

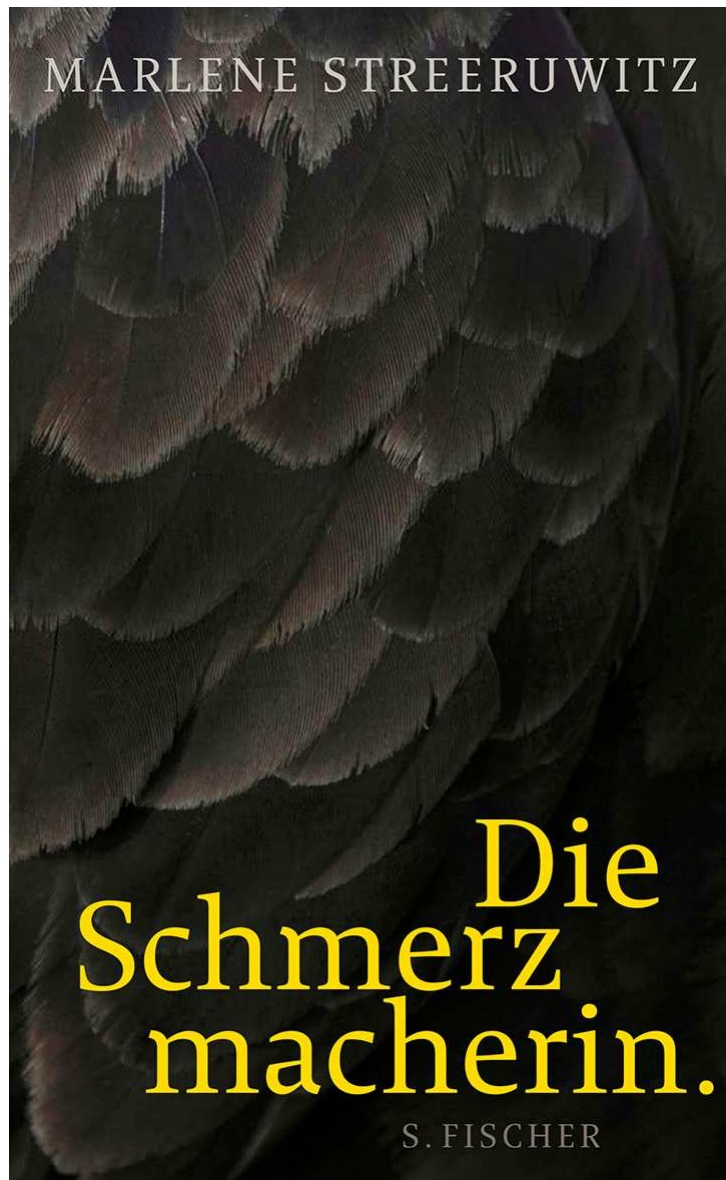
Excerpt

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Die Schmerzmacherin. – *The Hurtress.*

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December

There were more birds of prey visible than ever before. The long cold spell had driven them out of the woods. They were perched on the fence posts between fields and in the crowns of fruit trees. They crouched on the heads of saints on bridges and on the crosses at forks in the road. They sat motionless in the winter sun, their silhouettes forming dark threats against the fields of snow and the cloudless sky. Nothing moved. Ice and snow and sun and cold, the wide valley and the hills at its edges; all sparkling white, the sky pale blue.

She had to drive slowly. She was the first to mark the fresh snow, carving a track into the blank surface. But it was impossible to drive smoothly. Her wheels fell into the ruts of ice and frozen mud under the new snow. In the mirror it looked as though she was leaving a straight trail behind her, but in fact it was a bumpy ride. The car was being thrown this way and that by the hidden grooves. She wanted to drive the way driving looked, to glide. She wanted to glide, smooth like the snow. But she slipped, and swerved far too close to the edge of the deep ditch at the side of the road.

She drove slowly, letting the car creep forwards, letting the wheels find their own way into the grooves, bent forwards, feeling the bumping and shuddering against her stomach and chest. She looked out ahead, out into the expanse of snow, saw the white valley coming towards her as she sliced it in two, saw the white valley passing her by and falling away on either side.

She had noticed the buzzard on the parapet of the bridge from a long way off, every time something hit the axle, every time the wheels grated against a slanting rut. She assumed it would take off, fly away, flee. She began to squint.

She assumed it would launch off, would spread its wings and take to the air. She squinted in the hope that the sky in front of her windscreen would darken and the bird would fill her gaze for a second.

She wondered how this bird found water, when everything was sunk in deep, deep hibernation, the water in the little river beneath the bridge a single, thick stream of ice, snow blown over it.

