

From Bettina Suleiman: *Auswilderung / Back to the Wild*

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“Dirty” had been Yeh-teh’s favorite word as a child. For a while at the age of twelve, he had used it almost obsessively on every possible and impossible occasion: dirty, dirty—and I always agreed. Plenty of things at the institute were dirty, more than just the occasional cockroaches that felt at home in the humid climate of the testing rooms. But why everything was apparently “dirty” all of a sudden, no one could explain. I only shrugged, myself. Had something happened? The Schuberts, his foster parents, weren’t aware of anything, because Yeh-teh maintained a stubborn silence. He kept the promise he had made to me that he wouldn’t tell anyone, not even them, about our secret trip out to more or less unspoiled nature.

In that summer of 99 I was living like a student. My apartment was one large room, equipped with only the basics: desk, single bed, kitchenette, one armchair—visitors would have had to sit on the floor—wardrobe and bookcase. Between Prof. Wilder’s letter, *Dear Ms. Heuter, I am pleased to inform you*, and starting work in the fall of 98, I had had barely a month for my move to Leipzig. I had taken the first apartment that seemed vaguely suitable. What would I do there other than eating and sleeping, anyway? Prof. Wilder was known for working his doctorate students hard. I’d have time for visitors and a love life later.

Over the winter, the apartment had turned out to be a stroke of luck, third floor in a residential and office complex, half empty on the weekends meaning I could work in peace, and bright and warm because of the large south-facing windows. Even that first summer prompted disillusionment, though. The interior temperature remained at a constant level somewhere between 85 and 95 degrees, even though I’d only opened the windows and curtains at night for several weeks. The local newspaper printed photo after photo of the new lakes in the south of Leipzig, an army of barely clothed human bodies in search of rest and recuperation, old and young, hairy, wrinkly, skinny, chubby, etc. I hadn’t been there once in all my time in Leipzig, and I didn’t belong there either. I didn’t need to recover from my life; I was living my dream. I preferred to fill the

bathtub with cold water to cool down. Or I took the trash down to the trash room; separated the bottles by color in the basement on the night before my excursion with Yeh-teh, when I couldn't sleep for the heat. Or was it because of my excitement, the thrill of anticipation? Scenario one: Yeh-teh, setting foot in a real forest for the first time in his life, admiring nature in all its purity, climbing a tree, frolicking through the un-mown grass and doing all the things children of his species normally did. I would have taken all the subjects along if I could. Scenario two: Everything going wrong. A broken axis in the middle of a busy junction. Us getting caught. There were no excuses. It would be an absolute disaster. I had no emergency plan. The two scenarios rode a merry-go-round in my mind, alternating, allowing me no peace. As much as I feared the one, the other was worth the risk. This walk in the forest was what I could do for him, and what gave me the right to withhold that? If I chickened out now I'd never forgive myself.

From the basement, I went over to the underground garage and laid my head on the cool roof of my old Renault, unintentionally falling asleep and woken too late by the slamming of doors around me, the starting of engines. The office workers were arriving; a neighbor had to go to work. I'd slipped off the roof of the car before anyone noticed me. Ten minutes later, I too drove out into dazzling sunlight, bleaching all colors and making all shapes disappear, into a steaming dream world.

My eyes focused on the empty road flickering in the heat as I felt around for the half-full bottle of water next to me. I had an ad libitum supply of water. There were three more large bottles on the back seat. Next to them a big microfiber blanket, seven by seven feet, the largest the department store had on offer. For its purpose, it was about as abundantly sized as my back seat. It was going to be a crush.

My neighborhood was as if wiped out. Anyone who had to go to work was there by now. Children and old people were particularly at risk from the Saharan heat and stayed home. I was going to be late for the first time in my life and I had no idea how long Yeh-teh would wait for me. I sped along the empty streets, screwing my eyes up against the sun and hoping everything would be OK.

