

Translated excerpt

Ulrich Peltzer
Das bessere Leben
Roman

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The Better Life
Novel

Translated by Steph Morris



He shot up. Darkness all around him. No sound, just his breathing. That crash as the roof of the Reserve Officer Training Corps collapsed. Acrid smoke, flashes of light, red and blue, over the heads of the cheering crowd. Gasping, Sylvester Lee Fleming freed himself from the twisted sheets and rubbed his neck. This had been going on for days, ever since he arrived São Paulo. Yesterday (it was yesterday, wasn't it?) battles with the cops on North Water Street before everyone ran towards the city centre, stones flying at store windows, garbage cans burning, repeated chants and cries... stop this war!

Fleming felt for the switch on the bedside-table lamp. Velvety, yellow light fell on the magazine he'd been reading before he went to sleep (Newsweek). He caught the blur of a half-empty beer (Antarctica) between the sofa and armchairs in the far reaches of the room. The floor-to-ceiling curtains were drawn, behind them were windows you couldn't open, here on the eighteenth floor – an expanse of soundproofed plate-glass with a view of other glassy expanses, other tower blocks, a hairsbreadth away, day and night, through the haze (a canopy of toxic particles) left by hovering helicopters.

Yep, the beer needed finishing. As he glanced at his watch – just after three – the aircon came on and soft white noise filled every corner of the hotel room. One-handed, Fleming disentangled the covers – a blanket and a thin sheet – and spread them over his bare legs. Then he sank back into the pillows, holding the slender beer bottle on his greying breast, the other arm supporting his head. The witching hour, he thought (forced to smile), solitary hunters, dreams like a full-on assault, filling him with a panic alien to him. As if he'd been in real danger back then from the batons, the bayonets, after they (the mayor and his cronies) had called in the Ohio Army National Guard to enforce the curfew... jeeps full of heavily armed troops on the streets, deafening megaphones. That must have been... must have been Saturday, the weekend before the massacre.

The logo on the bottle featured two penguins facing each other in a red oval, encircled by stylised ears of barley and the words 'Cerveja Pilsen, Desde 1885'. He hadn't

since 1885. The year of the Mahdi: it shot through his consciousness (like an order). By January the rebels were outside Khartoum. Then they conquered the city and sealed Gordon Pasha's gruesome fate, as described in textbooks and regiment chronicles. A boy in boarding school uniform butchers his remembrance in front a bored class: His life was England's glory. His death was England's pride. Fleming couldn't remember anything except the last lines of Kipling's poem (and he was really trying). Verbose invocations which had never brought a single soul back to life. He drank and closed his eyes.

The crash had certainly not been as loud that evening as in his sleep now, just a muffled bang immediately swallowed by the raging crackle of the fire, the howling sirens, and not forgetting the crowd cheering as the roof fell to the ground, throwing up a parachute of sparks. Maybe someone had poured petrol or spirit through the broken windows. The weathered wood of the ROTC burned fiercely, in seconds. A blazing heat spread. People turned aside, shielded eyes with arms. Did you do that? He asked himself. He had (along with others, not alone) slashed the firefighters' hoses. Was the lovely Allison not involved too – with her righteous anger at the war, at the machinations of a regime which, as she used to say, had been bought. All those young faces in the glow of the flames, emergency lights revolving on police cars, banks of fire engines, slogans shouted through the fumes, coughing, laughing, hundreds of people (more even) gathered round the ROTC, and up the hill behind it, under the trees on the brow. From there you might have thought it was a festival, one of the wild parties at the end of the semester which got a little out of hand till the administration.... As if the main building might burn down. An SOS call right to the top where (clearly) they were only waiting for an excuse to send in the troops, to teach them (expedient idiots) a lesson they wouldn't forget in a hurry. Of course, Fleming thought, no doubt about it. He drained the bottle and placed it next to the bed.

There was no explanation – no plausible one anyway. Vindictive elves who sat on his chest as soon as he fell asleep and stole his breath although they didn't have the slightest excuse, all things considered. Perhaps the result of some mistake he'd made, thirty or forty years ago, something inexcusable, which could only be paid for like this, in dreams. Fleming had never (as far as he knew) felt fear in tricky situations where others might lose their heads, might panic even – as happened when fantasies clashed with the world, always a painful collision.

marks whose outlines were lost in the pleats. Two club chairs, a couch and a high-backed revolving office seat. Fleming had moved the desk to face the plate-glass windows to avoid staring at the ochre walls as he worked – screen, wall, screen, wall, like a correctional institution. The two rooms on the executive floor he'd reserved had been full already... as if they had no idea what they were doing, as if they hadn't sent him the confirmation, these... don't swear, he told himself, and pulled the covers up higher. Poor sods sitting at their shabby terminals. Ask again tomorrow.

