

Translated excerpt

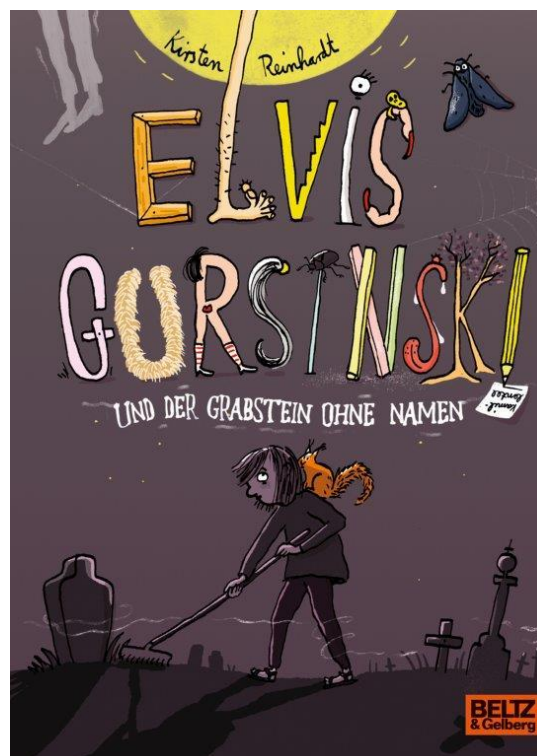
Kirsten Reinhardt / Tine Schulz
Elvis Gursinski und der Grabstein ohne Namen

Beltz & Gelberg Verlag, Weinheim 2022
ISBN 978-3-407-75681-7

pp. 7-9, 11-22

Kirsten Reinhardt / Tine Schulz
Elvis Gursinski and the Ghost Society

Translated by John Reddick





Prologue

1956

It's night-time in Berlin, hence also in a small graveyard in the suburb of Wedding. The sort of autumn night when people are woken up by frightening dreams, turn their light on, and make themselves a hot drink. Apple punch with cream, or cinnamon tea. No one left in the streets except the odd drunk staggering home from the pub. The wind rips away the last few leaves still clinging to the trees and hurls them into the air. Suddenly a man appears in the graveyard. Gaunt and bent, he shuffles forward with a ponderous, hobbling gait. He's carrying something in his arms. It seems to be heavy, as he makes slow progress. He stops beneath a bare oak tree and lets his burden slide to the ground; it instantly merges into the darkness. The man straightens up, and wipes his arm across his face. Then he just stands there, still as the moon. A

tawny owl hoots, startling the man. The wind abates all of a sudden. It is curiously calm now, not the tiniest breath of air. It's as if the entire graveyard were pricking up its ears. The man looks around. Abruptly going into frantic mode, he yanks something out of the bushes. Is it a branch? A ... shovel? Standing upright again he starts shovelling earth from the top of a small mound. He works fast. Fast and with great care, digging the shovel in with immense vigour. Finally, he bends over into the bushes, and reappears with his arms full. The man scatters leaves over the area he had filled in. Three times he offloads torrents of leaves, twigs, small branches. The fourth time it takes him longer to re-emerge from the bushes. It's hard work and he groans. What's that? The man's rolling something across the ground. Progress is slow, difficult and accompanied by grumbles. A stone! He rolls the stone under the oak tree. Then he pauses. Tottering from his efforts the man ends up sitting on the stone, with his head buried in his hands. A shudder wracks his body. He is seized by trembling. A strange sound comes out of his mouth. A croaking sound – yes: almost a screech. Then he stands up, shakes himself, and departs, slow and stumbling. The wind picks up again, more strongly than before. Howling and whistling, it rips into the crown of the oak tree and sets its branches trembling. And it carries away the man's hat. The hat goes scuttering across the graveyard and disappears into the night.



