



Translated extract from

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*“Tumbler doll,  
tumbler doll,  
show your legs”*

(Japanese, anonymous)

## I

We lie on the two mattresses, not side by side, but head to head. The artery over your temple bone pulses against my cheek. Your hair touches my nose, but it doesn't tickle, just smells of shampoo and of you. For minutes or hours we've hardly moved, saying nothing, breathing shallowly. Your eyes are closed, mine gaze up at the open window where nothing shows but a piece of the cloudless sky, not bright, not dark. And the only thing I would wonder, if I were to wonder anything, would be whether morning or evening is looming. I feel neither tired nor wakeful, neither heavy nor light, don't have to smoke or eat, or drink, or pee. I have no need for distance, but no desire to embrace you, either. I am free, *from* everything, not *for* everything, and yet not lonely...

This film unreels as soon as I think of you, of us. I watch it, and myself appearing in it (acting might be the wrong word), not as the woman I am now, but as I was many years ago: younger, prettier, and usually at your side.

The film, already slightly faded and scratched, can't be rewound; I can only speed it up or draw it out, halt sequences I like until the whole apparition dissolves because the phone rings again, or the postman, or because, troubled by no further disturbance, I have reached the shore of sleep, nearer today and farther tomorrow.

The longer the film lasts, the more uneventful it becomes – and perhaps the best comparison is not with a jerkily unwinding movie or TV film, perhaps the images that flicker across my retina one after another are more like a series of unfocused and thus similar slides whose unwilled, never identical sequence depends on the beats of my lashes, on how often my eyes close, open, close... The window-sized piece of twilight sky with no clouds or stars, the mattresses with their signal-red sheets in the depths of my room, our recumbent bodies, us on

the streets of Berlin, you in Joe's office, me in front of a box of old junk ... only the force of my memory creates each of these images and all of them together, which would justify the metaphor of the film and the slide series alike, were it not for the smell of your hair, the sticky warmth of your temple and my cheek, our out-of-synch breathing and the wantlessness with its promise of freedom which I felt and feel over and over again, which I've called happiness since the first time I knew it, a beguilingly undramatic happiness that returns to me with each recollection of it.

Back when our film ran in real time, when we *could* have been photographed, should I have asked about *your* feelings, though you usually acted as if they were no concern even of yours? Were you even capable of putting your emotions into words? Or did you just find it more convenient to express that sort of thing physically, with looks, flickers in your face, gestures – and sometimes with your cock? Did I ever dare to ask you what was behind your proud polar-bear face, your absent equanimity, your rare fits of frenetic activity, or love? When I wanted to know, and that was often enough, I masked the question as the ostensible feminine archetype of elementary interrogatory clauses: What are you thinking? Your still more economical and classically masculine answer was almost always: “Nothing.” Or: “Nothing in particular.”

Certainly you weren't the most communicative person; you were reticent and, still more important, discreet. You tended – in your better moments – toward slogans and catchphrases, catchy sayings, but you liked to read, fantasy novels, the thickest to be had. You just handled words better with your eyes and hands than with your mouth; like me, you'd trained as a typesetter.

*“Last night I chased the dragon again for the first time in ages. It's great to be free, with the sun so warm. But I've got to stay off the hobby, no kidding around. Here's the plan: get cash, do karate, find a place of my own.”*

Are you wondering why I'm quoting you words you wrote yourself? Because the notebook with these undated entries, which I never saw you with the whole time we spent together, landed with me back then, and I don't know if – and if so, how well – you remember these precisely eighty-nine sentences of yours, in which my name doesn't appear, despite or because of which I will repeat them to you, not chronologically, but word for word, to the end of our story.

Oh, Harry, if this notebook had ended up with someone else and they'd been curious enough to read it, they'd never have suspected that I even existed in your life, which was and is mine.

## II

Our meeting was a coincidence. What else? Maybe something like fate after all, since we could just as easily have passed each other by. The day our paths crossed, you weren't alone, and I hadn't been gone twelve months from the place where I grew up and lived until my thirty-ninth year.

