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Max Scharnigg
Die Besteigung der Eigernordwand
unter einer Treppe
(Climbing the North Face of the Eiger
under the Stairs)

**Translation of the first part of the novel the author has read at
the Bachmann Prize**

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1.

It was the on the first Thursday in April that I stopped going to our flat. For some weeks before then, I had been writing an article on the first ascent of the Eiger North Wall, and the foehn wind had been blowing across the city, making people restless and quick. I was the last to leave the newspaper office and rode home on the metro, my mind still on the ascent of the Eiger. On the journey I stood next to two men in conspicuous jackets. Their collars were done up almost to their chins and they spoke half into their jackets and half to each other about the coming weekend, and I heard how one was just saying 'but it'll be kicking at night' when the noise of the closing doors drowned out everything else. On the other one's back, which was turned towards me, the words 'Mammoth Extreme' were embroidered in large letters, and as I said them quietly to myself in my head, the driver's announcement came, so that it sounded like Mammoth Extreme Stiglmaier Square.

Anderl Heckmair and his friend Wiggerl had cycled to Grindelwald from Munich. That was 1938. They had put up their tent right in front of the North Wall of the Eiger, fortified themselves with Ovaltine and got on with it, in woollen jumpers. On the ascent they met the famous mountaineer Heinrich Harrer, who had been poking around on the wall with his roped party for quite some time. The boys roped on behind Harrer, and the four of them climbed the wall in seventeen hours. Holidaymakers in knickerbockers were standing on the terrace of the Kleine Scheidegg and watching the ascent through telescopes. When Heckmair reached the peak, his greatest worry was that he wouldn't find a bed for the coming night, as he and Wiggerl didn't have any money left. Later he was sent to the Eastern Front as a soldier; then he became a mountain guide in Oberstdorf. Two months ago, on the first of February, Anderl Heckmair died, the great conqueror of the Eiger. That was my twenty-eighth birthday.

I had been working too hard. M. had said that, and it was true. Two weeks ago I had asked to take a holiday, but hadn't been given an answer. Maybe they guessed that I wasn't looking for a holiday as such. I wasn't thinking of beach umbrellas. What I wanted was a friendly calm, such as you find in a little cemetery in a town. That was my idea of a holiday, a friendly calm with room to

move around in. I got out at Red Cross Square, didn't go through Leonrod Street like I usually did, but took the street after it. The pavements were wet and clean.

A young woman was walking in front of me. Her fair hair in a ponytail, from behind she looked like M. But she was somewhat taller and her jeans disappeared into brown leather boots. She was in a hurry, like me.

We had moved into the house in Juta Street a little over a year ago. It had been snowing at the time and the heating hadn't worked, so we froze for the first weeks and M. scarcely left our bed. When I came back from the paper, my breath billowed out into the bare rooms.

The young woman in front of me also turned into Juta Street, which unsettled me. The street wasn't long. Indeed, she slowed her steps and in front of the door to my house she slipped her handbag off her shoulder to look for her key. I stopped where I was, but that could only look right for a few seconds. Then I turned to the left, went through a passageway to some garages until I was standing by a wrought-iron gate hung with a sign: 'Close behind you'. Through the neighbouring house's backyard I reached our own – a low shed for the dustbins and a small garden where the janitor's wife planted hydrangeas. The hydrangeas had grown so high last summer that bees on their way to the highest blossoms had to take a break on our balcony.

Going through the heavy gate, which was only pushed to, I stepped into the stairwell. The young woman's steps rang out on the wooden stairs above me, while I stood there in silence. She hadn't switched on the light. The stairwell was dark and the dark smelt a little of hot meat, as there is a butcher's in the house. I heard how the woman's steps stopped and a door was opened, on the third floor I supposed. We lived on the second.

The light came on the second time I pressed the switch. Slowly I climbed the stairs, the newspaper from our letterbox in my hand. That meant that M. hadn't left the house today either. A light was on in our flat, shining warmly and evenly into the stairwell through the opaque glass of the old door. A pair of shoes stood by the door. Normally no one put shoes out on the landing, apart from children's wellies. They were men's shoes, carefully placed beside our mat. They had a sporty, narrow form, but weren't trainers. Their pale green leather was cracked in places; the leather lining was yellow. From above I could see the dark

marks left by the balls of someone's feet. The shoelaces looked much too long to me. They weren't my shoes.