1. With all the force of a little old lady

One Wednesday in July Elvis Gursinski is walking down Turiner Strasse. He's on a shopping expedition to Birol's. Elvis looks down as he walks; it's better that way, just in case he should encounter anyone. His hair hangs down over his eyes. The ground is covered with broken-off twigs, leaves and trampled summer flowers. A slippery mess. There must have been a right storm overnight! It's strangely cool as well. Elvis crosses Nazarethkirchstrasse without looking: unlikely to be any traffic. If his dad could see him now he'd shout out loud: 'Oh, you and your crazy dreaming!', he would lament. 'It'll be the death of you one of these days!', he would say. 'Oğlum, my son, my life, my misfortune! You'll run straight in front of a delivery truck! And what would I do without you? It would be the end of me!' And then he would cry a little, just to show Elvis that such a thing must never happen.

Elvis turns into Utrechter Strasse. Lost in thought, he doesn't notice that he and a certain person are heading straight for each other. They get closer to one another with every step. Elvis pushes twigs and trampled flowers aside with his sandalled feet.

He's thinking about his mum.

Early that morning she had closeted herself away in her studio and given him that special look of hers. That's the thing with Elvis's mother: yes, she can be an I-adore-you-sweetie-pie-come-here-this instant sort of mum; but sometimes she can also be the hang-on-a-second-I'm-having-a-bright-idea sort. And when she's having a bright idea it can just so happen that Elvis is ignored. Totally. In every possible respect.

For the hang-on-a-second-I'm-having-a-bright-idea mum doesn't usually have just one bright idea. Usually she wants to draw it then and there. And usually whatever she draws doesn't quite match what's in her head. So she draws it again. And again. And again. And this 'again-and-again' can continue for quite some time.

When Elvis and Madame al Nour are some five metres apart the furry little creature on Madame al Nour's shoulder begins to catch the scent. The old lady raises her head. Four metres. Barely audibly, a furry voice growls 'Graveyard kid dead ahead'.

Elvis doesn't clock any of this. Although he and Madame al Nour live in the same part of town they've rarely encountered each other. That's because both of them rarely venture out onto the streets. Elvis only emerges from the graveyard to go shopping or go to school, while Madame al Nour goes out on her checking-up trip just once a week. On Wednesdays, of course: the middle day of the week is the link between what lies ahead and what lies behind, and is thus the most suitable day for keeping tabs on unusual events. So there's little chance of their bumping into each other. But just such a chance has arisen today. Three metres. The furry creature blinks in alarm and emits a *sotto voce* growl, but Madame al Nour forges ahead regardless. Two metres now.

She tightens her grip on her walking frame.

One metre.

She crashes into Elvis with all the force of a little old lady.

Elvis staggers back, flaps his arms in the air, and just manages to stop himself falling over. BANG! The ashtray with its smoking incense stick crashes onto the pavement.

'Oh ... apologies!' Elvis brushes his hair away from his forehead. 'I hadn't seen you. So sorry. Honestly!'

He bends down to retrieve the ashtray, getting very close to the old lady in the process. Elvis catches sight of her gold-coloured finger nails and chunky rings. And he smells Madame al Nour. It's a calming smell, redolent of jasmine and old lady. Elvis deposits the ashtray back on the walking frame.

And then: WHAM!

He is faced all of a sudden by Madame al Nour's notorious sudden-nocturnal-explosion look.

Elvis staggers back anew, but this time he grabs hold of Madame al Nour's walking frame. She places her thin, bony hand on his and says, 'Well, well!'

While this is going on, a small fur-encircled nose starts sniffing his hair – or so it seems to Elvis – and he also thinks he can hear a grumpy voice in the region of the old lady's collar muttering 'Quite right, my dear. Quite right'.

Everyone in this locality knows Madame al Nour. Whenever she comes trundling down the street everyone gives way to her. In summer and winter alike Madame al Nour wears a calf-length fur coat with a matching collar. Down below, a pair of spindly legs peek out, clad in pink and white striped trousers, which are stuffed into black, ankle-length cowboy boots. Madame al Nour has a sharp, straight nose, a mocking lipstick mouth, and her eyes, surrounded with black eye shadow and with long mascara-ed lashes, flash like an explosion in the night. Above them: eyebrows shaped with mascara into perfect curves, and a pageboy haircut showing silver-grey streaks. But the oddest thing about her is the fur collar lying aslant across her shoulder. There are reports of passers-by claiming to have seen the head on the fur collar winking at them. Others will swear 'on whatever you like!' that they have one hundred percent seen the fur creature on Madame al Nour's shoulder busily sniffing at things, while yet others – especially children – believe, 'God's honour!', that they have heard the furry creature saying things to Madame al Nour in a hushed, bad-tempered voice. Stuff like 'Look out: dog shit to your left!', and 'Teenagers ahead!' Needless to say, adults dismiss the children's accounts as 'figments of their imagination' – with the result that

absolutely no one realises that Madame al Nour's furry creature really does talk to her. No one except Dalia.

