then only on certain days. He often reflected on why a day in late April might have this glow, but not one in early May. Yet he enjoyed the simple experience of waiting, and when he took the subway from the harbour to the main station during his lunch break, it made him even happier if that light happened to be there.

Once, on a high-school outing to an exhibition of landscape painting, he had seen a similar glow in an old painting his art teacher had stopped in front of to tell the class about Impressionism and its precursors. The picture, which was neither very big nor particularly conspicuous, was by Camille Corot. It was of late-summer trees, poplars and locust trees, with a line of hills in the distance and, in the foreground, the edge of a field, in which a farmworker was cutting wheat and a woman, wearing a dress and apron and a bonnet on her head, was watching the man work. Wheat Field in the Morvan – nobody knew what this meant until his best friend Moritz told him that the Morvan was a region of Burgundy, a granite massif in central France. Everything in Corot's painting appeared to be bathed in light, like looking out through a window into a summer's day that was far in the past and yet endured into the present.

The sky over the city had never struck Raimund Merz as particularly huge, let alone endless, even when it was the same light-blue colour as the woman's dress by the edge of the wheat field in the painting. On the horizon, however, there was often a rosy glimmer to be seen over the harbour and the river Elbe, and as a boy, running along the sunken lanes of the Feldmark with the other children, he couldn't get enough of the magnificent Hamburg skies. Raimund Merz missed very few things

when he went away for a few golden terms to England after completing his schooling and his community service, supposedly to study Biology, but his homesickness – a light-sickness, really – was still there when he returned home in his mid-twenties and moved to Berlin for nearly a decade because his wife thought it would be a good move for her career – and his – to live for a while where everyone else was living who wanted to make something of their lives and themselves. Merz didn't have that kind of self-centred ambition.

Floriane had gone to England with him. While he dropped out of university and reluctantly embarked on a series of part-time jobs for magazines, she studied Dentistry in Birmingham, and Medicine too, for good measure, on her mother's advice. From the very beginning, Flori was destined to be an oral surgeon. For his part, he watched the skies and the clouds. Every so often he was fired. The British were world-beaters at firing people. Flori and he had been together for a very long time, and they didn't need much to get by. People like him stifled all desire to get ahead. The light was the only thing he missed more and more keenly, but there was no spot in the Midlands or in Berlin where a strip of light stood out in the sky as it had once done in the Feldmark – not even out at Lake Müggel, where they would go during their Berlin years to walk, paddle and swim, and where they later rented a summer house when Flori had started to make a good living.

The light he longed for appeared beneath the steel-and-glass roof of Hamburg's main station on maybe eight or ten days per month, and when it did, it seemed as if it had retreated into the hall because of the notoriously foul weather and was being preserved there. The light appeared to be waiting, not just for the travellers alighting from their trains, who seemed flabbergasted by this bright and glorious welcome to the Hanseatic city, but also as a blessing for locals like him as they wended their way along the platforms before or after work as if they were off-duty railway staff.

Merz sensed from this light that there were apparently very few things that really made life worthwhile for someone like him. Children, yes. Friendship, yes. And maybe love, and maybe memories. There was a mysterious, warm affection to this

glow, and the only reason he could make any sense of many of his experiences was because they had taken place in this light.

A few days after his younger daughter had turned eleven, he drove her into the city centre in the morning and walked her to the train. Linda's class was going on a school trip to the Black Forest, where they would stay in a hostel in the Kinzig valley. Twenty-three children and three teachers were waiting for the Intercity-Express train to arrive amid a throng of excited parents, mostly mothers, on the crowded platform. Half of one carriage had been reserved for the kids and their minders. It was a Monday morning in early September, but high summer seemed unlikely to end any time soon. A further oppressively muggy week was due to give way to further long and almost unbearably hot days.

There was a mad rush when the train finally pulled into the station. Amid the colourful seething mass of bodies, Merz barely had time to grab hold of Linda to give her one last hug. When she was standing by the carriage door at last, looking lost, with tears welling up in her eyes, she mustered all her courage and kissed him, even though this immediately prompted jeers of mockery from inside the train. It wasn't easy for Lindy at school. Her classmates and their parents had turned against her because she'd been caught stealing. No one could explain gentle little Linda Annabella Merz's kleptomaniac streak. Even the school psychologist appeared helpless, advising them that they should stay calm for the time being and wait and see how things turned out.

