

Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker: *Zeichungen*

Sketches

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The villa was no more than twenty or thirty paces at most from the shore line. Outside the garden fence running around the plot, the grass was wild and – at least in the warm half of the year – never still, with insects galore bustling visibly and audibly in its midst; inside the fence, though, it was neatly mown; not one tuft grew higher than the rest. Quiet with the occasional gurgle, the water lapped against the shore. The house was a very simple building with larch cladding and a glazed two-storey veranda built on, which looked like a conservatory. Everything about the house was old, more likely from the century before last than the previous one. The window frames and bars and the door and its frame were painted dark green.

The first time I saw it properly I was walking towards it; a hand-made barrier had halted me at the start of the drive and I'd had to abandon the car. I'd picked up my leather brief case from the back seat, cast a last glance in the rear-view mirror, stroked my hair back, dabbed a tiny drop of cologne on my wrist, rubbed it against the other wrist and got out of the car. I walked towards the house and when I looked over my shoulder at one point, wondering if I'd locked up, the glistening red car seemed almost unreal in these surroundings, where everything was pale: the lake on the left, visible through the sparse wooded area; the pale asphalt giving way to almost dazzling gravel; the grass flickering silvery in the wind on either side of the gravel drive; and the absolutely uniform white sky. I went on walking.

The garden gate wasn't locked; I pushed it open and entered the premises, taking a slight detour around the deep red dogwood shrub growing in from one side. A path made of old railway sleepers ran narrow and seemingly narrowing towards the house. It wasn't that I'd never seen it; every winter we skated across the frozen lake as often as possible, and there was no other house directly on the water's edge; but still, I'd apparently never looked at it properly. Not the slightest sound came out of the building and I waited, initially listening, before I pulled the rusty wire cable dangling next to the front door. Shrill, bloodcurdling and disjointed chimes sounded. Nothing moved. After a while I pulled at the stiff cable again, and then another time. The chimes no longer curdled my blood. Still nothing happened. Looking through the windows of the extension, I saw several pairs of footwear lined up; the ends of the laces were inserted into the tops of the shoes. On the wall hung an anorak, a traditional leather jacket and a yellow raincoat – which was so stiff that it gave the impression that someone with no head, neck, hands or lower body were standing inside it.

Before I drove away again I wanted to take a walk around the house, more for form's sake than in the hope of finding anyone – and I was startled to find a man sitting on the patio. He was wearing a green jacket, a hat in the same shade on the back of his head, and his legs were wrapped in a grey blanket edged with red and white ribbon. I hadn't noticed him straight away, only seeing him when I was just in front of him. Other than the minimal motions required to smoke a cigarette, he didn't move. It was a strange and

remarkable scene: a man of thirty at the most, dressed and sitting in such a way that one might think he were three times that age. And he seemed to be hard of hearing as well. I stood and looked at him, not noticing time passing. Suddenly – but not sounding abrupt; in fact his speaking seemed to be part of the silence – he said, still gazing straight ahead: ‘I don’t need anything from you.’ It sounded like breathing, a continuation of his breathing.

I didn’t want to sell him anything, I said after a moment of surprise at his mild voice, appropriate to neither his age nor his get-up.

‘Then what are you doing here?’ he asked. He didn’t know me, he added. He said all that without looking at me at all or raising his voice even a trace. I had to turn my head slightly and lean forward a little to catch every word.

I wanted to make him an offer, with no obligations. All he had to do was listen, I said.

Now he narrowed his eyes; but not, as I’d thought for a second, because of what I’d said, but because of something that had crossed his field of vision. Then I saw it too – a male mallard was catching up on a female. The two ducks glided soundlessly through the water away from the bank, as if pulled on an invisible string. The green of the male’s head gleamed all the way to us. Once the male had caught up with the female, nothing happened; at a distance of perhaps two or two and a half hand spans, they headed somewhere at the same speed alongside each other and disappeared, as they’d previously emerged, into the reflections of the mountains enclosing the lake. And the wedges in the water too, drawn after them, united to form a single trace standing out against its surroundings as a white lustre. Mist descended from the mountains, as though scraps of cloud loosened from the sky had fallen.

‘You’ve taken over from Peter,’ he stated, and I had no choice but to nod. Then he sighed. ‘You’re wasting your time. I don’t need anything from you.’

I decided to take it slowly and said he could have a think about whether he really didn’t need advice, and then I asked whether I could come back, perhaps in a week’s time.

