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The Angel Snare

Der Engelherd

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Translated by Ruth Martin

Can it be that that afternoon was the start of everything that's happening to him now? Caspar Waidegger will ask himself much later, and he will let out a laugh, because of course any afternoon you care to choose comes at the start of the events that follow it. All the same. On a snowy night he will think he remembers that, one sunlit afternoon, everyone on his terrace was slightly tense in a certain way. This tension, if not caused by the sparkling wine they had consumed, was however being too quickly dispelled by it. He realised this as Fabian Kranichpferd was saying, in reply to something he could no longer recall:

“There *is* no history, there's only the way you tell it. Whoever is the best narrator, it's his story that becomes history.”

Anneliese Eichenperger smiled in agreement, resolute but gentle as always. She liked this young man.

Caspar Waidegger countered the aphorism with a quick glance upwards (in his estimation the boy was too smart): “At your age I thought so too. Or at least I felt duty bound to think it.”

Annelise Eichenperger nodded. She liked her old friend as well.

Fabian Kranichpferd thought Caspar Waidegger as vain and overbearing as an advertising column. Though that didn't stop him from wishing he himself had been more restrained, nor from giving a clumsy response. “Yes. Like I said. Thank you. For agreeing to talk to me. The thing I really wanted to ask...”

Caspar Waidegger replied a little distractedly, but with generosity: “Not at all, Mr... Kranichpferd. Laura asked me, and how could I say no to her?”

Behind her flattered smile, Laura Schmitz wondered what that was all about, the old-boy charm that clearly just underlined how little she meant to him. You didn't treat a friend of many years in that way (more to the point: a man didn't treat a girlfriend of many years in that way). On the other hand, in general CW had become nicer. She was permitted to spend more time with him, which was a pleasure she enjoyed with suspicion. Not exactly a

pleasure, but something she had spent years wishing for without hoping for it; something that meant too much for her to regard it simply as pleasure. “With suspicion” wasn’t right either. She just had no better way to describe the loss of her sad equilibrium.

When Fabian had asked her if she could get him an interview with CW (“I mean, you know him personally, don’t you?”) her cheeks and her back had gone hot and red (her back, at least, without anyone seeing): “He doesn’t give interviews. On principle. Ever.” But Fabian usually got what he wanted. He sensed what would be appropriate, and where, and how, and people liked him. The weekly magazine that seemed an unachievable goal for someone like him had finally been won over by his claim that he could arrange an interview with Caspar Waidegger (and this made him feel all the more wretched that he had annoyed Waidegger for the sake of a *bon mot*).

Laura had granted his request almost inadvertently, for the simple reason that she sometimes became stupidly bashful in CW’s presence, and mentioned Fabian purely because she was lost for something to say. “Bring him along next Saturday afternoon, if he doesn’t mind doing it in public – that way he won’t take up any additional time,” CW had said unexpectedly. Sometimes he invited a small number of friends over on a Saturday afternoon, as he explained: “so I don’t go completely feral”. That was his way of putting it: “a small number of friends”. He had two real friends: Anneliese and Dieter. Otherwise, it was always different people (“a small number”), who interested him for some reason at that particular moment. Recently, Laura had been to almost every one.

He would send out the invitations on the previous Monday. All week, the four or five chosen people in the town of D. would feel just that: chosen. He knew this, and became a little addicted to the power of being able to make a few people feel they had been chosen. On the terrace of his house, which was closed over in winter and became a winter garden, he provided canapes, fruit, tea, coffee and sparkling wine on those Saturday afternoons.

“What was the thing you really wanted to ask?” Caspar Waidegger looked at his watch, to show it would be the last question, and Fabian Kranichpferd inquired whether Mr Waidegger could reveal to “our readers” – particularly “our female readers” (*Oh no! I’m an idiot!* Thought Fabian) “I mean, *all* the good folk who read our magazine,” (he tried to save himself with a hint of irony) – what he meant by a scene in his last book. It was where a woman divorces her husband after he forgets their wedding anniversary for the tenth time, and she lists all the other ways he’s failed, like never buying her a single flower on Valentine’s Day and always forgetting to top up her canary’s water. Did he mean it as a satire on our society, and were the formalities supported by capitalist industry, like flower shops

and jewellers, gradually replacing real feelings and so on – the final question, if you like, please. Glad that the interview would soon be over, Caspar became loquacious:

