

**Stephan Thome**  
**GEGENSPIEL**  
Novel

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**Sample translation by Bradley Schmidt**  
**(chapter 10 pp. 227-240)**

## **Chapter 10**

The baby's muffled cries reached her, a distant sound that came from outside and remained outside as she looked through the window onto the front part of the patio. Two flower tubs, left behind by the previous tenant, were on there, some garden equipment and the brown wooden table her husband had brought with him from the city. Stone steps led down to the lawn. The end of the garden, where the ground was slightly marshy, bordered on the lot belonging to the carpentry. Sometimes workers who had parked on the street instead of in the company car park would walk across it. Rossmann Ltd. was visible on the doors of the blue van that she occasionally saw around. Her gaze carried further and was lost among lone fruit trees and fallow fields.

She didn't see the stroller because it stood close to the house.

It was late afternoon and she had neither showered nor eaten breakfast. Instead of running down the stairs, she went into the bathroom and stood in front of the sink. Listened, but everything was quiet now. Nobody was crying, no sound of footsteps on the stairs. As she took off her sweater and her bra, she revealed swollen nipples, more brown than pink. In German, nipples were called 'breast warts' and they were as ugly as that. She lifted her breasts with both hands and examined the damage. The workers would open the door, shoot each other looks and say: hell, I ain't gonna fuck that. In that argot she and Hartmut had laughed about at first, just like at men with perms and women in striped yoga pants. She turned on the shower and let the hot water run till the mirror steamed up. In the shower, she stuck her hand between her legs and felt nothing. There was no food prepared, the laundry needed to be done, but she was thinking about the letter that had arrived last week. With profuse apologies for the delay, that it had taken some time before the new address had arrived from Rapa, she sounded like she did at the wedding: cheery and intimate, as if they were still best friends, who now exchanged recipes instead of going out in the evening, and talked about childrearing instead of men. She wrote that Philippa was the name for a little princess and the picture was so cute. She has your eyes. Young mothers loved being told things like that. The

blessing young mothers had received shone from their faces, they don't stare at the mirror and regret their misshaped bosom.

Naked, she walked back into the bedroom. The wardrobe was open, on the bed there were three copies of a French magazine named *l'Avant-scène*. An old photo showed her at Cabo Espichel, high above the sea, underneath the photo was a hectograph flyer announcing the performance of *O leque de Lady Windermere*, in the Liceu Maria Amália auditorium on June 12th 1973 at 7 p.m. Two singles gazed out of their worn sleeves, *Do Ya Think I'm Sexy* and *We Don't Talk Anymore*. Without knowing why, she had gotten the shoebox from the closet, now she backed it back together, pressed the lid on, and put everything back in its place. Luís had also brought her some LPs when he earned some money during summer vacation, but those were in a different box.

I have to get dressed, she thought.

The confusion was new and as paralyzing as the agony of the region in which she had lived for three-quarters of a year. Hartmut guessed it came from the pregnancy complications. One of those monstrous words: cervical insufficiency. The doctor didn't want to rule out that the stress of finishing her studies had played a role, and didn't want to speculate over other causes. They had only moved in December, when she was five months along, with a suitcase for the books, a second one full of clothes, and the two boxes with the things from Lisbon. At first she had even enjoyed not having to do anything, and being able to lie on the sofa all day and read. But she started feeling worse with increasing girth. If she lay on her back the baby would choke her, on her side, then her back hurt; on her belly was out of the question. Hartmut did what he could, came back from university at lunchtime with something hot to eat, a newspaper, sometimes flowers. He accepted her bodily changes with humor, and when she asked, he read aloud to her. After an unwanted pregnancy and a shotgun wedding she finally found the time, sitting on his sofa in Dortmund, to fall in love with her husband. What else could she have done?

