

Beside it a Bouquet of Cat Grass

Reading · Lost Weekend, Munich · 2018-02-23

On my way to you, two seventy-year-old women keep me company on the train, in blouses as affirming of life as only folk-pop music usually is. Each of them holds a smartphone in her steady hands. They must once have carried their newborn children, and later their grandchildren, with just this gentle care. It doesn't take long for everyone in the compartment to catch on: the two ladies are sending pictures to each other. Pictures of mutual acquaintances, of their children and grandchildren, pictures which — as the one lady says — really did turn out rather nicely.

She presses her phone into the other woman's hands and asks to be taken to the "Gallery." Then the two of them stare at the screen, grinning and shaking their heads at once, wondering what on earth they've done now and collapsing into laughter.

Their eyes meet and both of them seem happy.

Then, suddenly, a stumbling confusion.

One of the pictures they've sent refuses to arrive. Four lowered eyebrows are lit by the blue glow of the screen until, amid loud cackling, the mystery is finally solved: the picture meant for one was delivered to the other's sister-in-law, who happens to share her name.

"Well, she's gonna have a laugh!"

Afterwards they set one of their profile pictures and — it feels like — talk about this "Gallery" a few times too often.

"Look at you, lookin' good! Look!"

Laughter.

It's touching, how much joy can be made out of so little. I'd have loved to hold all of it down, to be able to show it to anyone who needs it: this is how you use a smartphone! But what you'd really have to say is: this is how you're happy!

Two people showing each other how lovely the other one is.

What else did I want to tell you?

Ah yes — it did in fact turn out the way you always predicted: Mark and Lisa finally broke up for good. The two of them demonstrated, with the relentlessness of a

kitchen blender, just how hard two people can make life for one another; a monument against marriage and proof that the fault cannot possibly lie with the smartphone.

What else?

An acquaintance wrote to me this morning.

I see him too rarely, which is why I have to call him an acquaintance. And yet I feel very close to him: a young father, a theatre director, trying to make his art possible through honest work. He asked me whether I would like to write a short text for a small event at the Lost Weekend.

You and I were often at the Lost Weekend, the two of us.

Once, on a cold afternoon in January two years ago, we were drinking our coffee there when a gaunt, grey-haired bus driver was waiting in the warmth for his shift to begin. I was just at the till, you were sitting near the windows, and the man sagged towards the floor. He collapsed with the unreal motion of a child pretending to collapse. Afterwards you asked me whether I had seen his face — he had looked as if already dead. In the commotion, you hadn't even noticed me.

Bending over the man, I gave him first — no, last — aid; he was dead.

To this day that bus driver helps me with his empty gaze:

In my worse hours, he reminds me that one can climb out again even from Hades, provided the circumstances are right and there are people to show you the way.

(Ha, what do you think of this one: "Orpheus and the MVG." Well, never mind.)

The paramedic who arrived at the scene stood between me and the firing defibrillator with utter calm and told me how he had once arrived at an emergency where the first aid amounted to a ring of flickering candles. With that circle of candles, the first responders had initially expressed their best intentions — then, much more, their utter delusion. I, by contrast, broke the bus driver's ribs. He survived.

It was good to have had you as someone I could talk to about that experience a few more times.

For the text he wants, though, the story won't do. It reeks too much of self-glorification. And although the room on the evening of the event will probably be four-fifths empty chairs and one-fifth strangers, their opinion will still matter to me.

Strange, isn't it, how we lend a certain weight even to the opinions of people we will never meet — don't you think?

The theatre director said the event was in three weeks; a good friend has already been talked into attending. Unfortunately I'm still looking for a good idea. Perhaps I'll write a text about enabling the self with the involvement of the other. What do you think of that? First I'd start with a cheerful scene, then its darker counterpart would follow. After that I could slip in a short passage in which I lift the text onto a meta-level, in the hope of drawing a smile or two from the audience. That, presumably, would be the moment at which I'd glance briefly into the crowd — only to confirm for myself that the idea was mediocre and the execution too hasty.

A sigh.

Then perhaps a fable — in indirect speech, to strip it of its mythic character. Finally, a sad, unexpected ending.

Ah, speaking of fables. That reminds me of your first summer in Munich.

On a cool September night you had told me about European bees and Japanese hornets. Shortly before that you had climbed through a left-open second-floor window of a corporate building by way of a lightning rod. Tipsy, you stumbled down the two floors of the glass stairwell afterwards to open the enormous door for our little group. Above the sixth floor there was a rooftop terrace, and up there, while the others were talking far too loudly about careers and compact cars, you began, cold-lipped and quiet, to tell me about those bees and hornets.

Thirty hornets, you said, wiped out thirty thousand bees in just three hours. They simply bit the bees in half at the middle; there was something of the brutality of life itself in how hopelessly the many times smaller insects had to meet their end.

It was your hand movements that betrayed what you were really trying to tell me. You pushed the swarming bees away from us; as hornets your fingers whirled pitilessly towards us.

We held on to our beer bottles with white knuckles, looked silently out over the inner city of Munich, and understood:

We are not hornets.

But listen to this: I know the whole story now.

What we didn't know back then was why the Japanese bees are not necessarily met with the same fate as their European cousins. The first hornet — the scout hornet — always comes alone. The moment she enters the hive, the bees surround the intruder at a speed that matches the gravity of the act. They throw themselves upon the threat until nothing of her can be seen, and they begin to vibrate. A short while later the hornet is dead. The bees can withstand a ridiculous degree or two more than the hornet can. They kill her with their warmth.

Told that way to the end, the story takes on a different character, don't you think? Either it's the story of the shoal of fish and the shark — set in the realm of insects — or it's a story that tells us that too much warmth can kill.

I keep being overcome by the fear that this might also be the reason we hadn't seen each other in the last few weeks. Had we had too much of one another? Or was there simply more important work to do?

Friendships often thin themselves out, only to make way for another attempt.

Oh yes, one more thing, then I really have to be off: the Tengelmann from our shared-flat days has been rebuilt into an Edeka — you wouldn't recognise it any more. Yesterday, standing at the till, I had to think of how the cashier with the beautiful tattoos pointed out to us once, "that stuff there's not chives, y'know?" From the other ingredients she had figured out what our dish for the evening was supposed to be. As accomplices, as always, we reacted quickly and with a patronising smile. Yes, yes, we knew that very well — the greenery was just for decoration. Grateful for another punchline, we packed the cat grass into our tote bag.

How lovely it is to have someone beside you who knows who you will become in the next second.

The inscription tells me that your grandmother had her second memorial day yesterday. Perhaps you'll shake her hand on my behalf. In two weeks it will be the first anniversary of your death as well.

I won't be able to be here, unfortunately.

So I'm placing the white carnations in the usual spot for you already today; beside them, a bouquet of cat grass.