

Roland Schimmelpfennig:
An einem klaren, eiskalten Januarmorgen zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts

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pp. 5 - 16

On a clear, ice-cold January morning early in the twenty-first century, a lone wolf crossed the frozen river dividing Germany and Poland, just after sunrise.

The wolf came from the east. It ran over the solid ice of the river Oder, and continued west when it reached the far bank it. Behind it, beyond the river, the sun was still close to the horizon.

In the morning light, under a cloudless sky, the wolf ran across wide, snow-covered fields, till it reached the edge of a wood and vanished inside.

A day later, in another wood, thirty kilometres west of the frozen river, a hunter found the bloody remains of a deer. In the snow next to the deer he found the footprints of a wolf.

This was at Vierlinden, in the Seelow district. The last wolf seen here was over 160 years ago, in 1843.

The wolf stayed in this area. No-one actually saw it. Only its footprints and the bloody deer were discovered.

It was a very long, cold winter. Around the end of the second week in February it snowed for several days without stopping.

On the evening of the 16th of February a tanker skidded on the snow on the motorway between Poland and Berlin.

The tanker jack-knifed and fell on its side. Two other trucks hit it and caught fire. The tanker exploded. None of the drivers survived.

Sixty vehicles skidded as they braked on the icy motorway behind the crash and ploughed into each other. The people were trapped in their crushed vehicles as the fire spread.

This was around Glieningmoor. Within a short time there was a forty-kilometre traffic jam back to the Polish border. The motorway was blocked in both directions.

It was night by this time. The drivers of the cars and lorries in the jam turned their motors and lights off. In the darkness the snow settled on the motorway and on the stationary vehicles.

The fire engines and ambulances drove down the hard shoulder, passing the endless rows of vehicles. It continued to snow. Everything stood still.

A young Polish man was on his way to Berlin from a village near Warsaw. He had been on the road since eleven that morning. For three hours now he had been stuck in the snow on the motorway. He could see the glow from the fire in the distance, still burning.

The exploded tanker and the expanse of piled-up vehicles were around three kilometres away.

The young man had switched his old Toyota's engine off and he was freezing. He didn't have enough petrol to let it run. From time to time he gave the key in the ignition a half turn and let the windscreen wipers run, but he was worried about the battery. He hadn't switched the inside light on and wasn't listening to the radio. He was sitting in the Toyota in darkness.

– This could take all night, he'd heard a Polish lorry driver shout earlier. This could take all night, the man had kept shouting.

The young Polish man got out of the car and took photos with his phone of the light from the distant fire in the night sky. Then he got back into the car. You couldn't make anything out in the pictures.

He called his girlfriend, Agnieszka, who was waiting for him in Berlin.

– Nah, this could go on for hours.

– What are you going to do? She asked. Have you got a blanket?

– There's the sleeping bag in the boot.

– Leave the car and walk to the nearest village.

– There aren't any villages round here.

– There'll be a village somewhere round there. There must be a village.

– There's nothing here. I can't see anything.

– There must be a village, Tomasz. Walk to the nearest village.

You'll freeze to death there.

– There isn't a single village. And I can't just leave the car here.

Having waited another hour in the traffic, Tomasz got out of the car to walk to the scene of the accident. Before he set out, he looked for a landmark, knowing he would never find the snowed-under Toyota without some kind of marker.

At the side of the road to his right was a sign saying Berlin 80km.

I've turned into a boy scout, he thought, a fucking boy scout.

Tomasz walked ahead to the accident. It was still snowing. The flashing lights on the ambulances spun in the darkness. As he got closer, he saw the blue-white flames of the oxy-acetylene welders the firemen were using to free people from the crushed vehicles. He heard shouts and screams. In the thick snowfall a man of around sixty, well built, stood by the road in his vest, covered in blood, probably a lorry driver.

– Can I help you, Tomasz called in Polish. He thought he recognised him from Warsaw.

– Mind your own business, the man shouted back.

A helicopter landed on the other side of the motorway. Floodlights had been set up. The paramedics were carrying someone on a stretcher to one of the ambulances. They ran as fast as they could. A woman was running alongside the stretcher. She kept shouting something, a word, perhaps a name. Then she slipped and fell in the snow. The paramedics ran on.

Tomasz turned round and walked back through the stationary vehicles in the darkness.

