

Translated excerpt

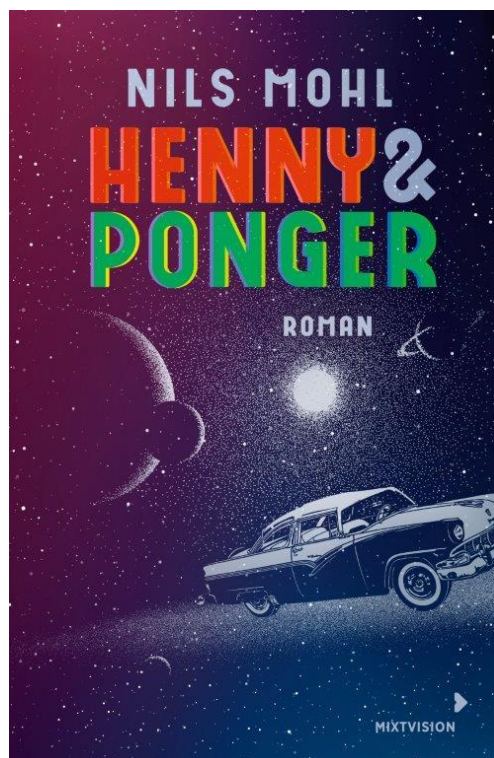
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Henny & Ponger

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Henny & Ponger

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I

S-Bahn 31 to Hamburg-Altona

1.

He has been staring and staring at her, and it's only when they're nearing the station that he realises that he's heading in the wrong direction and that he's never going to reach his stop. But he still doesn't get off at the next one.

She hasn't looked at him even once.

2.

The novel on his lap is open, but he can't concentrate on it. The carriage is packed, and the air is heavy with breath and bodies. The artificial light casts pale highlights on all the faces - apart from hers. She is untouchable. Her lips are shining. Her eyes even more so.

He can see this when they pull in at a station and she looks up.

Only ever for a couple of seconds, because she's reading too. Sitting on one of the transverse seats diagonally opposite him. Facing towards him. Even so, he can't tell what kind of book she's reading. The aisle between them is packed, and a scruffy looking figure is half obscuring his view as he rattles his cardboard cup, asking for spare change.

Watching someone unobserved takes a lot of practice. He had tried the roundabout way of peering round the glass pane, then had been quite blatant about it. But as soon as she turns a page or shifts position, he turns straight back to his own book. Or appears to, at any rate. Just as now, for example.

His chest feels tighter than normal, even though she once again hasn't looked at him. Not even for a second.

3.

He's still wearing his work overalls. Embroidery on the breast pocket: Susi's Garage. His fingers are encrusted with dirt. As they would be with someone who spent hour after hour screwing and soldering electronic parts, endlessly reaching for tools.

She's wearing a raincoat with a hood, bright yellow on the outside, navy blue on the inside, as fishermen wear in bad weather.

Compared to her, all the other passengers look ghostly white and exhausted. Odd, what one day does to the body. Muscles slacken, tiredness seeps out of the pores.

But she is smiling.

She even gives the scruffy individual a few friendly words and a coin. She speaks. "I'm afraid I haven't got much to give you. You can have my coat, if you like."

That voice.

As if she's setting up an invisible connection with the person she's looking at. The same with that smile. He can't understand it.

Is he the only one who can see it? Her presence gives the space around her a silvery aura. Simultaneously soothing and unsettling.

Her, so close yet a stranger: that's Henny.

4.

In the tunnel, Henny's silhouette is reflected in the windowpane behind her in a curious way. Framed with light, perhaps because of her hair or the yellow hood. Now, as the scruffy figure shuffles onwards, opening up the view of the other side of the aisle slightly more, the train enters an overground section of the line. The outside world flashes by, gaudy-grey.

Henny squints.

He squints.

The sun forces its way through one of the gaps in the leaden sky and hits the massive city centre buildings. Frontages sparkle from the last downpour. A fleeting spectacle. The clouds fold in on themselves once more, and a kind of colourless huskiness returns and envelops the universe. Typical weather for this part of the world; lots of rain, even in summer.