The buzzard did not move. The buzzard stayed put on the parapet. Her foot was barely touching the accelerator now. Her aging Kia purred slowly over the bridge. She looked at the bird, bending forwards and turning her head round to gaze up at it. Its dirty-yellow claws clung to the stone. Light-brown feathers fluffed out like pantaloons above its talons, dark-brown, speckled feathers running up its body. She bent further forwards, her face almost touching the windscreen. A moment. The bird. Its eyelids. She saw a yellow iris, which was immediately hidden by waxy skin. As she trundled past it, the bird looked away, turned its head. The movement could only be seen in the feathers at its neck; its silhouette was now in profile. Its head, now it had turned, ossified again, its eyes looking away. Turned away, not flown away.

She drove on, staring straight ahead, staring hard into the whiteness, bumped and shaken gently by the movements of the steering wheel. Her sheepskin coat dampened the bumps and knocks. The motor stuttered and the car faltered. She pressed down on the accelerator and the car moved off again. She let it carry her on. Then she put it in neutral and waited till it came to a halt. Still lying over the steering wheel, she noticed the slight irregularity of the valves in the reverberations from the motor. The car stood still and vibrated. The motor hummed, but outside. She continued to gaze.

The sun was behind her, in front of her the snow, everything coated in snow, smooth and glittery bright. Everything she could see was white and soft under powdery snow, the road ahead covered and no longer separate from the fields. She pulled the glove off her right hand and reached towards the passenger seat; felt for the bottle without turning to break her gaze. The bottle was ice cold. It had been in the car overnight and was as cold as it was outside. She held it in front of her and unscrewed the cap. But to drink she had to sit up. She leant her head back and continued staring along her cheekbones into the whiteness. The vodka felt icy and soft in her mouth. She held the bottle in her left hand and slipped her right hand back into the glove. She took another drink, and another, and another. She stared ahead and waited for the alcohol. She hadn't eaten. Nor drunk so much as a glass of water. The vodka was the first thing that day.

The vodka within; fresh snow she thought, and was forced to smile. When the warmth and the cool dampness came they were friendly, no explosions in her stomach or blows to her head. A leaden friendliness spread. Inside her. Her body filled up, starting in her stomach, and the vagueness rose to her head, reaching behind her forehead, behind her throat then settling over her.

The white world slipped away. She smiled. That was nice. She shut her eyes. The car around her vibrated, rocked her. A little. The glistening sun melted through her closed eyes and filled her head. It made her smile. She now sat on the bedrock of the snowy world. She could see herself as the buzzard had seen her, a little blue car, tiny and remote, in this long, broad valley, where she was the only person. She could see herself sitting in this car, the vodka inside her a small cold lake in the darkness of her body.

Why though? Her eyes slid open and she looked out. Why had that bird not flown? Why had that bird not flown away? That movement: that aversion. Was

the bird tired? Tiredness. It had looked like an effort. Effort. An exertion. The small movement one long exertion. And the disdain. The bird had disdained her. It had chosen not to look at her. Not to look. It had averted its gaze, in disdain. Was this buzzard no longer capable of flying? Was it so cold? So starved? Had it been unable to find water for so long? She had juddered past it in her small blue car and all it had done was turn away. It hadn't fled, hadn't got away, hadn't been able to flee. Not got away, not fled. Flying. Flying away, in flight. Above it all and free. That was sad. She reached for the bottle and drank. The vodka flowed ice-cold over her gullet. Perhaps the buzzard didn't think she was worth the effort. Perhaps the buzzard knew that anyone approaching in a little blue Kia was unlikely to be dangerous. Had she failed to frighten the bird sufficiently? Should she have beeped her horn to drive it away? She turned round and stared back through the side window, but fell straight back onto the seat and took another drink. She closed the bottle tightly and held it upside down. Nothing leaked out. She placed it in the glove compartment. She had to concentrate now.

The incident with the buzzard – that she was not worth its while – was about the meeting. That came straight from the ten a.m. team meeting, from the role play. She looked ahead. She felt separated; and at the same time part of the whole. She could observe herself from above and at the same time she was snow. You wish, she thought, and leant in front of the rear-view mirror. As beautiful as this soft, white, padded snow; no-one was that beautiful, no-one and herself. She looked the way she always looked.

She leant back. She should draw a line on the vodka bottle, make a mark. So that she knew the dose, the exact quantity which would give her this snowy-smooth doubled feeling. The precise quantity which made her so perfectly passive. She sighed. She wouldn't make that mark. It would be a smart move, but she didn't

make moves like that. She went into first gear. It wasn't so important. Moves like that pinned you down, and she would have to carry on drinking anyway, later. If she was to get everything right she would have to carry on drinking. Authentic – she was only authentic combined with alcohol, and no-one wanted her to be smart. Malleable – that was what she was required to be, and doubt had been expressed as to this. So she made herself malleable; with vodka it didn't hurt. With vodka it suddenly got interesting.

