



Translated extract from

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Wilhelm Genazino
Lovebefuddled

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I.

I watch a young mother as she moistens a thumbtip and rubs a brown spot off the right cheek of her small child. The child closes her eyes and holds her face calmly up to her mother. After that I follow a woman who's evidently confused; muttering curses, she knocks over three half-empty garbage bins, one after the other, then turns around and stands the bins back up. Two adolescents are jumping up and down on the lower landing of an escalator in an attempt to make it stop. But the escalator resists and doesn't stop. So the two boys make fun of the escalator and move on. Again I'm faced with the question of whether or not I ought to be interested in what's happening around me. A sign written in large white letters is scrawled across an entire display window: Two Pizzas For The Price Of One. I wonder if I ought to come here with Sandra or Judith. But Sandra doesn't like pizza and Judith doesn't like stand-up restaurants. I keep on going, but can't help thinking about the pizza offer. The only way it could work is if you had someone along who also happened to be hungry and had a little time to spare as well and didn't have anything against this pizzeria, especially the awful music booming through the open door and out onto the street. I imagine that these preconditions never apply all at once. A spurious offer!--I think to myself in quiet triumph, and forget all about the pizzeria. I watch a sightseeing bus go by and have to laugh a little. Our city believes that it's worth seeing, so during the summer it sends two or three proper double-decker buses coursing through the streets. What's amazing is that there are always four or five people who really do climb up onto the upper deck of these buses and play along. No one seems to notice that every tour has between sixty and seventy empty seats that

mock our city's claim to see-worthiness as quietly as I do. A shortsighted man passes very close to me, counting the change in his hand. Another man, who's munching on a roll, suddenly loses all desire to eat and deposits his half-devoured roll on a window ledge. I'm fascinated by a scruffy-looking woman standing beside the entrance to a department store and selling kittens. She holds two of the animals in the crook of her arm; a few others are in a cardboard box at her feet. An equally scruffy child keeps the lid of the box shut. Two older children are acting as though they were retarded by slurring their speech and keeping their tongues sticking out and resting on their lower lips. But they can't keep up the pretense for long, and break out in laughter. I don't know why the children remind me of my first day in middle school. Before the lesson started, a female doctor stepped before the class and announced that we were going to be examined. She called the children in alphabetical order and stuck her hands down each boy's pants, groping past the penis in search of the testicles, because she had to determine whether the testicles were properly descended and stored in the designated little sacks. Two boys (one of them me) fainted, presumably because we hoped in that way to escape the doctor's examination. And indeed we were allowed to rest on a bench for a while and it looked as though we were safe. But when we came to, the doctor opened our flies in view of the entire class and, while our pants were down, conducted a visual exam of the state of our testicles. I ask myself why my memory has preserved this scene. Sandra told me on the phone that I should bring a few peaches, a half-pound of Spanish sausage and a small loaf of white bread. I'm going to spend this evening and night at Sandra's. As usual, Sandra will cook; we'll eat together and chat, then watch some TV and go to bed early.

Sandra is forty-three years old, a head smaller than me; she has dark eyes and short hair, a good figure, and a decent education that she nevertheless considers mediocre. Although she is quite communicative, Sandra believes she is unable to express herself, which I find amusing. She spends between eight and nine hours every day working as a head secretary and by her own account does not suffer because of her job. She likes being in a position to know nearly everything there is to know about her co-workers (at a small factory for sanitary equipment) as well as the fact that she's occasionally allowed to make decisions that are binding on all employees. We've known each other for twenty-three years, albeit with interruptions. We first met when we were very young, and there was a time in the beginning when we almost got married. But then it turned out that Sandra wanted to have children, and this conflict spelled the end--not of our affinity but of the possibility of staying together. I did not then nor do I now have any desire to procreate. After two years of bitter clashes Sandra left me, and soon thereafter married an electrician. She quickly had a son and stayed married for six years. While she was married we met up again and once more became a (secret) couple. Today Sandra's son, long since grown up, is married to a nurse and doesn't visit his mother often enough, according to Sandra. Sandra hardly has any contact to her former husband and doesn't wish any.

I step into a department store and ride the escalator down to the food department. (To this day whenever I recall the testicular examination I'm pervaded by the sense of shame I felt back then. The story itself has become meaningless, but the shame is always fresh. Where does the shame derive its vitality? It's as if feelings freed themselves from their experiences and went on living their own independent lives.) I buy half a pound of

chorizo and a small loaf of bread. I ask a young saleslady for two pounds of the pretty red-yellow peaches lying right below an intense spotlight. The saleslady asks back: would you like the yellow or the white?