‘If you’re bored,’ he said, and tapped a new cigarette out of its orange pack. His voice held a barely audible laugh. His cigarette end was now on the ground next to his chair; heavy, deep yellow smoke rose from it. He had simply dropped it, I noticed. He struck a match and lit the new cigarette. For a few breaths, I stood there, still; then I felt a jerk – it was the realization that I’d been here essentially without warrant for too long – and said goodbye. The man merely raised his hand slightly and lowered it again. It seemed to be absolutely immaterial to him whether I stayed or left, was there or not there.

Quietly, I closed the garden gate behind me and strode back to my car. The gravel crunched beneath my feet. I opened the car’s rear door, put my case on the back seat, slammed the door and got in at the front. It was half past four, the sky was beginning to change from pink to violet, and all that remained for me to do that day was to drive home and make preparations for the next day. I started the car, reversed to the asphalt road, turned, switched to first gear and set off. As I did so I realized I had neither introduced

myself nor left my card. He might not even have noticed. And yet he had known I had taken over from Peter – on the one hand; and on the other hand he'd claimed not to know me. I drove home, lost in thought.

I'd only had this new job since the end of the summer, a month or so previously. After all the badly paid cash-in-hand jobs since my slipped disc, in other words since the end of my work as a carpenter, it was the first thing that looked promising to me – and to my wife along with me. Instead of looking for a successor here in the local area after my old friend Peter Gruber had hanged himself the past March, they had got someone from the Linz office to take care of customer service. The result was inevitably that even more clients withdrew their money than had already done so. My brother and our father had withdrawn their money right away and I'd have done the same if I'd had any. One day, I heard they were looking for a local man after all to take over Peter's accounts. Andrea, my wife, told me about it – and it was she who decided even before I did. 'You're applying!' she said. 'Give them a ring first thing in the morning!' I was annoyed that she couldn't wait, that she said it while her friend Johanna was visiting; and that it didn't even develop into a conversation between us. She said it and then she turned back to Johanna and the two of them went on talking about Christmas pastries. According to the two of them, it was impossible to buy proper Christmas treats nowadays; everything, even down to the cookies, was too big now, when it really ought to be small and delicate. All of a sudden they changed the subject to the new motorway access road a few villages away, which was a thorn in their sides – as it was to me and many others. Yes, it bothered me, that way of hers. Even if she hadn't meant it as a command, it sounded like one. I sat down in the living room and switched on the TV. Now I couldn't hear the voices from the kitchen any more. I saw that Andrea was right about it and I'd have decided the same way myself, and I pushed aside my annoyance. The next day, I really did call and was promptly invited to an interview. It was almost all too fast for me. I had just enough time to put my documents together and sweat out the motivation letter they requested and type it up on Andrea's electronic typewriter, before the appointment day came and I had to go to Linz.

Once I got there I had a strange feeling, one I didn't immediately recognize. It was the despised sensation of being on trial – the feeling why I had attended the master carpentry course but never turned up for the final exam. Every word I said, so it seemed as I stood in the bare, anonymous office, underlined my failure, which seemed sealed ever since the first stare from the lady in black who looked me up and down when I entered the room. I had no idea about finance, after all. On the way home I was infinitely and indeterminately happy, and even at home I was glad. Andrea opened the front door and beamed at me and asked:

'How was it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I went along.'

'Did you get the job?'

'No,' I said, and she dropped my hands, turned around, went into the kitchen and

returned to the washing up. I followed her and wiped my hands on my trousers.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, leaning exhausted against the dresser next to the sink, but she must not have heard me through the splashing and running water. ‘They’re going to call,’ I said and I knew it sounded like a poor apology, although it was genuine.

I took a beer out of the fridge and sat down out front of the house. The neighbour’s head bobbed up above the thuja hedge, or actually only his blue sunhat; he wandered a few yards, swaying like a boat at a slow walking pace, this way and that. Later, following a few attempts to start, a lawnmower rattled into action, purred and stopped again. When I stopped thinking with an emphatic shake of my head, I heard the monosyllabic clang of spanners. It was late in the evening and although the summer was almost over the heat was still sweat-inducing; the beer was ice cold and made me feel light, lighter with every mouthful.

