

# THE WEIGHT OF THINGS

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THE WEIGHT OF THINGS  
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TRANSLATED AND WITH AN AFTERWORD  
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## WILHELMINE IS NOT BERTA

Of all the events of 1945, there was one Wilhelmine recalled with particularly painful clarity. Wilhelm had hung the necklace with the tiny Madonna around *Berta's* neck, not hers. This although Berta's belly clearly demonstrated that she, *unlike* Wilhelmine, was no longer a chaste young woman. For her own sake—and for Berta's!—she ought to have spoken her mind. *Maybe* Berta had been good enough for *Rudolf*, but she certainly was never right for Wilhelm!

“Rudolf is so gentle and indulgent. A born brooder. He needs a firm hand, someone with both feet on the ground. He's a dreamer! His head's in the clouds! He needs a woman who knows what she wants! Berta, he's just not right for you.”

If, when Berta had come to her, Wilhelmine had spoken words to this effect, would Berta have ever fallen for Rudolf?

“Berta, you poor little fool! Couldn't you have found a better time for making babies? Rudolf might not even make it back from the front! And he couldn't slaughter a chicken,

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let alone raise a child! Too sensitive, too timid, never stuck his neck out for anything. Now he's gone off who-knows-where and the only thing you can think to do is have a kid! Berta! This is crazy!"

If, when Berta had come to her, Wilhelmine had spoken words to this effect, would Rudolf's last furlough have produced such a tragedy?

If so, then Wilhelmine's restraint was her own undoing—for Rudolf had indeed failed to return, and in his place came a stranger, Wilhelm Schrei, who handed Berta a daisy and a letter. She accepted both like precious jewels. "So. So," Berta said. Not even a "Thank you, sir." This stranger had trudged to Donaublau from Frankfurt on the Oder, in such treacherous times, no less, and all Berta had to say was: "So. So."

Heaven knows, that was going too far! Wilhelm, the poor sap, just stood there without a clue what to say. And what did Berta Faust do? She just forgot him; sat down at the table, ran her hand over the tablecloth, trying to smooth it out; said again, "So. So," and didn't even look up.

That's how Berta Faust was. Never in the present moment; always with her mind somewhere else.

In her misfortune Berta was at least lucky enough to have her—Wilhelmine—around. It was she—Wilhelmine,

and not Berta (!)—who offered Wilhelm schnapps, ham, bread; luxuries that sometimes Berta's father and sometimes she—Wilhelmine and not Berta (!)—used to buy on the black market or from farmers. Wilhelmine let the plainly quite hungry young man eat in peace and asked questions—questions that really Berta herself should have been asking—only once Wilhelm had stopped his frantic pawing at the ham and bread.

“All right. Rudolf's left us. That must have happened to a lot of people. At least tell us: how did he go? Was it over quick, or did it drag on?”

The poor fool was naturally so daunted and perplexed by Berta's thoroughly inhospitable silence that he hemmed and hawed, refusing to speak of such things, though this was the perfect time to sort them out once and for all.

No, Berta showed not the least consideration for that weary soldier. In the end, Wilhelmine even had to do Berta's grieving for her.

“The poor, poor dears! They were made for each other! And that's not all: a baby on the way, no husband in the house. Such a mess! What hope is there for a pregnant woman stuck living with her father—an old gravedigger to boot! The women in your family have always been blessed with useless men, Berta, but this Rudolf of yours has topped

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them all! It's enough to make you jump out of your skin. Berta, say something!"

Berta giggled and said: "So. So."

"What's so funny?" Wilhelmine hissed at Berta. Then she turned back to Wilhelm: "Karl was undoubtedly the most respectable of the three Faust boys. But there's been no word from him since this May. We did at least find out he'd been laid up in the military hospital in Castelfranco, which is somewhere near Modena. Richard, his twin brother, wasn't much of a letter writer either. After March of 1944, not a single word. Upper Silesia isn't even that far. You'd think he could at least have gotten away for a few days' leave! And then Wastl, Wastl clean forgot he even had a mother and sister back in Donaublau waiting for word from him. Wastl in Grajewo, Karl somewhere near Modena, Richard in Upper Silesia—that's all we ever knew. You call that staying in touch? They could at least have sent a letter home with someone, don't you think? In case they didn't make it? Shouldn't they have thought of that? Berta, say something!"

Berta kept silent.