The stairwell light went out with a distant, quiet sound. I stood in the dark in front of the unknown pair of shoes at our door. As if a background noise had gone with the light, the silence in the stairwell was suddenly more defined. A washing machine was churning round on one of the higher floors. There was no explanation for these shoes. M. didn't have either a brother or male friends who would visit unexpectedly. There had been friends like that, of course, but over the years they had all disappeared. The yellow lining was still visible in the gloom. I gently touched the shoes with my foot, pushing them a little to the side, until they touched the door. Inside I heard voices. A woman was speaking, her voice muffled, as if she were speaking behind two closed doors. I couldn't tell if it was M. The voice sounded relaxed and gentle, as if she were talking to someone who had already been sitting in a warm room for a long time. The male voice seemed to come from even further away, but I could clearly hear the hard syllables that started every third or fourth word. Then a door opened, the conversation grew louder, although I still couldn't hear actual words. Further doors were opened, both voices floated by near me. Suddenly I heard, very close by, how a chain was pulled across on the inside – the door chain that M. and I use every evening in a silent ceremony and without whose protective jangle we wouldn't fully come to rest.

The voices faded away once more, they embraced as they went, it seemed to me, touched each other between laughter, until finally the flushing of our toilet drowned out everything else. We had a very loud flush. The water dropped almost two metres to the toilet bowl from a tank under the ceiling. I took a step back; the light shone through the opaque pane of glass onto the landing, but it had lost its warmth. From inside came the sound of crockery being taken out of a cupboard and placed on the table, always enveloped in the two voices' quiet talking. A faint smell of warm onions wafted under the door. I stood there barely breathing, my key in my hand.

With a distant click the light came on in the stairwell again. From below I heard a flat's door bang and then the front door downstairs. With a start I turned around, put my key in my coat pocket and left – as if I was just about to leave the house. I hurried downstairs, as if I were in a film, and went to the letterboxes, which hung on the wall by the cellar door. I stopped in front of our letterbox, as if our little nameplate had the same function as the numbered sign in a company car park, as if I could park here and turn the motor off.

The house is old; it has a spacious entrance hall with a high vaulted ceiling. The walls are lined with blue tiles up to chin height. The light went out again, and the click of the timer clock came from very nearby now. I closed my eyes for a moment, the green shoes by our door gleaming on the inside of my lids. The shoes belonged to a man who was, at this moment, in our flat and talking to M. They laid the table and flushed the toilet. Something had happened. Only a few hours ago in the same flat I had got up, had woken M. and while I got dressed in front of the wardrobe, talked to her as I do every morning, in a gentle rhythm that suits her waking up. I ask her how she slept, what she dreamt of and about other absurd little things that might have happened. Had I opened the window this morning? Said something about the weather? Had the sun appeared in the room as a glowing frame around the edges of the blinds? And hadn't M. got up, to fetch a glass of water? All of that could have occurred yesterday or not at all. I looked up the stairs, but I could only see a few yards up. Above me everything was wooden and dark. I had no wish to climb the stairs once more.

There was space under the stairs. A pushchair and a bin for junk mail stood there. The janitor occasionally emptied the bin. The stairs towered above them like half of a roof. I moved the pushchair a little to the side and was taken with the way it was so easy to roll. Behind it there was complete darkness. As a boy I had had an attic room. My bed had stood right where the slope of the roof started. Sometimes I hit my head as I got up, but I slept well. For years after my parents had sold the house with the attic room, I could only fall asleep when I imagined the sloping roof of that bedroom.

I crept under the stairs. The floor was warm. There must be a heating pipe under the brown floor tiles. I sat down with my back against the wall at a spot where I could lean my head easily against the slope of the stairs. With my feet I arranged the pushchair in front of me in such a way that its side hid my spot from view. I put the bin beside it, like a watchtower. Laying my newspaper underneath me insulated me. I tried to remember which items in the paper today I had written. A two-column article on a TV film. I was happy it was now of some use.