The howl of a saw tore her out of her thoughts. The woman in the mirror held Christina's letter in her hand and seemed frozen by the question of whether she should place it in the box or in one of the drawers next to the bed. She no longer knew how it had started. The cradle had been in the bedroom in the weeks following the birth, Philippa had been changed on the kitchen table, and when she did sleep, a cozy silence prevailed in the apartment. Hartmut's temp position ran out at the end of the semester. They had spotted a house in Bergkamen in the paper, a mile or so outside of the city, DM 600 a month, two stories with a garden and a garage. Admittedly, the shopping couldn't be done without a car, but Hartmut only needed three minutes to reach the highway. And because he had to take on teaching appointments that semester throughout the Ruhr region to provide for his wife and child, they snapped it up. *Erlentiefenstraße* was a strangely enchanted

sounding name, eerie like a German fairy tale. The place was made up of a scattered collection of residential areas without a center. Single-family houses, whose gardens merged with the unbroken landscape. With an east wind it stank of the nearby pig farm, otherwise the smoke from factory smokestacks and blast furnaces swept over the roofs. She had lived in West Berlin for six years, and now she had arrived in Germany, a country as strange as the moon.

I have to get dressed, she thought.

In the meantime, the days became shorter, in the mornings fog lay over the landscape, and she had to force herself to get out of bed. The dirty dishes were stacked in the kitchen and the diaper pail was overflowing. Time glided by as if on rails. Her husband was gone the whole day, at night he kept himself awake with coffee to write and for about the last two weeks he looked at her differently than before. He noticed it. She did too. But what? Recently she had forgotten a tissue in a pair of pants and bit herself in the arm in fury when the laundry came out of the machine splattered with scraps of paper. The jeans lay on the floor, inside out. The bra had huge cups, which she had to fill out with additional cotton padding, and although she had just come out of the bathroom, the clocked showed ten before twelve. Without thinking, she ran downstairs. As soon as she slid open the patio door the screaming was deafening. She rushed to the stroller, snatched back the blanket, and took out the hollering child. Its face looked scalded, torn into a crying expression. As she pressed the bundle against her body, she couldn't avoid thinking about how easy it would be. The sky was hung with dark fall clouds and promised rain, but the baby calmed down. From time to time she knew exactly what was happening. Then she thought, I'm crazy.

"That poor little doll, eh."

Mr. Löscher stood with arms crossed behind the knee-high privet hedge marking his property. A grey-haired bespectacled man between sixty and seventy, whom she had only ever seen in blue overalls, excepting Sundays. He was the only neighbor whose name she knew.

"Hello." She instantly felt under observation and held the child closer to her chest. Workers' shouts and calls could be heard behind the rowan tree.

"Poor doll, eh. I just said that to my Helga" Mr. Löscher's poorly shaved chin motioned upwards. His wife lay somewhere behind the narrow gable window, recovering from a complicated hip operation. "She just lay here for a whole hour like she's exposed and hollers."

"I'm sorry. I think she's teething."

"Already? You should watch out, otherwise at the age of twelve she'll say Momma, I need my own place. These days things like that go crazy fast." As always, he spoke accusingly, but seemed jovial and used formal German in a way that sounded peculiarly familiar. "Helga always

says: ooh, doesn't she look lovely. I said, what a sweet baby, oh, she looks the picture of health she does"

"Is your wife doing better?"

"Sure, but there's no sleep with this racket."

Once she had offered to go over with Philippa and pay his wife a visit, but Mr. Löscher would hear nothing of it. He said everything was messy inside and the excitement would be too much for her. Before the operation, she had taken care of the house and he the garden, but now – you have no idea, he often said and waved it off. The mines were closed, furnaces disused, workers laid off. You have no idea. He himself had used to work in mining, not underground but in administration, or as a janitor, she didn't know exactly. "Well, I've gotta get going," he said, and remained standing where he was. "There's a lot to do when it gets shady out."

She stroked her daughter on her cheek and felt the awkward position she was holding her child with. Philippa lay sideways on her forearm, her hand grasping her diaper and thigh. She had learned from Ruth that a hearty hold on the crotch was the orthopedically correct way to hold a child. Maria got dizzy when she lifted her gaze. In this flat landscape there was nothing to hold onto.

"With the cherries in the summer, that just broke my heart," Mr. Löscher sounded off. "Back then, when your predecessors still lived here – those people didn't take care of nothing – Helga went over when it was time. For jam. There's a bunch of it in the cellar. For all I care, the Russians can let another two reactors explode, we have enough. Wool blankets, water canisters, all there."

"Do they already know when she'll be able to get up again? Your wife?"

"The doctors, nay. Are like politicians, all went to some savvy training." His chin motioned in her direction. "Now she's ok again, the little crybaby."

"I have to go inside and get some food ready."