Elvis wonders whether he ought to pick up the incense stick as well, but Madame al Nour is already trundling away, loudly cursing the city's street-cleaning services as she goes: 'Great! Us folk in Wedding get to clean our streets ourselves, whereas over in Wilmersdorf I bet everywhere's squeaky-clean...'.
'What was all that about?!', wonders Elvis.

And: 'Weird!'

Then he steps into Birol's convenience store.

The shop is just about large enough to turn around in, with shelves stuffed right up to the ceiling with confectionery and other items essential to life. Behind a small glass counter are mountains of filled rolls, doughnuts and freshly prepared sigara boregi. The smell of coffee pervades the air. Birol is seated in his usual place behind the tiny counter, half hidden by a large jar of extra-sour jelly babies and a revolving display cabinet bearing itching powder and stink bombs. The shop is directly opposite Elvis's school and stocks everything that anyone from the school might ever need. Birol is listening to his radio and pays no attention to Elvis.

Elvis is so discombobulated by his encounter with Madame al Nour that he buys all the wrong things – i.e. Dad-stuff instead of Mum-stuff. Birol, too, is on another planet today: he cracks no jokes, and doesn't ask 'so how are you faring today, my worthy friend?' He also doesn't let him stick his hand in the jelly baby jar. As if mesmerised, Birol devotes his attention exclusively to the voice of the weather-man: 'coming on now to the extraordinary storm, including unusually strong winds for the time of year, that hit Wedding around midnight last night, or more particularly the rectangle bounded by Seestraße, Müllerstraße, Pankstraße and Badstraße. Its strict confinement to such an extremely small area is presenting our meteorologists with considerable puzzles...'

It's only when Elvis gets back to the graveyard and home that he realises he forgot to get the one thing he went to the shop to buy: camomile tea.



2. Küçük and Camomile Tea

‘Camomile tea isn’t all that important’, you might well think; but you’d certainly see things differently if, like Elvis, you had a mother who was addicted to Camomile tea...

‘Elvis, camomile tea please!’, calls Peggy Gursinski, her voice echoing throughout the entire house. ‘Camomile tea-hee!’

Whenever his mother is struck by this particular urge, she’s incapable of getting out of bed and making the camomile tea herself, so Elvis has to do it. Of course he does. But Elvis hasn’t bought any camomile tea, and therefore can’t make any. In consequence he decides that he hadn’t actually heard his mother’s shout. He creeps upstairs to his room and squats down on the mattress beneath the window. No, he really can’t hear Mama’s voice – the summer birdsong is much too loud; not to mention the crickets!

Elvis leans out of the window and surveys the oak tree with a searching gaze. He whistles. No response. Reaching into his trouser pocket, he scatters a few sunflower seeds on the windowsill and taps his fingers against the woodwork. Küçük adores sunflower seeds: to her, they're second only to sugar... There's a rustling in the tree, and something comes hurtling across - something reddish brown, fleet, and decidedly fluffy: Küçük; that's the name the Gursinskis have bestowed on the squirrel that lives in the ancient oak tree.

Küçük leaps onto the windowsill, landing right in front of Elvis's nose. After briefly sniffing the seeds, she starts chattering excitedly, jumps up and down in front of Elvis, then quickly leaps back into the tree. There, she hops from branch to branch, screeching loudly and giving Elvis reproachful looks.

Then at last he notices: up there in the crown of the old oak tree, at the back on the right, where only yesterday the huge branch stood that contained Küçük's nest, there was now – nothing. Nothing but bare, splintered stumps jutting up into the air. That really must have been one heck of a storm! And Elvis hadn't even noticed it!