A click (like a bolt hitting an empty cylinder) and the white noise of the air-con gradually subsided, leaving nothing but silence, a sticky sensation on his skin, his breathing and his pulse. Can never be ruled out entirely – mistakes... but which one? Anyway didn't you always need someone to act as a catalyst, gather their courage at the crucial moment and make a decision, which only... How else could something become historic, a date no-one would forget, even after generations?

And anyway – Fleming suddenly realised how exhausted he was, weary and tired, long days in the chaotic city, followed by broken nights – it's not your problem and certainly not your fault that they fired directly, and even if it were, remember: they that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind. That's what it says in their scriptures. Extremely reckless, no thought for the possible consequences. They wore gasmasks and guns as they marched onto the campus. No-one could have guessed. You ran for cover, the fun over. Trashed banks and smashed store windows, blockaded streets, bashed cars, as if there were a God-given right to destroy the public order, a right to resist at any price because (don't forget) the constitution had been breached and, worse, abused and murdered by those in the highest positions of power, as it said in the speech one of the history students delivered to his fellows who had streamed together, before burying the constitution (an expensive facsimile from the university library) under a patch of grass. An arrogance only the youth are permitted, Fleming thought. You will risk anything, stop at nothing if it satisfies the yearning for justice... Oh Allison, what madness, what terrible mistakes. They can never be undone.

He turned on his side and drew his legs up, one hand between his knees, the other under his head. Her long, dark hair, so abundant and full, such a wealth of shining hair you

had to stop yourself reaching out to touch it every time you met her – on North Water

with her boyfriend Barry, who had bought pot off him a few times.

'Hey, Fleming! Come and join us.' Barry gestured to his tray. 'A problem shared is a problem halved.'

She laughed and held out her hand across the table.

'I'm Allison. You must be Sylvester.'

'Sylvester Lee,' Fleming said. 'Strange parents.'

'Allison Beth. How about that?'

'Great.'

'Allison Beth Krause,' Barry said and shot her a sideways glance betraying his pride, shy and disbelieving, at having landed someone like her. The knowledge that he could never have Allison entirely for himself, never in his life, strengthened his love (strangely) rather than allowing the slightest doubt about her feelings or affections. They were bound together as long as it lasts, maybe forever, with a secret accord, spiritual harmony, with which Allison could end a sentence he hadn't yet finished. Magical thinking, something not too strange for Fleming even in the fragments he caught; when Barry described it – 'do you think such a thing exists?' – he had nodded, taken a drag on the joint, and murmured something like 'of course'. He certainly wasn't going to undermine a customer's fantasies. Barry wasn't a bad customer, although not one of the ones who kept his business afloat.

They met from time to time, chatted, smoked together. Money changed hands. In March (in March?) he let Allison persuade him to go on a demo she had organised. Right across the city, accompanied by threatening gestures and swearing from bystanders, behind a banner the width of the street saying BRING ALL THE TROOPS HOME, Allison in the first row, clapping and chanting, no more war, no more napalm, no more Nixon. A stupid war against the wrong enemy. As if that wasn't clear, just a series of coincidences condensed into one single urgency. An illness with no hope of a cure (Fleming stared at the label on the empty bottle of Antarctica on the carpet, 'Desde 1885') yet there were medicines people thought could make them live longer. What for? Because no-one looks forward to dying, simple as that. You don't. Things still to be done.

He circled his arms around his folded legs and bent his head till his forehead and the tips of his shorn hair were almost brushing his kneecaps. Developmental phases, past and unrepeatable. Step by step, following a carefully devised plan – to be thwarted, hindered.

disjointed sequence of bewildering images, of sounds, catapulting him out of his sleep, night after night. As if he had ever had been in fear, of the police, the National Guard, other people, rapid turns of events. An uprising, a rebellion, breaking out after the television announcement. At peak viewing time – afterwards a play-off game was to be broadcast. Oh yes, basketball. Groups of fans clustered round the TV in every bar, hustle and bustle, crates of beer passed over their heads, so... No the game had been Friday. The trickster had announced the invasion of Cambodia the night before. It was still calm then. It was the following night when they moved from the bar district around North Water Street towards the centre leaving a swathe of devastation and... Saturday burning the ROTC, troops sent in. Sunday the curfew. And then Monday...