"Right now it all works with machines. Bath and the like. You have to see the crane in bathroom. Huge piece of kit. And in between either I got to carry, but that's nothing for my back. Or I say: Helga, get in the chopper. At first she thought it was funny, but what do you wanna do, eh. It is what it is. Have to live with it."

Maria pulled the blanket out of the stroller with her free hand. Why didn't Philippa cry and give her a reason to go back in the house? There were weeds growing between the red slabs on the patio, the beds on the slope were already overrun with them. She had never had a garden. When she looked up again her neighbor had come over the hedge and was walking towards the patio. "You wanna get a close look at me, eh. If I've already been hearing you the whole morning."

"I really have to go inside."

“We all have to do. She’s sleeping peacefully, the little doll.”

Since Philippa’s birth she found strangers getting too close unbearable. Their smells, the perspiration, their breath. In the supermarket, women stuck their heads in the stroller and patted the little thing inside, and every time she stood to the one side and had to pull herself together so as to not run away. Mr. Löscher permeated an aroma of basement workshop and cheap cologne as he came up the steps. His hair parted to the side glistened with the whiteness of larvae, like Helmut’s father’s did. She automatically held her breath. In Berlin people kept to themselves, but here they were in your face and said “howdy.” Maria forced herself to turn her arm to the side so that Mr. Löscher could see the baby’s face without laying his head on the mother’s shoulder. An index finger with an overly long nail approached Philippa’s nose. “What do you say about that,” he pondered. “I can’t think of anything better than cute. It’s really nice here, isn’t it.”

“I really have to go inside now.” She spoke so mechanically, like people speak without breathing, but Mr. Löscher couldn’t take his eyes away from the baby and didn’t notice anything.”

“When you can walk, well, you’ll help me in the garden. You may be a girl, but it’s not like that these days. You’ll getta rake and a hoe, and then we can happily putter around, us two.” His breath reeked of canned ravioli. He occasionally mentioned a son, but their relationship seemed strained, and he didn’t have any grandchildren. As his hand touched the baby’s face Maria caught a piece between her thumb and index finger. A moment later Philippa twitched and started crying. Mr. Löscher pulled his hand back in fright. “Wow, the siren’s started up again. I didn’t scare the little one I hope.”

“I pretty sure she had a bad dream. I must go inside. Goodbye.”

“Should I get rid of some of the weeds on the slope? Breaks my heart how things look here.”

“Not necessary, thank you very much.” Maria disappeared into the living room with the crying child on her arm. In the door to the hallway she turned around again and saw Mr. Löscher picking something up from the ground, then she continued on into the kitchen. Philippa was screaming her head off, probably because she was hungry. In her home country the babies were fed soup with fish and vegetables at five months, and Lurdes called at least once every week to dictate recipes. Puré de legumes, peixe cozido, hastily scribbled down they all hung on her refrigerator door, between the notifications of radioactive contamination of various types of fruits and vegetables that Hartmut’s sister regularly sent them. Maria frantically placed a jar in the water warmer, rocked her child and thought she couldn’t take the crying a minute longer. The thing on her arm stank. Up in the bathroom, she opened the playsuit, which already revealed brown patches, ripped it from her daughter’s body and confirmed what Hartmut had announced upon leaving the house: there were no diapers left. Yesterday morning he had said there were seven, three in the

evening, now none at all. She cleaned Philippa as best as possible with crocheted handkerchiefs, then she paced back and forth with the naked child in her arms and forced herself to breathe deeply and think logically. If Hartmut had said there were no diapers left at six-thirty then she hadn't changed the baby for a full six hours. She wrapped Philippa in a towel for the time being. It was a long way to the Schlecker drugstore on the north hill. The pacifier she pushed between her daughter's lips had been spit out again. Cursing, she laid the baby into the marital bed, raced below, turned off the water warmer, and reached for her wallet. She sensed she was doing exactly the wrong thing – Philippa had to eat! The crying fell silent when she pulled the front door shut behind her.

