

Schöffling & Co.

foreign rights

author Julia Trompeter
title SPRING IN UTRECHT
original title FRÜHLING IN UTRECHT
© 2019 by Schöffling & Co.

English sample translation

translated by Caroline Waight
copyright for the translation Caroline Waight

contact Anke Grahl
phone: +49 69 92 07 87 15
anke.grahl@schoeffling.de

Schöffling & Co.
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH
Foreign Rights
Kaiserstraße 79
60329 Frankfurt am Main
Germany

www.schoeffling.de

((pp. 31–37))

Theesalon

By the time I arrived at the *Theesalon van Griet*, housed in one of the old cellars below the Oudegracht, the kind built into the side wall, where pedestrians ambled constantly overhead and you felt a bit like you were in some cosy crypt, it was shortly after two and still quiet – silent, even. The tearoom didn't open till three, but I had to be there an hour before my shift to prepare everything for the afternoon rush. Well, rush is an overstatement, because you couldn't squeeze in more than fifteen customers at once; that was maximum capacity, with respect to both the space and the staff. That is, for me. Or Tom or Suzanne. We worked solo shifts, so each of us had to do everything simultaneously: brew coffee, make tea, serve cake, work the till, plus – and this was really the time-consuming thing, the thing that dragged me now and then into a proper pickle – when you worked at the *Theesalon van Griet* you were also a tour guide, a surrogate family, a social worker and a source of spiritual comfort.

Locking my *fiets* to the railings along the bridge, I glanced down at the Oudegracht. The greenish water was flowing very slowly; leaves spun silently on the surface, the colours that had been so bright only a few days earlier now gradually paling. The fiery red was now already brownish, the glowing rapeseed-yellow that had seemed to me like the last preserved rays of the sun was now scarcely less dull than a medium-matured gouda, and even the warm pumpkin-orange was somehow washed-out, as though some formerly van Gogh-like God were running out of paint. The wind had picked up, shaking the branches so roughly it seemed to be trying to snatch off the last of their faded burden. It sounded like a mouse rustling through a mountain of wrapping paper on Christmas Eve. Christmas, I thought. Oh no. Please, please be resolute, *don't* think about Christmas right now – and why does telling yourself stuff like that never actually work?

Luckily Christmas wasn't really Christmas in Utrecht, so maybe it wouldn't be too bad, doing without it for a year. Although I found it difficult to imagine skipping it when everything around me was already twinkling, already plunged into the bustle of capitalism. The shopping streets had their decorations up, and apparently someone had spotted one of the many *Sinterklaase* that washed up on the Dutch coast each November in a big boat. Christmas worked similarly here to back home in Germany – similarly, yet quite differently at the same time. The evening before 6 December, St Nicholas Day, children here were handed an imposing mountain of presents, so by 24 December there wasn't much left to do. There might be a handful of people in this small heathen-protestant nation still going to mass, I couldn't rule it out, and somebody had once told me about a Christian part of the country, the *bijbelgordel*, that cut across the middle like a literal Bible belt, but the vast majority wouldn't go. I'd asked my colleague Tom what people did on Christmas Eve, then, if they weren't unwrapping presents like in Germany or going to church. And Tom had replied that people listened to the radio.

What? I'd cried, thinking I'd misheard.

Yeah, said Tom, at Christmas people listen to a particular radio broadcast. They play four thousand of the world's most popular hits, right through Christmas and New Year, round the clock.

What? I'd asked Tom, people listen to pop music continuously over the entire Christmas period?

Nah, he'd said, obviously not continuously. They sleep every now and then, and they eat.

Even now I'm still astonished by this information, astonished and pleased, and Tom was equally astonished and pleased by my astonishment and pleasure, so something good came out of the culture clash. What did the fact that the whole country continuously listened to pop music on the radio from the day of Jesus's birth till New Year say about its people? What were the sources of this custom, and what were its consequences? I hadn't reached a final conclusion on this question, but I was convinced it indicated a difference, and that this difference could only increase the liking I already felt for this country. A people who could listen to pop music for days

at a stretch over Christmas, a period when intra-familial and intrapersonal crises were virtually predestined, without this leading to mass divorce and the general splintering of the Dutch family, had to have reached a pretty high level on the scale of modern stoicism. For if it was true what contemporary sociologists researching emotions had discovered, then the Dutch had to be spending the period up to New Year in one enormous hyper-romantic projected bubble. Judging by the books I'd read during my brief study of sociology, which had been even more short-lived than my time studying German, pop music contributed hugely to a false perception of love and romance, because it promoted the sense of an eternal bond and belonging, and assumed co-dependence and possessiveness within a relationship. So if this had no real consequences for the people in this country and their interpersonal connections, despite the din, then that really did speak to a profound psychological resilience, to minds able to cope magnificently even with the music industry's most intensive brainwashing.