Let me get this straight, Fleming thought: in the background of the room were two flaccid flags, to the right a desk and armchair, on the wall to the left a map of Indochina with dotted lines and arrows, alongside it the president, with papers in his hands, continually leaning forwards to explain the military situation to the public with an outstretched arm and index finger.

A flickering image, distorted by a black stripe which descended every few seconds. Someone had taped a piece of (very wobbly) wire to the top of the old set, probably retaped each week, for several semesters. The flags, the desk, the head and body of the man, of the most powerful man in the world (who would disagree?) threw bright electric shadows, transparent ghosts like the ones in photographs of séances – the ethereal aura of the material. A deep voice boomed through the room in the halls of residence, each word a blow to the stomach, Fleming recalled. He had come along with Barry. Allison was sitting next to a friend called Simone on her bed, in her lap a pottery mug which later she would throw in the direction of the screen (that was too much).

‘Liar,’ she yelled. ‘What a liar!’ As if anyone had been expecting to hear the truth, tonight of all nights. Leaning against the doorframe, Fleming fished a can of beer from the inside pocket of his cropped, battered leather jacket and opened it as softly as possible. ‘We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia,’ the voice booming through the small, sparsely furnished room claimed, ‘but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam,’ (the mug smashed against the wall), ‘and winning the just peace we all desire.’

‘Bastard,’ Barry said. ‘Who believes that?’

announcement came that they wanted to return to the negotiating table as soon as possible), took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. Fleming almost felt sorry for him, standing there in washed out shades of grey, a ghost of himself, continually bent and twisted every time the stripe descended the screen, but ultimately, objectively speaking, no-one was forcing him to give the speech or give orders (a revolver to the temple). There was nothing more embarrassing than excuses and tortuous explanations, disseminated after the facts, when it transpired role had been too big for you to handle.

Fleming took a step forward, to offer Allison some beer. She took a sip and passed the can to Simone. As if in slow motion, the antenna slipped sideways (a consequence of the flying mug? vibrations through the wall and the floor?) and suddenly there was just a seething mass of black and white dots. The sound was still working – measures had to be taken to halt the aggressors. Silence in the room, thickening with every second, the voice sounding muffled now, distant, two thousand light years from Ohio. Barry attempted to straighten the piece of wire (a clothes hanger). The image came back, then the flickering resumed.

‘Leave it,’ Allison said. ‘I’ve had enough.’

Simone gripped the beer can with both hands. There were tears in her eyes, gazing at the TV, Nothing more could be made out, no flags, no map, no president. Apparently they were living ‘in an age of anarchy.’ American universities were ‘being systematically destroyed.’ If (a dramatic pause) ‘the world’s most powerful nation,’ (got it?), ‘acts like a pitiful, helpless giant,’ (deaf, blind and limping), ‘the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy,’ (no shame whatsoever), ‘will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.’

Indeed, Fleming thought, suppressing a smile, while Allison got up, walked over to the TV, perched on her chest of drawers, and switched it off. Then she bent down and gathered the pieces of the mug, placed them next to the set and pushed her thick, brown hair behind her ears. Simone was sobbing quietly, her shoulders hunched.

“What are we going to do?” Barry asked.

Allison stepped outside and looked right and left, but it seemed there wasn’t anyone in the corridor who wanted to talk, to ease their dismay, to do something about this madness. (He was still speaking). Allison turned and sat back on her bed, taking Simone in

wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of her pullover and put her glasses back on. It had all been for nothing. Fleming's gaze wandered from corner to corner along the skirting board, discreetly searching for a ventilation grille, a floorboard which might be loose. He saw nothing which would work as a depot, a secure home (as long as she lived here) for his assets – a few bags of pot, uppers, downers and acid he no longer wanted to keep in his furnished basement room in the city after there'd been a break-in, or, let's say, since he'd returned to find the room turned upside down. Luckily whoever it was (a customer, a competitor) hadn't thought to take a quick look in the toilet cistern. (Ha! The cleverest hiding place in the world!)