“No, no, quite the reverse – that’s something the canary should tell you (it’s a budgie in my book, actually). I mean, the bird’s not a formality; it’s a hungry creature, isn’t it? And anyway, what’s wrong with formalities? They help people to show they wish each other well. Really, we should do that every day: be good to each other. But we don’t manage it every day, we have too many worries and things to do. We don’t live in fairyland, alas – we even have nine months to wait until next Valentine’s Day.” Fabian Kranichpferd switched off his Dictaphone and asked if he could send the text to Caspar by email for him to sign off (if what people said about this magazine was true, the fee was going to save his June).

“By post, please, I don’t own a computer,” said Caspar, thinking that he had never given anyone anything for Valentine’s Day. And now there were a few women who would read this interview and believe that they were the only one to whom he had never given anything for Valentine’s Day, though (they would think) he had most probably given things to other women. Why had he not answered honestly, and said that he thought these things were tasteless and bourgeois? (Because that was exactly the answer this stuck-up prig was expecting from him?)

Laura told herself that CW was paying her only slightly more attention than a cat; he didn’t even shy away from talking about giving other women Valentine’s gifts in her presence. She didn’t notice the way this thought re-established her equilibrium, and as the familiar uncertainty gently settled over her once more, she told herself she didn’t belong here and that in any case she was the only one at this party with a more or less normal surname. Fabian, on the other hand, seemed to fit in perfectly, surname and all - or pen name, rather, which sounded as if it had been specially thought up for this afternoon. He was feeling good, he even allowed himself to continue the conversation:

“May I ask you something else that interests me personally, *off the record*, as they say: what do you think about commercial fiction? Does the division between elite art and entertainment even still exist?”

Caspar was cross at being made to go on working, at having agreed to this interview in the first place, and tried to sum up briefly: “The experiment with the liaison between serious and superficial art has not been a success. But it would be wrong to pour scorn on superficial art. Just you try and write a proper kitsch novel. You’ll soon see it’s not that easy.”

He didn't say what he was thinking. His actual thought was that he wanted to write a book that would be as kitschy as life itself (and not as kitschy as kitschy art), and he believed it couldn't be done. Caspar Waidegger believed life was unbeatable in its stupidity.

Anneliese Eichenperger, in her warm but authoritarian tone, which was intended to highlight her status as a very old friend, thought otherwise: "My darling Caspy, nothing could be simpler: you either have to show people what they desire, which means what they think they are lacking, or what they are afraid of. Preferably both at once. You show good-looking, seemingly carefree, well-dressed people – ideally mentioning brand names – who still have worries and intractable problems. You can call it, let's say, 'The Incident at the Lake', and open it like this:

The Incident at the Lake

She was sitting on the terrace of her summer house, her huge blue-grey eyes staring out at the huge blue-grey surface of the lake. *If he doesn't come today either, I'll know for certain that something bad has happened – you could read the thought in the sad expression on her face, which in the shade of her wide-brimmed hat...*"

Anneliese paused: "Someone give me a brand name, quick, what's the hat?"

Caspar, who was enjoying the game already, couldn't think of any hat manufacturers, but Dieter Kehrbein reacted at once: "Stetson!

...her wide-brimmed Stetson."

Birgit Kehrbein corrected her husband with well-hidden (or so she thought) annoyance: "No, come on, that doesn't work, they make men's hats! Everyone knows that!"

"Chanel?" Fabian Kranichpferd suggested tentatively.

Patrizia Steinland, a music producer from the local radio station, knew better: "Mayser! A large company with a history. It's representative enough, and not as hackneyed as Chanel!"

Fabian looked defenceless and embarrassed, which made Anneliese instantly take him under her wing:

“No, no, hackneyed is exactly what we need. Chanel, you say? Fine by me.”

Patrizia Steinland gave a disgruntled twitch of her lips and said nothing.

“... you could read the thought in the sad expression on her face, which in the shade of her wide-brimmed Chanel hat seemed even paler than it was.