She drove. Made herself drive. In second gear. The car lurched slowly through the snow. She sat back, rocked and shaken. At the end of the valley came the side road, covered in snow. Then the road to the compound, which had been cleared. Traffic again, other cars, lorries, but everything at a distance. She drove with her arms stretched out like a racing driver. She held the steering wheel at arms' length and steered the car like one of the little electric dodgems at the Prater which you bumped into each other in – although they were surrounded by wide rubber tires. Then came the turning to Furth im Wald, snow on the road again. The gate. She fished her security card – on a band round her neck – from beneath her thick coat, and held it against the scanner. She watched as the gate slid open. She would have to snap out of this passive gaze and get in gear. In the car park she braked too fast. The motor cut out and she fell forwards against the steering wheel.

She was forced to grin. She remained flung over the wheel and reflected: was she grinning or smiling? It was probably a grin, this thing on her face, this distortion at the corners of her mouth – the way she sensed it, the way it felt. This was not a smile. Smiling was intentional; it was more intentional. When you smiled. Smiling distanced you from ugly things. Smiling: it made you, made you unassailable. Untouched. As long as someone smiled they didn't belong to them. Much like herself. She grinned. This was a grin. She really shouldn't

smile. If she walked into reception smiling... She'd probably be sent home. Cindy would send her home. Cindy would immediately realise that she would again be unable to contribute fully to the group and would send her home. Cindy did things like that. She would then have to go in search of Gregory and talk to him and he would organise a meeting. She would have to have a talk with Cindy about why Cindy could possibly have thought it would be better if she didn't participate. Gregory would then expect to see her in his office and want to see a report, and she would have to consider what Cindy would tell him, and how she could construct her story in order to corroborate with Cindy's report in a such a way that she came out looking cleverer, as the one who could contribute leadership skills. But in the end Gregory would say that she should have resolved her problem herself and not come running to him and bothering him. And so she grinned and was assailable and malleable and burst into tears at the right moments. Cindy was happy as long as all the women in the group burst into tears when she accused them of not pulling their weight. 'You think you're something special because you're prettier than me.' That was Cindy's weapon against her, Any, and there was no point returning fire. If she didn't start crying... it would be assumed that she would have to be sent for basic training first, because she was clearly still an unknown quantity, able to smile. It would be assumed that she had not been completely shaped by the training programme and was thus a destabilising element. Her motivation would be doubted and she would be assessed to see if she displayed symptoms of treachery. A person who smiled, a person like that, they might as well leave. A person like that didn't belong here. She would make her own decisions and it was best not to trust her. Treachery. It was not about doing the job; it was only ever about who might be capable of treachery, and when. Cindy lay in wait for the signs. Cindy was a guard dog with breasts. With enormous breasts. She, on the other hand, Amy, was new. She was the new girl. And so she grinned, so that no-one would distrust her and so that she could now get in out of the cold and wouldn't have to

leave straight away. And, she had better do it now. If she stayed any longer in her car, flung over the steering wheel... She could be seen from reception; two and two would be put together. She would have to grin even more. People put two and two together here. She sat up and took her handbag from the back seat. Two and two. She imagined Gregory doing the maths and then placing the equation in the middle of the conference table, how he tossed his hair back, the dark lock which fell over his forehead, with fine white hairs emphasising the shine. Look at this, is what that gesture of the head would say. Look at this. This is the equation and we must guard ourselves. Gregory would sweat a little – Gregory sweated around his temples – and everybody would be forced to consider whether this was provocation or an objective.

She took the key out of the ignition; everything was imprecise with these thick gloves on. She swung the door open and turned round on the seat to get out. She heaved herself onto her feet, supporting herself on the steering wheel and the door. Standing up was not easy; she had drunk too much vodka. She hadn't realised because she'd been sitting down. She would have to walk cautiously. If she slipped on the smooth snow and ice in the car park... Everyone would come over, and help her up, and smell the alcohol. What would happen then? She would probably be transferred to a special unit. There was undoubtedly a separate compound for such personal problems. She was not the only one; Heinz was drunk most of the time. But Heinz was deputy branch manager. In his case Anton would be the one required to take action, and he would never... not against Heinz. Not possibly. They were comrades, from back in the day.

She shut the car door. Standing up proved easier than she had expected. She was able to let go of the door straight away and walk off. She pressed her handbag against her chest, to keep her balance. But she slipped on the ice under the snow and a laugh escaped from her. She exaggerated the slip and sailed towards the

entrance. She could see Gregory standing behind the glass. He was watching her. She stumbled over a ridge of ice and was forced into a run to avoid falling over. Gregory rushed to open the door and she ran towards him. She thought he wanted her to run into his arms, but he stepped aside and she was unable to stop till she reached the middle of the foyer. She saw immediately why he had not caught her. Cindy was standing alongside Gertrud behind the reception desk, watching her. Gertrud was seated, on the telephone. Cindy had one hand on Gertrud's shoulder, a cup of coffee in the other. Gregory took a sip of his coffee. 'Our Amy. Isn't she a skatrix.' He gazed over the rim of his coffee cup and drained it.

