



Ralf Rothmann

The Night under the Snow

Novel

(Original German title: Die Nacht unterm Schnee. Roman)

304 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 18 July 2022

© Suhrkamp Verlag 2022

Sample translation by Shaun Whiteside

pp. 7 – 22

In the winter before the end of the last war the front moved almost every day, and since there was now hardly any shelter left for those who had been bombed out in the region around Danzig, they were driven west via Ohra and Preussisch-Stargard. The grandmother, the mother and the younger brothers had to cram themselves on to the covered bed of the old Opel Blitz truck. But the daughter, who had a fever, was allowed to sit in the cabin between the Volkssturm men, two silent old fellows who smelled of Jacutin, a tincture used against lice. She furtively pushed her black braids under the rim of her cap.

A helmeted young man sat outside on the mudguard and called instructions through the opening of the window to the driver, who had to get by entirely without light: ‘Right here! Stop! Sharp bend to the left! Careful, there’s a pothole!’ They advanced at a walking pace, and in spite of the gurgling wood gasifier shooting could be heard somewhere in the distance. But she wasn’t frightened; she was just glad she no longer had to lie in the cold, damp basement. It was comfortably warm between the men in their thick coats, and once the driver passed the ‘little one’ as he called her, even though she was almost seventeen, his tea flask and shared a bit of dry sausage with her. There was caraway in it, and she turned her head when she felt the other man’s elbow in her side a moment later. He had a bandage over his ear and a red glow slipped over the lenses of his glasses as he said: ‘Look over there, kiddo, that’s yours for life.’

Snow was falling, only a little, and she looked past him to the horizon, to the plain that appeared between the two forest edges. It looked like the bonfires they had after the potato harvest in peace-time, a mountain of embers in the field; but scattered among them you could see crooked gables, the black ribs of rooves and charred masts, and she only realised that this

was Danzig burning when she saw the tower of the Protestant Marienkirche. It loomed mightily out of the smoke into the night, and because the flickering firelight, repeatedly whipped to white heat by the wind, was reflected in the Mottlau, she thought for a moment that the water was on fire as well.

Now she remembered the dream she had had the night before, the black horse with the glass hooves that shattered with every step: so the bombs exploding in the distance had been the reason for the tremors in the basement of the village school, and perhaps she had opened her eyes wide or even trembled; at any rate the man said in a reassuring voice: ‘Now, now, don’t be afraid, chickabiddy. There’s a fire far away, and where you’re going it’s safe. A fine house, full of milk and eggs. It’s a castle, you’ll see. That’s where you’ll find your Prince Charming!’

The driver laughed hoarsely and she said nothing, just shook her head. After all the recent rubble of course she didn’t believe in a castle; the men probably just wanted to raise her spirits. The only thing she had seen so far, the Artushof in Danzig, was by now nothing but a sooty façade behind which you could imagine all kinds of possible ghosts, but no Prince Charming. Still, she was reassured by the fib, and when her mother called to her through the rear wall of the cabin and asked if she was all right, she closed her eyes and murmured, ‘Yes, I’m fine.’ And then she nodded off. Soon, Uncle Emil had said, the war would be over quite soon.

The wind whistled through the window slit, and the cabin smelled of tobacco and schnapps when she woke up a little later because she felt something on her knee, the bespectacled man’s glove. She wriggled around in the cramped space to show him that it was bothering her, but he ignored her, so she touched it and gave a start. It was a leather-covered Bakelite prosthesis like the one her teacher had worn since the battle of Kharkov, and she surreptitiously touched the fingers with their pronounced nail beds, unnoticed by the smoking man. His chin jutting, he stared into the night along with the others.

‘Slow! Planks! Ditch to the left!’ The boy on the running board called, then jumped down and ran alongside the driver’s cabin, and when, after a clattering stretch of wooden path, the driver took a sharp bend and braked so abruptly that she heard cries of alarm from the bed behind her, a crying child, she gripped the hand. ‘And now take care!’ he said and turned all the headlights on for a moment. The snow was falling more heavily, the wipers crunched. ‘Here’s your castle!’