I don't understand what she's asking and stop short. The saleslady repeats her question. To dispose of the problem once and for all I point my index finger at the peaches I meant.

Aha, says the saleslady, so you want the white ones.

Aha, say I, I don't know a thing about these new varieties.

But white-fleshed peaches have been around ever since my youth, says the saleslady, laughing.

Maybe, I say, ever since *your* white-fleshed youth! In my own, now somewhat yellowed youth we were yet unaware of this distinction.

The saleslady likes the way I highlighted her youth in front of her and the other customers. She laughs and packs up the peaches. I can tell by my reply that I'm in a good mood and that I'm looking forward to the evening with Sandra. Still, I don't understand why I draw attention to my age in front of strangers. At fifty-two I'm clearly no longer young, but nor am I so old that I should be alluding to my own transience in public. I don't know why I let myself get carried away to make such confessions. Again (as has been happening more and more frequently) I have the feeling that I'm portraying myself as unworthy for no real reason. I pick up the peaches and leave the store.

Half an hour later Sandra asks me in the manner of a wife of many years: so, how was your day? I tell her the truth, that I worked more today than I could have expected of myself. Then sit down and rest, says Sandra. I follow her into the kitchen. She's

standing next to the oven in her slip. That is to say, she's wearing a thin woolen vest on top of that. Sandra knows that I like to see her doing housework in a slip. Right below her left ear she has a single, long dark hair, which she doesn't remove. Later in bed I'll see the hair lying on the white sheets and it will bother me. Sandra, too, is showing signs of aging. For example, these days she's careful to save things she once would have thrown away without a second thought (an empty cookie can, used wrapping paper, vacation postcards that don't say a thing). Sandra is cooking risotto with wonderfully fresh seafood. She hands me a bottle of white wine to open and sets two glasses on the table. Later she tells me all about the latest turbulences out of the life of a gay colleague. Recently this man started living with another gay man who's much younger and who's constantly cheating on him. I listen to these stories with moderate interest, but I have to confess that they put me in a mood that's focused on life—which isn't always so easy to induce when I'm by myself. Ten minutes later I find myself laughing along about the gay men and their strange compulsion for near-daily revelations about their intimate lives. After dinner Sandra picks up her dessert plate (with a serving of cassata) and moves into the next room. She wants to watch a film about mixed marriages and asks me to join her. So I watch the film about mixed marriages, even though I'm no more interested in that than I am in the jealousy of gay men. But my reluctance is negligible. After the mixed-marriages Sandra wants to watch another film about Brazilian child gangs. That's too much for me. I tell her I'm heading to the bedroom next door. Sandra isn't at all bothered by the way the evening is shaping up; we're quite used to it. To this day I don't understand how anyone can spend an entire evening in the company of someone they know very well. I hide my befuddlement by submitting to Sandra's design.

She gives the hollows of my knees an affectionate tickle and says she'll be right in. In less than five minutes I've brushed my teeth and am lying in bed.

Sandra lives in an old building, and her bedroom has a massive washbasin next to the door. It dates from the time when most apartments didn't have their own bathroom. The sight of the lavatory bothers Sandra, but her landlord won't hear of removing it. Sandra doesn't have much understanding for the idiosyncrasies of apartments. She complains that the kitchen doesn't get as warm as the bedroom, that the door to the balcony catches and that it takes too long for the toilet to flush. The idea that apartments are every bit as imperfect as human beings and that one should therefore tolerate their inadequacies is foreign to Sandra. My own inclination is to attune myself to shortcomings. I enjoy constantly observing the analogies between the imperfections of things and those of humans. With Sandra I have to keep quiet about the fact that I think the washbasin actually adds something to her bedroom. I can lie in bed and watch her wash up morning and evening. I'm always amazed by how gentle her upper movements are in contrast to the more violent ones lower down. To the casual observer, these two separate procedures can make the person doing the washing seem split in two. I can say that Sandra washes like a young woman on top, and like an older lady down below. But I can't explain *how* the sequence of images manages to separate the person or rather the age of the person so clearly. The TV in the room next door is switched off. Sandra checks to make sure I haven't fallen asleep yet, and quickly washes up. We are at an age in which people sometimes screw so they can fall asleep quickly afterwards. Sandra and I are together relatively often, in order to dispel her fears. She's scared she's no longer desirable. For this reason she's almost always willing to go to bed. With two gentle

