

Thomas Brussig
Beste Absichten
Best Intentions

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It's 1989, the final months of the GDR, and ever more people are fleeing via Hungary. The police have stopped checking anyone properly and you don't need a permit to play a gig any more. Change is afoot and the rot has set in. They are the last East German band, their breakthrough just a matter of time. But then the wall falls and ruins everything. Suddenly music isn't important; it's all about money. With a light touch and a lot of humour, Thomas Brussig tells the story of a band and their dream, and what it's like when one thing ends and another begins.

"In another life I would translate Thomas Brussig's novels into English. Just to show dubious Americans how incredibly funny German literature can be." Jonathan Franzen

Thomas Brussig, born 1964 in Berlin, made his name in 1995 with the novel *Helden wie wir*. It was followed by *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Wie es leuchtet* (2004). His work has been translated into 30 languages. He is the only living German writer to have reached audiences of millions through 3 different media: books, film and theatre. His most recent novel was *Das gibt's in keinem Russenfilm* (2015).

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Translated by Steph Morris

MUSIC

They wanted to call me up again, I expect. The pretext they'd used to haul me into the District HQ at Rosenthalerplatz sounded harmless enough, 'updating your details,' but then the comments started, the judgemental looks. I had already 'served', but they could conscript me again if the mood took them. They leafed through my files, and a listless captain asked if I was born on 5 March 1966. He probably wanted to test my military reflexes and see if I would still answer, '*Jawohl*, Comrade Captain'. Instead I replied, 'If that's what it says, I should think so,' even though that would give them every reason to suck me back in, simply to 'teach me manners' again. The captain asked me to confirm various other details from my files. They may just have been toying with me, because any twenty-two-year-old who has already 'served' is about as keen to be called up twice as to get crabs.

Afterwards I went over their every gesture in my mind, trying to read the hints and signs I could remember, but it made me feel all the more powerless. I still had no idea what plans if any they had for me.

From the HQ at Rosenthalerplatz I walked down Pieck and Borsig. Back then, if you knew your way around, you could take shortcuts through the tenement courtyards. The gates to the yards and the doors to the blocks were always open, with gaping, woodworm-infested holes where the locks should have been, and if you walked through a gate into one yard and from there to the next, you found there were no walls or fences between each building's back garden, or if there were, there were always slats missing or a spot where the chain-link had been trampled flat. Some of the basement doors were open too, meaning if the door at street level was locked, the yards might still be connected via underground corridors. I'd been marking these rat runs with a 5H pencil on a street map since I was thirteen, and had developed a personal categorisation system only I understood, identifying which house numbers had a way through, and whether this was at ground level or below. My first recces were around Hackescher Markt, and over the years I had broadened my radius. The map reflected this, and I

had it on me at all times. The pencil marks were densest around Hackescher Markt, disentangling themselves as they radiated from this centre, thinning out or clustering around my more far-flung haunts. At thirteen I wasn't familiar with the term 'urban explorer', but it described exactly what I wanted to be. I took the routes I'd discovered whenever I had the chance, or tried out new ones. When I left the District HQ I thought I'd see if the tracks on my map were still up to date and took the back route: from one street through to a courtyard, out into the parallel street and from there through another building then out into the next parallel street, and so on.

I'd got as far as Tieck when I heard music from a basement. It was live. A band was practicing, and I couldn't tell if the lyrics were English or German, although the singer kept repeating the same line over and over. It was a fast, furious song; the drums were thundering and the guitarist wasn't holding back either.

On Chauseestrasse a number 46 tram trundled by. The sky was grey, as it had been for days. A crow was sitting on a wall, there was slush everywhere, and the street was so uneven it was as if the parked cars had flat tires on one side. The words, 'without music it's all just unbearable,' had been circling round my mind throughout the last few years. To clear my head of the District Military HQ, I went into the basement.

