



Christoph Hein

Horn's End

Novel

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Sample translation by Alexander Claussen

Chapter One

- *Remember.*
- *I'm trying.*
- *You must remember.*
- *It was long ago. Years have passed.*
- *You cannot have forgotten. It was yesterday.*
- *I was so young.*
- *You saw it. You saw everything.*
- *I was a child.*
- *It was yesterday.*
- *No, it was years ago. Look at me, I have gray hair.*
- *Look at me. Only a day has passed. You must remember.*
- *You worked in the castle....*
- *Yes, yes, in the castle. What else?*
- *My father forbade me from going to the castle. Back then, when it was over.*
- *More! Remember!*

Dr. Spodeck

The gypsies had come late that year. Easter had passed, and all of April, and everyone was hoping that they had chosen another town. But at the end of May, on a Thursday, their trailers were back on the Bleicherwiese in the middle of town. And on the clothesline drawn between the linden trees fluttered the long, grubby clothes of the gypsies.

The mayor showed up in the afternoon. He came with Bachofen, his deputy, and a secretary. By this point the schoolchildren were already standing around the gypsies. Two hours earlier, and the mayor could have finished his ridiculous performance in peace. But he was so addled that these miserable gypsy women could wring him out like a wet towel in front of the children and send him packing from the square. I might have expected the old gypsy man to chase him away with a dog whip. That's what I would have done in his place, anyway. But the old man evidently did not come out. He left the town council to his wives, and didn't even poke his nose out to look at the commotion in front of his trailer. He instinctively did the right thing. After all, they were looking for a reason to throw him and his entire troupe out of town. As it was, there was some shouting, the laughter of the schoolchildren, and the red, sweaty, bald head of our mayor.

A year earlier, I predicted he would have a stroke. He never returned to my office after that. He probably went to Ditzen, in the new town. Or maybe he had a doctor in Wildenberg, whom he visited when he had to report to the Kreis. But I hoped that when the time came, when he was drooling on his pillow, they would send for me. I hoped that his eyes would restlessly ask me for forgiveness and help, and I would be so happy to not be able to help him any longer. I would do everything in my power to keep him alive. I would work tirelessly to make sure that the tenuous flame of his helpless vegetation would not go out too quickly, that his final suffering would not

end before his time. And I would have known how to answer for this before my God, and how to confess to my priest, who would have been unable to refuse absolution for having finally satisfied this bitterness. And yet I knew that this would not satisfy me and that humiliations would continue to fill me until, on the day of my death, sooner or later, they tore me apart. Because it is not the bloated, pathetic, ox-faced Kruschkatz that is squeezing my soul into a pile of dog shit. It is this town that is killing me. I have detested it, as long as I have lived here, as long as I have been on this Earth. And I have hated it since my father bought me a practice here and told me that he had me trained just for this town. That he spent all that money on me just to pay this town back for the sins he committed against it during his lifetime.

If I am still living here, even though my father is long dead and I have left far behind me the repulsive and clammy misery of poverty and could go wherever I wanted, it is for this squaring of debts. The mission my father gave me, I will finish. I will finish it for my own sake. For the humiliations my father caused me, he shall not rest in peace, nor for the insults I have suffered from this town, the free meals and the donations I was forced to accept back then. And even if I could excuse and forgive them, I cannot forget. I cannot forget the cowardice with which this town constantly allows new injustices. The death of a man like Horn should suffice to blot out this town like the biblical Gomorra.

I heard about the gypsies from my daughter.

After my afternoon nap I had gone into the library. Since a few years now, I spend two hours each afternoon in my library and flip through the accumulated books. I don't read them any longer, I don't have the patience. I am tired of following invented characters and listening to their paper conversations, these strained, artificial gestures of pretended life.

