

Translated excerpt

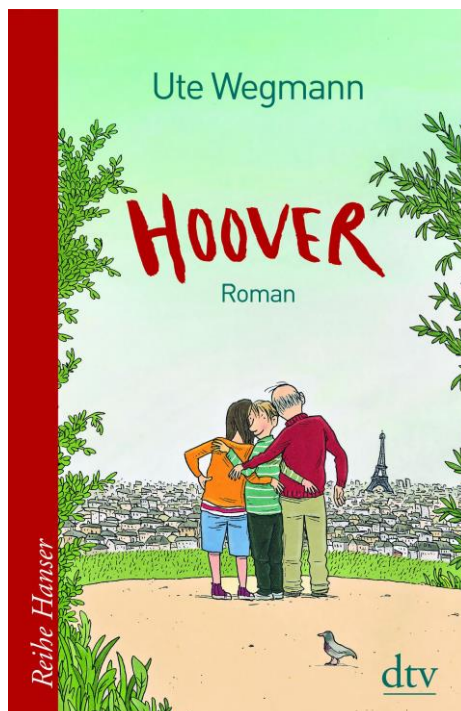
Ute Wegmann
Hoover
Roman

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Hoover
Novel

Translated by John Reddick



The Beginning

There were days when everything went wrong. Hoover knew this. On one particularly bad day his father tried to cheer him up by telling him that ‘Important and famous people nearly always have a tough time as a child.’ What a relief! Hoover didn’t know anyone who was having a more terrible childhood than he was. His father’s remark offered the promise of happiness at some point in the distant future. Perhaps he would become a famous musician, or a prominent doctor or marine biologist. It didn’t matter which! But from his vantage point in this weird and uneventful autumn he could see no end to the hellish time he was having. Ahead of him lay several more years of school, the appearance of whiskers, his first real parties, his first few beers, getting drunk in secret, his first kiss.

But for the time being he remained stuck where he was:

the youngest of three children,

the smallest in his family, and in his class at school,

the boy with all the freckles,

the boy with two dead grannies and a dead hamster,

the boy who didn’t have a dog,

the boy enduring the most boring summer holidays it was possible to have.

That was quite a list, and full of so many kinds of awfulness. Why couldn’t he be like his older brother, tall with lots of muscles and a dog, and a fantastic guitar player as well? Patience, patience! Things would change. Little by little.

Hoover was twelve. Anything was possible.

A Jar of Jam

Hoover sauntered along the pavement, past front gardens and parked cars.

Autumn leaves crackled beneath his trainers, and the last few leaves that still remained on the trees were a blaze of red, yellow and pale green. His hands thrust deep into his pockets, he jingled his money. He was very fond of autumn: its smells, its colours, its light, the precious last days of warmth. He hummed. He beamed. He stood still to watch a pair of squirrels. He helped an old man with a zimmer frame to cross the street. Cheerfulness glowed in his eyes; in fact cheerfulness glowed in Hoover from head to toe.

Crossing the main street and approaching the entrance to the supermarket, he watched the two glass panels slide apart with a gentle whoosh. There before him lay

his own personal paradise. He turned as usual into the Jams, Cereals and Savoury Biscuits aisle that provided a shortcut to the chilled food cabinets. And all of a sudden there she was, right in front of him. The cut-off trousers, Chuck Taylors and headphones told him at once that it was her. An oversized man's shirt reaching almost to her knees was flapping around her today as well.

There was a swift, scarcely perceptible movement, and then she looked at him. Hoover knew she was hoping that he hadn't spotted anything. But he had.

He had clearly seen a jar of jam disappear behind her back.

Her shirt hung a long way down from her shoulders, enveloping her almost completely. She must have stuffed the jar into the waistband of her trousers at the back. There was no bump showing there, not even the outline of her backside. Had he really seen what he thought he had seen?