The scenes from that April 17, 1987, involving me and – at least for the first few hours – maybe even you, are also something I can recall at any moment; and unlike the film or slide images of the mattress idyll, these scenes are clearer and more detailed every time, and especially now I see them before me almost to the word, like inventions, not events, figments of my imagination ordered up by powerful longing:

The subway had stopped at Nollendorfplatz, I'd gotten off, reveling once again in the almost deserted expanse that lay before me, hemmed by kebab stands, cafés, junk shops and flower kiosks, and in the fact that yesterday I'd lost only my change and the cheap wallet, not the document entitling an East German refugee who'd entered the country via the Marienfelde Refugee Camp to use the entire public transportation system for a year free of charge. The spring sun, high in the sky, shed glistening, nearly white light on the square, which looked both innocent and seedy now that it had thawed, but not rained; and to this day I see that kid, a slender girl in a neon green anorak who passed into my field of vision on my left, dragging her gym bag after her and clearly having no fun cutting school.

From the ledge next to the kiosk I picked up a crumpled "Bingo-BZ" from the same day, left there by its previous owner, no doubt bothered by the thought of tossing out something paid for and still usable – left for someone like me, for at the time I liked to read the gossip and horror stories printed in narrow columns under the screaming, sometimes hilarious headlines.

Skimming the newspaper, a cigarette between my lips, I made for my destination, the bathtub in the apartment of a Bavarian émigré social worker I liked – when you came tearing around the corner, you and your buddy. You acted strange, boisterous, even crazy: like two chained dogs that have torn themselves loose, but have slept just one night under strange windows and haven't gotten really, really hungry yet; but the glitter in their pupils, the lunatic

way they keep up each other's spirits already hints that they'll soon know and pay the price of freedom.

Good-looking men, the two of you, you blue-eyed, pale, ash-blond, the man next to you olive-skinned, with curly brown hair and a little silver earring. And that the sweatshirts stretched taut over your broad shoulders probably came from the clothing depot of the Workers' Welfare Association was the sort of thing I didn't notice at the time.

Though I wasn't wearing makeup and my sturdy body was draped in the sort of dress tellingly known as a tent, you must have noticed me just as I did you, for the two of you stopped, you on my left and the other on my right.

"Hey, kewpie-doll, where're you headed?" you said with such drawling distinctness that for a moment I thought you'd already had three or four beers. But your breath, which I could smell because your face came closer to mine as you spoke, had nothing sourly alcoholic in it, but something that made me crave cocoa. I've forgotten what my answer was, but the word kewpie-doll had its effect, telling me as it did that despite your irritatingly slow, painstakingly enunciated manner of speech, you could only be a Berliner, but not one who'd learned his ABC's in the East. Until the day I ran into the two of you, I had never met such young, and such clichédly waggish, fellow-countrymen or rather fellow-Berliners on this side of the Wall. The few people I had gotten to know better in the months after Marienfelde, such as the Bavarian with the bathtub, came from southern Germany and regarded the *independent political unit* as a kind of interim camp where they could study, a completely legal way of ignoring the "call of the Bundeswehr", "of the flag", as we "from over there" said. It was a while before I grasped that there was no significant difference between me, the "ex-Commie", and these others, that they too had escaped from something, indeed that all the defected North, South, West and East Germans plus the Turks, Italians, Greeks, Chinese, French and Americans... made up about half the population of the part of my city I wasn't born in.

On the flyleaf of the first, pirated book I bought in a bar with the first of my new money, in early December 1986, I wrote:

Now that I'm walking through the Western part of Berlin with the topography of the East in mind, I know that this city is in fact *one*; the buildings left standing on both sides are as alike as the ones built after the war. Berlin, East and West, makes me think of a last-minute present, a box of department store chocolates that goes unnoticed for weeks because its contents aren't very tasty ("scrumptious", they'd say here). Grayed or nibbled at and morosely replaced, the chocolates lurk in the molded plastic hollows, the plain ones on the right and on

the left the ones wrapped in gold foil, just like the others when unwrapped – like two peas in a pod, one could say, if chocolates had pods.