Adolescent risk taking—after all I was only twenty-four and my brain was still over-sensitive to dopamine and oxytocin, the reward and empathy hormones. I parked in a blind spot of the underground garage, a spot where my research had found there was no camera coverage. A place where I could smuggle something out of the institute that didn't fit into a handbag. I moved the front seats all the way forward and the back seat all the way back.

Only a month ago, I had sprained my ankle. I didn't need crutches any more but I still felt an ache when I climbed stairs. We couldn't take the elevator, of course.

And I had to make sure no one was loitering on the staircase.

As expected, I didn't meet anyone. The corridor was empty too. Morning was a good time; all the staff were busy with experiments or at their desks. Prof. Wilder, above all. No matter when he was in the institute, at six in the morning or eleven at night, on Tuesdays or Sundays, you really could run into him in the corridor at any time, sometimes with a pallid face, eyes half-closed, but always in the best of moods, always at maximum personal performance level. He gave himself the least slack, always setting a good example. Now is the time to concentrate fully on the project, was his message. Work as hard as you can. Now is the time to live your dream. Civilian life, as he called it, pregnancies and burnouts, could wait. Show me your potential, Ms. Heuter. Not making a sound, I opened the door to the Blue Room, took another good look around the bare space bathed in cold neon light, and looked closely at Yeh-teh, who was watching out for me at the window, his shoulders and head sagging. It was all about him. I couldn't let him down. It had been in this testing room that I'd made the decision to go on the excursion. That was a month ago now. The day before, I'd been in the forest and John and I hadn't met a soul. That trip had got me flustered like nothing else for a long time.

"Ever seen a roebuck skeleton?" John had called out to me four weeks previously, and I'd answered from my hiding place behind a bush, my voice rather too high as I was just about to vomit for the second time.

"Only in photos. And I was a child at the time."

Every year, when my sisters and I were dying of boredom at the end of summer vacation, my father had fetched his boxes of slides. We had spent countless

afternoons looking at hundreds of shots from his forestry research trips. Photos of foxes that had been run over. Photos of deer with washing machine sealing rings grown into their legs, souvenirs of illegal trash dumps. Skeletonized stags whose antlers had caught in wire fences, leaving them to die of thirst. Slim pine trees, skinny and rust-brown, festering upright like an army after a nuclear bomb. Enlarged shots of bark beetles, their u-shaped rumps and v-shaped heads flexibly linked like two train carriages, glinting blackish-brown in the sunlight. It was only when we hit puberty that the photos lost their fascination and began to trigger disgust. At first my oldest sister was the only one missing at our summer slide shows, then two years later my middle sister was gone too. From then on, just the two of us, my father and I, marveled at butterflies killed by pesticides, bird species threatened with extinction, and young squirrels that had been separated from their mothers during tree felling and died in the de-branching and chopping process. Another three years later, I was missing too.

All that had been no less gruesome than the empty eye sockets here in the roadside ditch, than the clean white bones, horns, and hooves. But they'd been nothing but photos and I'd been little. This skeleton was three-dimensional, real-life and enormous. The skull twice the size of mine. The ribs as long as my arm. "I found it there in the winter," John shouted over. "It was almost intact, still. I've been watching it decompose since then. It's fascinating, huh? I can't believe no one's taken it away yet."

I can't say I shared his astonishment. The roebuck didn't get any more fascinating if I imagined it "almost intact," with skin and hair, with flesh and fat and blood, populated by maggots and ants that accelerated its decay. Were there maggots and ants in winter? Saliva was pooling in my mouth again, although my stomach was so empty that its walls were touching and stinging when it contracted. I couldn't face swallowing my own saliva; I spat it out. White foam landed on small purple blossoms and scared off the bees. Wood anemones? Whole carpets of them had covered the forest floor of my childhood. Except they'd been much larger, far more impressive, and the countless bunches I'd picked of them, for myself—not for the grown-ups, who laughed at me—were indistinguishable from those in a florist. I thought about whether to pick a bunch

for John, just as a joke. But that might have caused misunderstandings, or at least seemed strange. Better not to.