Küçük lets out a howl of sorrow. Elvis reaches his hands out to her. Küçük hops onto them and clambers up his arm.

'Poor Küçük!' Elvis snatches the squirrel off his shoulder. Hugging her solicitously, he rests his cheek on her fluffy back.

'Elvis, camomile tea, please! Camomile tea-hee! Camomile tea-hee!'

The sound of his mum's voice reaches him both from outside, via the open door onto the terrace, and from inside via the stairwell: Mama in stereo and far too loud:

'Camomile tea-heeee! Camomile tea-heeee!'

Elvis deposits Küçük on his mattress and shuts the window. Taking a small pair of pyjamas from the cupboard he fashions it into a nest by the side of the mattress.

Küçük watches him, full of curiosity. Her ears are all a-tremble.

'All yours, madame', says Elvis, pointing to the nest.

Küçük trips to and fro sniffing at the material in her curiosity. The combined smell of Elvis and old terry-cloth appears to please her. Küçük hops into the nest and rolls up into a ball. She wipes her nose, whereupon her eyes close.

Elvis strokes her back, and whispers ‘Won’t be long!’

Then he sets off downstairs.

Just as Elvis is about to knock on the studio door he realises that it has gone all quiet in there. No more shouts for camomile tea, at any rate.

Instead there’s a curious scraping sound:

Scrape-scrape, scrape-scrape, scrape-scrape, it goes.

Non-stop.

Elvis knocks. Once. Twice. Five times. At last the scraping noise stops. There’s a rustling sound, then a thud. Elvis hears footsteps; a key turns in the lock, and there’s his mum standing before him. With red cheeks, tousled hair, and a total I’m-out-of-it look that turns into a distracted smile as soon as she sees Elvis. He looks past her into the room.

Oh no! What he espies in there is about as much as he can take...

‘What can I do for you? What do you want, my darling?’ his mother asks distractedly and with narrowed eyes.

‘Um...’, stutters Elvis. What did *he* want?! It was his mother who had called him, for goodness’ sake!

‘Elvis, please! I’m working. If you don’t know what you want, then don’t disturb me! I’ve got a lot on my plate.’

She shuts the door in his face, but then reopens it and pokes her tousled head out once again.

‘Listen, sweetheart, if you can’t think of anything better to do, then go and sort out the graveyard - okay?’



3. Warty Feet, Slobbery Tongues

Elvis doesn't understand the world any more. It's a mystery to him at the best of times why people do what they do. And his mother isn't exactly known for exhibiting predictable behaviour - rather the opposite, in fact ... At first Elvis thought he knew what was afoot, for his mum's studio looked in a terrible state again. There were crayons, eraser remnants and pencil shavings everywhere. And there were myriad eyes, clumps of knotted hair and warty, clawed feet, not to mention slobbery tongues. All of it drawn, of course. He had seen it on the scrumpled-up sheets of paper scattered on the floor.

It's been like that for quite a while now...

Peggy Gursinski is an illustrator. She dreams of one day creating a perfect picture book. One that makes children laugh and adults cry. And in the meantime she draws illustrations for school books and Health Department leaflets.

At some indeterminate point a change occurred. Little oddities began to creep into her drawings: a staring eye, a hairy toe, a knobbly wart. She once had a commission

to do a few straightforward illustrations for an educational pamphlet on immunisation. She drew for three days and nights, and when she was done, the syringes had spooky faces, and black blood was dripping from the needles and pooling in the bottom corner of the page in a welter of squinting eyes and long cleft tongues.

Unfortunately Peggy Gursinski hadn't taken a proper look at the drawing before sending it off, and so was taken aback when the people who had commissioned the work rang her and angrily asked whether it was meant as a joke. She said, No, it certainly wasn't, and what were they on about, she thought the drawing had turned out really well. So when, a few days later, her drawing turned up in her post box accompanied by a letter cancelling the contract, she was stricken with incomprehension. Was it really her who had drawn this horrible thing?

Much the same thing happened a few weeks later, this time involving a school book publisher, who promptly called time on their relationship, forcing her to earn a crust by taking a job in an old people's home.