I go into the library to be alone. To follow the aimless flow of my thoughts, to smoke cigarettes and to escape the sounds of others. The torrents of my bigoted wife and the affected drivel of my daughter, who threatens to become just as big a hypocrite; the timid voice of Christine; the pleading and insolent demands of my patients. Only here, only in the solitude of my library, am I spared these annoyances, freed to eavesdrop on my unplanned and rambling thoughts. I got into the habit of these library hours four years ago and will continue them for the rest of my life. And if, as I plan, I should die of a friendly and inconspicuous heart failure, or if my weariness should make me feeble-minded before then, I wish that these changes should happen in my library, in the hours after my nap, before Christine calls me to tea and I must deliver myself to my wife and daughter. I wish that whatever happens to me, happens in the seclusion of this room.

That day I went down for tea in silence. We watched Christine pour the tea and offer us cake. Only when she sat down did my wife tell us that the gypsies had arrived. Johanna, my daughter, had been to the Bleicherwiese and babbled on about what she had seen there with her classmates.

The gypsies' arrival was an annually recurring drama. And as much as the sight of the dark-skinned tribe with their colorful rags and their curly gray or stringy black hair disturbed the town from its mellow righteousness and the unchanging, sheltered passage of time, it succumbed again and again to the fascination and annoyance that this well-traveled misery offered in its unfathomable remoteness, its foreignness, and its incomprehensible, guttural cries.

I was convinced that at this hour the whole town was talking about the gypsies. What else was there to talk about? For Horn was still alive at the end of May.

“It looked like he got lost,” my daughter said of the mayor, “but perhaps he was just afraid of the women.”

She took another piece of cake and, once she had eaten it, provocatively slowly and thoroughly licked her fingers clean.

“Nonsense,” I said, interrupting the silence that had at last descended. “He doesn’t know fear. I examined him thoroughly. He’s not even capable of the feeling.”

My daughter tittered. I felt wretched and contemptible at the thought of having wasted so many hours and days with her and my wife, of having to fritter them uselessly and foolishly away in the future.

Thomas

I went with Paul to the Bleicherwiese after school. We wanted to see the gypsies. Paul had talked about them. He'd discovered them that morning on his way to school.

There were some kids already at the Bleicherwiese, maybe twenty. They stood there quietly and stared across at the gypsy camp, at their trailers and the many horses. It was a hot day, and the gypsy women sat in front of the trailers and washed their dresses, large, rectangular cloths that were laid out to dry on the grass like faded flags. The men rarely let themselves be seen. Sometimes someone would come to the door and call out a name loudly and coarsely. Then one of the women would go in, but soon return.

We first saw the boss when the mayor came to chase the gypsies away from the Bleicherwiese. The boss was a very fat man. He was so fat that he couldn't tie his shoelaces himself. He rarely got out of his trailer. In years past he'd never gone into town. Only the women went shopping. Sometimes he'd sit between the trailers in the evening and smoke. Then we could admire his fat, naked belly, bulging over the red sash around his pants. And every year, during each of his stays, he would visit Mr. Gohl, the old painter from the castle. Why he went to Gohl of all people, nobody knew. Dad said they were meant for each other.

Paul said we should ask the gypsies if we could work for them. The previous year, Paul worked for the fat boss. He ran little errands for him. In return he could eat with the gypsies and was given four big foreign coins as a farewell gift. Turkish coins, Paul said. He said the gypsies had stolen them because they were very valuable. He showed them only to me, and I wasn't allowed to talk about them with anyone. He made me swear.

So, Paul and I stood in front of the gypsy camp and waited for the boss's huge belly to appear in the doorway, so we could have the opportunity to ask the tribal chief for work. But we could see only the women. Young women, who yelled and moved wildly around as if in a constant dance, and grumpy, silent grandmothers who shot witches' glances at us from their wrinkled brown faces.

