

Stephan Thome, *Grenzgang*

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Sample translation by Tom Morrison

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He had packed the box into his car only to find he didn't know where to drive. A luminously blue summer's day had taken possession of the sky, was imposing its radiance upon the life of the city below, regaling the inhabitants with all manner of nebulous invitations. He felt the urge to get out of the city – but no destination sprang to mind, nor did he really want one. That was not to say he would just drive off into the blue. He'd never been one to do that. And besides, he could scarcely pretend his life had unexpectedly fallen apart on this sunny August day when in truth he'd known since spring that his contract would not be extended. His post had been one reserved for graduates admitted for habilitation, and he was now habilitated. Schlegelberger had never liked his research – and there was no room in the venerable professor's stable for beasts not stamped with his own academic brand. Sources, according to Schlegelberger's credo, were the bread of the historian; untenable theories, for example, most certainly were not. So instead of driving Weidmann had wandered the streets, not aimlessly, but in search of the least frequented café he could find. Women in mini-skirts came walking towards him, women in tight tops obstructed his path. Were abandoning themselves to the sun in ways a man could only dream of. Persistent randiness was apparently the vehicle that allowed him to experience something akin to the rage he ought to have been feeling. Words like 'brazen' came to his mind: words he did not recall having uttered in his life.

He drank a beer, washed down his meal with two glasses of Riesling, and read the paper. Schröder and his ministers were being soundly bludgeoned. Although he knew that Konstanze was in the bookshop on Wednesdays and never phoned before seven, he occasionally glanced at his mobile.

The air was beginning to smell of warm tar. And in Bergenstadt, the Grenzgang festival was beginning. For weeks, his mother had been keeping him informed by the phone about the elections of the societies and appointments to the main offices. Not even once had she asked him if he wanted to hear this news, she was too busy trying not to give anything away. Yet, she was

betrayed by the thickening of her voice at the end of every call: It's such a shame your father won't be here to . . .

Maybe that was why he'd said he couldn't make it this year. One reason among many.

His resumed his rambling in the afternoon, aimless now, walking straight through new and fashionable Mitte but zigzagging in the side-streets, where he bought a book, drank a coffee, and watched the light begin to fade and nose its way through the gaps between buildings. The two banners of black, red and gold on the roof of the Reichstag in the half-distance might have been paper flags on a birthday cake.

He asked for a Pernod and decided to smoke.

America? France? He was in touch with a few people he'd met at conferences, but none was likely to offer more than an associate lectureship for a semester or two. Brief respite and flight from his problem, but no real solution. He was altogether keen to treat himself, briefly, to the luxury of forgetting practical considerations and instead drifting until something or another, be it an unknown woman or the irrefutable awareness of his own wretchedness, would nudge him into action. The love of adventure was a trait he'd always admired in others. He was no day-dreamer, but he did not intend to complete those forms Konstanze had spread out, well-meaning but business-like, on the kitchen table, those applications relating to what she tactfully termed the 'gap period'. Be a man, she told him, and now he would try to be one – but not necessary the man she was hoping for. Ten years ago, his reaction would have been similar to her own, but now he wasn't even sure how he was going to react. If there was any truth in the adage that every crisis is also a chance, then surely you were allowed to take the time you needed.

'The bill, please,' he said to the waitress who was aspiring to a vaguely *Deux Magots* look in her long white apron and black jacket. He set off for the banks of the Spree, hoping to feel the evening breeze against his skin. The light was stretching itself over the flatness of the city. The pigeons were roosting in their nests in the girders of the bridges. Had he ever felt at home here? That was another aspect of his history with Kamphaus, who was born and bred locally, in Charlottenburg, and whose ingrained sense of irony was neither laboured nor tinged with resentment. Possessed of the gift of not being readily impressed, he met everybody on equal terms, unflinching. When Kamphaus returned from Bielefeld or Tübingen and quipped, Can you smell the fields?, Weidmann felt like he'd smelled of grass since the day he was born, and now he asked himself – nothing. He just felt the alcohol throbbing against his temples and a thirst that was not thirst at all or nothing he wanted to quench. Without noticing, he had turned back towards

the Institute, found himself standing in front of the high-windowed brick building, and felt an urgent need to do something.

The construction workers had knocked off for the day.

When Konstanze finally phoned, he'd been sitting in his car for a full half-hour, watching lights go out behind windows. One here then one there. Finally, the window of Schlegelberger's office went dark as well.