movements she determines that I'm ready for sex, and assumes the bridge position. I kneel behind her; Sandra sinks her head into the pillow. We go for a minute without any problems, then a painful cramp breaks out in my left leg, forcing me to free myself from Sandra. I leave the bed, shift my weight onto the cramped leg and walk around the room for a while on straightened legs. Sandra lets her body collapse flat onto the bed. After half a minute the pain lets off, but it doesn't disappear entirely. Sandra looks at me without saying a word, then lifts her body back into the bridge position. I'm moved by how openly she shows that she's counting on continuing our intercourse. But my mood is gone, and besides I'm afraid the cramp might come back. At this point Sandra throws on her nightgown. She tells me to lie down flat on my belly. I obey. Sandra sits down on the edge of the bed and massages my calves and the backs of my thighs. Before my eyes Sandra transforms from a lover into a nurse. And sure enough, the tension in my muscles gradually goes away. You should go to the doctor sometime, says Sandra. There's nothing you can do against cramps, is my opinion. It's not just about cramps, says Sandra, you should also get your blood tested. I'm amazed she doesn't say a thing about the unsuccessful intercourse. She acts as if she'd been counting on that kind of incident for some time. I roll over on my side, Sandra lies down behind me and rubs my back. Does it hurt? she asks quietly. No. I confess that I consider this style of contact between man and woman absolutely unbeatable. I don't notice which one of us falls asleep first. After three hours Sandra wakes up, gets out of bed, fetches a butter cookie from the kitchen and comes back to bed. In my half-sleep I realize that she's lying next to me and slowly chewing her cookie (a habit of hers). I listen to the chewing for a while and fall back asleep. I spend a night without disturbances and nightmares. Early in the

morning, around five-thirty, almost in sync with the first light of dawn, I open my eyes. My cock wakes up before I do, I press against Sandra, she immediately understands. Half a minute later we're plugged into each other. For a moment I don't know what I should be more grateful for, the disappearance of the cramp or our early morning thrashing about. After we've finished screwing I pull Sandra's nightgown back over her ass. This always amuses her. It's as if you wanted to stow my buns back properly in a drawer, she says. There's something to that, I say, good things need to be properly taken care of. Sandra laughs and gets out of bed and fixes breakfast.

I enjoy walking home early in the morning after spending the night at Sandra's. Each time I have the feeling that I've been away for a long time and am returning after some adventure happily withstood. I have a sense of freedom that's so pronounced it's a bit ridiculous. Walking through the parks I keep an eye out for fieldfares. I'm not really looking for fieldfares per se, I only want to let the word course through my thoughts a few times. Instead I see some lovely field poppies, growing on a pile of scree. The mild red flowers sway softly back and forth. I pass through the center of town and am appalled by a rolling steel shutter that has been lowered in front of a bank. I remind myself to take more of an interest in economics and globalization. Many of my acquaintances say we're having a banking crisis that's much more dangerous than your run-of-the-mill economic crisis. Nowadays people feel sorry for the banks--that never happened in my youth. I'm old-fashioned; now as before my own sympathies are with the people the banks have let go. A few homeless people have settled in the entranceway to the closed bank. Are they possible former bank employees? They search out places like that, protected from the wind, where they won't be driven away, and where it doesn't

get completely dark at night. I walk past the lowered steel shutter, which is beginning to rust, and again feel no interest whatsoever in the banking crisis. The homeless people are lying around as if they intended to lie around here forever. You can't help noticing how any space that's freed is immediately confiscated by other living creatures on the march. One of the homeless people is running his hand across his dog, playing with its fur; another is spitting out crumbs of tobacco. The images have an odd silencing effect that even manages to intrude on my internal life. I fight them off by following two bright children's voices. It's probably no accident that I'm now afraid I might someday lose my watch. I no longer wear it on my wrist; I keep it in the pocket of my suit, which already contains my keychain, a little money, a handkerchief and a little sticker that really belongs to Sandra. One day I'll be running away from something and reach for my handkerchief and unwittingly wind up flinging out my watch. I hurry through some icky side streets, taking care not to get too close to the repulsive furniture stores and disgusting cheap markets. A woman walking past a drugstore handles the special sale items displayed outside. I watch her fingering in quick succession: a bargain pack of diaper rash cream, a dishwashing glove, a package of puffed rice, a packet of shortbread cookies, a pair of panty hose and a dozen tea lights. I study the people who are either too comfortable or too lazy or too sad to make themselves breakfast at home. With overcast faces they sit behind a cup of coffee, quietly bittering away. People who are already carrying around more than two full plastic bags at this hour of the morning look boorish. Fatty infant legs dangle out of their mothers' baby slings like sausage links. Pink blossoms fall from the chestnut trees. I feel like a free man--I can tell because I don't have to make any internal accounting to anyone, including myself. It's worth noting how

