

Translated extract from

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Sibylle Berg
Man, asleep

Translated by Penny Black

Then.

Four years ago.

The thing I remembered most clearly from that day four years ago when the man sat next to me on the red bench, was a feeling of absolute unfamiliarity. I had never seen a person like him up close before, twice as tall and heavy as I, his every movement seemed like Tai-chi. I hadn't a clue what someone like him thought, what he might feel, what it was like to live in such a body.

That day was indistinguishable from any other by its ambivalent February weather, there was no new war or terrorist attack, no devastation or earthquake out there in the world. But for me that day was one of the most significant, apart from the day that I'd initiated a first nuclear attack. No doubt I had had the opportunity before to change the course of my daily life at short notice. Everyone is free to move to a malaria-contaminated country, to become a butcher who, having to deal with death professionally, then finds religion or has sex-change surgery, yet none of that would have made much difference to my state of mind. In the long term, the mood you are in will not be affected by actions. It changes gradually, gets used to disappointments, becomes resigned or angry. As far back as I could remember, which was not far - childhood and youth were way too far behind me to be connected in any way to feelings- the most pleasant time of my life had been between thirty and forty. That was the time I recognised that I was nothing special but nevertheless did not rule out the arrival of a miracle.

Hope had simply disappeared, and for some years my disposition had been quiet and peaceful, as if I was moving slowly in lukewarm water and could see over to the other bank, where things were not much more interesting either.

There was no fainting on that day four years ago, I didn't become dizzy, nor did I begin to rant or twitch hysterically. Rather, I was overcome by a completely inexplicable tiredness that weighed me down and quietened me. Half asleep, I notice that the man is interested in me but could not say what had aroused his attention. My

appearance was not of the kind that made other people want to cheer spontaneously, it just sort of was. Nor were my witty commentaries reason for his interest as we barely said a word.

At first we leant next to each other on the red bench and listened to the conversations of the people. They sounded like quiet music in a lift. And at some stage we stood up together and left the restaurant, something that, in appearance at least, did not bother our companions at all. Or maybe we had simply forgotten them. We wandered down completely incomprehensible streets. I had no idea where we were, we were tired in the way that meant we simply wanted to slip to the floor. I found that out from him later on but noticed it in myself immediately. Every step demanded an incredible effort.

Our conversation was so sluggish it was as if it did not exist – that first night.

We were silent, because that was the most polite thing for people who are not familiar with each other. Now and then we followed convention in a tired way and asked about each other's living circumstances. The man was involved in wood-processing. I forgot the details straight after. My thoughts were so cliché-ridden that I would have been distraught if he had run a management consultancy or been involved in event catering. Wood-processing had plenty of potential for illusions of a romantic nature and in that moment, that was enough. He lived in a small house with a view over the lake, which personally I found more interesting, as small houses with views over the lake deserve attention and affection. He didn't say "I love mountains", but expressed himself in a male way that seems almost to have died out, from a time when every man who had no idea about his inner life was nevertheless able to feign emotionality. "I become uneasy if I don't see a mountain for a long time. I never want to climb them, I just want them to be there." We continued on our way. The night turned black and finally we found ourselves in front of the hotel he was sleeping in. The moment was curiously unexciting and final at the same time. We embraced, and I knew that I never wanted to leave those arms and that firm, round body again.

Today.

Evening.

I look out of the window in the ridiculous hope that someone will notice me, from below, and come up clearly intent on sitting next to me for a while.

I am the only person who wanted to summon up the energy to feel sorry for myself, if only I had that much energy. Compassion can be mustered for those closest. For children, for one's parents. On the whole there is no longer any real compassion between partners, and as for the inhabitants of one's own village or country, you can produce a few sentences of polite solicitation that mean: a good thing that I wasn't affected.

If you need to completely unravel then the best thing to do is to travel to another culture, to an unfamiliar country with a strange language and skin with a consistency that is different from one's own – and already you can barely sense your own existence. All those wonderfully successfully unravelled egos you meet in tropical countries sitting under ventilators, brains eaten up as if by syphilis. They wanted a new life in paradise but only found heat and loneliness in neon-green rooms. I came across so many who had moved under the laughable impression that they would be warmly welcomed in Thailand, Cambodia or Laos. At the beginning, when there was money, the small delightful women hung around, but later on they left. The men sat on the beach, confused, not enough money for the flight back, and if they did have enough – back to where? To places called Duisburg or Liverpool, places where the sun never shone and where the course of life was so predictable. Much better to drown in the sea, jump off a tall building or simply dry up, roast the brain and you yourself are no longer there. Perhaps I'll soon be one of them. Prowling around with scraggly hair and a feverish look, perhaps starting a pointless sado-masochistic affair with a Chinese man and sleeping overnight on his stairs with a dog collar on. Gradually losing myself to madness, hastily buried in the mountains.

There is no reason to go on living. And I have no idea why someone who is no longer able to fulfil their biological contract smoothly still hangs on to life. Perhaps Nature just didn't have the desire to add on an extra switch for old people and those who are tired of life, perhaps Nature was too busy creating anteaters, a genuinely ludicrous and complicated undertaking.

Staring and making time go by. Thinking of nothing and feeling nothing, because you can't bear to. This is probably how murderers, paedophiles and soldiers come into being. They get stuck in a hole between thoughts.