Merz waved to Lindy and ran alongside the accelerating train, pulling faces because he knew she loved that. He immediately broke out into a sweat, but he kept running, and even when he could no longer make out his girl's sad face through the tinted windows, he ran and ran and ran and ran and ran alongside the train, out into the open air.

He stopped, gasping for breath, gazed after the train until the final carriage had disappeared behind the Berlin Gate, then took his phone from his bag and wrote to tell Floriane that their daughter had got off fine. For a long time he stood there in the morning sun on the platform, looking up at the posters hanging motionless against the

front of the museum in the still air, waiting for Flori to reply. No answer came, though. He could still feel Lindy's peck on his lips and all at once he missed her badly. He imagined Floriane reading his message in the pre-noon frenzy of her surgery before forgetting the three sentences mere seconds later as she bent over her next patient's gaping mouth. He felt sorry for Linda. Deep down, something must be tormenting her and compelling her to take things that didn't belong to her. He didn't feel sorry for the boys and girls from whom she'd stolen a sticker album, a fountain pen and, most recently, the chip from a games console. The class called her Magpie Lindy. He felt as sorry for himself as he did for his daughter. He sensed the old secret sorrow begin to choke him. It was only really this that made him start to move, and it was only to distract himself from his sadness that he walked back into the station and into the light.

A motorail train full of large camper vans with Scandinavian licence plates thundered through the station and on towards Altona for unloading. The juggernaut made an unbelievable noise, which so unnerved Merz that he turned away and put his hands over his ears.

He stood for a while in this position at the bottom of an escalator that ascended to the main station hall. An uninterrupted stream of people passed him, hundreds going up, hundreds coming down, as if the same people kept going round and round. None of them appeared to notice the light, and soon he too closed his eyes, immersing himself in the blackness, and opening them again only when the cement floor stopped shaking.

He took a deep breath. Just then, just as the roaring and rattling of the train passing a few yards from him began to subside, and he saw the light again and felt the familiar pang of leave-taking and his sadness that the only way of alleviating this feeling of abandonment was to distract himself, to keep going and to carry on . . . just then, Inger came down the escalator. He saw her, but she wasn't looking in his direction but rather to one side, over the tracks and towards the platforms. He recognised her at once, but was quick-witted enough to spin around and walk past the escalator and into the maze of tunnels beneath the main station hall. He strode off

towards a dead-end, with no way out or in. He realised that this was strange behaviour. Nobody had any reason to enter this dark underpass, and so he stopped walking, as if a film had been put on pause.

She didn't follow him. He stood there in the half-darkness, staring after her. It was her, all right. She kept walking along the platform without glancing back at him, seemingly oblivious. Inger hadn't recognised him. Apparently, she hadn't even noticed him.

No suitcase, no rucksack: she had no luggage. All she had with her, slung over her shoulder, was a slender red handbag, the same colour as her nail varnish. She was wearing a light-coloured summer dress, dotted with oversized, oddly pale poppies. Her hair was as it used to be in Berlin, long and loose, although it seemed a little less blonde – no longer quite so dazzlingly blonde. Inger had aged: her fear of ageing had been incapable of preventing that.

He followed her at a safe distance. Her hair glittered in a way he thought seemed very familiar until he saw that she had pushed a pair of sunglasses up onto the top of her head and they were reflecting the light. He shook his head at his own silliness and smiled, and this made him feel safe, as if his smile were a shield.

Slowly his nervousness subsided and his tenseness gave way to an acute curiosity he hadn't felt in a long while. He enjoyed the fact that she couldn't see him while he could keep his eye on her. He wondered which train she was waiting for and where she was heading. Inger vanished into a kiosk on the platform. Merz stood still and – it looked practised, even to him – immediately fished his mobile out of his bag. No answer from Flori. He hid behind a timetable board and pretended to look up the departure time of the Monday morning Intercity-Express to Stuttgart, which he and Bruno would be catching next week. Waiting there, he was keenly aware of the quixotic absurdity of his behaviour.

His eyes fell on the departure board. There was no train leaving from this platform. The next one was an arrival, the delayed night train from Budapest. Budapest – Vienna – Prague – Berlin – Hamburg.

Only now, for the first time in many weeks or months, did he allow himself to think of Moritz without immediately chasing the thought from his mind. He didn't know if they were still married, but if they were, Inger was probably meeting her husband off the train. Merz considered making a run for it. There was no way he wanted to have to watch her and Moritz greet each other, as they used to when they arrived separately at the garden in the village, or later in Weissensee and out in Köpenick, when Inger had been painting in her studio and joined them later for a swim.