A few days later the telephone rang and I picked up absent-mindedly but acquiescently. Almost all the calls recently had been from people asking, some of them very impatiently, what had happened to the trial newspaper subscription I’d promised them in return for taking part in a long questionnaire in the name of a certain company. It had been about frozen food products. What was I to say? I hadn’t even got the agreed fee myself. When I tried to contact someone and confront them, I was put off and consoled until I gave up. I always said the same thing – anything. And I hoped people were as forgetful or at least, indeed, as acquiescent as I was.

Against all expectations it was the woman in black on the line (I saw her clearly in my mind’s eye, complete with her name plate on the desk, but I couldn’t remember her double-barrelled name). She must have introduced herself – but I identified her by her voice. She told me I’d convinced her. I could and should start immediately. I listened, speechless. Was I pleased? During that very phone call someone was allocated to train me, accompany me to begin with.

‘Andrea,’ I called into the living room once I’d hung up.

Up until three years ago, we’d led a very pleasant life all in all. The worries we’d had up to that point were rarely money worries, and if they were then they’d never been major. For a long time we’d lived off the money we’d saved, not bearing it in mind, not even really thinking about it – including the compensation I’d been paid. But from the day when I went into the red for the first time since I’d had a bank account, almost unnoticed, it was as though we were leading a new life, not just one but several steps below the one we’d been accustomed to previously. At times it felt like I was jinxed, because nothing had changed on the outside; I simply couldn’t get out of the red, as though something had tipped over for good at the moment I entered the overdraft. There was barely ever enough money to live a carefree life for longer than two or three weeks. Every outlay had to be carefully considered. I lost jobs more and more often and had to look for new ones.

Then when all the world began talking about the ‘crisis’, the already sparse job offers grew even rarer. For a while there were no ads at all; the newspaper got thinner. The

people at the bank had long since put on a new face for me. Perhaps all that wouldn't have bothered me, or not as quickly, if it hadn't been for Andrea, who held it against me every day – and, it seemed to me, every day a little more relentlessly. She hated the worrying, which appeared to have very different dimensions for her than for me, and she hated the thinking – she hated, she exclaimed once with disarming honesty, our social relegation. She was beside herself, and perhaps just as surprised by that honesty as I was, because after her exclamation she fell suddenly silent – her mouth still open. Her beautiful big mouth stayed open until she got hold of herself, closed it again, turned away and left the living room. Sometimes, when I didn't have any work, I answered that she should look for a job of her own, she should go out and earn money if she thought it was that easy. Then she'd snort and laugh out loud, and I'd shrug in perplexity.

'Andrea,' I called again.

'Yes,' I heard her eternally bored reply.

We'd had a bitter row only the night before – it was the same as usual. It had also been about children. She rejected children – even the very thought of them – with the same dismissive laugh as the idea of earning her own money, as she had in the past as a sales girl here and there. Her tired face appeared in the doorway.

'Open a bottle of wine,' I said, 'I've got a job.'

I didn't look at her but I saw her face brightening out of the corner of my eye.

Then we sat on the patio, snuggled close and drinking white wine, and it seemed like the first time all over again. I felt the sweet warmth of her hair and heard her calm breathing that asked for nothing any more. She was all at once convinced that everything would be different, and she said so over and over until I shared her conviction. We sat in silence and it was wonderful. The evening gave way to night and we were still sitting there, and had the wine not run out at some point I'd have stayed there forever and I wouldn't have noticed.

Early the next morning, I returned to Linz as agreed and signed a contract. The wages were just over three thousand euro a month. I'd never earned that much. I received a lot of documentation, which I was to familiarize myself with immediately, plus a long list of names over several pages, the regular clients in alphabetical order. Later, a very young-looking man joined us who was to be my trainer, David Weider, but he wanted to be called Herr Weider, which I instantly found ridiculous. I arranged with him that he'd come to my house the next day; we'd visit the first clients from there.

That was the beginning of a very busy and strenuous time. Weider had only come along with me once and then never shown his face again, although it had been agreed differently. I drove from one house to the next and reeled off my portfolio, which I'd taken verbatim from Weider – if they let me. It was very easy, and few people showed me their rage openly. Perhaps, I thought after a while, that had to do with Peter. In essence it had been them, as a masse, as a collective, who had driven him to suicide, by directly and indirectly accusing him of having speculated away their money. Somebody

had even stabbed his car tyres and someone else, presumably, had thrown rocks through several windows in his house; I had passed it not long before and the glass still hadn't been replaced.

