

Matthias Zschokke

***The Man with Two Eyes* (Wallstein, 2012)**

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A Romanian nurse picked up the phone and handed it to the woman in the deck chair. The woman mumbled: “Io dormo, io dormo.” The man with two eyes laughed and said: “Since when do you speak Italian, Madam? It’s me, can you hear me? You’re not sleeping; you’re on the phone with me.” At this she had a coughing fit, and he said goodbye. *Io dormo, io dormo* would be her last words. She died that evening. A day earlier her twenty-one year old cat had also died. That was what the man had really wanted to tell her over the phone.

The cat had strayed into the woman’s life as a half-grown, feral animal and remained skinny and shy until the very end. She had conspicuously large, nearly transparent ears and only very rarely – and completely unexpectedly – took two or three steps towards a human being before withdrawing again without any apparent haste. As a matter of principle, the man with two eyes didn’t pay the cat much attention. Only once had she carefully approached him, brushing against his right leg before walking away with her tail held vertically. The reasons for the cat’s behaviour can no longer be established. At any rate, he was pleased about it and thought he might actually have won her over.

When she was young, the cat had had a pink, porcelain-fragile nose. Sometimes she would forget to put the tip of the tongue back into her mouth. This gave the cat what one might have described as a slightly worried expression. All her life, it looked as if she were burdened with onerous responsibilities. Such gravity! Such a graceful body! Such cool and soft paws! People who don’t like cats will shake their heads at these lines nonplussed. The man with two eyes couldn’t help himself, he liked animals. He felt comfortable whenever he was around them, and then the joy of

being alive would flare up in him ever so briefly. He knew, for example, that horses sleep badly if you leave them outside on their own. Horses take turns watching over their sleeping companions. He relished such facts.

Bail out your boat only when you have to. This was the only proverb the woman who had died in the deck chair seemed to have known. She would quote it with such regularity at appropriate and inappropriate moments that the man with two eyes ended up using the saying himself. He'd grown accustomed to the woman over the years. He loved walking down the street on her left side while holding her hand. Usually he couldn't think of anything to say, though. Just like peace and happiness, they didn't have very many words or stories at their disposal. Whenever she said the thing about the boat, he thought to himself: "How right she is; one should bail out one's boat only when one has to."

And now she was dead. She had chosen to end her own life, as the official designation would have it. He didn't wish for God to strike them dead with a thunderbolt. Them: the people who had made her life miserable. A thunderbolt was far too pure for that. The thunderbolt would never be able to get rid of the stench once it had come into contact with that bastard brood, those sickly malice-mongers who put down everyone who dared to dream of something better.

He wasn't even sure who he meant by that term, *bastard brood*. Probably everyone. He didn't even know where he'd got it from. Or *sickly malice-mongers*, for that matter. Once the initial numbness that followed the news of her death had subsided, these incoherent set phrases flooded his brain and darkened his mind.

The cat was lying on the kitchen floor, wrapped in a white table cloth. Since he hadn't been able to ask the woman on the phone what he should do with the corpse, he shoved it into a blue bin bag and carried it down to the basement where in the farthest left corner he knew he'd find a rusty coal shovel left there by the previous tenant.

He put the shovel into the bag with the cat and went to the nearby city park, a small piece of mixed woodland with clearings, paths, meadows, flower beds, playgrounds and barbecuing areas. In the morning the park was usually deserted, except in midsummer during the school holidays – but they were long over. At the edge of a grassy area he started digging a hole in the undergrowth. The soil was dark,

moist and soft: the digging was easy. He laid the cat wrapped in the cloth into the hole. He covered the hole and pushed leaves over it. Then he just stood there, arms hanging down at his side, and stared at the small mound. He said quietly: “So long, Bisibisi.” He had no idea why he called her “Bisibisi.” He pondered whether he’d recently seen a cat called that in a film or on TV, but he couldn’t remember. He shook his head, as if to chase away a buzzing mosquito, put the coal shovel back into the blue plastic bag and left.

After a funeral, he thought, you usually go for a meal. That is what the woman who had said *io dormo, io dormo* on the phone would certainly have suggested. So he went to Mario’s on Breite Straße to have pasta with ham and bacon. (After all, he couldn’t have known that the woman would die that very evening; they only informed him the following morning.) On the way, he left the shovel in the blue plastic bag next to a bin.