Shielded by the timetable board, he tossed back his head and stared up into the light falling through the glass roof onto the trains, the tracks and the travellers on the platforms. He felt himself panicking, and so he ran away from the sight he didn't want to see, and from his fear of seeing it. He rushed back to the escalator and into the crowd, where he felt safe. Wrongly, as it turned out.

*((pp. 195-206))*

The light was murky during the grey days Raimund Merz spent as Bruno DeWitt's companion in Stuttgart. A milky haze hung over the city, the hole in its centre where the railway station had once been, and the river, its banks lined with anglers who obviously had no idea how to pass the time and therefore killed it as they did the loaches, the bleaks, the nases and the other fish they pulled from the river Neckar.

Despondency. Almost everything in those days struck Merz as an assault. For so long he had resisted and gritted it out, but now he felt completely at the mercy of events. He was sitting alone on a bench on the riverbank between the Rosenstein bridge and Wilhelma, irritated, sunk in black thoughts and clutching a half-empty bottle of Chardonnay under his trench coat. He let the events of the past forty-eight hours file through his mind, contemplating his hopeless situation.

He had started off full of verve, keen to wipe the slate clean. He recounted all his experiences with Moritz, Inger and Floriane over the many years in the village, during his time alone with Flori in Birmingham, when the four of them had met up again in Berlin and, finally, during their married years in Hamburg. Bruno and he plundered the minibars in their hotel rooms near Olgaek underground station, draining all there was to drink. None of it had helped: neither drunkenness nor confession, neither boozing nor laughing, not tears, not sleep, not dreams, not begging, not sorrow or curses.

Bruno had listened patiently. He knew the details of Merz's marriage from many previous conversations. It came as no surprise to Bruno that his friend had been in love with another woman all this time. Who could live without loving? Yet he showed as much understanding for Floriane's view of the matter. Merz thought highly of him for giving him his time and for setting his own cares aside.

Bruno had his meetings at the art museum in the mornings, discussed matters with the curator of the Impressionist exhibition in the state gallery at midday and in the afternoons met up with his chance acquaintance from the train with a conspicuous blue vein at the corner of her mouth and many red freckles. Her name was Ali, short for Alice. She taught at a primary school in the north of Stuttgart and had a lot of free time at the start of the school year. Merz bumped into her twice in the hallway of the hotel – a sign, he suspected, that she didn't live alone and therefore couldn't take Bruno back to her place. It soon turned out that he was mistaken: Ali did live on her own and always had done, she said. She once whispered to Merz that he was right, his friend was dangerous, but for other reasons. With a sad smile she said, 'He's impossible to do without, isn't he?'

Merz had known this for years. He barely made a difficult decision without first discussing it with Bruno, either in person or in his imagination. Merz himself had no idea why it was that you couldn't get Bruno DeWitt out of your head and why not only every female, but absolutely everyone, took him into their hearts.

Ali assumed she'd never see Bruno again. She didn't know any better. She would see him – not often, but whenever he could manage it. She'd have to share him, though. There was always more than one freckle, thought Merz when he looked at Alice. He was very taken by the blue vein by her mouth.

There were people who slept, and others who made the beds. Mareike Kennedy's editor-in-chief's heart had to be big because she had once told Bruno in passing in a glass corridor in *Der Tag* newspaper's maze of offices, »Mr DeWitt, my heart isn't a hotel, but there'll always be a room for you there. A room with a view, no less.«

In contrast, everyone save Bruno seemed to have forgotten Merz. Had he fallen off the Earth? Where had he fallen to? He sat by the river Neckar, gazing at the muddy water streaming past, surrounded by anglers, joggers and dogs dragging their leashes along until their owners stepped on the cord, choking the animal as they reeled it in. It began to rain. He pulled the bottle out from under his coat and drank.

Neither Floriane nor the children had called. Had Linda even taken her mobile with her on the school trip? Prissy seemed to have more important things on her mind than worrying about her father. However, it wasn't up to kids to remember their parents.

It was quite possible that a locksmith was changing the locks on their house right then. It was quite conceivable that Floriane had put the Phoebus on the market for a knockdown price or simply left it standing with the windows open outside a tower block in Wilhelmsburg. Yes, it was quite possible that his life in Hamburg was imploding while the drizzle fell silently on Stuttgart.

