

Sibylle Lewitscharoff, *Apostoloff*

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On the Road with Rumen

This, I say to my sister, has turned out quite nicely for us. My sister is sitting in silence on the front passenger seat. A tiny movement of her head towards the window is the only sign that she has understood. She is used to my pronouncements and knows what I mean by them.

Finished, vanished, done away with. A father who would do away with himself rather than crush his whole family should be praised, not condemned.

Do. Surely there is a ray of sunshine in this word? Surely something is looking for admiration once it's completed? Condo, dildo, done. Done – my attempt to punch the headrest stops in mid-air, and I drop my hand to my knee quicker than I raised it. Stupid? Yes, quite a lot of things I do are stupid, and I have found nothing yet that will stop me. My sister can't see me or hear me at this moment, because she is smiling at Rumen and because the noise of the car is drowning softer sounds.

Sometimes when I speak to my sister it's like talking to a brick wall. She knows the outbursts I make; our father seldom comes off well – mostly he comes off badly. We maintain a steely silence about our mother. The wonderful thing about my sister is that she doesn't take me seriously and forgives everything. She is a model of patience, an angel to me, her younger sister. We are now middle-aged, but my sister, who is barely two years older than me, thinks she is dealing with an innocent child whose whims you frown at a little, in the full belief that she will grow out of them in due course.

Rumen Apostoloff is not used to us; his hair stands to attention right to its tips. He is horrified by my tirades, but he worships my sister. His hearing is excellent and he almost always understands what we say; only when we deliberately slip into broader Swabian dialect this linguistic detective is not quite up to the indistinct, slurred sounds.

Rumen is our Hermes; he carries languages back and forth, drives and finds the way as he drives – one of those desperate Bulgarian drivers who ignore all the things dying at the edge of the road as it flashes by. A victim of his nerves, devoted to us, he drives through his desperate country, which by night is even more desperate.

We cannot, I say to my sister, we cannot complain. We were fed, we weren't beaten and had our long education paid for, and at the end there was even some money for a modest inheritance. What more can you want.

The joyless reasonableness of my statements revolts me, which makes me shut my mouth for a while. My sister remains silent for long periods anyway, and Rumen does not dare to get involved in discourse which looks as though it is going to continue.

We are heading to Veliko Tarnova on a good road. We have just left Sofia behind; on the left you can see run-down industrial plants with a reddish-yellow column of smoke rising into the sky. The whole left side is enveloped in a reddish-yellow veil, with toxic particles glistening in the sunshine. There is a strong smell. A long column of lorries is ahead of us. Rumen Apostoloff straightens his upper body in its seat and grasps the wheel with determination: ahead of him he has the tough business of overtaking and in the back seat a woman he can't stand.

Hating your father is a wind that blows out all the little sparks of love you may have for your father, I say inaudibly to my sister as we leave behind us the red clouds of dust from the state metallurgy plant, once called *a child of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship*.

We are children of German-Bulgarian friendship, which is just as suspect as the Bulgarian-Soviet variety. A friendship made of lies, iron and tinplate, and little

remains of it but scrapped tanks and piles of dead bodies, long decomposed. Our father has decomposed under a separate pile: not a body from the war, but a recent death.

Why doesn't he let us see him, this father? That is, if he can!

We see nothing. The time is not yet ripe to fashion the image of our father with delicate hammers. Kristo – his heavily symbolic name. Not an accommodating, comfortable name that helps a boy get around in the world. What an iron crown of meaning weighs on this name from the cross. This father-Kristo, not a father yet of course, just a son, is said to have learnt to write quickly, but his name took a long time to master. As a doctor in his adult years he had messy writing, a challenge to every pharmacist who had to decipher his prescriptions. The name was completely illegible. Yes, in our father's case, as in others, his name was the essence of his personality, I say to my sister, and think I can hear her sighing on account of my patter and the incomprehensible whims it pursues.

A personality without voice or substance, at least for his daughters, assuming he appears in their heads at all, I say triumphantly. He does, he does appear in their heads. When it suits him he shows himself fleetingly, this bastard of a father!

In the dreams which begin at night and develop by day – that's where our father makes his regular appearances.

As my sister's silence persists, Rumen only groans and thumps the steering-wheel with his fist when some total moron, as he sees it, stops him driving at full speed – I am now speaking for my sister, although she normally denies that fathers appear in dreams, and she is particularly stubborn when it comes to our messed-up father.

