

Clemens Meyer

Als wir träumten

When we were dreaming

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After the child's play come the battles: Rico, Mark, Paul and Daniel grow up in post-1989 Leipzig, between joyriding, alcohol and fear, between rage and destruction. Every night they take to the streets, partying, stealing, driving their lives into brick walls. They are free and at the mercy of life itself. In a direct, angry, sensitive and authentic voice, this novel tells the story of the dream that a better life is waiting somewhere.

'A moving book. A monument to youth. A piece of magic.'

Sten Nadolny

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

Child's Play

I know this nursery rhyme. I hum it to myself when everything starts going crazy in my head. I think we used to sing it when we jumped around on chalked squares, but maybe I thought it up myself or just dreamed it. Sometimes I move my lips and say it silently, sometimes I just start humming and don't even notice, because the memories in my head are dancing. No, not just any old memories, the ones of the time after everything changed, the years we – made contact?

Contact with the colourful cars and Holsten Pilsener and Jägermeister. We were about fifteen back then, and Holsten Pilsener was too bitter for us, so we were usually patriotic drinkers. Leipziger Premium Pils. It was cheaper too, because we sourced it straight from the brewery yard. Mostly at night. The Leipziger Premium Pils Brewery was the centre of our neighbourhood and our lives. The origin of drunken nights in the local graveyard, endless orgies of destruction and dances on car roofs during the strong beer season.

The original Leipziger Brewery beer was a kind of pale genie in a bottle for us, which grabbed us softly by the hair and lifted us over walls, transformed cars into flying machines, and lent us carpets to fly away and spit on the pigs' heads.

But most of these strangely dreamlike flying nights ended up with us landing in the drying-out cell or on the corridor of the Leipzig South-East police station, handcuffed to the radiator. When we were kids (are you still a child at fifteen? Maybe we weren't any more the first time we stood in front of a judge, usually a woman, or the first time they took us home at night and we went to school the next day, or not, and still had the marks of the damned cuffs round our thin wrists), when we were good kids, the centre of our neighbourhood was the big 'People's Duroplastic Toy and Stamp Products Company'. An otherwise unimportant classmate got hold of stamps and little cars for us via his mother, who made stamp pads there, which was why we didn't beat him up and sometimes gave him a couple of coppers for his trouble. The big toy factory went bust in 1991, and the building was torn down, and the little stamp and toy car fence's mother lost her job after twenty years and hanged herself in the outside toilet, which was why we still didn't beat the boy up and sometimes gave him a couple of coppers. Now there's an Aldi there, where I could buy cheap beer and spaghetti.

The bit about the boy's mum's not true. She got a job in the new Shell garage in 1992 and always pretended not to know us when we bought beer and schnapps from her, because it was night and the shops were shut and the walls of the Leipziger Premium Pilsener Brewery were sometimes just too high.

The best thing was that the brewery was there even when we couldn't see it, because we were carrying an old lady's handbag home for her a few streets away, or because it was night (I mean those really dark evening nights in the winter when all you can see is the lights and you feel so sad). Or because we closed our eyes when we drove past. The good old Leipziger Premium Pilsener Brewery was there. We could smell it. It just smelled so fucking fantastic, of tasty hops, like tea only much better. When the wind blew the right way we could smell it for miles.

And I can still smell it now when I open the window, although I'm a long way away, but the others don't want to know. And how would they know, I've never told them, and when we lie awake in our beds at night I poke a corner of the cover between my teeth to stop myself talking about the wild days.

On nights like that I think of Alfred Heller, who we called Fred. He had a face turned greyish-blue like finest stilton from all the drink. He was a couple of years older than us, but he looked about fifteen. He had round glasses like a teacher's pet but he drove stolen or dodgy cars around our neighbourhood and the whole city, without a licence. It was strange sitting in a car with him, there was hardly any space because there were beer cans all over the place, and we did the craziest things when we were out driving with him. Something happened to us when we got into his car, something made us lose all our inhibitions, we had a sense of absolute freedom and independence that we'd never known before and now we screamed it out; it was as if the witch with five cats who lived next door to me had put a spell on Fred's cars. Sometimes we used the rolled-down window as a surfboard and held onto the roof with one hand. It was like a merry-go-round after a bottle of 'Stroh 80' rum.