I manage to con myself so elegantly that I almost don't notice. Because everything I'm thinking right now about freedom and love isn't really the case. As so often happens when I mull over these subjects, I feel a moment of weakness. Because of that I go inside a café and order a cappuccino. There is someone I have to account to, and that someone is myself. I'm plagued by the feeling that I'm rapidly getting older and that I have to settle my affairs--by which I mean exclusively my love affairs. I keep imagining the grisly scene of me lying in a hospital sometime in the near future, being visited by the two women I've loved now for many years and who don't know a thing about each other. This confrontation has to be avoided or prevented at all costs: by my breaking off with one of the two women. Right away I realize I won't pull off an elegant solution, so I practice evasive sentences: Each of you has to understand that I love you both! Then I think: Sentences like that aren't humanly possible either. To my left a child says Mama! I'm always late to my music lesson! It can't go on like this! The mother merely looks up, the child goes on playing. The child's complaint consoles me: so even children lead lives that can't go on like this! But where is the life that can go on the way it is? To my right a woman unpacks some new pajamas and drapes the shirt on her husband's torso. Despite the momentary ridiculousness the man is enduring as well as exuding, I envy him his wife's attentiveness. I think about Judith. Presumably she's sitting in some streetcar this very minute, heading off to the suburbs. I can no more do without Judith than I can do without Sandra, although in many ways she's the complete opposite of Sandra. The server brings my cappuccino and has me settle right away. Judith is fifty-one, in other words almost as old as I am. I haven't known her for quite as long as I have Sandra. Until about ten years ago Judith was working on her career, indefatigably but more and

more resentfully, and then she gave it up. Judith is a failed concert pianist. Shortly before her fortieth birthday she accepted once and for all the fact (once and for all!) that she had been outstripped by younger (and presumably more talented) musicians, and apart from a few occasional provincial appearances was incapable of generating any publicity. It was a clean break, and ever since then Judith has been tutoring to keep her head above water. Latin, English, French; she also gives piano lessons. She puts in at least six hours a day, sometimes seven or eight. She works in the homes of her pupils (boys and girls between eight and twelve and ambitious housewives). They live quite spread out, so she has to travel long distances and by evening she's as exhausted as a factory worker.

I finish my cappuccino and leave the café. Soon after that I see a distant acquaintance, Dr. Ostwald the panic advisor. He sees me as well and waves across the street, I wave back. He sails as a hobby; about three weeks ago he again invited me out on his boat. I wanted to get rid of him once and for all, so I nonchalantly told him that I loved two women and as a result had no time for hobbies. I should have kept my mouth shut. Dr. Ostwald immediately recognized the problem lurking in my reply and offered a conflict abatement treatment. That's not that bad; Dr. Ostwald would happily treat everyone if he could. I pick up my pace, but I also don't want him to notice my impulse to flee. Dr. Ostwald has a flourishing problem-practice on Schillerstrasse. As he puts it, he receives "panicized individuals" who can no longer cope with "life's experiential encounters." Human beings don't have enough strength to order their lives, he told me about three weeks ago. And: miserable people don't have ideas. I paused meaningfully and he went on talking. The point is to live so that there's no need for a higher degree

order in the first place. At that moment I wanted to laugh, but I controlled myself. It is the misfortune of the human race that we consider our problems solvable. I assume these sentences were meant to provoke me. I think Dr. Oswald noticed I was trying to avoid him. In principle I enjoy making fun of him a little bit, although I don't consider his work completely senseless. I look at a large display window once or twice to make sure that Dr. Oswald has gone. In the first years I was often afraid that Sandra would catch me with Judith or Judith with Sandra. Only later did I realize that the two women inhabit two completely separate worlds that are in no danger of colliding. Sandra spends her days in the office, while Judith is constantly riding busses and streetcars every day except Sunday. We're no longer young, meaning that we've long since given up seeking our fortune in restaurants, pubs, cinemas or dance parties. Moreover by the end of the day we're completely worn out by our so-called normal lives, and retreat to our apartments to recover. Rarely do Judith or Sandra spend the night at my place. There's no particular reason, only the general one that my apartment—let me put it this way—doesn't measure up to the more sensitive demands of women. Neither Sandra nor Judith is by nature mistrustful or suspicious. It's been a long time since Sandra called me late at night to check if I really was at home or whether I had acted so strange on the phone that she had little or no choice but to conclude that I was in the company of another woman.