He pricks up his ears.

Someone close to Henny is speaking.

5.

The two guys on the pair of seats opposite her are messing around. They could be a bit older than Henny. One of them is holding a bunch of roses. "Your bird's going to think it's a proposal," the other one says.

"Don't say I'm not romantic," the first one retorts. He has the hair of a romantic: bright red, like a coxcomb.

“And I’m a sceptic. I’m wondering whether that’s good old school stuff, or just completely out?” The sceptic is shaven-headed and has a nose ring. “Vase or compost? That’s the question.”

Coxcomb gives him a slightly offended look from behind the bouquet. Then he taps Henny on the knee. “We need your opinion. Does the Knight of the Rose still have a future in our day and age?”

Henny looks up. “In a world in which having butterflies in your stomach is constantly being turned into some big event, I can’t imagine it any other way.”

“Told you so.” Coxcomb elbows his companion in the ribs.

“Well, she reads books. What else do you expect?”

Henny suddenly takes a deep breath. “Though I personally find giving someone roses pretty lame.”

“Really? Lame, eh? So what would you find more exciting?” Coxcomb demands.

“If it’s about butterflies in your stomach, then it would seem to make sense for someone to build you a swing. Just for example.”

“Cool present. Good suggestion.”

Nose-ring looks at Henny with satisfaction. But she says: “It would actually be best, obviously, to separate feelings from your choice of partner. Anyone who’s really into someone is rarely able to make sensible decisions.”

The train speeds up and races down a track with graffiti-covered walls left and right. Henny crosses her legs. One foot moves rhythmically in mid air.

She isn’t wearing any shoes.

Coxcomb clears his throat. “You’re barefoot.”

She curls her lip in mockery. However, she replies without so much as raising an eyebrow. “Yes. I’m barefoot. But that doesn’t change anything about the fact that romantic love just throws people into emotional turmoil, and all the other catastrophes that go with it.”

Nose-ring tugs on his nose ring. “As a feminist, I’m shocked by this. Are you seriously advocating arranged marriages?”

“Arranged partnerships. That’s completely different.”

“So you’re saying that my mate might as well chuck his flowers in the bin and ask his parents to find someone for him?”

Henny shrugs. “That’s nothing to do with me. All I can say is that falling in love is extremely dangerous.”

And then – he reacts too slowly, far too slowly – she looks directly at him. At him in his baggy, battered overalls. And shuts her book.

Look.

Book.

Has he gone red?

6.

He – he who has spent the entire journey staring and staring at her – jerks upright. The pressure wave from a train speeding in the opposite direction makes the carriage shudder.

He is suddenly on his feet. He is Ponger.

7.

His heavy work boots seem to tell him which way to go. He moves from his seat in the middle of the carriage, away from her, shuffles past the beggar who rejected Henny's coat. How is Ponger going to manage this one? He hasn't got a clue. He slithers his way to the exit until he can't move any further forwards, clutching his book. His stomach suddenly contracts.

Both of them - she and he - are reading the same novel. No doubt about it. And so far as he can tell from this distance, they are more or less on the same page. Near to the start.

Ponger can tell without looking. She has also stood up and is following him. The hairs on his neck seem to have a life of their own.

Then the tap on his shoulder. He whirls round. The musty alcohol-saturated breath of the beggar. "Any spare change, sir?"

"What?"

"You're a nice lad, I can tell," the beggar says. Ponger reaches into the breast pocket of his overalls. Empty, bar a couple of coins. They land in the cardboard cup.

Impatiently, he looks beyond the beggar.

Henny is elbowing her way past some fat man and is working her way towards Ponger's grab rail. The warmth of someone else's body. Three millimeters away at most.

8.

Henny addresses him without any further ado. "I love this book," she says. "I've read it at least three times. It always ends the same way, obviously: they don't end up together. Not some clichéd ending. That's cool."

The raincoat smells new. Ponger, flustered not only by its characteristic PVC smell but also by Henny's proximity, says: "I wish you hadn't told me that."