And on a calendar sheet from March 14, 1987 marking my place in the same book, I had noted down the following two sentences:

I walk around, see people, and think: him and him and her and her... like me, at some point they all came here planning to continue on or leave again, at the very latest with the last train. But all the trains were long gone, and the last one never left; since then we've been wandering around the train station whose name is West Berlin – *Zoological Gardens*.

“Me Harry, him Benno”, you said, sketching a curtsy, not a bow. And I'm Soja, I replied – rather reluctantly, dreading a major outbreak of the giggles, like almost every time I introduced myself to someone here in the West. – “Soja? Oh really, and what's the whole thing? Soy bean or soy sauce?!” Only once did I try to explain that I wasn't responsible for my name, my mother was; even, and especially, “in the difficult hours” of her “first childbirth” her thoughts had been with her idol, “Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, the partisan executed by the German fascists” – and I was met with a wave of still greater hilarity.

But the two of you weren't laughing any more than before. “Well, Soja,” you said, “how 'bout it? Should we go for a cocoa?”

The gaze I shot back to yours must have showed you how transparent I felt. How did you know what association the smell of your breath had sparked in me? Your brazen behavior had already rattled my nerves, and having someone read my mind really unsettled me, but thrilled me too, given that that someone was you. I flapped my arms as if I could leave the ground like that, or at least shyly flip you the bird. Something drew me toward you, and something else warned me: a petty inertia of the heart, but based on experience. As my grandmother once said, do cheap thrills ever come cheap?! Besides, Christoph's bathtub was waiting for me; I didn't even feel fresh enough for the vague desire that was trying to seize me and throw me into your arms. Or did it creep into me through my navel – like a gas gathering behind my diaphragm, expanding and already starting to lift my spirits?

No, I said, can't. Got someone waiting.

“Okay,” said your companion, who hadn't gotten a word in yet, in evident relief – and grabbed you by the sleeve, so hard that the threadbare jersey actually cried out in protest, for you stood where you were, just as unwilling to be dragged away as I was. I did, though, forced by my conflicting feelings; I started walking, head twisted, not taking my eyes off you, and yelled at you: maybe later.

You freed yourself, your sleeve tearing like paper, ran after me, caught up with me. “Ok, three on the dot, right here,” you said sharply, almost threateningly, and didn’t stop following me until I nearly ran into a passer-by and decided I might want to look forward now after all.

### III

I’d met Christoph, with the bathtub – an unusually large one – at the end of January, in a bar that was every East German woman’s dream come true: the Malibu on Winterfeldplatz, its floor covered ankle-deep with the finest white beach sand. Artificial palms and real ficus benjamina plants half-withered from cigarette smoke and a lack of sunlight stood between the tables. Pink neon tubes in the shape of giant flamingoes meandered across the black walls, and globe lamps hanging from the ceiling shed a diffuse blue light. It was mainly this blue light that kept me coming to the bar, because it gave a horribly unappetizing look to the hamburgers, spare ribs and foil-wrapped potatoes you could order there. And that way I never ate more than I absolutely needed to keep from getting hammered in no time by the cocktails, which were very small but cost half as much as usual.

Christoph sat across from me because all the other seats were taken. For about half an hour he almost wrenched his neck, peering at the door past the people that flooded in and out, and with lightning speed emptying the carafe of rosé that he’d been brought without having to order it. When the person he was expecting, a certain Adrienne as it turned out, failed to appear, Christoph, his attractive face red from rapid drinking and perhaps from anger too, slammed a well-thumbed leather wallet next to his glass, stood up and turned searchingly on his own axis – like a caterpillar at a loss at the end of its stem – but the skinny, harried-looking waitress was nowhere to be seen.

Heirloom, I asked out loud, and placed my finger on the wallet. But rather than fumble anxiously for his property, Christoph replied with a grin, as if I had tried to relieve him of something worse than money: “No, not *yet*, I’m still alive after all.”