The steps down to the *Theesalon van Griet* were slippery with damp and leaves, fog clung to the walls, and I felt as though I were vanishing into some underwater realm. I had to shove open the door, which always warped in the cold. Fumbling, I found the switch, and instantly the tearoom was illuminated by an elaborate arrangement of lights. Two pairs of chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling, small reading lamps were scattered across the tables, and a bright spotlight lit the tiny stage, where musicians, poets and other performers kept themselves and their small audience enthralled on the weekends. First things first: I turned up the heating, which was kept low overnight. The room was dank, but that would change. The baking tin, rolling pin and various mixing bowls sparkled on the countertop. The last shift – either Tom or Suzanne – had done a good job of leaving everything ship-shape.

I started at once. We always had fresh apple pie for the customers, baking it in the hour before the tearoom opened. I found it a bit of a chore, but there were many regulars for whom our *appeltaart* was the tearoom's main attraction. The tasty pie was made using a recipe handed down by Suzanne's grandmother, and it swam in cinnamon, honey and syrup. Suzanne always insisted it had healing powers, and her

grandma was, fair play to her, approaching ninety. First time I made the pie I messed it up, because I thought the recipe had to be wrong somehow.

So much syrup, and cinnamon by the spoonful! I'd thought. That can't be right.

But it was. The apples came from Suzanne's garden, so they were proper ones: tart, pesticide-free, thick-skinned. Not the washed, cloned, supermarket kind but natural apples, some older variety a bit like russets, but not. They were stored on the shelves in a hidden corner of the tearoom. One neatly next to another, so that they didn't spoil. People are like apples, I thought. They go rotten too, if they're left all jumbled up. And as I stirred butter and sugar into froth, cracked eggs, measured flour and hunted for baking powder; as I chopped hazelnuts, peeled apples and cut them into delicate half-moons, kneaded and rolled out the dough, placing the apple slices onto it like soldiers arranged in rank and file, mixed cream and syrup, honey and cinnamon and drizzled it over the apple army, I felt calm, almost empty of thought. The movements were unambiguous in their way, significantly less ambiguous than the articulation of them could ever be, and for a while that let me forget the crack that had appeared in my reality. Right here and now I was whole, and the *appeltaart* I was making would also be whole, at least for a while, even if its name and taste were different from German *Apfelkuchen*. Better, I mean.

(...)

((pp. 149–158))

Dodenherdinking

The morning I left Berlin, Hauke overslept. I'm honestly not trying to say anything bad about him, only that he literally snoozed right through my departure. My train left the station at 7.34 a.m., and although the early hour posed a challenge to my biorhythm too, I wasn't tired at all, more deadened, dreaming. It was 1 November, All Saints' Day in Germany, but in Holland merely another day of the week: plain, grey, wet. Probably in both countries it had become no more than a post-Halloween hangover anyway, and I didn't care. My suitcase had been packed for days in spirit, so when I woke up that morning I crammed into it the most important stuff in a kind of trance, effortless and mindless. By the time I set off it was full of all the things I thought I'd need most urgently: my electric toothbrush, some painkillers, three books – one old (Robert Walser's *Robber*), one recent (Gerbrand Bakker's *Jasper and His Servant*) and another old one that I planned to read once I'd learned Dutch (Remco Campert's *Het leven is vurrukkulluk*) – a few CDs, two pairs of shoes, two pairs of trousers, underwear, shirts, pullovers, passport.