Caspy, do you want to take over?”

“Fine, why not:

The garden door at the end of the path opened. A figure, silhouetted against the low sun, strode towards the terrace. ‘*Mon Dieu*, finally!’ she whispered. But it was not him. It was an unknown man in -

Not Chanel?”

Anneliese laughed.

“Burberry?” said Birgit Kehrbein, who was thinking about what to get her husband for their silver wedding anniversary.

“Perhaps male characters don’t need branded goods?” asked Ferdinand Marx, the artistic director of the city theatre, who always made a point of dressing casually, but whose greying curls and pink fingernails were conspicuously well groomed.

Anneliese curled the corners of her Bordeaux-painted mouth wisely, knitted her high eyebrows together in thought and finally narrowed her large eyes to cunning slits: “uniform!”

Caspar agreed – “Absolutely,” – and went on:

“It was an unknown man in uniform. He showed her his identification, which she was unable to read because her eyes, already stressed by cosmetics, had been overtaxed by frequent weeping in the past few days.

‘I take it you are Miss S.?’

‘Yes, why? Who are you?’

He brought his identification right up to her face.

‘Do you know lieutenant K.?’

‘Why?’

‘I’m the one asking the questions here. Do you know him?’

‘ _ ’

‘Do you know him? Yes or no?’

‘What’s happened? Has something... Is he...?’

‘So you do know him. When did you last see him?’

‘I don’t remember exactly. Ten days ago, perhaps. Or is it longer... Why?’

‘Please tell me what happened then. What did he say to you? Did you notice anything unusual?’

‘Why me? Why are you asking me all this? He’s just an acquaintance. What’s wrong?’

‘Alright. I’ll tell you. He took his own life, exactly...’

The man looked at his...

Come on, give me a watch brand!”

Anneliese looked expectantly round the group.

Fabian ventured another suggestion: “Rolex?”

Then Patrizia Steinland thought she had finally cracked it: “Omega! The James Bond brand!”

“The man looked at his Omega:

‘...exactly four hours ago. There was a letter in his breast pocket addressed to you. And your photo, as I now see. You’re a beautiful woman.’

Caspar looked around. “Who wants to carry on? How about you?”

Journal of an angel addict

In the Middle Ages bird snare mounds weren’t a rare sight at all. In some places they existed into the 19th century. In bad times, poor people caught our feathered friends to eat, and in good times they caught them as song birds, too. The rich hunted birds for sport. Even the nobility were not above taking time out at the bird snare – just look at the ballad of Heinrich of Saxony, the future king:

*Lord Heinrich at the bird snare sits
Joyous he and light of heart, etc.*

Angel snares, by contrast, are something hardly anyone has heard of. An angel snare is a device for catching angels. It doesn't take up as much space as a bird snare, which is set up as a lightly wooded hill (it was originally called a *Vogelerde* or bird earth) and affords enough space for redwings, fieldfares and song thrushes – in other words, all the edible thrushes – and for linnets, siskins, yellowhammers, goldfinches, bullfinches and chaffinches. Angels don't require so many square metres. They are famously incorporeal, and there is room for all of them on the head of a pin. But what would they be doing on the head of a pin? They can be everywhere at once. And that is precisely what makes catching an angel so difficult. This is how you do it: using a special mechanism, a pin is held above a spherical angel snare made out of a tarnished silver mirror, near a place where a person or several people are at the pinnacle of happiness. The real, natural angel snare is this place, the dimensions of which can be greater than any bird snare – but the name has also been carried over to the spherical trap. What hemp seeds, rowan berries and earth worms are to birds, the feelings of humans are to the angels. They even acquire a little physical presence, in order to take part in human affairs. The art of the angel-catcher is to arrange for the joy of one or several people to be turned into suffering at the appropriate time. Another, more sophisticated method is to predict when this joy will turn into suffering, and to be in the right place at the right time. The invisible angel cries out; at this cry the pin flies into the angel's heart and it falls into the trap, which snaps shut at once, much like a bird-trapping net. Angels become visible in tarnished silver mirror glass; that's why they are kept in similar spherical silver mirrors. The name "angel snare" is given to both an angel trap and an angel cage.