Recently, the night before we flew to Sofia, he was sitting with me in my room. His presence was no more unusual than when, for instance, we read in a tale by Murakami: *When Katagiri entered his flat, a huge frog was waiting for him.*

There was no huge amphibian waiting for me, just my father. He behaved more discreetly than Murakami's frog and said nothing. Why strain your vocal cords – there is nothing we have to discuss. Slowly he got up and went through the wall. When he had disappeared, the end of his rope was still dragging on the floor, till it also gradually disappeared. My father mostly has his rope with him—that is nothing new at all.

Our Rumen is a frantic driver. Again and again he drags me out of my thoughts. When he overtakes you can't help wondering: Will he make it or will he not? He has just overtaken a road-train laden with tree-trunks, a red pennant fluttering on the last truck. Another lucky escape.

Rumen Apostoloff would like to show us Bulgaria's treasures. My sister and I know better: these treasures only exist in Bulgarian brains. We are convinced that Bulgaria is a horrible country – no, let's not be so dramatic: it's a stupid and evil country. What of its regions? Its sea, woods, mountains, meadows? For all we know there may be hidden charms there. We are not ornithologists, however, and we don't want to go bear-hunting. We care nothing about picturesque gorges of the Rhodope Mountains, hammer-blows in Rhodope valleys don't thrill us, bell-peals do not incite us to go to church. Fields of roses are fields of roses to us, nothing much more; fields of roses don't make our hearts swell. Just because someone points to a patch of land blood-red in colour, we don't start behaving like a couple newly in love, and our blood does not pump any faster. Staying sober is an art. We practise it with an iron will, as soon as we sense Bulgarian air, and certainly before we hesitantly set foot on Bulgarian soil.

And what about other things? The Bulgarian choirs, for instance, are they nothing? *Le Mystère des voix bulgares*, as they say in such an exalted tone. Doesn't that sound as if the singing was high up in the ether and echoed down the mountain? Don't we start grieving when we think of Orpheus, who sang with such a pure and enchanting voice in the Rhodope Mountains, plucking his famous lyre and making the rocks and trees gather round him, the wild beasts lower their horns, bucks and does go weak in the knees with delight; skin by skin, skin by garments – prey by hunter—as they bedded down on soft moss, and peace and trust reigned amongst all beings that have ears and a heart beating in their breast, because listening was all there was now, a strange kind

of listening, an excess of listening by sentient stone hearts and receptive stone ears, something you don't even read about in the Bible.

Well, we say, that's as it may be, but have you forgotten your great-great-great grandmothers? Those drooling Maenads, those screeching creatures, thirsting for revenge, baying for blood, evil. They blew their horns and screamed and made a din for so long that Orpheus's singing no longer had any effect and they were able to slaughter the singer. And soon the marble-white limbs were floating on the Mariza, Orpheus' head, still singing, was floating past beech coppices and thickets of willows, past hazelnut bushes and poplars; the beautiful head floated and floated, seawards and away. Away from this land of malice, then still called Thrace. No treasure of intellectual delight hiding in your Rhodopes. It's not the sound of Orpheus coming out of your choirs, it is the Maenads, at least their recent descendants. And that would be the answer to the riddle of why larynxes in Bulgarian choirs are so unnaturally constricted.

He sang so beautifully, our gynaecologist, sighs the choir of father-admirers, all of them former patients who claim to have heard their exotic Orpheus singing at the window, at his desk, tapping a cannula with his fingernail, bending over medical instruments, and in other places besides. Till finally he sang his own funeral ditty, a dying kr-kr that gradually turned into a death-rattle, embellished a little by the once extremely melodious paternal voice as long as there was enough air in his throat for this embellishment.

But his head, oh that paternal head, was already covered in deep black and clasped in the arms of death.

Let's get back to the script, I say, back into the Bulgarian misery this bastard of a father heaped on the heads and hearts of his daughters. Thank God I don't say it loudly, as is my habit, but so quietly that Rumen has little chance of hearing me, even if I am not quite certain that can't hear after all, because his secret-service hearing is so sharp that he hears sounds which have not even escaped into the air yet – they are just little tickles on a tongue.

Rumen, poor Rumen, have we already spoken about the Bulgarian pottery that you are so fond of showing us? The peacock-eye decoration, the flowing pattern on all the brown jugs, bowls, plates, ash-trays, little coffee-cups, once favourite presents for holiday-makers to take back to the GDR, prized more by the English nowadays? To us the plates, cups and mugs seem thick. Unpleasantly chunky children's crockery. Furthermore the stuff is not suited for eating off, as the fired-on cobalt blue seeps through the glaze and is toxic.