Once, when we were racing through the streets at night, Fred was so wasted he let go of the steering wheel and said, 'Shit, I'm too fucked.' I was in the back, next to Mark who was out of his head on drugs and Rico, who was still clean then, and we were too fucked as well and we only had eyes for the lights of our city racing past us. And if little Walter, who was in the front next to Fred when he suddenly gave up, and whose life I later saved twice in one night (and who then much later, in another night, just went and left us anyway), hadn't grabbed the steering wheel and sat down on top of Fred, half-sunk in his seat, and brought the car to a

standstill with a lot of burnt rubber, I'd be dead now or maybe I'd have lost my right arm and I'd have to fill out all the forms with my left hand.

Fred Heller had a brother, Silvio. Silvio didn't have Fred's criminal energy; he played chess instead. The two of them lived together, and while Fred & Co. were doing their dirty deals in the lounge, I played chess in the kitchen with Silvio. He had his own rules but I accepted them because, he once told me as he balanced his bishop on the schnapps bottle and took me, or my king, in chess from there, the doctors had made a mess of him in the ghetto in the zone days and he only had a couple of years to live. There must have been something to it because he dragged one leg and his left arm was almost lame. And sometimes his face did these horrible grimaces, he rolled his eyes until the whites went green, and hit his head on the chessboard over and over (I was really scared he might take his eye out on one of the pointed bishops). The whole thing made such an impression on me I even gave up in winning positions, when my knight raped his king according to his rules; I bit the head off my king and put it in the four-star freezer compartment and escaped into the lounge with Fred & Co. and did dirty deals.

The doctors messed him up in the ghetto. It took me a while to find out what 'ghetto' meant when Fred and his brother told their stories. Their parents had given them up and they spent years in a closed home for problem children, in the ghetto they called it, and that was where Silvio must have got a bit too many antidepressants and gaga-injections, which fucked up his liver and kidneys. Sometimes he talked about experiments but I don't think that was true. I asked Fred once if he was still in touch with his parents. 'No,' he said, 'when I see them my knife gets a hard-on.' Old Fred probably gets a hard-on when the wind blows now; he's doing time in some crappy prison. I don't know exactly what the last thing was that landed him inside, all I know is that he was on probation for the thousandth time and he had a file as thick as an encyclopaedia, and all I know is what they say and what's more or less a legend now. He was driving through town and the pigs were after him, it was night, and he had his usual alcohol level, and it just kind of took hold of him. He'd probably planned his last show. It certainly had style. Skidded to a halt. Turned the car around. Foot down. Rammed the first police car. Rammed the second police car. Reverse gear. Same again. Don't know how often. They say the pigs couldn't open the doors by the end. Then he got out and put his hands up, like Billy the Kid, and said, 'I surrender.'

I don't know if the pigs climbed out the sunroofs of their accordions, but anyway he gave the first one who staggered towards him a punch to break his nose, and since then he's been gone. And he'd said to me before he'd never go back to the ghetto and he wanted to give up all that

shit. And I almost believed him. Because one time when we were in a pub, Fred, me and my old school mate Mark, who was already off his head on drugs back then, and some guys started an argument with Fred (it was about old deals, he said), he didn't let them get to him, not even when they chucked beer in his face. And when I grabbed a barstool he said, 'Daniel, it's cool, forget that shit, this is my business.' The three guys were standing next to us at the bar and one of them pushed Fred and he fell off his barstool. He broke his glasses but he put them back on again, squinted through the shattered lenses and said to me, 'Daniel, it's cool,' and he said to them, 'I'm not doing nothing, you fuckers, I'm on probation.' He kept on saying it when they pushed him, and one of them punched him in the face a couple of times. Then Fred got a flick knife out of his pocket, there was a short click, he laid his left hand on the bar and rammed the blade through it into the wood with his right hand. 'You fucking poofers aren't getting me anywhere!' And then they left pretty fast and I called a doctor. And before he came and pulled the knife out, which was pretty deep in the wood, I drank a couple of doubles with Fred while the barman wiped away the blood, surprisingly little of it. He'd never felt so good in his life, said Fred, with one hand nailed to the bar.