'Where are you? What are you up to? How are you?'

'In the car. Nothing. Okay.'

Konstanze sighed.

'There's a lot of things I can do, but protecting you from yourself is probably not one of them.'

'Nobody's asking you to.' Schlegelberger emerged from the front-door of the institute, muttered something, half over his shoulder, to somebody behind him, then carried on talking into his mobile phone.

'No. But I wouldn't mind if you did ask. Or asked me to do something else. I'd have a better idea what to do then.'

'For instance?'

'Has it even occurred to you that you're beginning to cut a rather sorry figure?'

'Be a man, you'll say next.'

'Be a man. And why shouldn't I say it?'

'Because you've said it before.'

'I've said a lot of things before. Just about everything I say to you is something I said before. And that's the point: saying it makes no difference.'

He was a white-haired man of medium height, nondescript and well-mannered, popular with the administration because his despotic side, his inner Napoleon, was unleashed only at seminars and conferences. His voice was soft and quiet, and Weidmann remembered thinking, as a young postgraduate, Beware of those with soft voices. It was a passing thought back then, but now he remembered. Always good to know you were wiser once.

'Are you still there?' asked Konstanze.

'Do you really expect me to be whistling and rubbing my hands in glee?'

'Nobody's asking you to pretend. Be annoyed, sad, frustrated. You've got every reason to. But don't let this thing destroy your life.'

Or ours, he thought.

‘Aha.’

‘You always said science was a gamble. Like a game of Musical Chairs: when the music stops, you have to choose your moment to plonk your behind down on the vacant seat. But it’s other people who decide if there’s going to be a free chair near you. All you can do is do what everybody else does, and keep your eyes and ears open – that’s what you said.’

His own words. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so keen to stress his indifference, how much distance he felt from the academic world. When push came to shove, you paid for all your play-acting. He felt like he’d been going round in circles for much too long, aware the whole time that the chair most recently removed had his name on it; not that he’d actually seen the letters – he’d read them in his colleagues’ faces. Yet, he kept on walking, just like the others did. Then silence, end of music, and they were all in their chairs, watching him do a slow, final round of honour, longing with all his heart, longing more than he did for anything else, to be offered a seat among the only colleagues he had. No idea of what came next. For the moment, he sat in the car and watched Schlegelberger removing his jacket before getting into his Mercedes, which proceeded to roll out of the car park and vanish behind the tattered remains of the workmens’ fence.

‘Three cheers for my own words,’ he said.

‘I can’t cope with self-pity. After all, you’ve got your teaching qualification.’

The teaching qualification . . . Welcome to the chorus, Konstanze.

‘I’ve even got my *Abitur*,’ he said. ‘I could go to university.’ And it cost him some effort not to add: or teach German to immigrant children. He had a grip on himself, just, he was turning sarcastic, the nastiness was on the tip of his tongue, but he was not going to lose his temper. Thomas Weidmann, body temperature thirty-six point seven degrees in the evening, never more.

‘You could fetch a couple of the better bottles from your wine-cellar and come over to my place.’

‘Not today.’

‘Not today. Of course not – you’re too busy stewing in the juice of your own wounded feelings. And only this afternoon I was wondering if things might be easier if we moved in together. I mean: if we had moved in together. Now is maybe not the best time to think about it.’

‘No.’

‘So what are you going to do? Now, I mean, today? Or tomorrow.’

‘Celebrate Grenzgang.’ It dawned on him as he said it. He was going to Bergenstadt to celebrate Grenzgang.

‘I thought you said wild horses wouldn’t be able to drag you there this year. It’s on this weekend?’

‘It’s *Kommers* today, the walks start tomorrow.’

‘So we won’t be seeing each other this weekend,’ she said, and it was almost as if he could see her nodding in resignation. ‘I don’t even get a chance to help you, is that the way it is?’

The light snapped off in the library. The two auxiliary staff emerged from the building shortly afterwards, followed by a handful of students. The vehicles were driving with their headlamps on now, vestiges of gauzy clouds and streaks of violet were visible in the heavens overhead, along with some gusty commotion that had been absent throughout the day.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve got the time and inclination to spend three days partying in the country?’

‘I’m teaching tomorrow and the day after. If you’d brought it up sooner . . .’

‘I only made up my mind this very second. It’s the new, spontaneous me.’

‘Well, it’s a start, I suppose. And your mother will be pleased. Give her my regards. You’re sure you don’t want to stop by for something to eat before you set off?’