What was stopping him from sending Prissy a text? Really only the fact that her mother would be nearby. He should have got in touch with Inger long ago after reading her cry for help. Despite all the time that had passed since that letter, he'd have had to go along with her request and try to come clean with Moritz. Maybe it was too late. Hopefully it was too late. But what if it wasn't?

He'd taken the easiest option by doing nothing. He neither enquired how Priska was, nor did he ask her about her sister or simply visit Lindy – after all, the Kinzig valley wasn't far away! He didn't send a message to Inger either: it would have been

easy via Pippa's school. He preferred to wander around an unfamiliar city, feeling misunderstood, branded and depressed, drinking, dozing, dreaming and hanging out on park benches. Yes, he neglected himself and suffered from his self-neglect, and that only made him neglect himself and suffer even more. He wasn't Prince Arjuna. There'd been some misunderstanding: he'd never had that silvery glow of serenity. Rainwater ran off his head and down his neck into his collar. He swore, even though the rain was warm and its scent soon filled the riverside park.

As a boy, when his mother was weeping downstairs and it was raining outside, he had tilted the window open in his attic room. Rain seemed endless to him: it rained, and nothing could be done about that. Rain was the only force that was truly free and fair. Rain fell on everything left outside and unprotected; it fell on the quick, on the slow, on those who loved and those who hated themselves or other people, on the living and the dead, on infants and the elderly, probably even on the unborn and spirits and ghosts. Perhaps his father – who must after all be somewhere – was walking through this rain right now. Nothing else made such a beautiful sound, and nothing demonstrated the unfathomable diversity of the earth like the rain as it pattered and flowed. Merz discovered a star, a crystal, the shape of an animal, a ramification, a crater and a city map among the grass stalks at his feet on the banks of the Neckar.

In comparison to the editor-in-chief's hotel-sized heart, his own seemed paltry. How could it not? Self-destruction began in the heart; you always lost sight of your own desires first, and before you knew it your inner emotional compass had shrivelled to the size of a grain of sand. He hadn't initially noticed the atrophy of his inner life when it had set in a few years ago. His decline seemed barely more inconvenient than indigestion, a slight headache or an inflamed patch on the back of his hand. But then one morning he hadn't got out of bed, had turned his face to the wall, dozed off again and slept through the conference about the *Tag's* digital future that he had been preparing for months. The only people who noticed were Melly, the almost invisible secretary, and Bruno, who forgave him and put him on sick leave.

The internet age had dawned without him. Suddenly, long-standing colleagues he met in the company canteen got on his nerves. They finally seemed to have found a way to avoid conversing with other people. They swiped on their smartphones; they scrolled, mailed, posted, texted and used Whatsapp. They took photos of their food-laden plates before eating, and uploaded them to Facebook or Instagram, as if these were enormous, insatiable stomachs. For a time he took pains to stay friendly, polite and attentive, occasionally ordering prosecco for everyone and, later, white wine just for himself. But the result was that his days in the editorial department became as chaotic as his family life, and his working hours lost all sense of structure – their content, their purpose, their meaning and reality. Had he only become a regular drinker while working at the *Tag* in Hamburg? Nope! He had come into this world a drinker; he was born to drink and had drunk his way through his childhood and youth and then, unlike everyone else he knew, he'd never stopped. That didn't make him a boozier. At worst, a bit of a loser. He'd never drunk like a fish, and he virtually never hit the hard stuff. Only in exceptional circumstances did he drink before six o'clock, sticking to beer and later to white wine. He only drank red wine if it was a balanced Bordeaux or a fine Lagrein. He knew his limits and how far he could push them. A man like Raimund Merz drank so as to at least lend a little shape and a certain depth and grace to the days as they crumbled between his fingers and, not uncommonly, but oddly, it would occur to him that a bunch of happy young souls had once called him 'Ray' and that secretly he'd enjoyed that, more than almost anything else since those days with Inger in the unruly garden in the summery Feldmark.

That was how he had slid onto the dark side and learned that if he was a luminous figure – something he'd always believed – then he could only be a sub-species, an ecstatic, bibulous, alcoholic luminous figure. Ray. Ray of light. Even a ray of light could end up sidelined at the office summer party or at a barbecue organised by neighbours who weren't really neighbours but, at best, people who lived next door; and then he would drink too much and then talk too much and then, out of sheer boredom or, in truth, sheer despair, he would flirt with the wife of a twerp who bragged that he'd read everything by James Salter, John Cheever and Raymond Carver. Someone like Bruno DeWitt knew of course that this couldn't be true,

because John Cheever had left thousands and thousands of pages of diaries, of which only extracts had ever been published.