My old school mate Mark, who was sitting next to us half-unconscious, didn't catch on to any of it. And he doesn't catch on to anything now either, because he's strapped to a bed in a white room somewhere, in rehab.

Bed. Rehab. My little Estrellita. I sing, I dream, my little Estrellita. Her name's not really Estrellita but I like to call her that, it means little star in Spanish, and when some asshole crashed into a tree with her on the passenger side she was in a coma for five weeks, and when she woke up again she was even prettier than before, so small and fragile, and she made at least five pairs of eyes at me. I can't even remember what colour her eyes were. I must have been in love or something, because she was really a gorgeous little... tart. Walter, just as little but not as gorgeous, told me that and said I should keep my hands off her because half of Leipzig (including him, the bastard) knew every detail of her body, except for the colour of her eyes. And that's how Walter saved me from the clap and paid me back a bit for saving his life twice in one night.

It was a night like a dream. We were in *our* park, which I'm going to walk through again soon and watch the kids playing in the same sandpit we used to piss in and puke in too every now and then. Fred got caught again that night, standing on top of the brewery wall and passing the crates down to where Rico was waiting. We called him Crazy Rico behind his back, because he'd once bitten the tip of our Pioneer leader's nose off back in the zone days, because he wanted to confiscate Rico's Captain America comic, and the only reason Rico

hadn't been expelled was because not much later there weren't any Pioneers any more and so there weren't any Pioneer leaders. But it's not true that Rico bit off the tip of the pig's nose when he wanted to confiscate the crate of beer and Rico and Fred. Mark, who was supposed to be helping with the whole thing but was sitting on the pavement juggling pebbles for some drugged-up reason, ignored by the pigs, he watched it all and fought his way past all the spiders and spiders' webs into the park, where Walter, Stefan, who was already called Pitbull by then, me and my clapped-up Estrellita were waiting, thirsty. We were really incredibly thirsty because we'd just slaughtered one of Fred's dodgy motors, to start the evening, so to speak. Fred said he didn't need the car any more, and then someone kicked the door in, and then we all ripped the door out together and smashed all the windows, knifed the tyres and so on. I think if we'd had the same talents as that Frenchman in the Guinness Book of Records we'd have eaten that car up. I don't know what happened to us, we were on a high; sure, it was the alcohol as well, but something inside us went click, switched the lever to 'storm in the brain'. My little Estrellita danced around screaming on the roof of the car; my God, I loved her.

And there was a storm in our brains as well when Mark told us where Rico and Fred were. We wanted to get them out and we trashed every rubbish bin, road sign, park bench and every fifth car on the way to Leipzig South-East police station. The crazy thing was that the pigs, when we kicked the big iron gate like good little boys and told them the reason for our visit, just said, 'Get out of here, you can pick them up tomorrow.' But the smashing, breaking and shouting we'd done would have been loud enough to wake up Rico's deaf granny, who couldn't sleep because Rico, who lived with her, hadn't come home. Rico's arms were behind his back and they shoved him along a long, white corridor, into a bright, white room to a typewriter for his statement: suspected robbery. We heard him shouting from inside, 'It's OK, I'm alright, we're the greatest!' as if he'd already got used to being behind bars back then. Outside, Estrellita puked up on the front window of a parking police car, so we took her home pretty fast. And then in her building, little Walter jumped out of a third-floor window because of some stupid bitch who didn't love him and didn't want to go to the seaside with him, and I caught him by the collar just as he was falling, and the crazy bastard was still screaming, no, babbling, 'Anja, I love you!' when the cloth tore and Mark, no longer capable of motor control, hung out of the window himself trying to pull Walter back in. I can't remember exactly how no one managed to break their neck, all I know is that little Walter tried it again and threw himself in front of a lorry and we staggered home confused and drunk after I'd

dragged him off the street just before he got squashed to death. It was all crazy like a nightmare on a boiling-hot summer night.

There's not one night I don't dream of all this, and every day the memories dance in my head, and I torture myself with the question of why it all turned out like this. Sure, we had loads of fun back then, but still there was a kind of lostness in us in everything we did, which I can't quite explain.

It's Wednesday, and soon they'll unlock the door and take me to Doctor Confessional. I know this nursery rhyme. I hum it to myself when everything starts going crazy in my head.