They could get started; everyone was now there. He put his cup down on the reception desk and turned to Amy. Cindy took the cup and returned it to the coffee machine. She clinked the spoon against the cup to make a point, passing close to Amy and almost hitting her. Amy turned to look at Gregory but he didn't respond to her raised eyebrows. She felt her shoulders sink. It had already begun. There had probably been an early morning meeting already; HQ in London had certain expectations. Or wishes. Or directions. And Gregory and Heinz and Anton had expressed very different opinions, and Cindy had cosied up to Heinz. And because she couldn't attack Gregory directly she would have a go at her, Amy, Gregory's protégé. And now Cindy hated her because Gregory had put his cup down on Gertrud's desk rather than taking it back to the coffee machine himself, as everyone was supposed to. Heinz managed to take his cup back to the coffee machine; why was Mr Madrigal incapable of this, Cindy would scream at her. And if she replied that it was nothing to do with her what Gregory Madrigal did, Cindy would ignore it, because that was what people did who were in the wrong. Cindy would simply go on the offensive and say she should teach him during one of their sex sessions. She should practice it with him. Some men could only learn through conditioning. Some men only

responded to teaching by rote. Like rats. Cindy could dwell at length on this scenario. Cindy had a well-developed imagination. And Cindy had trained at the Stasi academy. Cindy hated Gregory. Gregory was the emissary from London and had his eye on all of them. Gregory had brought Amy here, and when he was in a good mood he reprimanded Cindy and explained to her that pretty women such as Amy also had a role to play in an organisation such as theirs. He did not wish to underestimate Cindy's achievements. Cindy had set up an impressive logistical structure, but this was also about individuals, and thus sometimes also about attractive individuals. 'Beauty is a weapon like any other device, and we are in need of all possible devices and therefore we need Amy.' When he said things like this she could feel the sharp knife-points with which Cindy longed to lacerate her face. At moments like this... She sensed this individual's intentions as if she were actually carrying them out. As if she was actually carving a grid into her cheeks. Or her breasts. But the others, they knew nothing of this. They seemed not to notice a thing. Gregory spoke at the most of 'understandable feelings'. Cindy had worked largely without supervision and had done a fantastic job. He had rarely encountered such an efficient set-up, everything always on standby ready to go. But Cindy was waiting for something. Amy could sense that too. She had no idea what it might be. It had a sexual flavour to it. Whatever Cindy was waiting for was sexual, and this was disconcerting. It was disconcerting for everyone. That much was clear in the team meetings, when the talk was of emergencies, or of an operation. Everyone then looked particularly serious so that no-one noticed their agitation. But the men shifted around on their seats and Cindy looked at their hands and her mouth tightened into a feline smirk.

It was hot in the foyer. Amy unbuttoned her coat and pulled the high collar away from her neck. Cindy returned from the coffee machine and whispered at her in German: why didn't she just leave; they didn't need her sort. 'I don't speak

German,' Amy said to Cindy's back. Cindy shrugged her shoulders. Cindy knew perfectly well that she spoke German. Amy knew she should have said so from the start. But she had thought... at the beginning she had thought that this was all just a laugh, that it would be a laugh. She had agreed to the whole thing so that her aunt Marina in London would stop saying she never did anything people suggested, that she needed a career and that this was a chance for her. The call came one morning, and by the evening Gregory had already met her in Vienna. Two days later she set off in the Kia. Gregory had enticed her with the prospect of a career without much work entailed and given her the hotel address. And the whole thing had come about as a result of a charity cocktail event in the Savoy in London for shareholders of a particular investment fund; Aunt Marina had got into conversation with Gregory. And now she had to pretend she didn't speak German because she hadn't ticked it on the form, because she had filled out the form any old how, ticking the boxes diagonally from top left to bottom right without reading a thing. Now she was a person who knew nothing about herself. She was continually being told that she'd said something different on the form, Heinz and Anton provocative and inquisitive, Cindy disdainful and suspicious, Gregory raising his eyebrows. Boris and Kunz didn't speak to her at all. Gertrud looked straight through her, never even saying hello. She didn't know anyone else's names, but they were all staff of some kind; she wasn't sure what they did. There were always different people at the team meetings. Mental training units, they were called, and she was to accompany them for a whole month at first. Then they would be able to judge if she should be accepted for the training programme, Anton had said. Gregory had picked her up at the hotel and brought her along as a surprise, and since then she had been coming every day and as soon as she arrived she was unsure why she was there and wished she wasn't. This had been going on for seven weeks.

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