And what about the Black Sea coast? Black Sea coast – doesn't that sound like the roar of the sea, gulls, dunes, beach cafés, bobbing little boats, clicking masts of yachts, and a little further on, over the border, Ovid? Oh, come on! Built over, ruined, polluted. The ash-grey sea? Fished out. Bulgarian food? Pap drowning in bad oil. The fish is a charred joke. Bulgarian art in the twentieth century? Hideous, without exception. Architecture (apart from monasteries, mosques or merchants' houses from the nineteenth century)? A crime!

My sister shakes her head, not to contradict me – after all, she didn't hear me – but just because a mosquito has flown into her hair and has got caught up in it.

As always her objection comes at the right moment.

Oh, I know. Deep down I know better, but I cannot restrain myself. Just the word Bulgaria is enough; it triggers off a fit which immediately sweeps away every trace of reason. I mingle hate of father and country and petulantly keep it on the boil. Bulgaria? Father? A knee-jerk reaction. Even individual sensitive Bulgarians are no help—we have certainly come across some and, hardly setting eyes on them, we rushed towards them in almost crazed euphoria. The childish bookkeeper inside me does not think of people like this as Bulgarians. They dwell in neutral territory, where all my favourites dwell.

Whatever Rumen shows us my sister acknowledges with a weak smile. I know this smile only too well. My sister puts it on when deep inside she feels utter tedium. It is a smile to reassure the world of her sweetness; it makes no comment and does not commit itself at all. The dry version of her smile, crystallised in sugar. Secretly, even

she is glad when she notices once again how stupid Bulgaria is. I know that only too well, although my sister is far too polite and far too cautious to give free rein to her aversion. The ridiculous country proves it: death has not taken a precious father from us, just a stupid Bulgarian. We have not suffered a loss; on the contrary, we have been lucky, for time was too short for him to infect us with his Bulgarian hocus-pocus. The only difference: my sister bottles up these thoughts and smiles, smiles constantly, whereas I infuriate Rumen by listing at length the features of the Bulgarian catastrophe.

We are already sick of Bulgaria before we really get to know it. Sad, but true: the Bulgarian language seems to us the most hideous in the world. Such a lily-livered, ungainly language, slurping its way forward, labial plosives that refuse to explode. No precision of any kind in the consonants. To annoy Rumen I like to resort to the ploy of praising the neighbouring Romanians. How pleasant Romanian sounds to the ear! How dark, heavy and lost to the world. Yes, it is to the Romanians' advantage that their Slav dialect was swallowed up by the Romance languages. And how good-looking they are! Yes sir, they sometimes look like tall Romans. And what a wonderful literature they have, full of black magic! Obviously, they had Ovid as their guest, they had important dissidents and were not to the last man arse-lickers to the Soviets as the Bulgarians were; the few dissidents in Bulgaria had been got rid of in the Lowetsch quarry or the Belene camp.

As soon as he hears me say the word Romania, Rumen pulls a face, as if he has a toothache. Every night in his dreams, I think, he murders me, grabs my sister and drags her behind a Bulgarian hill.

There were a few times when I went too far. Rumen has learnt now how to keep me in check. If I praise the Romanians he gets testy. What, the Romanians are civilised? Ha, Rumen retorts, their favourite sport was to lock Jews in pigsties and burn them alive. And they have no regrets, none at all, your glorious Romanians, he screams, and his voice quivers with resentment and outrage.

Meanwhile dusk has fallen and the traffic clears. We are travelling through a thinly populated area. Do humans live here at all, we ask after we have travelled through

hilly country for a quarter of an hour, with not one settlement anywhere. Only the gypsies' donkey- and horse-carts occasionally trotting along the edge of the road tell us that there must be people living somewhere behind the hills, in settlements thrown up somehow or other, with derelict shops boarded up in a makeshift way, assuming there are any shops at all behind the hills. There is nothing that might incite longing for parts unknown, that might revive the myth of adventure in the Balkans. Poor nags whose misery shows through their skin as if drawn with a hard stylus, their foreheads adorned with red pompoms.

