

"THANK YOU FOR THIS LIFE"

The beginning.

-If only this kid would come out so they'd unstrap me! Between the flashes of pain, the woman felt uncomfortably tied up. The neon strip on the ceiling flickered, the woman watched her breath form small clouds and heard cutlery scraping in the distance.

- They're getting ready to cook whatever it is I give birth to. In a mustard sauce.

- People in the country where the woman lived weren't particularly spoiled when it came to culinary matters. No one would have hit on the idea of cooking their child on a quadriga of nut-based elderberry foam, for example, but, at the thought of fine sauce being poured over her baby, it suddenly slid out of her.

Well, finally, said the midwife.

It's a ... she continued, then suddenly fell mute, and a heavy silence fell in the delivery room. After a few seconds of quiet moaning, the woman heard a tiny cough, and the baby was wrapped in a towel and handed to her. It's healthy. I think. Said the midwife. The doctor will provide you with further details.

The woman looked at the child. Its head looked a bit too big in its absurd roundness, but otherwise she couldn't see any defects to justify the eerie atmosphere that had descended. Only the child's expression was strange, it was almost adult and exhausted. If someone had decided to ascribe intelligence to this small vegetable's face, they would have had to believe that all it wanted was to disappear back where it came from.

I never wanted a child, that doesn't make sense.

- The woman sighed. I think you'll find that this sentence is not grammatically correct, the midwife interjected. The woman must have been thinking aloud, and she rolled her eyes. How much she hated grammar pedantry, the excitement over perceived imperfections. Everything has to be organized in this country, it has to make sense. You need a diploma for every area of life, whether you're a state-registered cleaner or night-watchwoman, you have to be able quote the classics,

and it's essential for every cleaner to master the periodic table. Even running a public toilet requires an aptitude test and training, and positively screams for continual psychological checks of those responsible.

Her frame of mind was out of joint, there was a baby lying on top of her that had silenced everyone, and it had a giant head.

It only existed because of a certain few seconds, because of that moment in a night that smelled of counter-wood and alcohol. The small Polish coal-carrier and the fat old caretaker – either of them, neither presumably furnished with a major inheritance, could have been the conceiver. Or not - her memory was so blurred the next morning that it could all have been a dream.

A sister actually supported her as she stood up after being unstrapped from the birthing chair - a kindness she had no reason to expect. Another sister took the baby and disappeared with it. The woman still felt a little unsteady on her frozen legs. She was led into her ward and allowed to get dressed. There was even a shower if she'd wanted it. Showering or having a bath was a luxury she would have accepted instantly in other circumstances, but the water was cold too that summer, so she just cleaned herself quickly in front of the six other women in the ward. A birth is not a particularly glamorous event. The woman took her little bag as it was proffered to her and went into the head doctor's consulting room.

- So, Mrs...

- said Head Doctor Wagenbach without looking at her. He was a bald man with noticeably frayed ears, as if they detached themselves at night and ran off to scuffle with cats.

- Congratulations on the birth of your baby,

- said Doctor Ear, and before she could say that it was perfectly fine to address her just as Mrs, he went on,

It is certainly no rarity for a child to be born with ambiguous sexual organs. We can do extraordinary things with surgery. You see, what we have here is a penis that could also be a clitoris. The x-ray shows both ovaries and testicles. Since the work of Dr Money, the standard procedure is to assign an ambiguous child to whichever gender it is easier to establish surgically. If the member is so small that it is clear

that even extensive reconstructive surgery won't be able to form a usable penis, then we must conclude that it is a girl. In that case we install a neo-vagina, which does have to be stretched for a considerable time through the regular insertion of some object. A cucumber, for example.

- Said the head doctor, without even laughing at himself. The woman could not relate the sentences he was saying to her baby, which was itself a thing she could not relate to.

- Well, what does it look more like?

- she asked the doctor. He looked at her a moment, and the woman thought she caught a slight revulsion in his face.

- It's a nothing.

- He said.

p. 19

- When the woman entered her flat later, the stale smell of its unaired rooms smacked her in the face. Despite the general desolation, a huge bourgeois ostentation dominated the rooms; the canon of world literature, a stack of classic albums, and some antique furniture made up the backdrop for a scene of despair created by an unimaginative set designer who had finally given up and filled it with empty bottles and full ashtrays. Looks like there's another Brecht play on and anyone can sing along.

The baby seemed to look around in an exaggeratedly slow, almost provocative way. The woman watched how its big head laboriously followed its eyes as they turned. After taking a 180-degree turn, the baby closed them, and the woman thought she heard it sigh.

No one was excited about this new human being. There was no bed, no painted sky, no toys waiting for him or her or whatever it is. The woman put the child down on the mattress and began to undress it. With cautious disgust, she removed the nappy, paused, took a deep breath, looked between its legs, and then finally

relaxed. Nothing scary down there, the child was like a plastic doll, it looked clean, closed, sewn up.