It was cold and damp in the apartment. Winter was slowly gaining ground, and anyone who knows Berlin knows the winters there are in quite another category from the wisps of cold air and gentle mizzle in the west. Winters in Berlin start in early November and end, with a bit of luck, in late April, although it can sometimes keep snowing into May. Buckets of cold rain are normal even in June. The tell-tale signs of a Berlin winter are darkness and a searing chill. One time, it must have been around 2009 or 2010, there hadn't been a thaw for so long that it wasn't until Easter, when the waters finally swelled and the icicles fell from the roofs, smashing like deadly spears against the cobbles, that all the New Year's fireworks and empty bottles of champagne reappeared on the pavements, where they had spent weeks – months, in fact – hidden beneath thick snowdrifts. Later, on Easter Sunday, I'd gone to my favourite all-night corner shop in Wedding to pick up milk or whatever, some basic thing we needed but as usual had forgotten to buy, when I got the sudden urge to wish

my fellow humans a Happy New Year. In Utrecht they were called *avondwinkel* or *nachtwinkel* and were really just regular shops with extended opening hours, not proper kiosks, and in any case they were a rarity. Not that that was a problem, because of course I was trying to learn to do my shopping in the light of day.

Anyway, on that early November morning last year, the morning I left, it was already pretty frosty; a clear day, the cold fogging up the inside of our windowpanes so that the odd trickle ran down them like a tear. And I can still recall the feeling that crept over me as I shut the front door. There are many, mostly clumsy metaphorical words that try to describe emotions, and if I wanted to go rummaging around in the grab-bag of ancient descriptors for what I felt I'd probably pick out *uneasy*, maybe also *deserted*, most likely with a base note of something like *disconsolate*. The *uneasy* bit is self-explanatory, I think; after all, I was leaving a stable if not exactly good situation, stepping out of a system that functioned somehow and emerging into the new and unfamiliar. I was a Berlin Robinson Crusoe, Columbus, Humboldt, setting off into the New World, and come to think of it, why weren't there any famous women to use as examples? *Deserted*, however, I probably have to explain. Why, one might ask, would a woman feel *deserted* if she's the one doing the deserting? Surely it would have made more sense to feel like I was the *deserter*, or even *undeserving*, *undependable*? After all, in a few hours, maybe only three or four, poor Hauke would have woken from his stupor, found the bed empty next to him, and not been worried at all. She's got up then, he'd have thought, maybe she's meeting someone or, in a brief surge of altruism, has gone to the baker to buy some rolls. Hauke would have rubbed his eyes drowsily and staggered into the battlefield of the kitchen, his hair charmingly tousled, wearing his old shorts and the threadbare Ramones T-shirt I'd seen him in last, which he'd be wearing forever now, in my memory at least. And if he was lucky, there'd have been some coffee left in the blue tin, and, if he was even luckier, some milk just on the turn and not just past it. He would have put the radio on, and the host of Radio Berlin would have told him someone had been pushed in front of a train at Uhlandstraße, at least I'm pretty sure they would have, because the host had said so three hours earlier while I was at the baker's buying coffee. Filter coffee in a small brown retro plastic cup, the way they served it in Wedding, where you could always pick and choose whether you were behind or ahead of your time.

Yes, and I'd felt *disconsolate* as well. The feeling twisted deep inside my belly, from my solar plexus to my guts. It was and is an awful feeling, fathomless and desolate. I see it sometimes in the eyes of children crouching outside shops, holding signs written in a language they understand poorly if at all. It's a bad comparison, of course, because obviously I wasn't an underage, unaccompanied refugee, as we like to call our country's missing children in bureaucratic German, but an adult woman halfway through a degree, provided-for at least in the basic sense, with total freedom of movement, a woman whose plastic passport with its obligatory unsmiling photograph let her travel wherever she wanted to go. Yet I was disconsolate, just as disconsolate as any other person might be when they're standing over the broken shards of something, even if – or maybe precisely because – they've broken the shattered thing themselves, if they lose it and miss it and are torn apart inside.