When I abandon myself to loud music, in seconds I enter another state. Above all, that sense of general pointlessness vanishes. There were five of them in the band. They had seen me, but took no notice. They were all my age except for the guy on bass, who was around ten years older. The guitarist was a lithe, wiry fellow with brown eyes and a face stolen from a beauty contest – smooth and soft. Nefertiti reborn as a man. The keyboard player was also way too good looking, and not the kind of boy you'd expect to find in an underground band. He was son-in-law material, with a bright, open face, short blonde hair and delicate, spidery fingers. The bass player's face, on the other hand, was covered in a thicket of beard. His lips and nostrils could hardly be seen. His eyelashes and eyebrows were overgrown too. Not only this, he played with his eyes closed, twisting and bending and jerking his upper body according to some inscrutable system. The drummer sat in a black polo shirt and black jeans on his stool, with a black mop-top and narrow eyes which made him look like the sly Urfin from Alexander Volkov's children's book. A film of sweat covered his skin. But in the centre stood a girl so pretty I should really describe her, but I'm not even going to try. If she were a Red Indian, her name could have been Little Chestnut, and I didn't understand how the band weren't constantly playing wrong notes with her standing there. She sang on most of the numbers; it just so happened she hadn't been singing as

I came in. An acoustic guitar hung from her neck, as big as a cupboard drawer. The naked bulb dangling from the ceiling cast harsh shadows. The walls were whitewashed, which made the shadows even sharper, and there were a few electric bar heaters standing around. They weren't managing to warm the room up. Apart from the drummer, the entire band were wearing roll-neck jumpers.

Now I understood what the guitarist was singing: *'Unterm Radar, unterm Radar, wir fliegen, fliegen unterm Radar.'* So it was German. He whacked the strings as he sang, and sometimes he grabbed the microphone as if he had to fight for it. Whenever he sang, a little spit flew. Seen at close quarters, rock music is hard work. You think the energy comes from the speakers and amplifiers. But that's not true. The energy comes from the people and their rage.

After that tune they launched straight into the next. Heavy guitars played a stubborn, monotonous rhythm, constructing the dark machinery of a song, aided by swirling keyboards. Then they were cut, just bass and drums still playing as the singer came in. She had a soft, incredibly clear voice which made a stunning contrast to the roughness of the track so far. To stop myself staring at her the entire time, I concentrated on the keyboard player's hands. Where did such long fingers come from? Were they a transplant from some figure in an expressionist film?

The keyboard player was clearly in charge, as it was him who interrupted the songs if something wasn't working. Then they tweaked it till it was better or at least different. He spoke to each band member by name, so I soon found out the drummer was called Micha, the guitarist André and the bass player Rainer. He never addressed the singer by name though, and his own name never came up either.

In the second or third song the keyboard player stopped playing halfway through and said, 'We need some other kind of tone here. Something like a...'

'Saxophone?' The guitarist suggested.

'Nah.'

'Harmonica?' the guitarist asked.

'Harmonica would work,' the keyboard player said. 'But none of us play it – what about you?'

He was asking me, and I thought, wow, if I say yes now I'll be in a band. I'll be making music, which was by far the most exciting thing you could do in that country. But sadly I couldn't play the harmonica or any other instrument.

The guitarist said, 'I can make it sound more like a harmonica.' They repeated the passage, and the music resounded

around me again, as weighty as religion or the birth of a galaxy. Everything else was pale and profane in contrast.

I thought of the District HQ, the neon strip lights and their ribbed covers, the cheap doors and handles, the pasty faces of the officers, and their uniforms, which gave me pimples at the mere thought of wearing them. The District HQ was grim on every level, a temple of idiocy. But in this basement I had found something I never wanted to give up, never lose hold of. I'd heard loads of music of course, on records, on tapes, live, louder than in this cellar, but even so, this was new. Now they were playing another song which began with guitar riffs, soon joined by drums, then bass, then keyboard, and each of these instruments had made the song weightier and darker, and I felt I was in a witches' kitchen or Frankenstein's lab, and when the singer's voice came in, I knew I was experiencing something I had never experienced before. What I wanted from life, was something to do with freedom, where no-one has power over you, and I knew I had to be exposed to this music to get closer to that.

When the musicians stopped playing however, and started talking, it was as if everything amazing vanished in a puff of smoke. They were only something special when they were playing. And I found it quite incredible over the following weeks and months how these people, who created something so beautiful together, were nothing special at all when you took away the music.

Once their band practice was over, the musicians all lit up, and when they'd finished their fags they reached for their jackets, coats, scarves and hats, while the drummer rolled out a foam mattress, getting ready to spend the night in the basement. I was staring open mouthed, and he said, 'You don't know of a secure rehearsal room, do you? Anyone could break in here in seconds.' He glanced around him: drum kit, keyboard, guitars, amp, cables, speakers... 'That'd be too bad.'