Allison leant forward, her chin supported on her fists, her face, with its high cheekbones (to die for, Barry once said), perplexed. But then she leapt up (decisiveness and anger) and ran into the corridor. They heard her shout out, heard replies, becoming louder, voices and footsteps from next door, heard her gradually find her way out of the paralysis which had gripped her during the last twenty minutes. Simone was standing with her hands on her hips at the edge of a throng, one of the groups now amassed under clouds of cigarette smoke, from the fire escape right to the lifts, discussing what to do – occupy the university president's office? Burn down the Reserve Officer Training Corps building? Assemble tomorrow at midday around the bell on The Commons? For sure, no doubt about it. Allison was totally in her element, while Barry compiled a list of what to do first, second, third... Contact to Buffalo (I'll call right away), where he and Allison, so they hoped, next semester at the latest... away from Kent, from Ohio... Music was playing, nice music, Fleming thought (he remembered this), which someone was playing in one of the rooms, floating above their heads like the ascending smoke, above the plans they were making, a tangle of excited voices, of hugs, laughter, of the determination not to take anything decided in a shabby puppet theatre by a bunch of puppets, a clique of malevolent medal-wearers.

Fleming relaxed his grip on his legs, turned onto his back and stretched out. Angel could get hold of sleeping tablets. He should have done it yesterday... When you have to start making yourself notes with everything written down on them... customers, informers (the two security service heads this afternoon), sums of money. A name with a number after it. Would have been suicide then – the accounts always in his head, delicate business deals, their game and keep your mouth shut (your job).

The air-con switched itself on, then straight off again. He turned onto his stomach and stuck his head under the pillow. The next day the usual suspects were all there gathered around the bell, a gift from someone or another housed in a small wall structure of yellowish bricks. Speeches were made, amplified across the wide lawns of the campus by a megaphone. Finally someone took a spade and dug a hole, a grave for the constitution, which was no longer valid and must be buried (applause, whistling). Allison and Barry were sitting in the crowd on the hill which rose behind the little wall with the bell. You had to make a point, Fleming heard them say as they headed to the meeting, you had to draw a line, nodding without explaining exactly what they meant. Lines, points... fantasy worlds, unsusceptible to temptation, a vision of the inevitable. Why, he asked himself, pressing the pillow over his head with both hands, did I actually go along... then walk down the hill to mend the microphone? A loose connection – he'd had a little screwdriver on his penknife, great! When he ran out of breath, he flung the pillow aside. Paths had crossed (wrong time, wrong place, as if luck were a matter of seconds, of a few yards) like particles hitting each other in an accelerator, changing course or splitting into several dozen others, building blocks of matter. The things you hoard to explain events (mass times velocity equals energy) to leave no room for doubt or nightmares. What would have happened if... (he breathed out heavily) police cars hadn't appeared that Friday night while people were flooding out onto the streets after the basketball game, in the mood to party despite everything (the speech). Bottles starting to fly, hitting metal, more bottles, glasses, curses heard, curses against the state, the president, culminating in appeals, hysterical cries, to hit back at the warmongers, the banks, insurers... On one street corner in the centre a fire of trash and building materials was blazing. Panes were smashed, dancing beams of light in the offices of a credit broker, papers floated out of its shattered windows, ring binders, card indexes, a young man standing on the side of an upturned car shouted unintelligible words into the din, into the breaking and clanking of glass and metal, wailing sirens, in big waves, approaching... And then the first tear-gas canisters started exploding, a hailstorm of shots rained down on the aimlessness, scurrying, shadowy figures, suddenly lit up bright by a floodlight (from a police car). You saw raised batons coming towards you (no-one knew what was going on any more, he thought, not with the best will in the world) a burning sensation in your nose, in your eyes, nothing you could do about it, unless you had a moist handkerchief... back home in the basement you shut the blinds, lay on your bed and drank the rest of a (very expensive) bottle of Seagram's.

Stimulus and response, till there was no going back. A crying shame. Fleming grasped his cock and pulled on it, kneaded it. Reality was a chain of fuck-ups, of inconsequential moments and spontaneous decisions which later – most people didn't understand this – became set in stone... Became plausible connections between A and B... He let go again and crawled on all fours to the telephone. C, D, E. Facts documented by historians. He sat back on the edge of the bed, knocking the bottle of Antarctica over with his toes so that it rolled on the carpet in a semi-circle. Life and death, pride and glory. That afternoon the mayor had declared a state of emergency and alerted the National Guard, who began advancing on the tranquil city from their barracks, forgetting (an easy thing to forget, in the heat of the moment) to inform the public (loudspeaker announcements in the streets, two or three phone calls). Would the fire have been started otherwise?