The street lay empty and quiet before her. The sky continued to darken, soon it would rain. There was a command center in her head, setting up plans and yelling orders, a complicated guidance system in which everything trickles away. She considered taking a walk over the meadows. A bit of exercise would do her good. A man with a stroller, whom she had occasionally seen walking here, approached from the end of the street and suddenly she had to think of the staircase in Steglitz and of the room reeking of mothballs where she had sub-let for six months. The loneliness of the first and the last semester, as if a circle had been closed. Maria stopped and enjoyed the peace and quiet. Despite all the difficulties she had passed her exams, she had a degree. The man with the stroller went along the garden fence, threw a glance towards the sky and said: "if you want to go by foot, I'd recommend an umbrella." He wore the same jacket as the TV cop with the mustache whose name she couldn't remember. The jacket was light grey and went past his belt. His German didn't sound as if he was from the Ruhr region.

"I'm just going quickly to Schmücker to buy some diapers." Hartmut had already mentioned the Schmücker store before, she didn't even know which direction it was in. He took care of the shopping when he came home in the evening, the diaper problem was his fault.

The man stood there and closed the cover on the stroller. "What a huge industry that must be. I mean the diapers."

"Five during the day, two at night."

"At the least. Nine thousand within the course of a childhood, I read that number somewhere. Or was it seven thousand? Something like that."

The phrase "you have no idea" was on the tip of her tongue.

His gesture looked like he wanted to give her his hand over the distance of two meters, but in the middle of the motion he paused and furrowed his brow. "Is that your child I hear?"

"My daughter is asleep."

“Strange. I could have sworn that the crying...” Taking a step back, he stretched his neck as if trying to look past the awning into the top floor of the house. “I’d say she’s woken up.”

“I just have to go get diapers quickly.”

“It takes a while to walk to Schmüchel. If it’s an emergency I can help you out.” He pulled a diaper out from under the stroller. “The little one is named Philippa, right? I talked to your husband once.”

“Thanks, it’s kind of you.” She took the diaper and tried to smile.

“I have to go shopping anyway. If you don’t need anything else, I’ll bring you a pack. Pampers or luv? And which age, five months? Trust me, I’m an expert.”

“It’s not necessary. I ... “

“If I don’t walk a couple miles a day I feel I’m getting rusty. The curse of the old sportsman.”

All at once, Maria heard the screaming as well. It could be heard throughout the whole street, the desperate cry of her neglected child. “Five Months, that’s right. I think I should... I mean... thanks a lot, really.”

“No problem. If I come at a bad time I’ll just leave the package in front of the door. See you around. Last house on the left.”

Back in the kitchen, she turned on the water warmer and ran back upstairs. Philippa had fought her way out of the towel and lay on the bed, red as a lobster. Command central took over. Suddenly all of her movements were sure, and maybe it was shame that kept her from opening the door two hours later. Crouched under the kitchen window, she watched as the neighbor walked along the street and pushed the stroller a couple meters ahead of himself, caught up to it, and then sent it off once again.

She sat on the sofa in the living room for a while, humming melodies that went through her head and rocked the sleeping baby. She didn’t want to put her in the stroller on the patio because of Mr. Löscher. Laundry, washing dishes, tidying up. Time also passed when she just told herself what she needed to do. For three whole months she had only been allowed to get up to go to the bathroom, and although she had started to go for walks a lot recently, she was sometimes overcome by exhaustion and at other times craving for a cigarette.

In the bedroom she tucked her daughter in the marital bed and lay down beside her. The doctor at Johannes Hospital had said in parting, “remember: although the umbilical cord is cut, it still exists emotionally. The window was ajar. A freight train rolled by at some undetermined distance, and Mr. Löscher chatted with workers from the carpentry shop. For half a year she had been intending to write Ana, although she knew it wouldn’t change anything anymore.

Shortly before falling asleep she heard it start to rain outside.

When she awoke, Philippa had disappeared. The little checkered blanket she had laid over her daughter was wadded up on the pillow. Panicked, Maria looked beside the bed to see if the child had fallen out, raced into the hall and heard Hartmut banging around down in the kitchen. After she had calmed herself, she washed her face in the bathroom. António's face had been floating through the shapeless space of her dreams for weeks, but she asked herself how she could know it was his face. In the apartment in Lisbon there hung only one picture of him, in Rapa there were many, although her parents hadn't had a camera at the time. They had one now and were waiting for the opportunity to take pictures of their granddaughter. Maria slipped into a pair of pants and resisted the urge to lie back down in bed, and then walked down stairs.