"Ah, so it's your first time," she says. "And I'd already decided that you liked secrets and mysteries. Watch out."

The train rounds a bend. Her shoulder touches his upper arm; on purpose, he suspects. He's afraid of treading on her feet. "You've not got any shoes on. Did you mean what you said about mysteries?"

She raises an eyebrow, just as she did before. "My dear Ponger. I'll call you. There are too many people around now."

My dear Ponger?

Trembling to the rhythm of the train, she lays a hand on Ponger's chest and looks at him as if there were something worth looking at, as it says in the book that they're both reading.

"Is that a kind of dare," he says, "to look at a stranger in the hope that they'll give you their number?"

"You'd be better off doing the normal thing and getting off at the next station and getting the next train to wherever you actually want to go."

"Maybe I haven't got to my station yet."

"You won't find it in this direction."

Before Ponger can reply, Henny looks over her shoulder. He regards her profile.

What had he been expecting? Pointy ears? Shimmering mother-of-pearl scales? Gills? The only thing that takes him aback at that moment is the look of slight fear in her expression.

9.

There is a sudden commotion in the carriage behind Henny. A kerfuffle. "Okay," Ponger says. "So you know which stop I get off at, and you know my number, and you know what book I'm reading. Anything else?"

"I don't know your number."

"Didn't you just say you'd call me?"

Just before she reaches for the red button by the door, she says: "It sounds silly, but there really isn't time for long explanations. You need to watch out too, don't you? Take care."

Then everything happens in the blink of an eye, several little things all at once. And so it is almost imperceptibly that she slips something, a flat something, into the breast pocket of his overalls.

A phone.

Seconds later ...

10.

A jolt -

11.

- the carriage seems to have wedged itself firmly in the tracks: a screech of metal on metal. Brake pads struggling to control the monster train.

People in the aisles clatter into one another, shocked out of their everyday lives. Eyes open, wide open.

“What’s going on, miss?” An anxious voice close by.

The beggar?

The cardboard cup slips out of his weather-beaten hand. Coins arch through the air. The moment seems to last forever, yet everything is happening all at once.

A hiccup in the brain.

The train squeals to a halt. Everyone hangs on for dear life. The beggar bangs his head on the rail to which Ponger is clinging. Cardboard cup and coins clatter to the ground and bounce and roll in between pairs of shoes and off soles, then ping against the door, which is still shut. Then silence.

Through the window panes, the world – moving just moments ago – is completely still.

Henny pulled the emergency cord, Ponger realises.

And then she vanished.

12.

Cold air whistles in through the doorway. Other sounds, too: a rushing noise from outside, like plumbing pipes inside a cavity wall.

People are shoving others aside in order to film what’s going on. Ponger thinks he can see Henny’s yellow coat. A breath of air strokes his cheek before the carriage door shuts again.

How did Henny open it?

Has she actually gone?

The train driver promptly makes an announcement: *do not leave your carriage under any circumstances. It could be fatal.*

Everyone around Ponger looks upwards. There's a clattering above their heads. The pictures in his imagination are as clear as if he could actually see them: she has climbed onto the roof of the train. She's running in the opposite direction of travel and is having a laugh on top of one of the carriages at the back of the train. There's a bridge over the platform for cars and pedestrians. Henny can catch hold of the railings and climb over onto the bridge.

The other passengers catch her on their phones, disappearing into the tumult of the city. The bright yellow raincoat is blown upwards slightly from behind by the wind. The hood flaps backwards. And Ponger hears a radio crackling close to him. "UP1 in flight. Get here, now", says a distorted voice.

13.

Someone's breath has fogged up the window pane. His breath. The doors are locked again. The passengers are chatting; some are even laughing. The shock is abating. A 'danger is past' mood. The relief is palpable.

Sirens. Beams of light flashing on the roofs of the police car convoy. Blue strobe lights everywhere, illuminating all the neighbouring streets.

Ponger takes the phone out of his breast pocket and turns it over in his hands. A cheap supermarket phone. Fully charged, but locked. He shoves it back into his overalls. The train snorts pneumatically.

Is it going to start again?