- Well well,

- she whispered,

- so you're a thing, like a little puppy, I'll call you Toto.

pp. 46 - 47

- It was the Seventies, and in the capitalist part of the world parents tried to talk their children out of wanting trademarked things. They wanted their children to be children with that fake purity that adults always press on their offspring. Many would actually have cheered the reintroduction of school uniforms. But it was the time when the first psychoanalysis patients were emerging from practices and declaring without inhibition: I have learned how important it is that I emphasize my individuality.

Meanwhile, the concerned parents of capitalism need only have made a short trip to the eastern part of the country to find out that expensive clothes are not necessary to achieve alienation. The children in the home wore blue trousers made from some dubious blended textile that would have burned in around three seconds and left no ashes, if anyone had taken it into their heads to try.

Surprisingly, as if to compensate for the surface uniformity, the children turned on the fat ones and the thin ones, the red-haired ones and the too-clever ones and the too-stupid ones. Only those that didn't stick out in any particular direction got through life as painlessly as possible. Humanity functioned well enough without making an effort to accept any abnormality that was not part of the evolutionary plan.

The pack had considered Toto an aberration from the first day, and had been waiting for a reason to underpin its collective antipathy. It looked like that reason had now come. They stood with bated breath. It was all too beautiful: they'd been right. He was a bad person. A thief. Didn't we know it all along, he's a thief, they thought, those character-less children. They had formed a circle around Toto, and perhaps for the first time a few of them dared get a sustained look at him. He

looked a bit strange. Yes, strange, it dawned on the children, and finally they sensed why they had never felt a desire to get to know Toto better. He was a criminal. A criminal. A criminal who looked like a fat girl.

pp. 296 - 298

- They cried a lot, the guests, as the rules of the home required they be called. They cried and wanted to be stroked, wanted to hear that it would all be okay. They would get out of here, get back to their homes, where they would find themselves with the bodies they used to have, the ones that didn't hurt yet, the eyes that could still see something - but Toto could not offer them any hope they still might have had, any last fucking hope, here, at their last stop. Should she tell them it would be better after death? She couldn't do that, because too often she sat there alone to witness the guests being cremated, the guests who lay stiff in the death room in the morning, the death room, no window and only separated from the broom cupboard by a curtain, there really was no window, and woe to anyone who believed in a soul that flew out of those dead bodies. Toto could only sit at the beds and stroke hands and faces and not stick to the protocol and be hated by the other workers because she didn't stick to the protocol because she spent too much time stroking them, and then the others had to do the dirty work, the feeding, the turning, the putting cream on their sores, shaking off their hands, the others were left with that. Toto couldn't do that. The care was important, most of them didn't want to eat anymore, they could only talk and remember, and they needed someone to tell them that their lives had been something special, especially beautiful. It's not so bad you're about to go, after you've had such an extraordinary, beautiful life. And that the children hadn't come, oh, they'd all been here yesterday, but you were sleeping so nicely that we didn't want to wake you. You had to lie, or else it was unbearable, they weren't allowed to know that no one loved them anymore, that their life was over and that there wasn't one person left behind to love them. No one could bear that.

Toto sat and stroked and listened over and over to the stories about childhoods and trees, how wonderful they'd smelled, but what had really smelled so wonderful was the idea that a glorious life had been waiting beyond that meadow. And it had never come. Just like with Toto it had never come, that glorious life with the scent

of flowers and acacias. There were only broken marriages, failed careers, lost children, illnesses and defeats, but most of the people here had forgotten it all, which was good to know. That you forget what your life actually consisted of, and what stays is your childhood and your first love, your first own home, your first trip on a ship and the ocean, into which everyone wants to dissolve. Toto would often wash the old ones so that they smelled nice and looked like angels, with the pretty hairdos that she did for them, clean and fresh, and then she could just about bear another day. Toto always stayed longer than her six-hour shift, sometimes, when they were dying, she stayed the whole night. She sat in the room next to the curtain, behind which the cleaning equipment was kept, held a hand and listened to the same words over and over again. I'm so cold, so cold, they said, and then she'd put the hand back on the body and know there were no more ways she could stop the cold. I'm scared, so scared. And then all she could do was stroke them, even though that didn't help much. That giant black hole, never see the spring again, never get to grow close to a dog or a human being again. And when the end came, Toto put her face and her arms very close to the dying one; the way you wrap up babies tight, so that they feel good, that's the way you had to hold them, so tight, so that they feel cared for and then they're free to go to that empty place that is cold and nothing.