This oppressive twilight is the forerunner of the Bulgarian night. At night the Bulgarian mountains sleep like big black animals, and only here and there, far apart from each other, points of light glint out of decaying houses. Because there are fewer lorries to do battle with, Rumen is now relaxed, slouching in his seat with a burning cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

Today I am in a better mood; being driven around agrees with me. I also am quite glad to be on the back seat, because I prefer to spread my vitriol from behind. Anyway, it would annoy Rumen even more if I were sitting next to him. As he is a bad driver, that could put us in serious danger.

Please manage without me

Please manage without me, says Father. A foaming father-wave washes through the inside of the car, a powerful jolt in our spirits causing the roof of the car to fly off; for a moment we are driving along under the open sky.

Please do without me is something he has never said before; never before has he been so polite when leaving us. The sky, pale as ash, confirms he is gone. It remains dubious what kind of father he was supposed to have been. I can't remember his voice, my sister can't either, and we fail completely when we are supposed to describe our father's voice. What kind of German did he speak? Was it good? Clear? With an Austrian accent because he polished it in Vienna? Was his speech free of grammatical errors? Was his vocabulary rich or poor? We don't know, although really we ought to know, as I was eleven and my sister was thirteen.

Whether he burst into speech or started hesitantly – we don't know. Whether he spoke in a roundabout way, covering himself so to speak – we don't know. Whether his speech lurched forward, whether it was smooth, fast, limping – no idea. Did he have the unpleasant habit, like many foreigners, of speeding up his speech when he was no longer sure of his grammar? And what about his voice? High, piping, throaty? Or did it come from deep inside his chest? The chorus of admirers which used to surround us claims that he spoke such utterly wonderful German that it was like listening to a poem. Above all he sang so wonderfully that it was unbearable.

We have got into the habit of keeping quiet when we hear things like that – one of the rare cases when my sister doesn't resort to her famous smile. Thank God, the chorus of father-admirers has thinned considerably; there are hardly any of them alive who knew him personally. Now it's up to us to get a clear idea of who our father was. When we were still little and ran through the garden with thin plaits flying, we were watched by women, total strangers, who concluded that we had somehow turned out wretched, not like that legendary Orpheus, hardly worthy of being called his daughters. Now the question arises in our minds: does this wretch have any claim to being considered our father?

Let us state that our father was a typical Bulgarian. A typical Bulgarian has vigorous hair growth, has perfect white teeth, eats garlic and doesn't die till he's ancient. In our father's case, the hair was black and thick; however, he hardly ever ate garlic. The typical Bulgarian keeps his hair into old age, and it grows white late. Our father did not pass the test of age, however, so we have no precise knowledge about this. Only that at the moment when his friend looked at him one last time and stroked his head, whole bunches of hair remained in his hand.

Where else was there hair? Caught on the furniture? Was there paternal furniture? Maternal furniture?

The furniture slept in reticent contrariness on long-piled fitted carpets. Blue carpet in our parents' bedroom. Chipboard furniture with a formica veneer. Eggshell-coloured carpet in the living room. Our father had staked a claim on the little red sofa in the

balcony-room. When he sat on this sofa he felt safe and managed to get along without emotions. Actually, he needed little space around him – just enough room to fill with his sadness. Sometimes however he walked irritably round the balcony room and snarled, showing his white teeth. Deep down he was certainly repressed. No wonder that only a few years after his death, a battery lying in the sun on the table in the balcony room exploded and spilt horrible-smelling chemicals on the red sofa.

His contact with people around him was only perfunctory. Look at people once, closely, impress them on your memory, and that was enough. Everything else could then go out of focus. He always wore his melancholy on his head like a little cap. He considered his inner darkness unique. And his family supported him in this belief; oh, the family satellites brooded about the unfathomable darkness in the soul of a Bulgarian father and a Bulgarian man – and, to be sure, the one that was oppressing us was a particularly monstrous specimen. There was a glow of genius-like confusion and sensitivity in this darkness. Why did no-one, for heaven's sake, ever take a good look at this man's obtuse facial expression and conclude that we were dealing with – no, not an artistic wreck—with a total wreck of a doctor.

He did not, as time went on, become forbidding and irascible like most of our school-friends' fathers. When he fetched his worn waistcoat from the wardrobe we knew what was coming. He closed down the world around him for two months, it was always in the spring, and we were condemned to be closed down with it. Tiptoeing around his locked little room, knocking timidly on the door, asking hesitantly if he wanted something to eat – and no reply. If you opened the door a crack, there was such a musty smell pouring out that you shut it again at once. He was lying on his sofa as if he had decomposed.