John was a postdoc in comparative psychology, a charming, slightly thickset behavioral scientist. I was an interpreter for his test series on self-control and intentional communication. Essentially, we were applying Mischel's marshmallow test. My lines were: I'm going out now, and you can eat the peanut then but if you manage to wait until I come back you'll get two. I'm not waiting an eternity for a peanut! I thought the vast majority of the subjects after around sixty seconds; as expected, they didn't have a great deal of self-control. How would I have reacted? I looked down at myself and found myself neither a drug addict nor obese, and nor did I have any other behavioral disorders. My income was better than that of my age cohort, my educational level higher, and I was prepared to work harder for my goals and never, ever give up. Mischel would have categorized me as a "successful adult," which meant by implication that Little Marina would have restrained herself and raked in the second marshmallow.

Several subjects had been unavailable due to illness at the beginning of our test series, and because John had needed the data urgently we had worked long into the evening on the previous three Sundays. It hadn't bothered me. I spent most of my time hanging out at the institute anyway. I was married to the job. The Sunday excursion had been his idea, to get away from the stress, get a breath of fresh air, and I'd accepted; I wasn't quite sure why. Leipzig was supposed to be a green city but in the nine months I'd been living there I hadn't found any good reason to pay a visit to the local forest. Even in the overcrowded park near my apartment where I sometimes jogged after work, I was occasionally mortally embarrassed in front of the others running in equally pointless circles, fulfilling a plan no one had imposed on them but themselves. At least it was healthy.

When we finally left the roebuck behind us—it hadn't been the only thing John wanted to show me, thank God, just an attraction by the wayside—we turned off the road and directly into the forest. All at once everything was green. I'd forgotten what a jungle a normal German forest is in the summertime. Secretly, I'd been expecting a parched, half-dead landscape; they'd had been reporting risks of forest fires and warning levels on the news for weeks, giving the

impression that only fools would even set foot in the woods at this time of year. In actual fact it was cool, I almost felt a chill, it was moist, the muddy ground giving off an intense smell of earth, and there was something wrong with the air. John came to a standstill. "Can you smell it?" he asked, and took a deep breath in and out. "Oxygen."

We walked independently of any paths, through the middle of thorny underbrush that tore at the skin of my bare ankles, through three-foot-high banks of nettles surrounded by fluttering butterflies. Soon my bare arms were burning like fire. I didn't make a fuss; the stinging nettles didn't seem to bother John either. Wasn't that once a test of courage, running through stinging nettles in short pants and not pulling a face? That must have been an eternity ago, at kindergarten age or before; I'd completely forgotten it. Eventually we reached a steep slope as I stepped out of the shade of the trees into the sun, and I very nearly fell head over heels down it. John grabbed hold of me. At the tips of my toes, the earth fell away at a sixty-degree angle or so. A wide path ran along the bottom of the slope and beyond it, paradise began. I would have liked to go on breathing—I just couldn't. Ahead of me surged a sea of lush grass, a stream gushed and gurgled across the green, above it all a radiant blue sky. There was even the obligatory wooden bridge. What wasn't there was picnic blankets and barbecues. Babies clad only in diapers toddling across the grass. Metallic pink scooters luminous in the green, bikes with trailers for carrying children, strollers. Nothing disturbed the idyllic scene. It was so *Heidi* it hurt.

John settled on the bare earth in silence. We had obviously arrived at our destination and it was now time to admire the world's magnificence for a while. I remained standing, demonstratively; I didn't need all this. I bit my nails and thought about the roebuck and whether I was obliged to inform the authorities. What kind of person just abandons the corpse after running over a deer? Down on the ground, John was breathing in deeply and out again with a long sigh, his eyes closed. Fine. I sat down as well and opened my eyes wide. Even five minutes of looking at nature has been proven to aid relaxation and provide new momentum. I would have been happy enough to be able to breathe properly again.