The basement door was a few planks knocked together, more gaps than wood, a symbolic door. A blanket blocked the view in.

'I'll give it some thought,' I said. But I knew I couldn't help. The other band members left, one after the other, leaving us two behind. Above the light switch was a sign: 'When the music's over, turn out the lights!'

Feeling awkward, I turned to a corner of the blanket, hanging off, and reattached it to its nail. Micha said, 'You're one of those organised people, aren't you?' And then he asked me straight out, 'Can you handle money? You look like you can.'

I had no idea what being able to handle money meant, nor what someone would look like who could handle money. 'How do you mean?' I asked.

'We still haven't found our Brian Epstein.'

Two hours ago I'd been asked if I played harmonica, now it was whether I wanted to be the manager. All roads seemed to be leading me towards the music scene.

'Have you got a name, then?' I asked.

'Have we got a name.' He paused for effect, then said, as casually as possible, 'The Plague,' and left me to think about what it would be like managing a band with the name, 'The Plague'. I could already hear myself calling arts centres: 'Would you like to have The Plague?' Or, 'I've got something infectious for you. I don't believe The Plague has reached Zwickau yet. Have we got a deal?' I pictured their first album, *Outbreak!* The Plague was a really cool band name.

I was working as a porter in the Metropol Hotel and next day, when I saw a metal basement door being replaced, I simply carried the old door away with me after work. 'Simply' in the sense of not asking anyone; carrying the door was not simple. After a hundred metres I realised I had bitten off more than I could chew, leant the door against a wall and hoped it would be there in half an hour. I rushed to the rehearsal room. It was ten to five. Micha and the keyboard player were there, smoking. Micha greeted me with a 'Wotcha, Brian.' When I described the 'steel reinforced door' the keyboard player said he could fetch it with his Barkas van, and the two of us set off.

He was called Sebastian and he had use of the Barkas because he was a courier for the council. 'You're going to be our manager, right?' he said, as he started the van up. 'I like it.'

The door was still there. Sebastian reversed up to the wall, but as we tried to lift the door into the Barkas, blood started dripping from his nose. Sebastian threw his head back and said, 'Shit, shit, shit.' Kept saying, 'shit, shit, shit.'

His nosebleed stopped, but I had to heave the door into the van on my own. 'You wanted to lug that thing all the way to the rehearsal room?' Sebastian asked as we drove off. 'Are you Popeye? Or Obelix?'

The door grated at every turn, and when we drove over cobbles it made such a racket I thought the floor would collapse. I was always around when things broke, often implicated. Only that morning I had broken a water jug by filling it with hot tea, and at work I tried to sign something, but as soon as I put pen to paper I found myself holding the pieces of a ballpoint. Last week I tried to open my letterbox but it was stuck. I reached through the slot to adjust the door but instead tore the whole row of boxes off the wall,

as the plank of wood they were attached to was only loosely screwed to the masonry. There was a horrendous crash as the metal hit the floor. I was expecting a similar sound on this journey as the steel door fell through the floor of the van and hit the street. But the van held out till we got to the rehearsal room. Sebastian said, 'Rainer will fit it. He works as a caretaker.'

'The caretakers I know only tell me what they can't do,' I said. 'And they certainly can't fit doors.' The letterboxes had sat on the hallway floor of my building ever since the day I had ripped them from the wall. I once saw the postman delivering our letters. He looked as if he were feeding a dachshund.

'Rainer's no different,' Sebastian said. 'He only answers the phone if you let it ring twice, put the phone down, then call again.'

Why the complicated procedure, I wondered, and Sebastian seemed to be reading my thoughts. 'It's to sift out people calling about the usual caretaker stuff, blocked bogs and all that.'

The rest of the band had arrived now. Micha came over to the van, and we carried the door downstairs, directed by Sebastian. I felt like I was carrying out some weird initiation rite which would make me a member of the band. 'Look what Brian's found us,' Micha said. 'A real security door.'

After I'd been called Brian a few times and failed to protest, the name stuck, and no-one asked my real name. And if they were going to call me Brian Epstein then I might as well be their manager. That must be what they wanted. Why else would they call me Brian?