Hartmut's bag stood in the hall next to an open pack of diapers. He sat at the kitchen table, gave Philippa her bottle, and threw her a smile, behind which fatigue and unspoken questions were hidden. "There you are," he said jauntily. "I didn't want to wake you." He had already washed the dishes.

"Was she crying?"

"She was awake. I thought I could give her something before she started." The clock over the sink showed shortly after six. Even though they were on daylight savings time, it was already dusky outside. The long nap had amplified her fatigue, and she felt like a mountain climber in thin air. Hartmut briefly glanced up at her. "The diapers were outside the door?"

"I was in a rush when we came back."

"Was it a rough day?"

"I slept longer than I wanted." She sat down next to him at the table and ordered herself to smile at Philippa. "Once again."

"The autobahn here is a catastrophe. The A40 is all plugged up. What does our neighbor always say? The Ruhr crawl, that's spot-on."

"Our neighbor smells strange," Maria said frostily. "Besides, I never know what I should say in response. He came over to look at Philippa. The poor doll."

"Old men smell like that."

"I wish he were bed-ridden, not his wife."

"Who knows what she's like." He wiped Philippa's mouth with a moist rag and repositioned her so she could burp. Maria felt an ache in her chest. "Did my sister call?" he asked.

"If she did, then when I was asleep."

“I bought some frozen pizza. I couldn’t think of anything better.”

“I’m not hungry anyway.”

“What did you eat today?”

Her gaze was intended to remind him of her dislike of questions that he had been asking far too often recently. It wasn’t chatting when he asked her how her day had been. He had probably asked Ruth to call in Bergkamen in his absence and confirm that the mother wasn’t starving, the child wasn’t lying in its own excrement, and the deep freezer wasn’t open, like last week, till all of the provisions were thawed. She had to be on her toes and she was. A book of Beckett texts lay on her bedside table, and she moved the bookmark forward twenty pages every day.

Hartmut looked at her over the table. “It will take a while but I’ll get tenure someday.”

“Does Mr. Löscher just want to chat?” she asked, instead of taking the bait, “or should I offer to visit his wife again? Or invite him to coffee? I have no idea how that works, being neighbors. It didn’t exist in Berlin.”

“If he gets on your nerves just say you have things to do.”

“Now he wants to get our garden in shape. It just breaks his heart how our place looks. I don’t understand half of what he says.”

“First the garden, then the cellar, and eventually he’ll be taking his afternoon nap on our sofa. You have no idea about these caretaker types.” Hartmut laughed, and she managed to laugh too, although her chest tightened even more. “Seriously, though,” he said, taking advantage of the moment. “What did you eat?”

“I don’t ask you what you eat all day, do I?”

“Muesli for breakfast, a chocolate bar at ten, then...”

“Hartmut.”

“... I went to the cafeteria, it was delicious. I absolutely have to take you out to the cafeteria in Bochum. Mushy risotto with contaminated vegetables. I drank coffee in the afternoon, ate a couple cookies and an apple. Now I’m getting hungry again. And you?”

“Give me the baby, I’ll change her.”

“I just did. Let her fall asleep.”

“Good,” Maria said and stood up. “I’ll be downstairs in the laundry room.”

He reached out and held her by the arm. Her gaze slid over the chaos on the dresser, where baby clothes, pacifier and forgotten groceries formed a still life of being overwhelmed. Why did he pose dumb questions when it was immediately visible that she did not have things under control. “You didn’t eat anything,” he said. “Nothing the whole day. Not even bread.”

“If you don’t want me to hate you, then stop keeping check on me.” She pulled away, ran down the cellar stairs and slammed the door of the small room behind her. For several seconds she listened if Hartmut had followed her, but he didn’t. The metal outer door led to where the trash cans stood and beyond the hedge, the place where Mr. Löscher cultivated his compost. Her cigarettes lay in a blue box with old gaskets. Maria pulled one out of the pack and held it under her nose. The command center issued a clear “no”. During her last visit Ruth had spoken of the irresponsibility of mothers who smoked while nursing, which in her eyes was similar to mixing enriched uranium into baby food, and she didn’t have to be paranoid to consider such comments consciously placed hints. The tobacco smelled good. Smelled of afternoons in Mescalero, where she had read and watched the bustle on Lausitzer Platz or had chatted with Ana when the traffic allowed. Now tears welled up in her eyes as soon as she thought of West Berlin and her best friend.