“You mustn’t be fooled by all this green,” I heard myself saying. Perhaps I wanted to make this paradise more bearable. I launched into a lecture: In reality it was all made of concrete. The bushes all the same, the trees, the birds, etc. Everything stayed in place, was kept up at great expense, the number of plants maintained by controlling the animal stock, the number of animals with the aid of hunting. Only a ruling by the forestry office could change anything here, but why bother? It was fine as it was. I’ll admit it all sounded pretty confused.

John asked whether I knew that for certain or just thought so.

“A relative of mine teaches forestry,” I answered vaguely. We hardly knew each other, so why get more personal than necessary? Saliva began to gather in my mouth again. As I spat, a long thread dangled from my lip; I wiped it off with the back of my hand.

“Speaking of vomiting,” John noted with enthusiasm, not even feigning sympathy, “do you remember the first time you looked a gorilla in the eye?”

I didn’t want to come across as touchy so I gave a vague nod, and he joined in with my nodding. “Bronx Zoo. He was huge. He was standing right in front of me and I had to lean my head way back to see his face. My dad said the usual stuff: isn’t he huge, look, he’s picking his nose, that kind of thing. But I hardly listened, I just stared into those big brown eyes up there and thought: wow. It was like one of those gigantic pictures, Oklahoma City bombing, or when an atomic bomb explodes, and all you can think is: wow.”

A squirrel came climbing up the slope. Two arm’s-lengths away from us, it stood up on its hind legs and looked around. As I was used to doing at the park, I took out a granola bar—I always had one in my bag, the fastest and most compact form of nutrition, thirty seconds at the most for a snack between meals, and also popular with squirrels. But as I tore open the wrapper the animal fled in panic.

“I was embarrassed to be just standing there, staring at the gorilla,” John continued his story, unimpressed. “There must have been ten people standing around. I’d been taught it was rude to stare at people, and the gorilla definitely looked,” he cast around for the right word, “harassed. But still, and even though my dad started nagging and promising me popcorn so that we’d move on, I stood there like I was rooted to the spot. In the end the gorilla bent over and barfed

right in front of our feet. That got rid of us all. He did it so slowly and carefully, I was sure it was deliberate.”

“Gorilla barf showed me my true path,” I summed up.

“No, that came later,” he said, his eyes glowing with enthusiasm. “That was my internship in Uganda.”

Next to the travel plan on the team pin-board were the postcards—zebras, chimpanzees, and a crane in the middle of a heart in the colors of the national flag, black, red, and yellow—I ♥UGANDA. GOD ♥UGANDA. UGANDA ♥ME. I’D RATHER BE IN UGANDA.

“Uganda,” I echoed. “Where the happy gorillas live. When the subjects are allowed to choose where they want to live one day, they’ll probably all move to Uganda together. A big harmonious commune. Sitting in trees all day, stuffing themselves with fruit. Makes you wish you could go with them.”

John laughed. “You’ll have a long wait for that day!”

I wasn’t sure what he meant but I didn’t know whether I ought to ask him. There was an unspoken two-tier system at the institute—on one level those who knew about animals, biologists, zoologists, primatologists, behavioral scientists, and so on. And on the other level the support staff, administration workers, statisticians, technicians, and interpreters like me. An undergrad assistant studying biology had more kudos, at times, than a doctoral candidate with a master’s in sign language. I didn’t want to show any weakness, so I replied vaguely, “Everything takes time.”

“Some kind of return to the wild isn’t a realistic scenario,” said John. “Ask Griffin.”

As though the two of us were constantly going out for coffee, his good buddy “Griffin” and I. To date, I had met Prof. Wilder alone in his office on three occasions. That had been nerve-racking enough; I didn’t need that any more often than every few months. We saw each other all the time at the lab meetings, his doctoral students’ colloquium, and the guest lectures. I had enough respect for his work not to bother him all the time with mine. I was expected to work independently and I was fine on my own. “Reintroducing them to the wild would be hard, sure, but...”