Hoover struggled to put on an air of indifference, stepping past her with a casual 'Hello'. What should he have said, anyway? 'Hey, you, you've just stolen something!' She already knew that perfectly well. Or: 'Don't worry, I won't tell anyone.' No, he certainly wouldn't tell anyone. But then he heard his grandmother's words: 'People who steal apples also snaffle iPhones!' Can you equate apples with jam, and jam with mobile phones?

She blinked at him, her cheeks slightly flushed, and when she said 'Hi', her voice had such a deep and beautiful ring that he could barely manage to walk on past her, wanting instead to stay rooted to the spot in the hope of hearing her speak another word, another two words.

By the time Hoover reached the chiller cabinets his head was in quite a mess. He was supposed to be getting milk and a vanilla dessert topped with cream. He had also planned to get himself a bag of crisps on the side – he'd been looking forward to them all the way to the shop. But when he went rushing up to the till with the milk, he had very nearly forgotten the crisps and the dessert.

Her shirt lifted in the draught from the glass doors. She crossed the car park. Hoover followed her at a distance.

Columbine Street, Elderberry Street, Chestnut Avenue – straight through the park in a westerly direction. The setting sun dazzled him.

He thought for a moment of his mother, who was waiting for the milk. The girl walked through the underpass beneath the railway line. A paved path ran steeply upwards next to the tracks. This was unknown territory for Hoover. It was railway land, and trespassing was forbidden.

Brambles and other smaller bushes lined the path, and a riot of weeds were growing amongst the paving stones. The hedges and bushes, already partly stripped by the autumn winds, allowed him to stay out of sight. He looked at his watch, he looked at

the milk, the vanilla dessert, the bag of crisps – then looked up to find that the girl had vanished.

Creeping on along the edge of the undergrowth, Hoover came to the crest of the path, then stopped in his tracks, startled by the sight of a small garden house that suddenly loomed up in some allotments beyond a series of box trees. It looked pretty ramshackle – the plaster was peeling off, a corner of the roofing felt was all crinkled, the tiny windows with their faded gingham curtains were blank and scratched – but the flower beds full of autumn flowers and herbs looked watered and well tended. There were five other garden houses in the allotments, and the whole place had a desolate air.

Hoover crouched down behind the trunk of a plane tree and took a good look at the house.

A branch was suspended above the door, and in front of one of the windows stood a bench made from a couple of planks. Suddenly he heard voices from inside the house. A laugh, a cough. He ducked right down. The door creaked open, and a bent-over, delicate-looking woman with grey hair heaped up on the top of her head came out, followed by the girl. The woman was wearing white trousers and a long red blouse embroidered with fine gold thread.

‘Say a big thank you to your mother, my child.’ The woman’s voice was kind and gentle.

The girl put her arms around the woman as though she were made of fine porcelain.

‘See you soon, Frau Albertocchi. And thanks for the tea!’

They waved each other goodbye. The girl had thrown her shirt over her shoulder.

Hoover stayed in his hiding place until she had turned off into the street at the end of the path.

He suddenly realised that the milk felt warm: not a good omen!

He needed to get home as quickly as possible.

As soon as he opened the front door his furious mother wanted to know why a quick trip to the shop had taken him two hours.

Hoover couldn’t possibly let on that he had followed a girl onto the the railway tracks, and he absolutely didn’t want to betray her secret.

‘I bumped into Jens. He’s got a new skate board and he wanted to show me some tricks.’ There was a pause. ‘Sorry about the milk!’

His mother kept her eyes glued to her desk and said nothing.

‘Right, then: no rice pudding today!’ she called after him, clearly meaning it as a punishment. Hoover had indeed been looking forward to rice pudding with cherries –

but rice pudding, crisps, food in general suddenly seemed to have lost all their importance.

He disappeared into his room, thinking about nothing but the girl. He'd seen her several times in his street recently, and occasionally at school. She was in Year 9, the year above him.

'Stealing is wrong': he couldn't get the words out of his head. It was the Seventh Commandment: 'Thou shalt not steal!' Hoover had never stolen anything. But how bad was stealing if you gave away what you had stolen? And to someone who perhaps needed it really badly?