Chapter One

Roses

‘There was hardly anything anyone could have done for her, I’m afraid, and perhaps people with a particularly painful past can’t help it: they numb themselves again from one moment to the next, whether with work, because they know that they’re more or less lost for the future which, regardless of our worst experiences, needs our trust to succeed. Always anxious, with uneasy eyes and a racing pulse, she did try to do right by everyone, to dress “respectably” and do her hair “tidily”; but as soon as the moon grew fuller again she rushed headlong into the next disaster, which could be a dance or a drunken fumble behind the dodgems. And it was probably a bitter victory: devoting oneself to disappointment, loss, the end of everything under brightly coloured garlands gave her an almost mocking power over the evanescence of all pleasure.’

I had expected that Wolf, from one of whose letters this extract is taken, would one day write something about his mother, ‘my wild little mother’, as he once called her on the telephone. After a long life as a librarian who has met many authors at countless readings, I know: an author rarely has more at his disposal than his own biography, and if he is honest he presents his readers with something that no one else could easily invent, something original if possible; we are all wretchedly clever in the end. Instead he writes what only he can write: his own story, hovered about by the echoes and shadows of the past and the apprehension of the future. Only then will his language become urgent and, paradoxical though it may sound, also affect others. Or as Richard, my late husband, would put it much more succinctly: ‘Tell the story you know.’

A book about Elisabeth... I doubt that she would have thought her life worth mentioning. She was, admittedly, not excessively modest, like everyone she very much wanted to count for something, but at the same time she feared the attention of others. Striving for contentment and everyday comfort while at the same time being as inconspicuous as possible: that was the most important thing for her. For that reason she even abandoned her own name with its melodious vocalic splendour and its elegant final cadence; in her circles, in the beer tents and dance halls of the farm and mine workers, it was presumably too ostentatious or even too lofty; she wanted to be called Liesel, or Lisbeth at most.

Wolf, with whom I had remained in contact since his first book, had asked me for letters and photographs at my little retirement party in 2000, and while I was looking for souvenirs of

her I came across Nani Brüggemeier's postcard in a shoe-box. To it she had stuck the death notice from the *Neue Ruhr Zeitung* with a short Bible quotation entwined with thorny roses, and suddenly the fact that Elisabeth had died less than a year after her husband, after Walter – I must have noticed at the time, but then slowly forgotten – seemed to me like a retrospective token of love, in spite of everything. As if in the end she wanted to make amends and not leave him alone, wherever he might be. On the mourning card, incidentally, it said Liesel, not Elisabeth.

My father had given her a job, shortly before his death. Convinced that the naval mess that he ran on Kiel harbour was going to fall into British hands, as early as March 1945 he had secretly gone in search of women who spoke English and had serving experience. There were a few such among the many refugees in the barns and stables of the farm near Bovenau that belonged to my father-in-law. But I had made a point of drawing my father's attention to Elisabeth, not only because she had attended middle school in Danzig, knew *Gone with the Wind*, my favourite book at the time, and had worked as a waitress in the holidays. I liked her affable cheek, her quick-wittedness and, I admit it, I liked her boyfriend.

Elisabeth Isbahner, who was soon working for us on the buffet counter, was four or five years older than me, but only a little taller. In those days both women and men were slim or gaunt, and if no one called them small it was probably down to the wedge-shaped cork soles on which they served between the tables or behind the buffet. She had dark blue eyes, slightly wavy deep-black hair and a not especially high forehead whose wrinkles above the top of her nose formed a little square when she was brooding or non-plussed. Even then, on her cheeks and earlobes, there were broken veins that could have been scribbled with a purple pen, and there was something curious about the length of her nose; it cast a shadow over her thin lips, which were never without make-up. But if she raised her chin and stared at you from her eyes, which were sometimes almost black, she could actually look intimidating. Then the drunks liked to call her 'the gypsy woman'.