So it was All Saint's Day when my train to nowhere departed, and for some reason I'd assumed at first that *dodenherdenking* was the Dutch equivalent. But this 4 May, almost exactly six months after I arrived, I am surprised – although in theory I was told ages ago about the date – to find everything in my new world grind to a halt at eight p.m. on the dot. And only now does it become clear that the German All Saint's Day, condensed into a single day during the first centuries AD due to an inflationary spike in the number of saints, the day when you're supposed to remember all these miraculous people at once, has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the political and liberal gesture of *dodenherdenking*. I'm standing at the till in Albert Heijn when it happens. Of course, neither I nor the other shoppers can hear the *taptoe*, the trumpet sounding a tattoo in Amsterdam, but the indecipherable murmuring of an employee through the loudspeakers in the ceiling and the ensuing silence that sweeps across the country – that I can hear perfectly well. It's so silent in the usually *gezellige* supermarket that I can hear the beating wings of a moth, trapped and confused in the orbit of a halogen bulb; so silent that I can hear my own blood rushing in my ears. So now I'm standing here, I think – no, I know – at this moment, this minute, on this patch of Dutch soil, and everyone is keeping silent.

I gaze at the blonde head of the young beauty in front of me, standing raptly with a box of eggs in her hand, upright yet loosely poured, like a Rodin sculpture. I

gaze at the two old men, one of whom is picking fussily at his cotton handkerchief. I gaze at the poor *bedelaar* by the glass doors, who has stopped begging for *muntjes*, *muntjes* and now is looking almost solemn. And I try to see into myself and my own head. Perhaps some of these people really are thinking about the war dead, of heroes and anti-heroes, and of those who at some point were simply gone, mislaid, so to speak, all the brothers and fathers and sons. But anybody thinking of them is probably thinking too of all the dead sisters, of mothers and daughters in the rubble, and of the infants who had the potential to be either sex, and whose death went unnoticed from the outside. Yet perhaps, or more likely, the people here are thinking of their own dead, those who have died of old age and cancer, of miscarriages and accidents, of drugs and alcohol, of heart attacks and suicide, thinking of the gap everybody has to mourn somewhere in their family or group of friends. And although I don't want to, I feel a tear running down my cheek, from an eye that is after all a kind of window, like the window in our kitchen, only my eye opens not onto Wedding in November but Utrecht in May. So this is what it's like, I think, in Utrecht in the spring.

Oh, and it's hardly a new world. I'm not a proper explorer, of course – Holland was already a fully developed country by the time I began my spontaneous settlement of it six months ago. Still, I make lots of new discoveries every single day; sometimes I feel like an undercover detective who can't stop marvelling at the ever-smaller differences. But getting back to the female explorers for a minute, Wikipedia actually has a long list of important explorers, featuring roughly eight hundred names in alphabetical order, and not until letter D do you find the first woman: Alexandra David-Néel, a French travel writer who apparently researched Tibetan culture and Buddhism. According to the article, she was the daughter of a militant republican and an arch-Catholic mother, which probably helps explain her personality – it must have been an explosive mix, because at seventeen, at the end of the nineteenth century, she left home to make her first independent journey. Only to Switzerland, of course, but who am I to nit-pick. The next lady appears under E – Isabelle Eberhardt, Swiss, also a travel writer – but there's subsequently no hint of femininity for a long, long stretch amid a sea of Georges and Carls and Ottos and Juleses and Pedros; I briefly held out

hope for Elisha Kent Kane under K, but on closer inspection she turned out to be an extremely beardy man.

Naturally I wonder whether this blatant, near-total, enough-to-make-your-eyes-pop-out inequality is due solely to historical, sociological and political reasons, or whether there's some psychological cause as well, something that might denote a mental difference between men and women. Or has the encyclopaedia simply whitewashed female explorers out of existence? It's possible. Seems unlikely, though, when I think about it more closely. Probably the one-sided split boils down to the fact that the great discoveries of the past, of continents and the like, decreased proportionally as emancipation progressed. It's not like there are many new continents discovered these days; I can't remember a single one within the last fifty or hundred years, and now that you can take a virtual helicopter ride over your entire travel itinerary via Google Maps before you even set foot out the door, there's pretty much nothing left to discover. Might as well stay at home, the woman of the world could justifiably conclude, and leave all future discoveries to a simple algorithm.

There was, incidentally, at least one very famous Dutchman among the explorers: Abel Tasman, who discovered New Zealand in 1642. Having said that, he wasn't brave enough to actually disembark. The Maoris who already lived there seemed understandably a little put out by the influx of overseas tourists, so he decided against planting his little orange flag in the sand.

This excerpt is presented for informational purposes only – any use or copying for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited. For further information on international rights for this title please contact us.