The mayor arrived at three o'clock with Mr. Bachofen and a young woman who lived in the new town. They went to the gypsy women and spoke to them, but we were too far away to understand them. Then a young gypsy went into one of the trailers and the mayor turned to us and told us to scram. Since none of the children moved, he yelled again and shook his fist, but he didn't come closer. A few of the bigger boys laughed, so I stayed too. I pretended not to care what the mayor said and hoped he didn't recognize me.

The young gypsy stepped through the trailer doorway and shook her head. The mayor went to her, gave her a paper and spoke at her, although he must have known that the woman didn't understand him. None of the gypsy women knew our language, only the boss spoke it a little and could understand us. And the old gypsy woman, the witch with the moustache. The gypsy shouted strange words, and the other gypsy women squawked at the mayor. It was a great spectacle in the meadow. The mayor shouted, the women screamed shrilly and the gypsy's dogs yelped. Mr. Bachofen, who was with the mayor, went silent and tugged at his jacket. Then he looked darkly at us and waved his hand to shoo us away.

At some point the boss appeared in the doorway. He wore a red vest over his naked chest and stared at the sky. Then he spat, came carefully down the small steps, walked around the trailer, spat again and went back inside. He did all of this without giving the mayor a single glance.

"Maybe he'll stab him," whispered Paul in my ear, as the fat gypsy walked around his trailer.

"Who?" I asked.

“The gypsy,” said Paul, “they’re awfully quick with a knife. My dad saw it.”

“Then he’ll go to prison,” I retorted.

“Fat chance,” Paul snorted derisively. “Gypsies don’t go to prison. They’re fast, nobody can catch them.”

I froze at the thought of seeing how our mayor would be sliced open by the massive old gypsy. But he had already gone back inside.

The mayor and the others turned around. They had to carve their way through the excited, screaming gypsy women. As he came past us, I saw that there was sweat on his red brow. The older kids said that he asked the gypsies to move their camp outside the town, onto the flood plains. I didn’t hear that. I didn’t hear anything he said to the gypsies.

An hour later, only Paul and I were left facing the camp. The other kids had disappeared, because nothing was happening. We had come a few steps closer, but kept our distance from the gypsies, because of their two long-nosed dogs, who were now lying in the sun and were carefully observing us with watchful eyes. We were hoping that the boss would come out again so that we could ask to work for him.

Last year, Paul had tied the boss’s shoes before class every morning and in return received a bread roll with a thick slice of bacon every day. He sold the bacon sandwich in the schoolyard during our break, everyone wanted to eat the gypsy bacon once. Paul told us that the bacon was made from fattened cats. The gypsies ate cats to keep their bones limber. I was disgusted, but I too bought a bacon sandwich and choked it down in the schoolyard. I felt sick for two days afterward from the thought that I had eaten cat bacon.

We waited silently and watched the gypsy women. Then Mr. Gohl came and stood next to us. He patted my head and nodded at me.

I knew Mr. Gohl from the castle museum. I was often there in the afternoons. Mr. Horn let me be there, I helped him to arrange the new exhibitions. Mr. Gohl also worked there. He was a painter and never said anything, all day long. He wasn't mute, sometimes he said two or three mysterious words, but most of the time he stayed silent. He lived with his daughter and had to take care of her. She was feeble-minded. Actually, we said she was stupid, but my dad told me not to. She is very sick, he said, and I shouldn't be using that sort of language. I sometimes helped Mr. Gohl, when he moved his paintings onto the white walls in the castle.

He stood next to us and looked at the gypsies. He had taken off his hat and was holding it to his chest in the crook of his arm. One of the gypsy women saw him. She let out a loud cry. The boss appeared in the doorway, saw Mr. Gohl and pompously spread his arms.

“Comrade!” he roared.

I saw how Mr. Gohl's eyes began to glow. The old gypsy waved him over with a short, commanding gesture, and then walked down the few steps of the trailer. When they were facing each other, the gypsy grabbed Mr. Gohl's shoulders with both hands, shook him, and called out once more, with the same warmth and just as booming: “Comrade.”