“Not primarily for practical reasons. They’re neophobic animals. Resettling them in the wild would cause them suffering. They’re not children any more. They

can't climb and they'd have to deal with parasites and predators. Or they might eat something poisonous. You don't re-plant an old tree. That's why experiments like that have never been really successful. The quality of life with foster parents or in animal homes is higher than in their natural habitat." He spoke patiently, as if to a child, in a tone as if he were explaining basic math to a five-year-old. Not as if this were about our work, or about those we worked with. If there was one thing I couldn't stand, it was being lectured at.

"So you mean it doesn't matter what we do. The subjects will stay locked up. Nothing will change."

"If great apes are recognized as persons, you can't act against their interests any more. That will change. They'll have legal guardians who'll be obliged to act in their best interests."

"Or what we think is their best interests," I countered.

"Or what we have well-founded reason to assume is their best interests. You won't be able to experiment on them in medical labs. You won't win research prizes at their expense, publish in *Nature* and *Animal Behavior*, satisfy your ego. Assuming, of course, they listen to us and make the laws." He paused for a moment and it looked like he'd finished his lecture. But then he added, in a derisive tone: "And you won't be able to put them back in the jungle just because you think that's best for them. Just as an aside."

"We'll see," I shot back at him, more sharply than planned. "Thankfully, they'll be able to decide for themselves on the matter. Zoo or jungle? Anyone would choose the jungle."

"They wouldn't, though."

"Just because something's new, doesn't automatically mean you have to be phobic." John laughed but I went on. "Of course it's unpleasant to begin with when you leave your comfort zone. Sometimes you just have to push yourself to find what makes you happy." I was aware I sounded naïve to him. But the truth isn't complicated, and when a man says the opposite and kindly offers to explain it to you—or does so unasked, in most cases, and then expects you to be grateful—then it's better to stand up for yourself in good time. That much I knew. I was female, sure, but I wasn't a little girl any more.

John had listened attentively, the frown on his forehead looking increasingly like a question mark as I went on. He took a deep breath to answer but didn't know where to start. He apparently decided it wasn't worth the bother, because he said in a conciliatory tone, "There's no need to argue. It's not our decision."

There was a rustle behind us, followed by a wild screech. Out of the crown of a linden tree—recognizable by the size of its leaves, as large as a saucer or the palm of a gorilla's hand—a magpie flew down to the meadow. A second one left the tree in the opposite direction, disappearing into the woods. Following its flight with my eyes, I summed up my argument: "Everyone knows animals are best off in the wild."

By the time I turned around, John had begun climbing down the slope. End of discussion, as soon as I got the upper hand. I pulled myself together and clambered after him. As a child I would have rolled down the hill and now I'd have made my descent on my backside, had I been alone. In front of John, though, who had skipped down the last few feet like a young deer, I was embarrassed to do that.

All of a sudden I found myself on the ground, still hearing the scream I must have uttered as I fell. John hadn't noticed anything, or he didn't care. Far below, he was beating his path through the hip-high grass. I picked myself up, realized I couldn't possibly put any weight on my right foot, dropped onto my hands and knees, and crawled back up the slope, dragging my foot behind me. It was surprisingly easy on the slant, but at the top I had to crawl on my elbows and knees, my head way back, which pretty soon felt like torture. My arms were beginning to hurt too. I gave up, sat down, and waited for John to notice I was missing at last. And someone as blind to what was going on around him claimed to know what was happening in the minds of animals he couldn't even communicate with! What a know-it-all—I'd show him.

A month later, I knocked three times at the open door to the Blue Room, quietly enough not to be heard in the neighboring rooms but loud enough for Yeh-teh to turn around. It's time, I said. He scanned the empty corridor over my shoulder. Then we exchanged conspiratorial glances. In nature, silverbacks attacked instantly, I'd read, if you made eye contact with them. There was no danger of

that with Yeh-teh. And in general—I may have been risking my job, my dream, my future, etc., with the whole plan. But not my life.