This delicate woman's hands were also surprisingly large and powerful; it was plain that she came from a family of farmworkers and that she herself had done some hard work before fleeing West Prussia. Her nail polish – I had never seen her without that coral red, not even when she was milking on the farm – was probably intended to distract, but instead it emphasised them. But what might have been deemed her lack of beauty was in the end outshone by her fresh youthfulness and the energetic joie de vivre with which she got through her darkest times. Her broad smile was enchanting in spite of her strangely grey teeth with their amalgam

fillings; the whole of her face seemed to have been made specially for that radiance, and as soon as ‘Winke, winke’ or ‘Mir geht’s gut’ appeared on the radio she turned it up and whistled along.

There was always a cigarette smoking in her ashtray beside the till, and even if she was chatting to the guests at the bar she never took her eyes off the hall, the thirty tables under the huge cartwheel chandelier. Without having to learn it, she instinctively knew how to do what my father called ‘reading a pub’; she seldom forgot names, she knew exactly who drank what, and had the different kinds of schnapps poured even before they were ordered. That way everyone soon had the sense of being a regular, and a special one at that.

In the early afternoon the waitresses took a break, and then she herself did the serving, and I loved those hours before the evening session, when the sun shone through the brightly coloured skylights and the ticking of the old grandfather clock grew louder. Usually only a few guests would be sitting under the beams of smoky light, flicking through newspapers or studying documents; Mirka, the caretaker’s white cat, rubbed itself around among the tables and allowed itself to be stroked, and I often sat with a lemonade by the counter near the telephone and did my homework. In that stillness it became particularly clear that Elisabeth never walked around slowly or calmly, even when things weren’t hectic. In certain situations it is not unthinkable that small people compensate for their shorter legs by taking quicker steps. But she walked in that ‘goose-gallop’, as my mother called it, when there was nothing else to do than carry an empty glass through the empty pub to the sink. She always wanted to do everything quickly, although she never tried to mute the hard tick-tack of her heels on the tiles; everyone was meant to hear how urgent everything was to her, and how quickly she worked. And if for a moment there was nothing to do, her little eyes gazed into the void, strangely lost, her narrow face slackened and the only thing she could think of doing was lighting yet another cigarette.

‘Why don’t you go into the sun, Luisa?’ she once asked on one of those afternoons, when I was struggling with tough Cicero, his letters to Atticus. With her head thrown back she blew smoke into the air. ‘Why are you bothered about your stupid school-leaving exam? Will the washing come out any cleaner?’

I grunted quietly and shook my head. ‘And what about you? Did you finish middle school to pour beer in a place like this? Don’t you want to do anything more interesting?’

She brushed out an ashtray. ‘Why should I? Do you think I’d be better off anywhere else? Your mother is decent to me, the guests like me and I have every weekend off. Try finding

something like that in these times. And what do you have planned for when you've finished school?'

I shrugged. 'No idea, something with books, I think. I might train to be a librarian.'

Elisabeth took a sip of her coffee. 'I don't believe it! You want to become one of those dried-up beanpoles with their hair in a bun and inky fingers from the stamp? You're not going to get a husband that way, I can tell you that for nothing! Or only one of those froggish ones with wire-rimmed glasses.'

'So? I don't want to anyway!'

She smiled seriously, looking almost sad, and winked at me. 'I bet you don't, kiddo. I just have to look at your curls and your mouth. In a few years you'll want it so much that the boys will be fighting over you in the cloud of perfume you leave behind. So enjoy the time when you've got your peace and no one wants at your knickers. Put the books away and get some air!'