Three ambulances with flashing lights came towards him down the hard shoulder. He searched through the snowstorm for his marker, the sign with the distance in kilometres from Berlin. He found the snowed-covered Toyota and went to the boot to fetch the sleeping bag.

Tomasz had been living with Agnieszka in Berlin for three years, where he mostly worked for a Pole, Marek. Marek and his crew gutted houses and/or did them up. They did everything.

In Poland Tomasz had always worked on his own. Sometimes when he'd had work outside Warsaw he'd slept the night in the sleeping bag, on the building site or in the car. But he couldn't do that anymore, not in Germany.

Since moving to Germany Tomasz didn't feel up to working on his own anymore. Since moving to Germany, Tomasz didn't feel like being on his own.

The lock on the Toyota's boot had frozen. To his right stood the sign by the road, eighty kilometres to Berlin.

Then he saw the wolf. The wolf was standing in front of the sign by the side of the road, seven metres away from him, no more.

A wolf, Tomasz thought. Looks like a wolf. Probably a large dog. But who would let their dog roam around here? Perhaps it really is a wolf.

He took a photo of the animal in front of the sign, in the swirling snow. A flash in the darkness.

A moment later the wolf was gone.

She had a bruise under her right eye, and a split lip.

The girl was sitting in the bus shelter at the village's only bus stop. The village was called Sauen, the nearest town Beeskow, in the Oder-Spree district.

It was early in the morning, six thirty. It was still dark. They were waiting for the school bus. She was sixteen. Her mother had punched her twice in the face with her fist the night before.

The snow was falling through the globes of light around the street lamps. The village consisted of nothing more than a few houses on a main road.

Alongside her on the bench in the bus shelter sat her boyfriend.

– Let's get away from here, she said to him.

They both wore heavy leather jackets, Doctor Martin boots, chains and earrings, but they had soft faces and slight bodies.

– Where do you want to go? He asked.

– To Berlin, she said.

By the time the bus arrived they had gone. They didn't take the main road. On the main road someone would have stopped sooner or later – two children early in the morning in the snow. They took the tracks through the fields.

The girl was called Elisabeth, and the boy was called Micha.

As they reached the woods it stopped snowing finally, after four days.

– Fuck, fuck, fuck, Charly said, smiling at the same time, with a wide-eyed look.

Jacky followed his gaze through the shop window out to the street but there wasn't anything there, nothing in particular. Cars, pedestrians. It had stopped snowing.

– There were other people living round here before. It used to be different here.

– Charly you have no idea who used to live here.

– But you can tell, you just can. You can tell, you just can.

– We didn't use to live here either.

– We don't live here anyway.

– Yes we do. We live here.

– We don't live *here*. Here.

Prenzlauerberg, Berlin: before 1989 the shop had been a bakery. One of the old sales assistants had taken it over when the wall fell and with a little money had turned it into a corner shop, a so-called off-licence. She kept two rabbits in a little cage behind the counter but eventually she got in trouble with health and safety and the rabbits had to go. She had stayed open late at night, and sold newspapers, cigarettes, beer, spirits, crisps and cola, and when the old people in the neighbourhood could no longer make it down to her, she went up to them with their newspapers, beer and cigarettes, but that was all over now. The shop wasn't making enough, rents were rising in the area, at sixty-five she packed it in and then came Charly and Jacky, young people, and took the shop over. It was just what they had been looking for, and they'd been saving. They repainted the walls, black and gold and dark red.

– You have such a strange look on your face, Charly, you know? You get this very strange look. You go all wide-eyed, what's the matter?

– That's just what I was about to say to you, you know? Did you know that, hon? You look strange, you have done all day. What's up? What are you thinking?

– I'm thinking something's not quite right, but I don't know what.

– I can tell you what's not right. Not enough people are coming in. I mean the business is going well, but there still aren't really enough people coming in.

– That's because of the weather, Charly.

– And then you pull a strange face and say I'm pulling a strange face. And at that Charly went wide-eyed again.

– Do you think we'll ever have children?

– Of course, of course. But don't you think it's a bit too soon?

We've only just opened the business. Don't you think we should settle in here first? You are twenty-nine.

– I'll be thirty soon, and you've hardly got a hair left on your head.

– We've still got loads of time.

But they knew that wasn't the case. They sensed they would never have children.

– But sure, Charly said, sure. What about... What about... Let's think the whole thing through. Let's think the whole thing through from start to finish, and as he said it he went wide-eyed again. From start to finish, fuck!