The restaurant was empty except for one customer sitting at the window with his face to the entrance. He looked familiar. The man with two eyes knew he didn’t have it in him simply to nod at this apparent acquaintance before taking up his usual place at the table in the alcove to the right of the entrance. There he had intended to think in peace and quiet about the court report he was working on, and about whether there was any point at all anymore in writing these court reports. He reddened; anger flared up in him for an instant, anger at not being allowed to remain alone. Yet he couldn’t help himself: as if attracted by a magnet, he walked across the room and asked, “Is this seat taken?” The stranger looked up from his plate and – his mouth being full – pointed to the numerous empty chairs in the restaurant before asking why he had to sit down at his of all tables.

“Because I believe we’re acquainted,” answered the man with two eyes standing in front of him. “When one is acquainted, then the situation dictates that one should greet the other and share a table, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I don’t know you. But please, go ahead and sit down. You seem to want company.”

“But aren’t you so-and-so? And don’t we know each other from such and such a place?”

“Indeed, that’s me and yes, I frequent the places you mention. But, try as I might, I can’t remember you.”

“That’s quite possible. I’ve often been told that I have a stingy-looking expression; my appearance is not very memorable; people tend to forget me quickly. But look closely: didn’t you recently call someone who looked very much like me a fraud?! And are you not the very same person I called a hypocrite and parasite in return?! Which I why at first I was tempted not to sit down at your table out of the fear of being drawn into pretence and being dragged down by you into the mire.”

“What mire, if you please?”

“The mire of mutual politeness, not to mention the mire of flattery and lies. Just yesterday at noon, for example, I was having coffee in the canteen of the chemical plant close to my office when I noticed a few characters sitting together, a stinking cloud of poisonous gas looming over their heads. Taken individually, each of them seemed reasonable and tolerable to me. Taken together, however, they were unbearably stupid and loud, leading one another on to malicious gossip, dim-witted cruelty and spineless sycophancy. I’ve just realized something: the sight of you has made me lose my appetite. I strongly feel I should go home, lie down and rest. Please excuse me.”

He nodded curtly, turned on his heel and left the restaurant.

A girl was playing with her friend in the inner courtyard of the block of flats where the man with two eyes lived. The courtyard was a narrow asphalt square with a rusty frame for beating carpets right in the middle. The sun had been shining for days on end – which was unusual for this region in late autumn – but it never reached the bottom of the courtyard. So, the asphalt in the corners was constantly wet and covered in dark green moss. Whenever someone opened the gate to the street to go out or to come in, the courtyard was suddenly illuminated and a wave of warm air poured in. Then the girls stood motionless and let the warm air swirl around their naked legs.

One of them, called Filine, would have loved to show her friend Ulrike how well-known she was in the house and on what good terms she was with all the tenants. She therefore gave everyone who passed by a defiant look, lifting her dress slightly in a curtsy.

Filine is a rare name. Perhaps it wasn’t a name at all, perhaps it was an invention. Her parents were perfectly capable of something like that. They had artistic tendencies, lived on the ground floor and had furnished their flat in a romantic style. When Filine was born, she’d been welcomed into a newly decorated nursery with blue

miniature furniture and sky-blue wallpaper complete with white fluffy clouds. One could look into the nursery from the street.

Filine looked defiantly at everyone who passed by, lifted her dress and curtsied. To her disappointment, none of the tenants paid her any attention. She had grown quickly. The last time the tenants had seen her, she'd still been in a pushchair. They looked at the girls bemused, smiling stiffly at them and said: "Well hello, you two." They didn't know what else to say. Uncertain, they continued on their way, hesitated while thinking about what else they could have said and looked back before deciding to move towards the exit and leave the house, or they climbed the stairs and disappeared quickly into their flats. Filine was disappointed. She would have loved to show Ulrike that she was on safe ground here.

Finally, one of the people returning home asked her after she'd curtsied: "Can you dance?" He had two eyes, and he looked out of them. That was all she could remember later, when they asked about him.

She answered: "I take ballet classes, and I can curtsy, you know, for taking a bow." The man with two eyes didn't know what she meant. In his opinion, she had a confusingly delicate frame and was too small for her age. There's another set phrase: too small for her age. The man didn't know how old she was, but he thought she was too small for whatever age she was. Ice cold air drifted up from the basement and swept around her lower legs which were soon covered in goose bumps. "Look, your skin looks just like sand paper. You could polish a church bench with those legs." Filine looked at the man, then at her legs, and ran into the dark hallway, with Ulrike right behind her. In the hallway, they both practiced doing *pliés*. The man screwed up his eyes and stared after them. He seemed exhausted. He had a pinched nerve in his back. He could move his head only to the right. He was also hungry. I'd really like to jump up and down like that again, too, he thought as he followed the two girls into the dark hallway and asked: "Could I do what you two are doing there?"