When I took up my job, the world was just recovering from the so-called economic crisis, and the way of the world seemed to pick up exactly where it had let off a year previously. Nothing had changed; only some things had been regulated, it was claimed. There were financial advisors on trial here and there, but nothing serious. On one occasion, I met one of my new employer's managing directors and I asked him about a particular court case going through the media. I requested his opinion on the outcome of the trial. All he did was laugh, put his hand on my shoulder and say, 'My dear colleague! What could possibly come out of it? They can't put us all behind bars! Or what do you think?' Then he laughed again, and the people around us joined in, one even clapping, and I laughed as well.

The days: busy and strenuous. And when I got home in the evenings I'd work through the papers until late at night, learning and revising.

Although the first month passed very quickly, it seemed as though it had lasted much longer than thirty days; so much had happened, I'd seen, heard and learned so many new things. I was starting to enjoy the whole thing. It was work.

Yet something was different since I'd been to see Herbert Hauser – the man in the house by the lake. As though I'd lost all the momentum I'd gathered during the first month. I didn't know why that was; nothing had happened. There was no reason. But that was the way it was; from then on, I hardly enjoyed the work at all. I kept seeing myself as if through someone else's eyes, and I didn't like what I saw – I had lost my face; I could no longer make out and difference between me and Weider.

Time began to pass slowly. One seemingly never-ending day followed another; and since the beginning of the cold season, I'd had the counter-intuitive feeling the days were now lasting longer. And yet it was a wonderful time, still, again; Andrea was like a new person, as if she'd turned back into the cheerful, untroubled woman I'd met eight years before and married five years ago. Andrea seemed so happy that I forgot not to be.

Winter passed and I thought perhaps it was down to the bleak season with its lack of light that people didn't want to do business with me, thought winter was possibly simply not the right time for that kind of thing. But when it went on the same way in spring, when the colour came back, as it had begun, I began to worry to myself. Once a month, a list of the most successful advisors was hung up at the regional headquarters in Linz; and while my name hadn't been on the list to begin with, I now found it regularly at the very bottom of the chart.

Andrea had begun to talk about a baby, something she'd done when we'd first been together but then suddenly refused; and now she suddenly talked about a holiday in the summer, talked about Greece, a place she'd been at sixteen and had dreamed of since. She'd talk of one of them, then of the other. And all at once the two subjects came

together and she made a joyful announcement that she wanted us to go to Greece in the summer and make a baby together there. It would be ten years ago in summer since she'd been there. She had a very precise vision of it all, and I often listened to her as she described it. Although I occasionally intended to, I didn't tell her about the lists, or about the comments from the woman in black; I didn't tell her anything. In the evenings I'd pretend, if necessary, that everything was going very well, while by day I moved on from one sometimes pitying, sometimes puzzled and sometimes angry shake of the head to the next.

One evening at the end of May I was sitting in the village pub, which was unusually empty apart from two pensioners. As I soon worked out, they were talking about Herbert Hauser. The main subject was that he must be incredibly rich. He came from here, one explained to the other, but the other contradicted him and the one who'd just been speaking fell silent. Then the other man said Hauser had come into an inheritance, the house and a big pile of money. They talked. I drank beer, built a house out of beer mats and only half-listened.

Later that evening I asked Andrea whether she knew Hauser. She said she vaguely remembered him. Hadn't he been to school with one of her sisters? He lived in the house by the lake now, I said. And she replied, 'I'd like a villa like that,' and I switched on the TV, annoyed by her response.

The next morning, as I was leaving the house with my jacket slung over my shoulder, Weider drove up.

We had to talk, he said after a brief hello, and I shrugged my shoulders and nodded, and the two of us went back into the house. Catching sight of Weider, Andrea dropped the newspaper, leapt up from the breakfast table and disappeared into the bathroom; she was still in her nightdress. I sighed and hung my jacket over the back of a chair. Weider sat down; only after that did I make a vaguely inviting gesture and take a seat – as though gesturing to myself. He put his briefcase on the table, opened it, removed some papers, closed the case and pushed it aside. He cleared his throat several times. Not once did he look me in the eye. As if I hadn't seen the lists several times in Linz, Weider laid them out painstakingly slowly on the kitchen table, one next to another. We were sitting opposite each other and he put the lists down facing me so that I could read them. As if I'd never seen them, and as if I didn't know or hadn't understood what they meant, he explained them in such precise detail that it seemed almost spiteful. The customers were running away in droves. Here were the figures. Andrea, now in faded blue jeans and a blouse but still barefoot, had taken a seat at the other end of the table, and I couldn't find the heart to ask her to leave us alone. I sensed her watching me the whole time, only me. It felt grotesque to be disciplined, here in my own house, by a man of twenty. He talked and talked, explained all sorts of things about these figures – which were inconceivable to both of us, but in different ways – and I was long since only hearing what he said from far away, and I waited. Like at the dentist's surgery, I let my thoughts wander to some faraway place to escape the here and now. I waited until he'd finished talking. Then we stood up almost simultaneously. He went to the door and I accompanied him. I watched him go and said, for lack of anything better, 'See you next time.'