‘I need to get on the road. It’s late.’

‘Call me when you get there.’

‘Are you cross?’

‘Drive safely, Thomas.’

One hour later, he got out of the car because he needed to pee. The car-park was dark, and the stairwell was the only part of the building that remained illuminated. He breathed in the smell of sand and wet stone. He’d been sitting in the car for over an hour without listening to the radio or reading his newspaper, trying to pin down the sensation that his life of the past twenty years, and perhaps even of the twenty to come, was being concentrated in this moment, in this compressed now-inside-the-car – but there was no getting hold of it. As years went, 1999 was improbable in the first place, hard to pay emotional justice to. *Don’t change the subject.* Four shadowy digits on the outer perimeters of the calendar: the

countdown was almost audible, and you had to smile over the announcements of fresh starts splashed across the billboards. *It's you we're meant to be talking about.* Apart from anything else, he found it hard enough to do emotional justice to his own situation, without adding Konstanze to the equation. Few people walked through this part of town in the evening; he found the owner of the nearby snackbar killing time at the fruit machine.

After relieving himself, he bought a beer then returned to his Golf-cocoon.

He needed to get away, but didn't know what from. It was hard to draw clear lines in this marshy territory. His mother would be pleased to see him, would ask no questions but know from his face that something was wrong. If nothing else, he would tell her not to phone him in the office anymore.

He finished his beer. Seen through the windscreen, Berlin was looking good, displayed a modest luminosity beneath the nocturnal sky and flowed with moderate diligence along Invalidenstrasse before stretching out with the patience of a bed-ridden invalid. After taking the liberty of dropping the empty can out of the door and onto the sand, Weidmann decided to obey the command uttered by the heap of paving-stones piled in front of the entrance.

He reversed and then drove up to the hoarding. The bonnet of the car was poking into the gaping hole.

He left the door ajar and the keys in the ignition. Before reaching the stones, he turned round again to remind himself of the route: take a left, turn right into Chausseestrasse, straight ahead until Mitte turns into Wedding. Follow Seestrasse until the feeder road to the *autobahn*. He was lacking a toothbrush or change of underwear, but one was on sale at motorway service stations, the other would be waiting in the wardrobe in Bergenstadt.

The stone he picked up was heavier than he expected. Another look round: the car-park was empty, the shops were closed, bars were something you found elsewhere. Weidmann weighed the stone in his hand and ran his eyes up the front of the building. Second floor, Chair of Modern and Contemporary History, Prof. Dr. Dr. hc. mult. Schlegelberger and his illustrious crew. Actually, he didn't care which window he struck. If you can't draw a clear line, you can at least make your point. One last look, a tram was approaching from Nordbahnhof, and the instant he heard its brakes begin to squeal Weidmann raised his arm and hurled the stone. Turned his back even in the moment of silence in which the stone arced towards its target, heard the shattering of glass, and sauntered back to his car.

No sirens, no shouts. No reaction at all. Just a heart beating louder than usual and a hand that trembled as it turned the key in the ignition. The tram was stationary still, the road clear. The rear-mirror showed him that one of the windows now bore the pattern of a spider's web, at its centre a black hole. The window might have been Schlegelberger's, but he was not sure.

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'I'm out here,' Karin Preiss calls through the open door of the balcony. A lukewarm breeze comes wafting through the rooms and envelopes Kerstin, when she comes out to join her hostess, in the scent of night and gardens. The terrace-like structure encloses two sides of the house, and juts out over the town as if it might serve as a takeoff platform for ski jumping. The noise of traffic drifts up from the valley below.

'Huh.' She takes the deepest breath she can, glad they won't be going back into the stuffy living-room. Already, a trail of night-time moisture glistens on the railing of the balcony.

'I hope there was enough paper. Frau Rheinberger sometimes forgets to put in a new roll. We don't get many visitors.'

'Fine. Thanks.'

'I've put your glass down there on the little table.'

For a moment, they stand there in silence, and Kerstin is grateful for the darkness and the nocturnal valley that offers their eyes an innocuous focus. Solitary headlamps advance through the dark, plotting the course of the bypass motorway. Behind the Schlossberg, the spire of the town church is visible.

'I expect your son could tell us if that's the evening star back there.' Frau Preiss' is pointing a finger in the direction of Gartenberg mountain.