Then

Four years ago

By the time I came home that evening we first met, the man had already left a message on the answering machine. His voice, completely unfamiliar through the machine, filled my empty flat. He pretended that he was checking whether the telephone number was correct, and it was astonishing that I called him back immediately, because I was not a particularly adept telephone-user. Voices without bodies fill me with fear.

The man responded so quickly that you could almost believe he had been waiting for my call, however that was the end of the active part of the conversation. Neither of us had developed the art of engaging conversation and we did not know what to say, nor how to stop, so we listened down a line that, despite all technical developments, still managed to buzz. At some point we said goodbye and afterwards I remained calm and a little perplexed. I missed the silence, which had been like a light comforter made of down.

Later on, I lay down ready to sleep and waited for the fear that usually arose when I had arranged to meet someone who was unknown to me – but there was nothing to be afraid of, more a feeling of inevitability. And no other option but to meet the man,

because the idea that he would disappear out of my life with that conversation filled me with something unfathomable.

During the night I dreamt of prosthetic legs made out of artificial flesh that looked like tuna steaks. In the morning my legs had disappeared. As I did every morning, I stood at the window with a coffee - on stumps - and watched the neighbours as they lived their lives. It was astonishing how seriously they dressed themselves up in suits and skirts and jackets, their faces left behind in some sort of in-between world. You should really only meet people at 6 o'clock in the morning when they are still in their pyjamas, their hair sticking to the scalps and little bits of spit on their faces. With a bit of luck you might even hear a sentence that has not been filtered or controlled. As I took myself over to the desk and started to write instructions on how to use a pulse monitor, I noticed that my legs were still there. Sometimes it is the little things that help improve one's mood.

Today

Evening

Two hours after sunset quiet returns to the island.

On the street in front of my window the Chinese are ambling along. They would probably not describe their gait as ambling but as purposeful marching. The impression of an undecided gait comes from the anatomical facts of the limb proportions of many Chinese. What we would describe as bow-legs are in fact normal legs in this country.

Mainland tourists sit in the restaurants talking loudly. It is never really quiet because the fishing boats go out in the grey of the early morning, the hostelrys open and the locals eat rice soup before they catch the first ferry at 6 o'clock.

I go into the restaurant that is right underneath my flat. Five metal tables are lined up against a small wall right behind which is the sea. When I can no longer stare into the

darkness I observe a couple of rats that are always around. On the table next to me sits a western couple arguing off-puttingly in bad English. They are very probably Germans who are afraid of being recognised and scorned. The great northern people possess a peculiar sense of self and whenever I met people who shrank from saying where they came from, they were always Germans.

The couple had dressed themselves up touchingly as adults. He is the sort of person who has never asked himself what he actually wanted, completely irrelevant, as if there was any chance of actually getting it. They probably had parents who were over-conformist, for whom bringing up children meant rules and constraints to ensure that everything functioned smoothly. Along with millions of others as they grew out of their parents they probably tried out rebellion, getting dressed up as punks or campaigning against nuclear power. After that they quickly sorted themselves back into their sleeveless jumper and slip-on shoe world, where one did an apprenticeship, married, brought up two children and finally left the world quietly, without leaving the slightest trace of disturbance behind them.

After the argument the couple fell into a silence that took up an unpleasant amount of room. They are not happy and feel that the other is responsible. Every word, every action of the other is perceived as an attack because inside everything is so raw and sad.

And now the woman who apparently owns the place comes over with some tea and asks me if I want “the same”. And I do want “the same”. Fried noodles with some unidentifiable vegetables. Ten minutes later and the meal has disappeared into my stomach. I know that my body is functioning, I don't have to listen to the sounds in my stomach. I can't allow myself to get ill right now, because at some stage I will have to carry on living, go away, stay here, make some sort of decision that is of no interest to anyone apart from myself.

Then

Four years ago

Business had led the man into the city that I had spent many years. The women with whom he had been sitting somewhat ungallantly did not overlook our precipitous departure. And so the delicate business relationship that had started to develop was immediately ruined. Instead of travelling back to where he lived, the man remained in my city for an undefined period and we undertook various strange things that I had planned.

It was the first time we met.

I had a small bag with me in which I would like to have carried a warhead. The sun was too bright in the heavens and we walked amongst those who had gathered round the lake to demonstrate their good mood. Apparently ambling aimlessly on sunny afternoons is an activity that makes people afraid. Everyone appears to want to punish themselves with a collective masochistic turnabout by repeating terrifying childhood memories. They run about behind adroit smiles and fall into bad moods that they can't explain as the sun is warm and the meadow full. Perhaps back then in their childhoods there were still fathers who worked as only those in Eastern Europe and the Third World now work: down mines and pits, in quarries and factory buildings filled up with poison, man, in his purest purpose as human asset. Walks had to be taken. It would not have occurred to anyone to cycle around on ugly bikes with helmets on: walking, that was it. Glimpsing the sun just once a week.

The man moved in a way that I had previously only seen upright bears move. We were miles away from silent understanding, from having a shared language. I had no idea what we wanted from each other, we were probably following instinct, despite our reservations. So we pushed ourselves amongst the masses along the bank and asked no questions of each other, which I found agreeable. I noticed that we were holding hands without being able to say how it got to that.

Our first meeting was nothing more than a silent amble by the lake, and a sense of well-being at a level I had very rarely maintained before. The man took me to my flat, we held each other, and then he disappeared into the night. I hadn't asked him when he wanted to return home. But I hoped, never.