He froze to the spot, turned around and looked at me in amazement. He came a few steps closer, very measured. Slowly, he raised his eyes, which he had lowered again as he approached me, from the tips of his shoes and looked at me.

‘Our cooperation,’ he said in a tone I’d not heard before, running his bluish tongue along his lips, ‘is over.’

It sounded as if he were talking to an imbecile. Had he already said it and I hadn’t heard? It made no difference. At that, he turned around. As he got into his car I puffed out my cheeks, raised my eyebrows, let the air out of my mouth and murmured, ‘Aha. Aha. Over. Aha.’ I nodded and talked like an idiot – for a few seconds I was the imbecile as which he’d just treated me. What I’d have liked to do was grab him by the ears and drag him out of the car and kick him so hard he’d have landed back home, in Linz or Wels or Steyr or wherever he came from.

Andrea didn’t speak to me for a week; I thought it was best to leave her to herself. When the week was up she packed her bags.

‘What’s this all about?’ I asked her.

She didn’t answer, going on packing; she hadn’t even raised her head. Her movements seemed as stolid as those of an assembly-line worker. It was early afternoon. I watched her for a few minutes, then went downstairs, took my thin jacket from the hall, slung it over my shoulder and left the house. After barely a hundred metres, I stopped and turned around; I felt the need to change my trainers for the heavier mountain boots. As I tied the laces I heard a long zip being closed upstairs, in several attempts because it jammed in the middle. A little later I left the village on the road to the lake. At first I simply walked, glad of the movement and the mountain boots, in which I felt as every time that someone else was walking on my behalf, and I thought of nothing; but the longer I walked, the more slow thoughts came to me, one after another.

Once at the lake, I passed through the wooded strip and squatted down by the shore. I was protected by the trees and a tall sage bush and couldn’t feel the light wind that had risen, as I saw from the water surface, which was driven from southwest to northeast and looked at times, if one ignored the reflections, not much different to the surface of a river. The waves lapped against the shore, at times rhythmic, then unrhythmic, and it sounded as though someone were playing a xylophone made of water. I threw a few stones; they dropped heavily into the lake. The water formed a narrow, brownish hem along the shore; a little further out, it took on a yellowish tone, further again it grew deep green before finally stretching deep blue to the opposite bank. A thin thread of smoke rose into the sky above the house. Is he sitting on his terrace again, I wondered. I couldn’t see anything. The rock face behind the shore was slowly dyed a light shade of red, and gradually the lake too began to take on this pink tinge. The sun had set, and a waxing moon the colour of a cabbage white butterfly had hoisted itself in the eastern, paling sky; it looked like it was painted on. I had sat in this spot so many times over the past months.

It was late by the time I got home. On the way I’d gone to a pub and drunk a few beers

and lost track of time. Or had I lost track of it beforehand, squatting by the lake? Every glass of beer was wet on the outside, again. Although I watched the waitress pouring them every time I couldn't work out how it happened; perhaps she had wet hands and I hadn't noticed. I stood for a moment outside my house. Only the light from the streetlamps glistened in the windows, and a light trembled in the bedroom's glass; one of the streetlamps had had a loose contact for months, and although I'd reported it to the council no one had come to repair it. The garage was open and empty.

I'd seen it straight away but I didn't read the note on the table, weighed down by the prayer dice usually kept on the sideboard because we no longer used it. I didn't read it, simply screwed it up and threw it in the cold stove. At that moment I knew everything there was to know – knew she was gone and wouldn't come back, and I didn't care; in fact I was glad. I was angry. The light on the answering machine flashed. I listened to it. My brother had left a message I could hardly understand; he had called from a bar in the next village. After pacing the house for a long time, I took my bike out of the garage and cycled to the next village.