His Catholic Grandma Elli had explained the Ten Commandments to him on more than one occasion. She had considered this necessary since he was always doing things that – so she claimed – God simply couldn't abide. He hid his brother's and sister's favourite belongings when they'd upset him. He searched for naked women on the internet (though of course Grandma couldn't have known that). He resorted to lies when he found himself in trouble. His fits of rage at meal times were legendary. As a small child he had never wanted to eat what his mother put on his plate – he had always wanted to help himself, just as the grown-ups did. But no one understood him.

'Honour thy father and thy mother!' – how often Grandma Elli had told him off about that!

Hoover looked out over the Rhine. Obeying the Ten Comandments was perfectly possible – but as his father was fond of saying: 'There are always exceptions to the rule.'

Perhaps today he had encountered just such an exception.

Grandpa

Hoover had been sitting on the window seat in his room staring out for quite a while now. What else could he possibly do? His mother was cross with him, and busy as well, and his brother and sister were out enjoying their life, which – as always – was so much better than his own. It was bad enough having siblings who were three years older than him, but not only that: Theo and Kat were also twins, and stuck together no matter what: could anything be worse than that? What's more, he had parents who were totally in love with each other (not such a common phenomenon these days) and therefore always wanted to do everything together: sit side by side on the sofa, watch the same programmes on TV, tell him off for exactly the same things – the list was endless.

Being the youngest in a family such as this seemed to him to be a complete disaster.

Hoover had managed to cope with this abominable situation over the last twelve years, but every now and again there were bust-ups with the twins or with his parents, and sometimes – much the worst-case scenario – with all four of them at once. On such occasions he felt like a complete gooseberry. Silly expression really, but it was

true: he had this sense of superfluity; he was superfluous to requirements, he was a nuisance to everybody.

Whenever this feeling of superfluity came over him he went to see his grandfather. His grandfather was always there for him; he listened to him, he consoled him, he did his best to understand him, even while Grandma Elli was still alive.

For Hoover his grandfather was his lifeboat in stormy waters, his saviour. And Grandma Elli with her Ten Commandments was the voice of God.

Towards evening Hoover heard his mother making something in the kitchen. It smelt like rice pudding. He smiled: she simply wasn't the punishing sort. The phone rang, and his mother's scraps of conversation came echoing through the hall.

'in the University Hospital? ... on the way to the loo ... you fainted? And how're things now? Yes ... are you ok? – Yes, yes, talk to you tomorrow! 'night Father!'

She put the phone aside and looked across at her son, who was leaning ashen-faced in the doorway.

'Is Grandpa in hospital?' Hoover asked. Grandpa positively radiated health and energy. It flashed through his mind that Grandpa was *never* ill. It couldn't be true!

'No need to worry, he probably just felt a bit dizzy. They've checked him over, but they're keeping him in. They want to keep an eye on him. Nothing can happen to him in there.'

'But he hates hospitals', Hoover whispered.

'Don't ever take me to hospital!' That's what his grandfather had said when his grandmother died. Hoover had given his Grandpa's wrinkly hand with its tangle of black hair a firm squeeze, he'd pressed his lips together and nodded his head, as if swearing an oath. And for him that had amounted to an unspoken promise. His grandmother couldn't look after his grandfather any more – she was dead, after all. It was his job now. But what could he do? It was already late.

'Grandpa's fine. He sounded a bit tired, but cheerful. You don't need to look so worried. We can go and visit him tomorrow evening. They might even discharge him.'

'Is that what he said?'

His mother nodded and stroked his head – then let out a yell: 'The rice pudding!'

The smell of burnt milk wafted out from the kitchen into the hall. A white crust had formed on the stove top, and the rice was a gooey black mess in the saucepan.

Later, when he was in bed, Hoover's thoughts dwelt on Grandpa, who was no doubt lying in a tiny room with white-painted walls. A disgusting hospital smell invaded Hoover's nostrils. Or was it the smell of burnt milk? Whatever it was, it was ages before he fell asleep.