'Before my mother came to live with us, he had the front room, the one with the balcony. He set up his telescope there, and occasionally deigned to let me look through it. So I can safely confirm it's the evening star. Also known as the morning star or Venus.'

Frau Preiss nods.

'It's a nice hobby, really: stars, planets. I wish my daughter had something like that. A hobby you can even turn into a profession, one day.'

'Or consign to the basement in mothballs.'

'That too.'

‘There was a time when I thought I could turn my hobby into a profession.’

‘Dance – now that’s more up my daughter’s street. I must tell her you used to study dance. No chance here of working in that area?’

‘Have you heard of any? I need to start working soon, thanks to a joint decision by my ex-husband and the Ministry of Justice.’ She mentions the amended maintenance law, further amending a few minor details so that she doesn’t need to mention Andrea’s pregnancy. ‘And don’t get me wrong, I’ve nothing against going back to work, in principle. On the contrary. It’s just with my mother . . .’

‘Tricky.’ Frau Preiss is apparently fascinated by the appearance of a white lounge-bed on the grass below them. ‘But I’m envious of your training all the same. All I’ve got is my *Abitur*. Two semesters as a law student in Giessen, and by the end of them I just about knew where the canteen was. Before that I did one of those voluntary service years. Afterwards, I did two more voluntary years of a less socially oriented nature. Then I got married. There’s a TV sketch by Loriot about the Diploma in Yodelling. Have you ever seen it?’

‘I think so.’

‘Something of my own.’ Frau Preiss stifles her laughter by shaking her head. ‘But that’s exactly what I never did. Nothing of my own. Not even a diploma in yodelling. Not even water aerobics with the Red Cross. Instead, I sold mulled wine at the Christmas market with other ladies from the Rotary Club. At least it was for a good cause.’

‘You brought up a daughter, as far as I know.’

‘Does that count as “something of my own”?’

‘Does it fit into any category? Remember me telling you about my friend at Starnberger See, the woman who grew up here?’

‘Anita – what’s her married name?’

‘Halbach. But if you want to annoy her, say “von Halbach”, which is her full title.’

‘Back in my second or third year at secondary school, there were few girls in my class who didn’t want to be like your friend Anita. She must have been in fifth or sixth year. Bergenstadt had its own disco in those days, *Melody-Maker* it was called, disco was all the rage then. And rumours would be flying about the outfit Anita ... what was her maiden name?’

‘Becker.’

‘Becker, that’s right. About the outfit she showed up in and the bloke she cleared off with. All made up, probably.’

‘Actually, I don’t think it was.’

Frau Preiss turns to her a face lit up with pleased astonishment. It’s hard to be sure in the darkness, but the wine seems to have brought a visible flush to her cheeks.

‘No? She really was like they said? As far as I was concerned, she certainly was. I wanted her to be. After all, it’s how I wanted to be myself.’

‘Not only did she use to be like that, she’s still much the same. No longer in the countryside, of course, or in the discos. But that was what I wanted to say: Anita always did exactly what she wanted to do, did her own thing, as they say. Flitted about here, there and everywhere, met lots of men, and eventually married one who owns property all over the place.’

‘So she really was like that,’ Frau Preiss murmurs. ‘That’s good to know, somehow. She was somebody with plenty of drive.’

‘And since she got married she’s had more money than she’ll ever be able to spend. Opened a boutique then closed it down six months later because she’d got tired of it. A couple of weeks ago she called me from Nice, one of her lovers had taken her there. Or maybe it was the other way round – what do I know.’ It’s her customary, not wholly sincere, indignation about her only friend. But she keeps to herself the comment that was on the tip of her tongue: That Anita has no children and is nudging an age at which a lifestyle such as hers becomes faintly ridiculous. On the wrong side of forty a downhill slide from one affair to the next, with lovers she’d bought or were even older than she was.

‘And?’

‘And – would you want that kind of life?’

Frau Preiss answers with fit of coughing that forces her to slam down her empty glass and clutch at the railing. There’s something theatrical, something acted, about it. On top of the side-table beside the lounge in the garden below lies a forgotten magazine whose pages are beginning to ripple in the damp night air. It’s a while before Frau Preiss takes a deep breath and lifts her eyes from the ground.

‘Was that a trick question?’

‘No. You don’t think it seems like a life on the run? That something’s missing. That she’s chasing after something she’ll never find because when it comes down to it she’s really running away. From her own loneliness, in other words?’ Only now does she notice the flickering tea-candle inside a little round jar

suspended from the canopy, at an angle to their backs so that one half of Frau Preiss' face is illuminated, the other in the shadow of the garden, lending her face something one-eyed and penetrating.