"No. This can't go on. Someone needs to do something. What's your story, sir? Are you planning on staying in Donaublau, then? Nowadays all the cities look more or less the same. A heap of rubble is a heap of rubble no matter

where you go. Nowadays everyone has to start from scratch. The Faust boys used to sleep in the next room. That means we've got three empty beds, two dressers, a table, and three chairs—will that do for you?" And Wilhelmine stared at Wilhelm expectantly.

Wilhelm stayed. Yet it was not until the 13th of January, 1960 that the ring—the obligatory wedding ring Wilhelm had properly owed to Wilhelmine from that very first day forward—that Wilhelm at last placed this ring on her finger. Still, she at least got it in the end.

But the necklace with the tiny Madonna—that remained with Berta.

The degree to which the necklace with the tiny Madonna had become an object of Wilhelmine's ambitions was something Wilhelm had never understood. Over time, he even forgot there ever was a necklace with a tiny Madonna.

For Wilhelmine, doubting and brooding were like alcoholism or drug or nicotine addiction, problems of the sort Wilhelm tended to evade with an "if" and a "but," an "on-the-one-hand" and "on-the-other." Wilhelmine assumed that it would always be *her* judgment—accompanied by some of Wilhelm's "on-the-one-hands" and "on-the-others," his "ifs," his "ands," and his "buts"—that would guide them through their various marital disputes. Yet even understanding full



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well how things were between them, there remained in Wilhelmine a vague anxiety that she had never been able to shake and that she could express only by occasionally exclaiming: “Wilhelm, something has to be done!”

Their household was consummately organized. Her position as cleaning woman for Dr. Ulrich Reichmann’s clinic and the Donaublau branch offices of the Mueller-Rickenbergs fulfilled both her financial and her creative needs. And what remained of Wilhelmine’s energy was burned up in her and Wilhelm’s ceaseless marital combat.

In the long run, however, Wilhelmine couldn’t ignore it any longer: her ambition craved a new object, and she resolved at last to take the matter of Berta in hand. Intuition called to her as she was preparing breakfast with quick and nimble gestures: “Today the matter shall be settled for good and all.”

Wilhelm had always hoped to dodge this particular turn of fate, indeed had steadfastly fought—successfully for the three years they’d been married—to prevent its ever coming to the fore. But Wilhelm was getting older, and the older he got, the more inevitable it became that, like it or not, he would one day be forced to face up to a certain fact, which he had known in his heart all along: Wilhelmine was no Berta!

“Let’s leave things be—what’s done is done! I can’t undo it!” Quite often during the past three years, this phrase would serve as the second-to-last word in each new installment of their perennial discord. His wife, the resolute Wilhelmine, saved the last word for herself, having always at hand an irrefutable riposte to whatever objection Wilhelm might offer. Convinced that every marital dispute inevitably required a winner and a loser, Wilhelm stuck to the latter role, in which he felt perfectly comfortable. Far more upsetting to him was the realization, clearer and clearer as time went on, that Wilhelmine was not satisfied simply to cling to her various judgments, but was also inclined, under certain circumstances, to actually act upon them.

“On the 13th of January, 1960, we were married.” These were the words with which Wilhelmine, determined to realize her new objective regardless of the cost, opened their breakfast conversation on the 13th of January, 1963. And with a sinister single-mindedness, she smacked the dome of her egg until it was pulp.

“And the 13th of January was Berta’s birthday,” Wilhelm countered, taking pains to give an impression of composure, of even temper, and in particular to radiate docile humility, though gloomy thoughts were now wandering like ghosts

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through the cells of his brain. Yet his efforts were in vain, and his gloom could not be hidden from Wilhelmine, for it had a marked effect on Wilhelm's smile.

#### WILHELM, THE SMILER

Wilhelm's smile won him extraordinary benefits. In particular, it brought in generous tips, a most welcome supplement to his salary as chauffeur and Come-hither-boy to Johannes Mueller-Rickenberg, which the Schrei household had come to rely upon as a regular addition to its income. These tips, in turn, became further incentive to Wilhelm's talent for smiling; the smiler Wilhelm knew how to work up the proper smile-combination much as a chef, when cooking, strives for the right mix of spices. All that was needed, according to Wilhelm, the chauffeur and Come-hither-boy, was a proper assessment of his rider.