I was comfortable where I was, sitting on the warm floor, my outstretched legs just reaching the pushchair, which almost hid me completely behind its waterproof cover. The bin, somewhat lower than the pushchair, formed an angle with it at the side. The light went out, in the distance the bells of the Church of the Sacred Heart struck eight and even before the last chime – and completely contrary to my usual habits – I fell into a peaceful sleep.

2.

I spent the next days under the stairs. Occasionally I stretched my legs in the yard, but not often. I had absolutely no need for movement or variety. I wasn't bored. In a kind of waking sleep I carried on writing the ascent of the Eiger in my thoughts, without of course writing anything. Nonetheless my thoughts were detailed and so exact that I could delete the sentences in my head hours later, like on a computer, and the remaining text moved into the gap. I could also shift around whole passages and proofread others in peace. This work was very demanding. The text had grown to a length of nine pages and I was continually adding new sections. During longer breaks, I listened to the people's steps on the stairs above me. I soon started another text in my head, a kind of catalogue in which I attempted to write down short profiles. I wish I had access to these descriptions today. I remember that they were powerfully sharp notes, a little like the ones that a sommelier makes as he tastes wine.

There was a woman, for example, who descended from the fourth floor every morning and pounded each step with such targeted violence that before she passed overhead I had put my head between my knees, as if I were sitting in a plane about to crash. The steps were still creaking minutes after the stomper had left the house, as if they had to relax slowly afterwards and creep back into their old positions. When the woman came home in the evening, I could barely tell her steps apart from those of the other people. She only thundered in the morning. People walked differently in the evening. They crept back into their flats and were barely noticeable, or relieved, or so heavily laden with shopping bags that they took a tiny break after each step, as if the atmosphere were thin. When someone walked like that, I imagined it was Anderl Heckmair, who was right then taking the last steps over the north ridge towards the peak. Some people even stopped at the first half landing, to look out of the window.

I spent a long time under the stairs worried the users of the stairs might discover me. I had prepared what I would say in that eventuality. I couldn't stop changing it and running through it once more in my head, embellishing it here, tightening it there. In all its variants, the core of my defence was to pretend that I had ended up sitting under the stairs unintentionally. As if I had just been

looking for somewhere to rest for a moment and the corner under the stairs had been most handy. Combined with an endearing helping of absentmindedness, and a convincing 'and why not?' attitude, it would hopefully be enough to ward off my discoverers and allow me to slip away into the yard until they had withdrawn.

I had no immediate intention to leave my place. I could see that the Eiger text would need some more time, and I couldn't think of any better work space than my hiding place under the stairs, whose darkness seemed not to permit people a good view of it. I wasted barely a thought on the newspaper office. After all, the paper was printed without me every day, every morning at around six a bustling albino stuffed them in the letterbox slits like dynamite into a rock. Not infrequently this handling caused page one to crease. Often I saw the scrunched up headlines all day, strangely truncated words which also ended out of sight in the maw of the letterbox. I enjoyed guessing the whole title from the crumpled parts. That was easy with the large daily papers, as they always chose their main title from a small collection of political terms and set phrases. The tabloids were much harder, because they really tried to contort their titles in eye-catching ways. Many of the papers stuck out of their letterboxes all day long, and a fair few went directly from there to my watchtower bin. But I couldn't make myself read any of them. Guessing the headlines was enough for me, even if I could never tell for sure if I had chosen the right solution.

I didn't eat anything under the stairs. From the very first hour my hunger had disappeared. At the beginning I explained that by my lack of movement, but I soon had to admit that even with the smallest expenditure of energy I should have felt a need to eat. Instead I felt full, and on certain days even satiated. There was, it seemed, a correlation with the smells from the butcher's. Only on the two days each week when *Leberkäse* was prepared did that intense feeling occur. I didn't have the time to investigate the phenomenon any further. When I sometimes tried to get hungry, on a whim, I felt like a violinist who wants to perform something but doesn't have an instrument. It almost felt progressive, to

do without metabolism, as if I were a special kind of human. But I didn't think about it all that much.

3.