He cleared his throat and then asked after Sandra, using the sign for “boss.” I repeated it, reluctantly; did I really let Sandra order me around so much that it gave the impression she was my “boss?” I ought to work on my body language.

But this wasn’t the time to correct him. Sandra’s not coming, I said. Let’s go.

It only took us two attempts to leave the department unobserved. Unbelievable that we were really doing it. He squeezed onto the back seat of the Renault and we spent ages adjusting the huge blanket, tweaking it first one way and then the other. He was used to riding in cars; the subjects were brought from their homes in the old barracks to the institute by bus, and I’d prepared him to hide differently than usual. Unlike the bus, I’d told him, my car didn’t have curtains.

We drove past the attendant and out of the underground garage. Incredible how easy it was.

We headed south; we had to drive right across the city. I cast a glance back at every red light, checked either side to see if anyone was looking at my back seat, curious or horrified. But no one paid us any attention. Everyone was staring straight ahead at the road surface melting in the heat. As if in a trance, I registered the city limits sign by the side of the road and then forests, fields, and immaculate new homes, the earth still churned up by heavy machinery. Later came construction stores, furniture houses, McDonald’s, sometimes in the direct vicinity of a new housing project, sometimes as if dropped straight down from the sky onto a lunar landscape.

The more distance we put between ourselves and Leipzig and Prof. Wilder, the braver I got. I stopped by the side of the road, lifted the blanket, praised Yeh-teh for being so good for so long, and let him sit up. A bitter, pungent smell instantly dispersed around the car. A smell impervious to a Little Tree on the rear-view mirror or a whole forest of the things. I opened all the windows as far as they’d go and drove on swiftly, turning the air conditioning up to full. Beads of sweat ran into my eyes from the heat.

On the back seat, Yeh-teh shuffled to and fro in excitement and the car swerved slightly at every movement. I gripped the wheel more firmly.

“We’re now in the Saxon wilderness, you hear?” I talked at him to calm myself down. “And it’s nothing to do with you that all the other drivers are gawping through our windscreen. Out here, anyone stands out if their genes haven’t come from the same inbred pool for centuries.”

He didn’t understand me, of course. I articulated slowly and clearly, nonetheless: “You’re no greater sensation out here than I am.”

He growled and signed something, but I had to concentrate on the road. Then he leaned his head back, his face only an inch or so away from the ceiling, and gave three or four hefty sighs.

We were now passing through proper villages with gray houses, past tiny stores and people who seemed less bothered by the heat than us city types. At some point came villages without shops, then villages that looked absolutely abandoned. In the end the undulating cobbles and the trees planted in straight lines along the sides of the road, plums and apples, were the only signs of human life.

Just after Wilderau, I turned off onto the unmarked car park, which hadn’t changed since John had brought me here four weeks previously. Sand crunched beneath the wheels. Pebbles hit the underneath of the car. I drove through the dried-out puddles at walking speed; there were a lot of them and not enough space to avoid them. The car swayed to and fro. I parked in the shade, glad to have got there at last. My sprained foot was beginning to ache from braking and accelerating. I turned around. Yeh-teh’s shirt and pants were drenched in sweat. He sat motionless with his eyes closed. I cleared my throat, he opened his eyes, and I asked: How’s it going?

He didn’t reply, only yanking the door open and taking deep breaths of the hot air. Then he complained that my “bus” didn’t have curtains.

“Look upon beautiful nature and calm your temper over what must be done.

Ludwig van Beethoven,” I quoted my father’s entry in my poetry album and gestured cheerfully at the forest. At the age of eight, I hadn’t understood what it meant. I translated: Now we’re going on our walk. As promised. It will be fun.