'You mean, you don't think loneliness is something people should try to flee from? I think it is.'

Kerstin opens her mouth, about to say: I do, too, but . . . Instead, she shrugs, surveys the collected lights of the valley, noting how they become ever-more sparse the higher she moves her eyes up the slopes. Above the lights a black tier of forest, crowned by a fairy-chain of lamppost light in Hornberger Strasse, the highest street on the Rehsteig. After that, pitch-darkness.

'Shall we go back into the house?' inquires Frau Preiss. 'Or should I bring the bottle out?'

She just nods in reply, and Frau Preiss nods too as she releases her grip on the railing, briefly laying a hand on Kerstin's shoulder before going inside.

Flee from loneliness. Sure thing. But where to?

It's hardly a coincidence, she thinks to herself, that for years now her son and her mother have been the only people she's had anything to do with. Even her phone calls to Anita are made so that she will not have to lie when she asks herself, during one of her regular self-examinations, if there's a friend she confides in. The almost regular calls might be taken as a strong indication of social normality. But if the truth be told, the last time she didn't find an excuse to turn down Anita's invitation to visit was three years ago. And now? When Frau Preiss called, she hadn't even started fumbling for an excuse, but the longer the evening lasts, the more strongly she feels no longer capable of friendship of any kind, of mustering the unselfconsciousness necessary to set off with somebody unknown without knowing where it would lead. To take those first steps when you're shy even of touching the other person's hand.

Might Weidmann be somebody who understood all this? Maybe even felt much the same? Does he possess the degree of understanding she was willing, when they were on her terrace a few days ago, to read in his face? She's already forgiven his insensitive remarks about forgetting, and now she feels growing hope, tentative but persistent, that she might hear from him before parents' day.

Her wristwatch reads eleven-thirty. The lights of Bergenstadt are beginning to float about in the dark. What she'd really like to do now is walk home through the quiet night-time streets. And if she was lucky she wouldn't get there to find her mother wandering about the house again, convinced it was time to

get up. Doctor Petermann had been most encouraging about applying for a care allowance. In view of her mother's condition, he said, he foresaw no difficulties and would advise her to apply for Care Level II. He also recommended that she apply for a CT to investigate the cause of her headaches, and perhaps spend a few days in hospital so that more tests could be done. She'd told him that her mother no longer slept through the night, and he'd kept nodding, as if to say: I know what you mean. She's reluctant to admit it to herself, but the prospect of having her mother out of the house for a few days and knowing she would be well looked after during that period is enticing. For any emergencies tonight, she's left the number of the Preisses on a note adhering to the bedside table, but she's not sure if her mother's still capable of using the telephone. Kerstin takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. Her headache-prone temples are beginning to live up to their reputation.

'How did you and Anita actually meet?' Frau Preiss comes back to the balcony, bottle in hand.

'It was the dance again. In Cologne.'

'Don't tell me she was a student, too?'

'More or less, I mean: she studied this and that. Swapped subjects every semester, in fact, until she got tired of the whole thing.'

'And it was with her you came here first?'

'Twenty-one years ago. Actually just for the weekend.'

'Let me guess. No, don't let me guess, it's too obvious.'

They look at each other, and Kerstin nods.

'I fell for one of the competitors. Don't fall in love with a local, Anita warned, but I don't seem to have taken much heed.'

'The Grenzgang.' Frau Preiss tops up her glass and lifts it for a toast. 'Here's to the Grenzgang, then. There's not much else worth celebrating in this neck of the woods.'

'Cheers.'

'I've rarely seen you walking with the Rehsteig women.'

'I joined them quite often seven years ago, at the last Grenzgang. It was still the Rheinstrasse route then.' Kerstin shrugs. 'But I don't recall seeing your face among them, either.'

'No. Frankly, those assemblies bore me. I don't enjoy singing and I abhor sweet schnapps. I used to like going along, but now I prefer a quiet glass of wine.'

Taking a sip from her own glass, Kerstin notices that what seemed like a rich bouquet has taken on a hint of being over-ripe. The balcony now resembles the sun-deck of a ship at the railing of which she stands in order to enjoy the gentle bobbing of the waves; she also feels a vibrating in the soles of her feet that travels upward and has turned into faint pain by the time it settles behind her eyes.