Wilhelm's smile told Johannes Mueller-Rickenberg that Wilhelm was meek and a little dumb, but also discreet, and that in his work as a chauffeur and Come-hither-boy he was quick, agile, and dependable. It reminded Johannes Mueller-Rickenberg that he could be sure of his Wilhelm seeing

both everything and nothing, hearing both everything and nothing, understanding everything and grasping nothing. In a nutshell: Wilhelm was a storybook chauffeur and ideal Come-hither-boy. It was to reinforce this image of himself, in the eyes of Johannes, that Wilhelm's smile was cultivated. He knew just when to sneak a pinch of acquiescence into the recipe and when to leaven his stupidity with a dose of wit, knew when and in what place and under which circumstances his smile should suggest presence of mind, how his smile should corroborate for this or that passenger what the passenger already knew. He had a skeptical smile, a brooding smile, a sly smile, a moronic smile and a shrewd smile, a clear-eyed and a purblind, a dutiful smile, the smile of a deferential and devoted spirit, as well as the smile of an obstreperous spirit prone to criticizing everything, and then yet another that was never indelicate or frank, always "on-the-one-hand . . . on-the-other," always ready to let one or another nuance recede, dwindle, or simply vanish. Nor was the pursuit of his bonus the sole motive for Wilhelm's really quite cunning talent for smiling. His thoughts were already inclined by nature to "ifs" and "buts," to "it merits consideration" and "in view of the circumstances," to "on the one hand, when you consider" and "on the other hand, you have

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to bear in mind,” and this reticence enriched the vast range of his smiles. He believed all and nothing, doubted all and nothing, was a born dreamer who never dreamed. In a nutshell: he was a worthy representative of his nation.

### THE SMILER WILHELM AND WILHELMINE’S AMBITION

The smiler Wilhelm could clearly sense, even while exercising his smile, that somehow he had already made a wrong move. There was something too deliberate, too intricate in the way Wilhelmine spooned out the remainder of her egg. After long consideration, he couldn’t decide which was more worrisome: the sudden failure of his smile to have its accustomed effect, or the ultimatum issued by his Wilhelmine, which, though given three years ago, now came back to him violently and unexpectedly.

“If you want to marry me,” she’d said, “then it must be on January 13th.”

Reliving again the terrible anxiety of that day, Wilhelm suspected his third anniversary might begin with yet another ultimatum. Even with his “if” and “but,” his “on-the-one-hand” and his “on-the-other,” he would have to tread carefully, very carefully, given the circumstances. Of course,

when you considered Wilhelmine's irritable disposition, caution itself might here be in some sense misguided, since Wilhelmine was as likely to interpret it as weakness. Yet as he thought back further, to the days leading up to the 13th of January, 1960, he decided on caution after all. A bit more caution back then and things might have gone better than they did.

"Wilhelmine! What's gotten into you! January 13th is Berta's birthday! No. We'd best avoid that day."

"So what? Berta's birthday? Are we supposed to walk around her on tiptoes for the rest of our lives? It's January 13th or it's never!"

"Wilma, dear, you're acting like a child! And it's not only Berta's birthday, you know, it's also an unlucky number."

Wilhelmine shook her head and broke out laughing, uproariously, maybe also a little perversely. "So now you're superstitious? Just like our poor Berta—she's superstitious, too! No, Wilhelm, no: if you're too big a coward to take me to the registrar's office on January 13th, then don't bother. What I need is a man, one who's there for me in spring, summer, fall, and winter—who's there every single day! I'm not interested in half-measures."

Undoubtedly he had been right not to make Berta's birthday a point of contention before, but that did not necessarily

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mean—did it?—that hinting at his old objections now, three years later, was a good idea. In the end, Wilhelm forced a decision: he would wait. He would see what precisely his Wilhelmine was going to propose. It could be she was somehow in the right and he somehow in the wrong. The only compelling certainty here was that Wilhelmine was on the attack: everything else was open to doubt.

But now it came to him how last night in bed he had, in fact, gotten carried away and let slip a certain vow: “My golden girl. My little spitfire,” he’d started, sliding up beside Wilhelmine. “Tomorrow is our third anniversary. You didn’t forget that, did you? Shall I make an oath to you, my turtle-dove? You have my word of honor as a chauffeur—but what am I saying? You have my word as an upstanding man, who always lives up to what he says—that from this day on, even more than before, I’ll beckon to every wish that falls from your lips,” and here he planted, with great relish, a gentle kiss on the face of his golden girl. “I will fulfill your every desire, even before you’ve come out with it. Dear little Wilmerl, you busy bee, my exalted, my one and only beloved! Mark my words! Mark them well! This is what our third anniversary means to me! By God, let there be no doubt! This is what it means to me!”