One morning the pushchair was gone. I had slept in that day. The place on the wooden panelling where my head leant had already taken on a brown sheen, a discovery which filled me with satisfaction for some inexplicable reason.

I had assumed that the pushchair was no longer needed, that it had been left here for ever and that every time its owners went by they felt a pang of pain, which they were by now accustomed to. The only family in the house who had a little child always dragged its pushchair upstairs, causing a racket above my head which was agreeably different from the people's steps.

Without the pushchair, a bareness filled my place. The new space seemed to keep changing under my waking and probing gaze. As if I were trying to focus a telescope, my eyes zoomed from one side to the other and yet after all their exploratory forays they still couldn't be happy with the situation. The bin was now something very insubstantial on the edge. When I stretched my legs, they no longer had the thicket of the pushchair's shopping basket, in which they had settled down until now. Bare and long, they jutted out into the open. The lack of my main concealing object didn't change my invisibility at all. The residents passed my hideaway the same as always, in the order they kept with remarkably regularity every weekday morning. Each one had a set time to leave the house; seldom was the order altered by a stumble, a rushing back, an ill-defined hesitation on the last step. If these irritations did crop up, however, then en masse, affecting all the users of the stairs.

No one saw me, but my work stopped progressing. I couldn't immediately call up extensive sections of the ascent of the Eiger in my head. For example, it was only after much concentrated thought that I found the crossing of the 'Weiße Spinne', which even today is the key point of any Eiger climb. Deeply worried, I skim-read sentences which were incomplete, read phrases which I had thought long since deleted, found typos and inaccuracies in every line that both embarrassed and excited me. A quick survey of the whole text revealed that some sections were as flawless as I had left them yesterday. Others appeared to have been thrown back to various stages of incompleteness and some parts, transitions and asides I couldn't remember at all. As often as I tried, I could only

see them briefly, never long enough to clearly recognize what was missing. It took all morning and some of the afternoon to determine the damage and carry out temporary safeguarding measures.

I was so absorbed by this work that I noticed the steps too late. They were different from all the others, and came from upstairs. In my first days under the stairs, as I assembled my catalogue of steps, I had tried again and again to imagine M.'s walk. To that end, I had her walk by me in my thoughts, I accompanied her once again through the arcades and markets which I had once gone to with her, without however coming to any useful conclusion. Now the echo of the one I'd been looking for was in the air. It was a walking that didn't seem completely to serve moving forwards. With every forwards move, the steps moved back slightly, barely touching the floor and needing every few steps to add a little extra hop, to match the rhythm of the stairs. I put all this together hesitantly, and by the time I had interpreted it and put down my open Eiger ascent, the front door clicked back into its lock with a slight tremor of its pane of glass. Threads of sunlight crossed the hall; particles of dust moved in them, up and down.

I wanted to start work on the text again, but I was in turmoil. The missing pushchair and then M.'s steps had confused me. I tried again and again to remember her steps, as meticulously as you try to remember the last words of someone who has died. She hadn't checked the letterbox and had left without hesitation.

The last time we left the house together, three or four weeks ago, she had turned back in the stairwell as she always did, under the pretext of having forgotten her key. I had waited ten minutes in front of the butcher's display window. Then M. had stepped cautiously out of the door. In the flat she had changed, and was now wearing dark trousers instead of a light-coloured skirt. She looked shyly at the ground, took my hand quickly – like a plea for understanding – and put her own limply in mine. The limpness, that was her fear.