»Nine-tenths of it has never been seen by anyone but his wife and children«, Bruno said to the boaster, and the man waved his hand dismissively and stalked off to the terrace fridge to open another beer.

»Come with me«, he said to his wife, who stared sheepishly at the grass before obediently moving away.

»Take care«, said Merz.

»Sure«, she said.

He'd never heard of Cheever. Merz neither kept a diary nor read anybody else's diary. He very seldom read fiction. Actually, he almost only ever read books about entomology. During the hours he spent sitting on the banks of the Neckar he had in the inside pocket of his coat, if only for his own safety, a paperback edition, sticky on the outside and porous inside, of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau's *A Natural History of Insects*, which he had purchased from an antiquarian. *Hymenoptera*. In Stuttgart he read Le Peletier's unforgettable descriptions of the five species of digger wasp native to the shores of the Mediterranean.

All too often he had stumbled into the jaws of lurking depression on such supposedly festive occasions or, worse, he had laughed at others for fear of appearing a laughing stock himself. Floriane despised him for his ritual evening beer, his obligatory half-bottle of white wine to top off two pints of beer. She got embarrassed when he drank a whole bottle of white wine, sometimes even two, at social events, suddenly pulled himself up to his full height and smoked a joint, which made him boisterous and witty and lewd and often snide and mean. He made her sick, Merz knew: his stench at night, his slurred speech, his scurrilous talk, his denigration of her sisters and mother. Yuck! The next morning that wish that you could wake up from a nightmare in which you'd died. Then, luckily, Linda would sometimes come and jump in bed with him, snuggle up and stroke his two-day beard – what Lindy called his grey stubble field. When Merz tried to envision what might have caused him to surrender and let himself go like this, he saw no chasm he might have fallen into, just a wide, barren plain stretching out before his mind's eye, and then something pricked

the corner of his eye: the wind rushing over the grey stubble field had blown a shrivelled heart into it. One of countless broken hearts like his; a grain of sand.

Find out who you are. Find out where you really come from and where you belong when you've stopped pretending to yourself. He had comforted himself as they got off the train and Bruno and he wheeled their trolley cases along the edge of the crater in the heart of the station. Though his marriage was presumably over, life went on regardless.

He had gazed out of the window of the taxi on their way to the Olgaeck underground station, noticing nothing but a little girl in a tracksuit standing on her own at the tram station and gazing up inquisitively at the top of a tree being buffeted by the wind. What was up there for the girl to marvel at? He'd craned his neck but hadn't spotted anything remarkable. No kite tangled in the branches, no balloon, no brightly coloured bird. He'd seen only the wind, and the wind shaking the trees had drawn his attention to the murky sky, the scudding clouds, great flocks of birds high above the city. He suddenly realised that he was in Stuttgart. All at once, that sadness, that boundless nostalgia was back.

For the first time it occurred to him to give it all up. Splitting up with Floriane – you can say it! Something nameless inside him – something ancient that must have been the remnants of the grocer's spirit that the families of his mother and his deceased father had schlepped with them through the generations – whispered to him that he could live without his wife. Live better, indeed. Dr Lepsius earned a good living; more than a good living. Month after month Flori raked in three times as much into their account as he did. The way it looked, she'd have to pay him alimony. He was set up for life! Now he'd have payback for all those years and decades of silent suffering and enduring.

But people like him were ashamed of such calculating impulses. Greed, be gone, he repeated daily to himself. He even managed to banish these very first thoughts he'd entertained of breaking up, thought of Priska Marie and Linda Annabella – Prissy and Lindy, his daughters he lived with, and his illegitimate daughter Pippa, who possibly didn't even know that he, rather than Moritz Rauch, was her father.

Shadow, dust and wind. He saw her throwing herself into Inger's arms on the concourse of Hamburg station, saw Pippa before him on her cloud bicycle and remembered her dog, which looked like a young fox and which the girl had called Sleipner. Strange, because that's what Floriane's sister's Giant Schnauzer had been called three decades ago – Sleipner, after Odin's eight-legged stallion, on which he could ride both forwards and backwards through time.

Inger or Moritz must have told the child about the old days; about the garden, the four friends, as they'd been; about the dog that often kept them company; yes, even about the boy they'd apparently both liked very much: Raimund.

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