He pulled him to his chest and hugged him. Mr. Gohl was still holding his hat in the crook of his arm. When the massive gypsy released him from the embrace, he smiled sheepishly and tapped the felt hat back into shape. One of the gypsy women brought a bottle and glasses, and the boss and Mr. Gohl, standing, had a swig of the yellow drink. Then Mr. Gohl reached out his hand to the gypsy. They said goodbye.

As he passed us, Mr. Gohl put on his now-repaired brown felt hat. He seemed distant, dreamy. His small, sunken mouth seemed illuminated by the glimmer of an unheard happiness. The gypsy stood on the steps of his trailer and watched him leave. Then he went inside. We couldn't talk to

him. There was no point in waiting for him any longer. Paul suggested we secretly follow the old painter home. I wasn't on board. I didn't want to, because I knew the painter well. But I didn't know what else to do, so finally we ran after him.

Only after two days were Paul and I able to talk to the gypsy boss. And we had to repeat our request twice before he understood us. His hairy hand gently stroked his huge belly as he looked at us with narrowed eyes and said "Go to women. Women give work to young men."

And with a changed, coarse voice he shouted something to the women in his language, who broke out in shrieking laughter and swayed their upper bodies back and forth. We went to them. My face was burning, and I would have run away if I wasn't afraid the women would laugh even more shrilly. I asked Paul with a silent glance what we should do, but he just stared at the ground, his face flushed, as if he had been rooted in place, petrified.

One of the old crones stroked me and pinched my cheek. Her hand was brown and bony and hurt me. When I raised my head, I saw her bad teeth, her dark stumps, and the thick beard on her upper lip and chin. The old woman showed us what to do. I had to move the goats when they had eaten the grass around them. I had to take a long iron rod, that the goat's rope was tied to, out of the ground and then drive it back in with a brick. And while the goats were eating the grass, I had to make sure that they didn't get into the laundry and the big black pots the gypsies had sitting in the sun. Paul was sitting with the gypsy women. He had to carry buckets and pitchers when the women demanded it, and look after the horses. But mostly he just sat among the gypsy women and watched them.

When the clock struck six we said goodbye. We said that we would be back the next day, right after school. The gypsies nodded and laughed. I didn't know if they understood us.

"Are we really going to go back?" I asked Paul.

He nodded.

“We didn’t get anything,” I objected.

“They just got here,” he retorted. “In a few days they will have stolen enough. Then they’ll pay us.”

Gertrude Fischlinger

I couldn't control my son.

I knew that he went to the gypsies. People told me that he was working for them. He and that boy, his friend at the time, the pharmacist's son. Whenever I tried to talk to Paul, he would leave the room silently. But after all, I couldn't tie him up. I had the store, and, in the evening, I had housework to do. And with my swollen legs I couldn't run all over town after him. He needed a father.

That was the year Paul started to come home late. He would disappear after dinner and come back around ten, eleven o'clock. I would lie in bed and wait for him to lock the door and climb the stairs. I worried that the police might bring him home one day. He was only fourteen. When he came home, he went into his room, without looking in on me. But I would be relieved, and even the throbbing in my legs would grow softer and steadier.

I didn't know what he did in the evening, where he was hanging out. I didn't know his friends. Only the pharmacist's son, who surely came home much earlier.

I knew that Paul drank. I had found an empty bottle in his room, and I prayed to God that he wouldn't end up like his father. It was all worse because he didn't tell me anything. I had asked Mr. Horn to talk to him, but he just shrugged his shoulders and, with his tired, understanding smile, apologized. He would not speak to him, not about this. I had only rented him the room in the hope he would talk with Paul occasionally. I couldn't, not anymore. No matter what I said, my son wouldn't listen to me.