After the defeat of the Flensburg government and the arrest by the British of Wehrmacht High Command under Admiral Dönitz, the naval mess that had survived the bombing of Kiel almost intact was briefly used as a prisoner-of-war camp for German officers. For days the sound of chisels could be heard, removing the bas-reliefs and stone swastikas above the doors and gates. The paintings and busts in the officers' mess were smashed too, and once a Scottish sentry put a bit of greyish-white alabaster on the counter, Hitler's nose, and wanted a beer in return.

Mess staff were forbidden to have any contact with the prisoners, and the windows and doors overlooking the courtyard were boarded over. Kitchen refuse had to be carried through the hall. I liked the British soldiers, some of whom had red hair not unlike mine, and who were almost always polite and called me 'miss' or even 'young lady'. I learned how to soak grainy Assam tea in cream before preparing it with the strainer and built myself up a supply of different jellies and Cadbury's chocolate bars. They were wrapped in delicate silver paper, and a middle-aged sergeant once told me to keep it because in England you could get a well-trained guide dog for a hundredweight of it. I thought he was making some kind of joke and said, 'But I don't need a blind dog!'

He remained completely serious, sipped on his tea and said with a glance at the firth, where the masts and bows of sunken ships loomed from the water: 'No, you don't...'

Unfortunately after only a few weeks the soldiers were transferred and the barrack wings, two-storey brick buildings, were renovated from the ground up. Now the new Ministry of

Social Affairs was moving into the spaces, decently dressed men and women, but some of them walking with sticks or with a sleeve in their jacket pocket. Here and there you could still see square moustaches on upper lips, because before Adenauer had uttered his famous phrase about dirty water – that you don't throw it out before you have clean – they were an everyday phenomenon in Schleswig-Holstein: a prime minister and almost the whole of his cabinet had been members of the National Socialist Party, the first heads of the Criminal Investigation Department came from Himmler's SS, and a Gauleiter who had demonstrably murdered Jewish citizens in Riga, was assessed by Kiel's denazification committee as 'incriminated to a lesser degree Category III' and received a pension.

Suddenly the corridors smelled of the spirit from the duplication machines, and the clatter of typewriters could be heard all day. The mess was now open both to Ministry employees and to the citizens of Kiel. You could have breakfast there, increasingly often with real coffee from beans, and there were cheap meals like lobscouse or cabbage roulades until eight o'clock in the evening. Then Elisabeth would go and sit on a little brandy barrel and ring the ship's bell over the counter, polished brass engraved with the words 'Tirpitz' and 'Never forgotten!'

She rarely seemed to be exhausted after work – or else she wouldn't allow herself to be tired. She often went into the city centre to shop, or to go to a dance at the Alhambra with her friends Anne Breuers, who worked in a bakery, and Heide Rix, a typist in the registry office. Once a week she met up with other women in the craft circle of St Francis' Catholic church to sew clothes for the needy, and sometimes we sat together in front of her radio and listened to thrillers, ideally in the dark, because then the creak of the doors and the crunch of gravel under the murderer's shoes sounded all the creepier.

In the summer, when it was light for longer, we also liked to walk down to the harbour. Many of the houses on the firth shore were still sooty ruins, but the Scandinavian ferries, several storeys high and magnificently white, were anchored in front of them again, and the violin sounds of the classical pieces that drifted across the water from the speakers, Sibelius often, or Grieg, cut straight to the heart. New ships, some of them huge, were being built in the wharfs and draped in evergreen garlands for their maiden voyage, and sometimes the workers on the scaffolding whistled after us and cheered when Elisabeth showed them her tongue.

She never allowed herself to be intimidated by the men, at least not discernibly, and gave them 'as good as she got', in her words. At the same time she stiffened if drunken or even affable dockers came towards us on the quay. Then she would trip over the tiniest bump in the path, and if she put an apparently protective arm around my shoulders, she also held on to me quite tightly. But in the end she made up for her anxiety by being cheeky, or rather she disguised

her anxiety by being cheeky. She did have a weakness for the sailors in their white dress uniforms and their shiny polished shoes.