She didn't always have the fear; the fear had moved in with us later, like a sick relative. It wasn't there yet in the first year, even if M. later claimed I just hadn't seen it. At the time we used to meet on a bench in the Court Gardens. It was exactly half way between her university and the newspaper office. We had arranged to meet there once, and from then on we went to the bench every day, always at the time of our first meeting, without having planned it. We were shy and at the same time unable to recognize this characteristic in each other, so that right from the start there was a familiar balance between us. In the first few weeks neither of us dared to suggest a meeting for the next day. Each time only a vague hope preceded our quiet meetings in the Court Gardens. Every day I was sure that M. wouldn't come, and tried to ease the pain of this supposition by thinking up innocent reasons why she wouldn't be able to come. I conscientiously pocketed a book each time, depending on my mood either Knut Hamsun's *Pan* or Byron's diaries, as I was not going there to meet M., but to read a little. I still haven't read a single line of either of those books. M. always came. In her bike basket she always had either Canetti's *Auto da Fé* or a book by Françoise Sagan. Mind you, she read both of them, later. We were very similar. If I had taken Byron, she always brought Sagan. So our books fell in love too, and today Byron and Sagan stand next to each other on M.'s bookshelf, and Canetti and Hamsun lie one on top of the other near me, because I tend to pile my books in knee-high towers. A summer passed with our meetings in the Court Gardens without our undertaking anything else except sitting next to each other on a bench. The copper beech hedge, which hid the city behind our backs from us, was developing bare patches when one day M. didn't want to sit, but took my hand and the two of us, very cautiously, left this first place.

4.

Only with difficulty could I limit the mess under the stairs to a normal amount. At the same time, I wasn't in a rush. I blamed the day's occurrences on a construction fault, a wonky scaffold that I had stacked too much on until it finally had to collapse. I wanted to avoid this happening again and spent the day

carefully sorting the texts in my head. I spread them out page by page and felt pleasantly refreshed by the spaces they left. While the house was calm in the hours around noon, towards four o'clock the first residents returned and brought a taste of tired walking and stale breath into the house. I didn't pay them any more attention, had drawn my legs up to my chest and was dedicated to the work of ordering and starting again. Those parts of the Eiger text which seemed to me unchanged I gathered into a corner, and everything which seemed to have gaps I carefully spread out, worried that another gust of wind could leave the scattered separate sections in complete disarray. Like doctors' sterile and exact actions during an operation, I worked on, aware that something living lay before me. Yet in spite of a thorough search, part of the text was nowhere to be found: the part that dealt with Anderl Heckmair's approach to the foot of the Eiger. I looked through the beginnings of all the sentences, like someone who is waiting scans a crowd. But between the climbers' arrival and their first lengths of rope up the Wall, there was a gap in my narrative. I went over it again and again, but nothing else attached itself. What was even more unsettling was that I really no longer knew what I had written there. Nor did my archive offer any clue. I had mislaid Heckmair's approach to the North Wall. Not a footstep or image was left. Behind my closed eyelids I could see nothing except the front door, which had closed behind M. It was red and violet. I had to look at it for ages.

Hey, what're you doing there?

The red and violet door on my eyelids dissolved. In their place these words appeared, like the text of a LED sign they scrolled from left to right, much too fast. I knew that I would have to open my eyes after they had crossed my vision, and nothing would be as it had been before.

I had never seen the man before in the house. He had stopped three metres away in his tracks, so that his whole body was strangely side-on to me; an old cotton bag hung from his shoulder on long straps. His hair was long and white, it lay on each side in an inconspicuous way. Around his neck hung a cord, which was there to hold a pair of glasses that rested on his protruding tummy.

The man's question still hung in the air. He looked at me in a friendly way. I knew that the dialogues I had learnt by heart would be out of place. So I said:

I'm working.

Without a moment's surprise he answered:

You're working under the stairs.

They are my stairs too, I live on the second floor.

How long have you been sitting here?

I paused and thought it over.

I couldn't tell you exactly, a while, for sure, a few days, two weeks, certainly not more than that.

The old man took a step. His expression contained nothing unusual, which disappointed me. Now he took his glasses in his hand.

Would you like to come in?

His glasses tapped on the door. I was still crouching with my knees up to my chest. My mouth, as I noticed now, had grown stiff after my long silence. It cracked in my jaw as I spoke.

To your place?

Yes, I live here, my name's Jahn. Today it's – I mean, I'm cooking today. There's chicken with peppers.

He talked softly, his voice wandered around his words, without any hurry. Chicken with peppers. Words like a new sun, which rose swiftly above my mountains of words and shone between the sentences formed of glaciers, granite and peaks. It burrowed its way through all the mountaineering terms; the chicken with peppers emitted its red warmth through all the clips and karabiners. It did no less than melt its way through my work of the last few days.

I was dripping.