Mr. Horn had arrived in town four or five years earlier. I was filling bags with flour when he came into my shop. He stopped in the middle of the room and waited patiently for me to turn to

him. He didn't look at the shelves or in the glass display cases, so I knew he wasn't going to buy anything. I kept filling the flour. I thought he was looking for information, but he didn't ask anything, just stood quietly in the shop and watched me. I straightened up and brushed the flour from my hands and apron. As soon as I looked at him, I knew he didn't need information either. He was not the type of man who would look for the boat docks or seek out the best restaurant. He had strangely gray skin and wide, nearly black circles under his eyes. I thought back then that he must have been sick a long time. Jaundice or TB, I guess.

He asked if I was Ms. Fischlinger and added that the mayor's secretary had sent him. His name was Horn and he was looking for a room to rent. Then he fell silent and looked calmly and blankly at me. I was surprised. I had never rented a room before. Since my husband left, I hadn't even thought about it.

"I live with my son," I told him that day. "He is ten years old. I had him late in life."

"I will not bother you," he answered. "All that I need is a bed and a very bright lamp. And some hot water early in the morning."

I stared at him and reflected.

"I have poor eyes," he finally added. Even now he didn't make an effort to seem gracious or even friendly.

"You misunderstand me," I said. "I'm not afraid that you will bother us, but that my boy will harass you. He's not well brought up. I had to leave him on his own too often."

"I have no expectations," he responded.

And with that, although I had promised him nothing, the matter seemed settled for him and me. During the lunch break I showed him the apartment and his room and gave him the keys. In the evening I set up the reform bed and carried the record player and the little sewing table into

the bedroom. I left him the china cabinet. I only needed the mocha set and the wine glasses in it once a year, and now that I had rented out my living room, I would have even less opportunity to use them.

Mr. Horn had told me that the town had promised him an apartment. He was going to work at the castle, in the museum, and hoped to rent from me for no longer than a year. But the year passed, and he received no apartment, and a second year passed, and ultimately he lived with me until his unexpected death.

He was a quiet tenant. Sometimes I listened carefully to hear a sound from him, the footfalls of a man, the creaking of a leather armchair, a gargling in the bathroom. I listened in the hopes of feeling that there was a man in my apartment. But he seemed to move silently. There weren't even little splashes of water next to the tub when I went into the bathroom after him. I made him breakfast and dinner, but he refused to eat with us in the kitchen. He didn't want to be a burden on us in any way, and his restraint was strict and without exception. Even if he had been gruff and arrogant, rather than shy and vulnerable, his behavior could not have been any more dismissive. Even in that half a year when I could almost believe that I meant something to him, he remained infinitely distant from me.

I had accepted his proposal to rent a room in my apartment because I hoped that his presence would make Paul speak to me more kindly. I hoped that Mr. Horn, as a stranger, might find a connection with him, a connection that I had lost long before. And not least, I agreed to his moving in because I had lived alone for so long and finally wanted to have a man in my house again. It wouldn't have bothered me that I didn't see him often, that he ate alone, that he never deigned to have a cup of tea or a short talk with me. All that I wanted was a friendly greeting in the morning

and a little smile when we met each other in the hallway of our shared apartment. But after only a week I knew that I could expect more warmth if I had lent the room to a sack of wood.

He remained the stranger who had wandered into my store, who disinterestedly observed me, stayed out of my way and waited calmly to get his due. He lived with me for over four years. There was never a loud or angry word between us, but whenever I thought of him, I cursed the day I gave him the keys to my apartment. I couldn't throw him out, there was no reason for that. He was correct, and polite to me, and I couldn't ask him to be friendly too, since he didn't even have a grain of affection for himself. I had taken him in for Paul's sake, but my son was drifting further away from me, and Mr. Horn wouldn't help me. And I couldn't ask him to.

"I have no expectations," he said, as he rented the room, unpacked his suitcase and unquestioningly accepted everything in the room, the tables, the pictures, the heavy leather armchairs; even in the years to come he hardly changed a thing. It took only a week for me to understand that with this sentence he had merely wanted to say that I should expect nothing of him.