Presumably.

pp. 325 – 329

The End, Toto Grown-up and Old

- Toto, getting close to fifty, was suddenly the oldest tenant in the building. When she'd moved in, over forty she'd been then, she always just felt either one or the other, but not old and not young anymore, and most of the tenants had been older than her. Very old, very gray, very fat or very thin, and beige. They all wore beige and had the same haircuts, short if they were women, and a wreath of hair around a bald patch for the men, they were suspicious. They had disappeared one at a time, into homes or into the ground, and now mainly young families from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tunisia lived here, and lots of children, and Toto wasn't one of them, as much as she tried to comfort the children, or carry the baskets for the women, or cheerily greet the men. Toto noticed that she now began a lot of sentences with:

Over there, where there used to be... And politicians, who'd always been old men before, suddenly became young women, but there were still no trees anymore, or meadows. The ground had become too valuable. All agriculture had been moved into hangars and production sites, animals grew in mass breeding plants, only a few out-of-the-way mountain regions kept small organic farms. The affluent went into the mountains at the weekends with little baskets, talked to the chickens and then bought eggs, which the hens wrapped in crepe paper personally for them.

The excursions to the mountains were nature-viewing events for dual-income families. They crept up those mountains in their thousands, drank aromatized fennel tea in comfortable restaurants and then returned to the traffic jams so they could be ready the next day to do their damned jobs.

The world had not ended.

Toto had no friends.

pp. 334 – 336

- It was a Sunday when Toto had decided to go on a trip to see if there was something beyond her block. She had sat in a train, and her legs had trembled.

This is reserved. A buzzing noise. The woman had built herself up in righteous anger in front of Toto. This was her fucking seat. She had paid for it.

They had become so much angrier, the people, because they sensed they couldn't get any justice anywhere anymore, or what they thought was justice, because everything was changing and time wasn't even polite enough to wait for their lives to finish.

My seat. My right. My law. My garden. A gray eminence. The hair, the hiking pants, the rucksack, only the cheeks were reddened with broken veins.

I'm sorry, said Toto, and got up, the woman didn't even try to hide her hatred. Toto smiled at her, and now the woman's head went red, she was going to die! She didn't want to be smiled at by something like this, someone like this, and she didn't even know what it was.

She had always done the right thing, this woman, whose savings had recently been transformed into a bonus and paid to a banker, and she'd never found a husband. She hadn't been looking for one, she was political. Born in the late forties of the last century, a left-wing activist, a great friend to the oppressed, and even that didn't count for anything anymore.

Even the fucking oppressed didn't count anymore, and everything she'd believed in no longer existed. No longer meant anything, hadn't she and her comrades re-invented the world, done it all first? Slept on the floor in shared flats, even though it really hadn't been at all comfortable, and demonstrated against nuclear waste dumps and for abortion rights. She'd written poems, and gone to readings, it had all been so exhausting, only the things you struggled for counted, and now she lived in a housing project at the edge of town, there were no cafés, one supermarket, employed people, and no children, and there always seemed to be a wind blowing, and she was old. She was fucking old, she rolled around on a child's scooter, carried a rucksack, and she had achieved nothing with her struggle, her demonstrations, her Palestinian scarves, her Nuclear-Power-No-Thanks badges, and her revolution had been hijacked by young apolitical morons who just whined a little on internet forums. Men kept telling her that she was bitter. Because she wasn't natural anymore, and selfless and giving. Bitter, frustrated, hysterical, that's how stupid old men and stupid young women categorized the bad fucking moods of older women who had fought so that these stupid little chickens could become underpaid politicians. These young women who demanded the right to wear skirts that didn't cover their backsides without being classed as a sex object. They just liked the cold air on their bums, young women who called people like her dykes, unfeminine, despised them because their breasts sagged and didn't dye their hair, these young women who demanded their equality, which they used to get their husband Torben to change the baby's nappy after Torben had been at work for twelve hours, and she, she'd had a hard day in organic shops and on adventure playgrounds. And now they weren't even going to allow her the right to her own fucking seat. The government did what it wanted, it demolished buildings, even though she was still there, demonstrating against it, it cut down trees, re-built railway stations underground, made noise, and she'd be dead by the time any of this might one day actually work. She wanted to have a nice life in her last decades, she'd earned it. Then there it was, sitting in her seat, her reserved seat, the annoyance wouldn't go away, her whole day was ruined.

End

pp. 389 - 393

- The facility was decked out in cheery colors. A lot of pink, supposed to be calming, no corners, Rudolf Steiner would have leaped in joyous approval, and there was a mild shimmer to the light, the staff was outstandingly well-trained, and came mainly from the Philippines, Filipinos being world-renowned for their ability to deal with the needy, they were not shy of physical contact, in fact they sought it out.