We hoped our mother, this sports-loving skier, mountain-climber, owner of an ice-pick, would throw open the door and administer a few resounding slaps to the zombie, and either wake him up or finally send him to the cemetery, or at least force him to take off the appalling waistcoat with the moth-hole over the paunch and burn it. Nothing of the kind happened. We stopped wasting useless hopes on our mother.

There was no maternal furniture. What did a woman want if every fibre of her being was directed towards her husband. It was true that she decided what furniture from which esteemed company was to be brought into the house, from the Schildknecht company, for instance, which in the sixties enjoyed the reputation of exclusivity and good workmanship, but she only ever made decisions for his sake, to cheer him up, never on her own account.

Chipboard! There are a hundred reasons to ram a wall of chipboard bookshelves with your head. Chipboard bookshelves, with the works of Uwe Johnson, Max Frisch, James Baldwin and Albert Camus lined up like good soldiers, call up the destructive urge. Bring an axe! Bring a saw! Rip pages out! My sister, that imperturbable sleepwalker, walks past chipboard bookshelves as if they were the most normal thing imaginable, even when cabinets are added, little doors with waffle-patterns, little doors with little brass keys; behind them, cognac and snifters, whisky and the appropriate heavy glasses live their discreet lives.

If our parents had embraced the books of real drinkers – Lowry! Faulkner! Cheever! – they might perhaps have given the Schildknecht company and its chipboard a wide berth. But no, if you go looking for disasters they will come to you soon enough.

Our father stayed moderate in regard to alcohol. He was a night-fighter and didn't need it; he could elicit from furniture things that people normally don't; he could smell its despair. The nocturnal threats did abate during the day, but in his head he had cultivated a hearing hotbed, planted with sensors which could detect the vibrations of these threats, no matter how subtle or distant they might be.

When we talk of subtle, extremely subtle hearing, don't we involuntarily think of angels?

I am tempted to give my esteemed fellow-travellers a lecture on the topic of angels. If it were not so brutally noisy inside the little Daihatsu I would tell them about the angels that stand closest to God's throne. Their hearing is infallible, it is said. In the exalted company of angels, no less than in the ambit of the singing, lyre-plucking Orpheus, listening is practised to excess. God sometimes speaks incredibly softly,

softer than a newly-born amoeba (we would never guess he was speaking in a hundred thousand man-years), and then sometimes as loudly as if Fathers' Day had just dawned (really loudly, loudly enough to split the eardrums of little humans of every variety).

Angels are guardians of truth, a thought which I use obstinately to counter the noise of the Daihatsu; they have to pick up the tiniest specks of communication that are caught up in the words hovering, floating and fluttering in air currents. Anyone who listens so intently, probing deep into the innermost silence, may not understand in the real sense. Let's assume that God says *scarcity*. An angel's brain can't afford to be too long in frantically checking all the possible variants of scare and city, and every instance of city in the Bible, and coming to the conclusion that cities in the form of London, Paris or even Sofia don't really inspire fear, but are just chance acquaintances in the whole word, so to speak, and lurk very indistinctly in the background.

A thoroughly stupid example, I know (and I take it back at once. We may ignore the problem of literally hearing literally, but not the problem that we lack proof that God speaks clear and direct German. Or Latin or Greek or Hebrew. We can exclude Bulgarian, however. Bulgarian is out of the question!)

Hey, sister, don't be so glum! I am thinking of angels and you put your head to one side and slip away from me in sleep, just because it is evening and the motorway is empty.

Angels, sister, messengers! The evening rush-hour, wings flapping in the sky. A flood of signifiers!

The function of messengers is to analyse divine gobbledygook. To collect, examine, group, connect. That is to say, to listen, of course. It is their job to pass on the commands that are sealed inside, as if in amber, to all who have ears to hear, even if there is perceptible vacillation in the Supreme Will, as if the Supreme Will were doubting itself, so to speak. There must be no errors in listening. The messengers must receive and transmit messages correctly.

Our father's line to the outside world was cut. He only listened inside himself for his own ineffable purposes. We had better not be too particular about what region they came from, these things he heard. From the intestines, I imagine. From his heart, thinks my sister, that romantic tramp.

Whenever the consulting-room was empty, if nobody was heedlessly making a lot of noise around him, the hearing hotbed showed what it was capable of.

In his brain there were holes, and into them leaped gloomy images. Flimsy leaves of nothingness began to rustle in his head.

It was only yesterday, sister, wake up! The little leaves!