He sat down again, waved the waitress over as soon as the toilet door had slammed shut behind her, asked if he could treat me, to whatever I liked, ordered another carafe of rosé for himself and said: “Pleased to meet you, I’m Christoph the Bavarian.”

I told him who I was and where I came from, and then we marveled a little bit, exactly as our roles demanded, he because I didn’t like vodka, I because he kept drinking this funny pink wine even though they had a famous Munich beer on tap here. Christoph outed himself

as an Augsburger who had grown up “near Brecht’s parental home” and had come to Berlin six years ago to study education. But that soon “bored him to death”, partly because he “couldn’t seriously imagine” “taming children one day”. Now he put a bit of time into a youth project called *Pumpe* and had a weekend job that brought a bit of money in.

“And you? What got into you, turning your back on the GDR?” Christoph wasn’t tactless enough to accuse me of “betraying the socialist cause”, as others had done before. (That irked me only slightly; just as we had dreamed of an alternative, I granted you the reverse illusion.) Instead he offered me the chance to cover for him now and then at his weekend job, when he had more important things to take care of or had to visit his mother. And a good deal later, as we staggered out of the Malibu, he offered me his bathtub as well. “Here,” Christopher’s speech was slurred, “here’s a key to our communal flat. I had it along for Adrienne, but she doesn’t seem to want it anymore. Come whenever you like. Usually we leave the house early and we’re out a lot or at our girlfriends’.”

Christoph’s fist poked my shoulder limply; a “ciao” that sounded like meow escaped his mouth, and then he turned and strode off, his legs slightly stiff and splayed, the walk of a sad but proud man just before the end of the night.

Once it had swallowed him, I set out too, toward Tiergarten, warming the key in my hand.

Preferably, I would have taken Christoph along, and much preferably I would have gone along to his place, if only because of the bathtub. But now that I lived in their midst, I was no longer capable of finagling one of these Western men with halfway proper backgrounds. Sure, I was nothing special, but I boasted long legs, clear skin, a full bosom and mouth. Back in the east, when I still had the benefit of exoticism and the guest had the freedom to determine the degree of closeness and distance, some of these guests, at least, had been less choosy. Two political science students, one from Marburg, one from Bremen, had in succession “empirically tested” the “erotic differences” between their “chicks” and the ones in the east “with the assistance” of my “affections”, as the Bremer put it. I also had fairly clear memories of a Heidelberg dentist – and the vasectomized German literature student from America who went into such transports at the sight of my heating stove that he kept shouting “oh, it’s crazy” as his toes felt the hot tiles. And some men who had grown up alongside me or in the other regions of our little country quite appreciated my uncomplicated manner, my eschewal of firm commitment – especially given that East German men felt insecure with really beautiful women, who supposedly wanted “to be courted, and entertained one way or another”.

And now? I made every effort to play up my not exactly plentiful charms with lipstick, fishnet stockings, chic bras under filmy blouses. But though I joined the bored barflies some evenings, nothing ever happened; nothing but an occasional flash of patronizing or critically lecturing interest in the – quite unspectacular – circumstances of my “soft landing” on the “planet of really-existing capitalism in the solar system of Deuropa” on which Christoph had congratulated me at our first binge in the Malibu. And despite the approving smile with which I acknowledged the tired polemical quip, I already knew types like Christoph well enough to wonder whether he or an editor of the satirical *Titanik* magazine had cooked up that pun.

It was as if they were wrapped in saran wrap, these friendly young men, so nonchalant to the untrained eye, whose exquisite “dress codes” I learned to decipher even before I knew exactly what the English word meant. I felt it as soon as I laid my hand on one of these men’s hands and tried to leave it there for a while. It felt as if their well-groomed, sinewy hands with the strikingly swelling veins, though they gave off warmth, were numb. Or was it my fingertips? The men seemed to notice these blockages as well, for they would pull their hand away, most of them casually, indeed gently, while my hand still sought contact and my nervous system still waited for something to happen that would quicken my pulse, raise my operating temperature and heighten my sense of smell.