I went ahead, limping across the barely used road, and he followed me. On the soft shoulder, he stopped and looked at the scrubby bushes growing there. As if we had all the time in the world, he knelt down and fingered the plants. If John

could see this now: not a bit neophobic. Come on, I said. But it was only when I took his hand, which felt smooth and firm like a big leather glove, that he moved reluctantly, as though he were doing me a favor. As if we'd come on this trip for my sake, not his.

Hand in hand, we clambered down into the roadside ditch. Despite my handicap, Yeh-teh proved to be an even worse climber than me. Sweating and breathing heavily, we arrived on the other side. To be on the safe side, so that we didn't get lost on any account, I took the same path that John and I had taken, along the ditch. We'd have to turn into the forest by the roebuck skeleton, a gruesome but clear milestone, and then walk straight ahead for a while before the panorama opened up, our destination. The thing I wanted to show him.

I led the way but kept turning around to check he was still following and hadn't stopped again to touch or smell something. If I only I could have taken a photo for John, without him going running straight to "Griffin." What was it he'd said? "You'll have a long wait for that day." If I was waiting then it was for Yeh-teh, who was gazing around in amazement, looking at the plants, listening to the birds, uncertain but definitely not afraid. It didn't look like he was suffering to me. I knew it. It was clear that he belonged here and not between glass and concrete walls.

We walked a few hundred yards. The distance seemed longer than last time and I was beginning to worry we'd gone too far, that someone had found our marker the roebuck in the meantime and taken it away. According to John it was a miracle that hadn't happened long ago. Had we taken the wrong path? At last the white bones shone out in the ditch a few yards ahead of me and I was downright glad of the gruesome reunion, of the shivers running down my back at the sight of the huge empty eye sockets. I didn't have to vomit this time.

I was still immersed in looking at the hole where the nose had once been when a scream sounded out beside me that curdled my blood in my veins. *The voice of the adult male gorilla is tremendous.* I'd read that the previous summer, to prepare for my job interview. How imprecise nineteenth-century science was! What was a "tremendous" voice supposed to sound like? Now, Yeh-teh proved Darwin right. There was no better way to describe his voice. Tremendous. Ear-splitting. Blood-curdling. He stood as if turned to a pillar of salt, his fur on end.

Screaming, he stared down into the ditch. I'd never have imagined the skeleton would upset him so much. He was still an animal, after all.

It's a deer. I wanted to teach him the new sign in the hope of distracting him. I added: Fascinating, huh? But he didn't imitate my movements, didn't respond to what I'd said, stood frozen to the spot. Dirty, he said, once he'd finally found his way back to words. Dirty, dirty. And then he turned on his heel, headed back to where we'd come from, and disappeared from view. Impossible to catch up with him, even if I hadn't been hyperventilating. "Yeh-teh? Yeh-teh!" Please don't run onto the road. In the end I spotted him behind a tree, hiding shamefaced. He lowered his mouth to the ground, slowly and carefully, and his half-digested food came flooding out soundlessly. Then I had to sit down for a moment.

He refused to go any further, no matter how idyllically I described the paradise awaiting us beyond my unfortunate marker. You've never seen anything like it. You have to take a look at it. It didn't work any more. You close your eyes, and I'll guide you? No. Too late for good ideas. He wanted to go home. I could lead him to water but I couldn't force him to drink it. I couldn't carry him. What else could I do? I had one last try. I said goodbye and marched off on my own, not turning round, like I'd seen parents do a hundred times over with stubborn children, like my parents had no doubt done with me at an age before my memory. Seven or eight steps, and then I couldn't stand it—what if I lost him for good this time? I turned around. He hadn't followed me. Whatever you want, I said.

I drove us back and swore that day wouldn't be our last trip. Next time I'd have to be more careful, though, prepare him better. Everything takes time. He wasn't a little child any more, after all. He had to get accustomed to things slowly. How? No idea. But there was no doubt it would work out; I hadn't vomited the second time, either. At some point I'd have an opportunity to make up for what I'd messed up that day, and I'd take it. Promise.