‘It’s been a strange year, at least as far me and my family are concerned.’ Frau Preiss’ voice is suddenly louder. ‘My daughter is acting oddly, which is par for the course. My husband works round the clock, like he always has. And I feel something so alien to myself that I don’t even know how to put it into words.’ The garden below grows very still, no wind is ruffling the leaves of the large dog-rose bushes. ‘I realize I risk being totally insensitive once again, but we’re coming up to midnight and you’ll understand that I have to ask this question: What made you realize your marriage wasn’t going to last?’

A solitary bat emerges from beneath one of the gabled ledges, flaps over their heads off into the night. That part of the evening long concealed behind looks and in pauses in the conversation now begins, at the same time dashing Kerstin’s hopes of putting a front-door between herself and the real reason for Frau Preiss’ invitation.

‘Everything did,’ she says.

‘Sorry?’

‘The steady decrease in attention. The wealth of excuses why other things were more important than the family this weekend. The enthusiasm for Grenzgang that seemed suspicious in a man pushing forty. The fact that there was more silence between us, and less laughter. The magnetic attraction younger bottoms exercised on his eyes. I can give you thousands of examples, but the principle is always the same: Priorities change, love turns into routine, routine turns into boredom, boredom into arguments. Something like that. And eventually you start to feel that even in bed . . . do you want to hear this?’

‘It’s up to you.’

‘Well, even in bed you start to feel you’re not really being noticed. What I’m trying to say is, nothing in particular makes you realize – you just do. Or else something brings it home to you one day, and it dawns on you that actually you’ve known for a long time.’

Frau Preiss nods and lowers her voice as if she’d suddenly prefer her words to be inaudible. The palms of her hand are placed flat on the railing, to the right and left of her wine-glass.

‘So it was your husband’s behaviour that made you realize what was happening, if I can put it like that, rather than . . . your own?’

‘Probably,’ she says dully.

‘Please don’t get me wrong. When I say I love my husband, it’s not just an empty phrase. And not when I say I have a happy marriage, either. But one day in spring I was standing in front of the bathroom-mirror, and out of the blue I said aloud: I don’t have a marriage at all. I love my husband and my husband loves me, but we don’t have a marriage. Because my husband’s never there. Not ever. He’s simply never there.’

‘The company, you mean.’

‘The damned company. He doesn’t talk about it, probably wants to spare me, and I don’t even expect him to talk about it. I don’t need to see the books, I can read it in his face. We owe everything to the company.’ Her thumb points behind her shoulder. ‘The house, the cars, the most extensive private collection of ladies’ underwear in the entire district. Three cupboards with nothing but lingerie inside, I imagine I might own more of the stuff than your friend Anita does. But it’s gobbling him up, and me along with him. The company’s destroying our marriage.’ One of her nostrils begins to tremble.

Kerstin is less astonished by the unexpected turn their conversation than by the lack of sympathy she feels. By the complete absence of sympathy, to be more precise.

‘You might be asking the wrong person, you know. I’ve reached the conclusion that if marriages do come to an end, then they end with a cliché. I mean, there are millions of marriages, but only two or three ways of going on the rocks: adultery or boredom. Overworking may be a third. Sorry, I don’t want to sound cynical.’

‘No problem.’ Karin Preiss nods. When Kerstin hears her sniff, she instinctively half-turns to her, saying:

‘Go ahead. Cry.’ She remembers how two weeks ago she’d thought the day would come when they’d embrace, and when it happens she’s merely surprised to find it feels so pleasant and ordinary. It feels much less spectacular than the wine, for example. She’s almost a head taller than Frau Preiss, and right now it’s a source of gratification. Maybe it’s not too late after all, she thinks, maybe she’s not suffering from an incurable fear of intimacy but can be healed with careful treatment, with wine, embraces and the trivial insight that even in the brightest of bathrooms life doesn’t always look so splendid.

‘No, I’m not going to cry,’ says the muffled voice of Frau Preiss, coming from somewhere in the region of Kerstin’s

shoulder. 'Instead, I want you to call me by my forename. It's Karin.'

'Kerstin.'

They move apart and shake their heads as if to say: What is there to be said? And raise their glasses to each other.

Karin Preiss dabs the corners of her eyes with the knuckles of her index fingers.

'I've decided I'm not going to suffer. And that's not the only thing: I've reached the conclusion I'm *unable* to help my husband in this matter.'