At the start of the millennium, no one would have thought that the world could so quickly become such a harmonious place, a place dominated by ocher tones where there were no more wars, because people were preoccupied with patching up the surface of the Earth, where there were no more religions, because everyone was too busy trying to survive, and where there was nothing left to be envious of. Honestly, no one could've foreseen that.

No one, out in the world of the functioning, would have named the home Leper Island, or Storage Facility for Superfluous Life, or Lunatic Asylum, Homeless Shelter, or Garbage Collection Point. People didn't think like that anymore, amazing how in the past few years, which could virtually be called the decade of self-regulation, the act of controlling your own brain had entrenched itself so well. Almost everyone censored their own thoughts, inspected them for both political and humanitarian correctness, and became miserable when they caught themselves in old clichés and prejudices. Particularly sensitive people drove themselves insane; they incessantly monitored the stream of their own thoughts and scourged themselves or banged their heads against the wall as they kept discovering inner impurities. It had become normal for people to express their questionable thoughts out loud in conversation:

- Oh, excuse me, one would say, I just thought to myself that I don't actually like you very much, do please forgive me,

- One would say, or:

- Oh, I just caught myself in a prejudice based on your skin color, awkward, awkward.
- The conversation partner would gratefully accept this openness, since being a self-regulating person was considered a sign of good etiquette.
- Unfortunately this continual thought-monitoring had led to sleeping disorders among many, though that wasn't particularly noticeable, since the worldwide consumption of sleeping pills had increased fourteen-fold since 2010. The accepted opinion was that sleep wasted time, but until science advanced, it remained an unfortunate necessity for maintaining physical performance. At least scientists had established that humans needed a block of four hours' sleep plus three power-naps to reach the peak of their capacities and sustain it for extended periods. The hours that were won as a consequence opened new, previously unimagined opportunities. Languages, like Chinese, could be learned, advanced training could be completed, physical fitness could be worked on. Just as people had learned to become non-smokers without questioning industry interests, people now naturally took a sleeping pill at around 10pm that put them to sleep for exactly four hours, then swallowed another on waking that made them instantaneously energetic and efficient. No one drank coffee anymore, everyone preferred delicate, healthy herbal teas made from blood-cleansing plants that grew in mountains untouched by negative environmental influences. After that you began your exercises and your vocational further-training programs.
- People didn't talk about those homes, which were usually located near train tracks. One knew that they existed, and that sick people who needed help lived there. But there was no interest in them beyond that.

Toto had been put alone in a room, since her smell, which was very sour, might have unsettled the others. The pink bars in front of the windows didn't really bother anyone, they were more like a frivolous break in the structure of the bank of broken stones outside, where the railway used to run. The home was a functional building decorated with the aforementioned friendly colors; clean, well-heated in the rainy season, it included a small garden covered in foam rubber, around which the bolder inhabitants could jump.

Toto had been presented to a house doctor on the first day of her stay. The results, which she was informed of a few days later, were less than encouraging. Toto had a

form of leukemia that even the specialists, specially called in, only knew from nuclear accident sites. The doctor remained baffled; it was inexplicable that Toto had not undergone treatment years ago, since it was an illness that developed very slowly. The chances of recovery were very poor, and by this time non-existent.

- Toto did not really understand the diagnosis. It was as if she slowly wanted to leave a party she had never been invited to, but had no idea which of the many hosts to thank first. The doctor had given her medication with a strong morphine base that was supposed to create a unique state of complete satisfaction. But since Toto's body secreted such a substance almost the whole time anyway, there was no great change. She was even more peaceful, and had begun to sing again - that entity that had stopped her before had fallen away.

Almost all the inhabitants of the home now had the daily pleasure of listening to two hours of singing that did not aspire to anything. It sounded like a conversation with the beyond, a lament full of hope. But of course no one said that. You couldn't exactly say: hey, that sounds like a hopeful lament. They were just paralyzed when they heard Toto's voice, borne by a sadness and a love that none of them had ever known.

- Toto felt complete, even stronger than ever before, the time beneath the bridge was forgotten, along with the sadness for that lost love. Toto no longer remembered with regret that she had never experienced what it was like to simply be with someone, effortlessly, and the nausea had disappeared too, it only came a little at night, and then she vomited into a bucket that stood next to her bed.

Toto was happy.

She couldn't know how it would have been if someone had loved her, but it was futile to regret it. She couldn't know how it would have been to live in a different time either, or as a different person, or as an animal. You can regret all the possibilities you never had, or you can be happy that you emerged briefly out of the great darkness of infinity that rules the rest of the time, before birth and after death. A brief moment of light, that's a lot already, billions, trillions of egg cells were never even granted that.

Toto mostly sat on the bed, rocked backwards and forwards and smiled. Such a gift, this life, and how interesting that so much should have happened during her stay.

THE END