"No." said Filine. "My mother hears everything through the open window. If I call, she'll be here immediately. In the flat it's too cold to play, that's why we're outside. Yesterday I danced in front of people. At the end I put my hands over my head, and then I bowed down, like this..." She demonstrated what she'd just said.

All three of them knew that this wasn't really a story. But that's how stories start. And then, suddenly, you find yourself right in the middle of one, and blood gets

spilled and small white dresses get ripped to shreds. He earned his living as a court reporter and knew how these things happened.

Filine had thin hair, enormous eyes and ears that were too big. She had a hamster called Moth or Moppet or something. The man said she should ask her mother to get her a second hamster because otherwise the one she had would die of sadness. Then he climbed the stairs to his flat, not before saying – as a sort of goodbye - “Beautiful, the way you dance. And your legs: so slender and as white and soft as flour.” Then he cleared his throat because his voice sounded gravelly.

Ulrike observed them and listened to them in silence. She’ll have to get used to this, going unnoticed next to Filine, the man thought as he climbed the stairs. It’s a pleasant feeling, going unnoticed. You can rest and become sluggish as dough. Filine, on the other hand, will never be able to become sluggish as dough. She will dance on and dance on, always at the centre of attention, until she drops dead from exhaustion. Then the ice cold air will creep up from the basement and will settle upon her.

All men dream of being freakishly strong. Usually, they’re not. The sight of thin, delicate bodies of children reminds them of their dreams. Sometimes one of them suddenly is unable to control himself and he grabs such a small body in order to measure his size and strength against it. For a brief moment, he actually becomes freakishly strong. The children nearly always cry while they give evidence, at which point the man realizes that they actually are children and that the difference in size is a fact of nature. That realization makes such men sad and dangerous.

In the late afternoon he descended the stairs again. The two girls were no longer playing in the courtyard. At the sight of the empty square a sudden wave of weariness hit the man with two eyes. He felt shattered, tired and spent. He felt the sudden need not to have to think of anything for a while. The office and the decision whether he should chuck in the entire court report nonsense could wait until tomorrow.

A few days earlier, a barber named Türschmidt had opened a new salon three doors down. He advertised his especially low opening prices in the shop-window. The man with two eyes decided to call on him. He passed by the neighbouring gourmet restaurant that only opened in the evenings, stood in front of the shop-window, carefully studied the list with the promotional prices and then entered the salon. After a short while, an elegant man came out of the back room. His steps were barely

audible. He looked like he was floating. His straight, sandy hair had been accurately cut to the very last millimetre and was hanging from his head, light and elastic like gossamer. It reflected the daylight and shimmered softly with each movement. The man with two eyes asked: “Mr Türschmidt?”

“Yes.”

“Would you have time for me, by any chance? If not, no problem. I just live three doors up the street and could go back home and come back later.”

“No, no,” said Mr Türschmidt. He was pleasantly soft-spoken. “You’re in luck. At this very moment, I happen to have a big gap in my appointments book. Please excuse my curiosity: may I ask you how you came across me? Did you see my ad in the newspaper? I’m interested for marketing reasons.”

“I just told you: I live three doors from here. I pass by several times a day and I noticed your promotion.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. Yes, indeed you did say that. You know, when you open a shop like this you want to do everything right and so from morning till late you do nothing but think about what you could improve. And in the process you become inattentive to what is happening or being said at the moment – because your thoughts are constantly in the future or in the past. – But back to you. Would you like a consultation? I’ve taken a course with the barbers’ association that makes me qualified to tell each client what haircut suits them best. Or do you by any chance have a clear idea of your ideal style?”

“Well, I actually just wanted a trim and my neck tidied up. You see very well what I look like now. And I’d like to look about the same after the procedure – admittedly I’d like to look less battered and more at ease with myself, more detached again. Nothing conspicuous or studied please. I want my head to radiate balance and trustworthiness so that people who see me won’t feel tempted to think about me or about how things look inside me. Least of all me.”

“Very good. I’ll see what I can do. Please sit down at the basin here. May I wash your hair before we start? Not that it looks dirty, quite the opposite, but it so happens that it’s easier to cut wet rather than dry hair.” The man with two eyes sat in the chair pointed out to him, tilted his head back into the basin and surrendered to Mr Türschmidt who started washing his hair and massaging his scalp, applying pleasantly firm pressure.

The man with two eyes thought of the woman who'd mumbled *io dormo, io dormo*. He'd known her for a very long time and he knew how much she enjoyed sleeping. A warm wave swept over him and a smile spread over his face.