'*Unable* to help?'

'Unable.' As she divides the last of the wine between the two glasses, half-filling them, she seems to be sealing a fate Kerstin is only beginning to sense. Karin pauses, sips, then returns to her previous stance at the balcony railing. Apart from a lamppost still vaguely discernible in front of the garage, Hornberger Strasse has disappeared behind the dense dog-rose bushes.

'Am I right in thinking we're about the same age?'

'I turned forty-four that day you congratulated me recently.'

'I'm forty-two. Our children are growing up. My husband's always working. You're divorced.' Abruptly, she turns away, an almost fearful look on her face. 'Excuse me, but may I ask if you've . . .?'

'No. There's nobody.' Something about the way they hardly dare look at each other makes Kerstin feel uneasy, the certainty of being trapped stifling her previous tentative hope of intimacy. She's sitting in some lousy trap.

'In a nutshell, this is what I feel: We're not a pair of twenty-year-olds with our lives stretching out before us. But we're not seventy with our lives behind us, either. We're in our mid-forties and life is passing us by.' She returns to her wine.

Kerstin doesn't bother to reply. It's too late.

'Do you see what I mean?'

'Not quite.' Bergenstadt is blurring in front of her eyes. The few remaining lights in the valley start to thicken then melt away. The woman she thought might become a friend was trying to enlist her as an accomplice.

'I don't want to sit at home night for night waiting till I get too tired to keep on waiting. I *am* tired.'

‘So am I. Ought to be going soon.’

‘What I want to say is, I’m going to have a look at one of those clubs for couples.’ Karin holds her glass without drinking from it, just swilling the wine back and forth, nodding all the while.

‘What?’

‘Yes. They’re advertised in the *Boten* even. There are no clubs in this part of the world, but near Giessen, for example. I never noticed them before but I started looking out for them after that conversation with my daughter.’

‘You’re pulling my leg.’ But she’s a little less shocked than she feels she ought to be. What had she expected, after all? ‘Tell me you’re not serious.’

‘Going to take a look, I said. You can go into one of those clubs and look round, no strings attached. The sky’s the limit but the choices are your own, that’s what the nice lady on the phone said. It’s their motto. And it didn’t sound sleazy at all.’

‘You mean you . . .?’

‘*Bohème*, now there’s a name. The club looks very stylish on the photos on the internet.’

‘Count me out.’

‘Think about it.’

‘Count me out.’ Kerstin empties her glass and for one drunkenly clear-sighted moment feels tempted to smash it between them on the tiles of the balcony. She can feel the anger rising. ‘I’ve got to go.’ Glass in hand, she turns towards the door.

‘Yes. Three bottles. Oh oh. A bit much.’ Karin laughs and lays a hand on Kerstin’s arm. ‘But we’ll see each other again soon, won’t we?’

As they go into the living-room, Kerstin thinks she hears a car pull up outside. It’s all too late. She will meet Hans-Peter Preiss on the stairs and skulk past him with an embarrassed smile, like an illicit lover making a hasty getaway. Will go into her own house and hope not to be greeted by a mother waiting for breakfast at the dining-table. And where exactly is Daniel right now?

Outside in the hall, she swaps the wine-glass for her jacket, careful not to look in the mirror. She shouldn’t have come. At her stage in life she ought to be able to spot a blind alley without exploring it to the bitter end.

Karin Preiss continues to smile as if everything had been a little joke. The light snaps on outside the house.

‘Thank you so much for coming.’

‘Listen,’ says Kerstin, gazing into Karin’s face as if it were a crystal ball. The room around her comes off the hinges and begins to spin. ‘Do you sometimes have presentiments too? The sudden certainty that something’s going to happen.’

‘I don’t mind if it does. As far as I’m concerned, there’s been nothing happening for much too long.’

‘But you don’t know what it is. If it’s good or . . .’ The sound of steps approaching on the flagstones.

‘I know enough. That I haven’t seen a cinema from the inside for years, for instance. That the last time I danced was at my niece’s wedding, and this summer’s Rotary Club ball will just as tedious as those of the past twenty years. You’ve got a presentiment that something’s going to happen? Good. Be sure to give me plenty of notice.’

‘Yes,’ she replies, suddenly uncertain of her whereabouts. The steps come to a halt outside the front door, a key scrapes over the lock. It’s the alcohol, she tells herself, it couldn’t be anything else. Nobody ever got drunk on shame and fear alone.