Yesterday we admired a Thracian princess's gossamer-thin crown of leaves in the Sofia museum. Fashioned from gold, thin as a fingernail. We flashed our joy round the showcase in alternating blinks of our eyelids. In our memory, gold remains gold; it just gets rolled more and more thinly into more and more fantastic leaves. And for this reason the miraculous headdress of the unknown princess leaped as an impression into our brains and remains cheerful, ever cheerful, not causing any harm.

We are not our father's daughters. You want proof? Our father would have stared at leaves like that for a few seconds, and in a trice they would have developed into a threatening spectre. As they were only seemingly the product of human hands, they would have hypertrophied, in his mind, into the devil's handiwork. Secretly the leaves would have soon been rustling in his head, or worse, they would have begun to twine themselves around his head and form a sinister wreath. Silently, let's make no mistake. Coiling leaves, enveloping leaves, an airy plot, devised – by whom? why? – in order to torture a Bulgarian one metre seventy-seven tall.

As if the delicate material was transformed into something bulky, clumsy, as soon as it gained entry into the paternal head. He would fight against it with floods of words – inner words, not spoken ones. Without success. These words that he dispatched into

the battle-zone were the last thing that might have managed to remove this utterly ridiculous crown of thorns with which an unknown enemy had marveled his head.

MARVELOPED! This is the word that judge Daniel Paul Schreber* would have shouted, roared, to show his enemies he was still a man.

Our father said nothing in cases like this. Not a peep, not even in Bulgarian. Was there a girl inside our father, perhaps?***

Swarming activity: repairmen were busy in his head. You could see how feverishly they were working by the clouds of smoke that rose above the joints in his skull, despite all the hair coving these joints. Oh yes – oh no! – Things were rushing hither and thither and never coming to rest.

His head, as we said, was full of the flood of blackness and entwined in the beyond.

Let us boldly hypothesise that we are not the children of this father. Nor of the woman they claim is our mother. Absolutely not. Our thinking-power does flag, however, when we look around for a father and a mother that might be worth considering. Zeus, perhaps? Or was it immaculate conception? No, no, not by the woman, by the man! This is infantile, we hear the scoffers say, pathetically infantile. True, no doubt: a non-real father and a non-real mother are a guarantee of permanent infantilism. But let us not ignore the energies which drove our still tiny legs to escape from the maze where we were held captive by questionable parents who claimed to be genuine.

Childhood is nothing like a treasure that must be preserved, as people constantly insist. With sheer impotence in their hearts, sheer stubbornness in their heads, this is the way the decrepit childhood-preservers babble. What we wanted was to put the state of being a child behind us as early as possible. Learn to read as quickly as possible. Run away from childhood, read our way out of this hypocritical diminutive, and never go back. It is an embarrassment to us that we were ever children at all. Every year we spend rushing into old age is precious to us, as it separates us further from childishness, child's play, childhood, in a word, from that idiocy that is valued so highly by everyone.

My sister's quest for love began at the age of five. As she watched her beloved, her palms were pressed against the bars of the garden gate, her little fingers clasped around them. There was building work going on in our street. No, she did not fall in love with one of those nuggetty little Italians who at that time were armed with heavy pneumatic drills; no, it was a German. If there were a description as splendid as *a blonde bombshell* for a man, he would have deserved it – *the blond man* sounds less attractive. Muscular body, sun-bleached hair, shimmering gold around his head, as loved by the hero-worshipping Greeks, there was her man standing in the trench, clods of earth flying from his shovel.

In choosing this shovel-wielder to fall in love with, my sister at this early stage showed an instinct for power. He was no ordinary builder's labourer but the future boss of the Epple Company, the first-born in the family, serving his apprenticeship in Wurmlinger Street.

My sister was not bothered by the differences in age that hovered over our street in loving little clouds of chemicals. It's only sexual pedants who maintain that there is a difference between five and twenty-five. They have no inkling of love's vaulting over time. Pre-empting blithely, (she was not yet acquainted with Homer), my sister applied to herself the line by the Greek father of storytelling: *methinks she is not the daughter of mortal men, but of God*. Thus everything was possible and everything was permitted.

I was the only thing that was in her way. Jealousy, perhaps? My sister, usually so patient, didn't dally long; she drove me from the gate by biting me.

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*Schreber was the author of memoirs about his own madness, much discussed by Freud, Deleuze etc.

**Schreber was convinced he had to become a woman for his messianic visions to be realised.