Mr Türschmidt asked whether he could be so bold and enquire what he was smiling about. The man with two eyes explained that in the morning he'd spoken to a woman on the phone who'd said she was sleeping when she'd actually been talking to him! What's more, one had to know that sleeping was the woman's favourite pastime. He knew this because he'd known her for decades. She lived with him in a flat. Mr Türschmidt laughed and said that it was indeed funny. Then he said: "If you could sit up and take a seat over there?" After drying the dripping hair with a towel he started cutting. He proceeded with caution, one single hair after another, it seemed, while his cheeks slowly coloured. He looked like an aged angel, as if he'd never been truly alive. The skin on his face was very smooth, his thin hair hung down like a bob over his muted oval face and at each of his movements it shimmered like the coat of a two week old llama. Outside, the last few rays of the setting sun caught the façade across the street. Mr Türschmidt cut one fine hair after the other. Everything was calm and peaceful. His breaths were barely audible and he looked at his cutting hands in a focused and loving way. The cut ends danced down towards the floor, looking like gold dust in the reflected light.

The man with two eyes fell asleep. When he woke again, at first he didn't know who he was looking at in the mirror. He thought it might be Mr Türschmidt and was about to apologize to him for having nodded off. Then he saw that it was himself staring back at him in the twilight. He could make out the barber's face above his own. The barber eyed him quizzically while holding up a small round mirror that showed the nape of his neck. The man with two eyes said: "Very nice, thank you, really neat. I feel younger. Brand new. Not quite myself anymore. I look rather like you now. Just look at the two of us in the mirror: we could be twins. Obviously you like your own haircut best and can do that style best?"

Mr Türschmidt didn't get the hidden meaning in that comment. He laughed sheepishly and said: "Yes, yes... I hope you're happy with my work. Try as I might, I couldn't infer what sort of coiffure – that's what we professionals call a haircut – your last barber was aiming for. I guess you haven't had your hair cut professionally for a while; perhaps you even did it yourself. You were asleep and I didn't want to wake you to ask for your specific wishes but followed my intuition instead. I did what

seemed right to me. And, I think, with good results: you look terrific. I'd be really glad if you decided to become a regular customer and perhaps even recommended my salon."

"I'll think about it. But you have to promise that you're actually capable of more than just this one haircut. Otherwise this street will soon be flooded with Türschmidts."

The barber laughed sheepishly again and said yes, yes.

It's hard to believe that this could be the same man who just a few days ago had wanted to eat pasta with ham and bacon at Mario's and then had had his hair cut. Bleary-eyed, badly shaven and with dark circles under his eyes, he was standing in the darkness and looking around searchingly. But it was him.

The woman who'd fallen asleep in the deck chair and then had choked to death had told him years ago that if he ever felt exhausted he should go to Harenberg: in the underpass he should turn left and then go up the stairs where he'd find a line-up of hotels where one could recuperate. He'd followed the instructions but the street he reached was bleak and no hotel was to be seen. Because his suitcase was heavy he didn't feel like turning around and climbing down the stairs again. He preferred to believe that her information had been correct and that he only had to take a few more steps to find the hotels she'd mentioned. As it was, the drizzling rain was making a good job of disheartening him even more: the simple thought of turning back would have made him despair.

It was a cold evening and the sky was pitch dark and starless. Houses to the left, railway tracks to the right. No lights anywhere. He passed by a Portuguese club. The windows were covered with curtains. Two doors down, he saw an Italian club: the door was blocked up, giving the impression it hadn't been opened in a while. Garbage had accumulated outside. A dark shape stepped out from the next entrance and blocked his path. He didn't immediately realize what had blocked his path, and got frightened. The silhouette looked like it belonged to a tall, bulky character. The man with two eyes thought he'd caught a glimpse of a livery. At least he'd seen a few dull buttons shimmering on the coat and on the head there seemed to be a cap that could also be part of a uniform. It was too dark to see details, and the character was also standing too close to him. The silhouette switched on a torch and handed the man with two eyes a leaflet and adjusted the torch so that he could read what was written

on it. After the initial fright, he decided to decipher the text: “Rosaura receives in intimate atmosphere. Sandwiches. Pure alcohol. A lot of white, transparent skin.” The torch was turned off. A heavy, warm hand landed on the back of the man with two eyes and gently shoved him in the direction he’d wanted to go anyway.

Two doors down, around the corner, there was a Turkish community bar. Four neon tubes on the ceiling illuminated the place. Three young men with black hair sat at a table, smoking; a fourth, older man was standing a bit further away behind a buffet. Another two doors down there was an establishment without a name. In the door one could see a dimly lit porthole; one couldn’t see in or out through it. He opened the door and entered. Behind the counter stood a woman with a leathery face and big breasts. This must be Rosaura, he thought.