As we sat on the quay wall and I nibbled on a liquorice twist, she selected one, ideally fair-haired, and stared at him with a frown. 'Let's see how pretty we are today....,' she would murmur, or: 'Right, let's fall in love!' And already she was raising her chin, blowing a strand of hair from her forehead and calling, 'Hey, what are you looking at! Do you want a passport photograph?' And if the boy in question was startled or turned red and walked away with a shake of the head, she would murmur: 'Damn, another polite one, a goody-goody. You can have him.'

But every now and again one of them would join us on the wall, offer us one of his cigarettes and strike up a conversation. The English and Scandinavian sailors were particularly nice, and only glad to be able to chat to a woman after days or weeks among men on the sea. They even danced with me on the tarmac when popular tunes were played from the speakers, and made her laugh with their pidgin German. When it grew dark and the gas lamps were lit, she would take my hand, run her thumb gently around on my back and murmur: 'It's getting late, kid; you should be going home. I'll be right after you.'

She lived with us in the attic over the former officers' mess, but the spacious room beside the stairs was in front of them actual flat and had a bath, so that she was quite self-contained. Her radio, modern for the time and with a light display, was almost always on, and sometimes when I walked past her door I could hear the rattle of the Singer sewing machine that one of the drinkers in the bar had found for her, apparently free of cost. She had stacks of fashion magazines from the time before the war, but also new Danish ones, and she tailored almost all her own trousers, skirts and petticoats with a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. Complicated-looking patterns on several layers of silk paper hung on the wall above her bed, although her blouses or tailored suits tended to be simple, without the extravagant details of the models. They required more patience than she had.

Admittedly you couldn't only hear the radio or the flywheel of the Singer through the thin plaster walls. It was shortly after currency reform, and hardly anybody had enough money to be able to afford what Elisabeth never lacked: fabrics, cigarettes, bean coffee, perfumes, soaps, nail polish and leather shoes. However, she was certainly not earning very much from my thrifty mother; I myself hardly got any pocket money. But for a long time I couldn't imagine that her little riches had anything to do with the voices or laughter of men in her attic room, the sound of bottles and glasses, the rhythmic squeak of the old bed and the deep snores till morning.

We never got to see the faces of any of her visitors; Elisabeth always ensured that he left the house before she had carried in the laundry basket full of bread rolls and set up the big Ritter coffee machine, at just before half past six. And then if my mother and I appeared for breakfast in the guest room, she would look perhaps a bit paler than usual, and seemed a little shaky. But her hair was always neat and she was in a good mood, and always did everything smoothly – her nails were always even freshly painted. But my mother sometimes seemed to smell something on her, perhaps cheap aftershave or greasy brilliantine, and she would look at me with her nose wrinkled. She liked Elisabeth, but rarely showed it. Since the end of the war, since the death of my father and the disappearance of my sister Billie, still sought by the Red Cross, she fell ill more often than usual and often had such bad rheumatism that she shuffled when she walked. She avoided the area around the counter and preferred to work with the women in the kitchen or did the book-keeping and was glad that Elisabeth was taking care of the ‘cold beer business’. Elisabeth knew how to respond to the guests, the sober ones and the drunk, and it was after another of those noisy nights that my mother took a pre-cut roll out of the basket and said with a chuckle, ‘Well, my little kitty-cat, nice and relaxed? You were miaowing very heartrendingly again...’

Then Elisabeth raised her painted eyebrows and inflated her cheeks with apparent rage. But then she smiled with her eyes. ‘What was I doing? Nothing of the sort!’ and once more I noticed that she always made her voice sound a bit more girlish and defensive when talking to people she considered to have authority. She set the warm milk down on the table and looked at me for a moment from the corners of her eyelids. ‘The notions you come up with, Frau Norff. Do you think I have time for such things with all the work I do? The sewing machine squeaks, the old pedal. I’ll have to get it oiled.’

[...]