

André Kubiczek

A SKETCH OF SUMMER

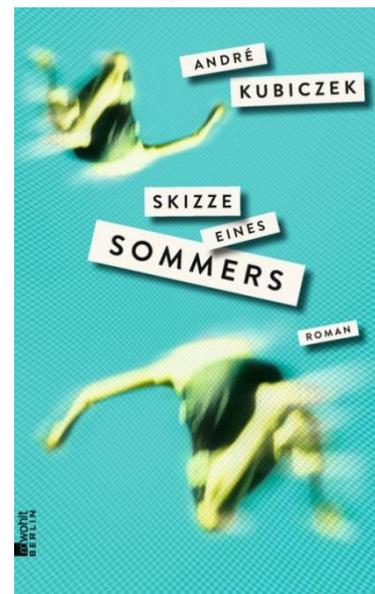
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One summer, four boys and 1000 Deutschmarks.

Potsdam in 1985: it's the summer holidays, but this year 16-year-old René is staying at home. His mother is dead, and his father is in Switzerland. He leaves René 1000 Marks, which he duly divides up with his friends Dirk, Michael and Mario. This will be the kind of summer, they all realize, that they will never experience again.

The boys ramble through streets emptied by the holiday season, sit in cafés and vie with each other to see who is the wittiest. They also go to the disco twice a week. Because despite all their pretensions of mature worldliness, they all want to find the right girl. Dirk and Michael try to impress the assertive Rebecca, while the half-Lebanese Mario seems to be quite the ladies' man, despite being only 14½. But René is desperate to see one particular girl again, the one who never dances to the wrong music at the "Orion" disco.



A Sketch of Summer is a light, warm-hearted novel about the best times of all, when youth is infused with a sense of beautiful tragedy; it is about first love, friendship, the music that forms your taste for life, and the books you read again and again. André Kubiczek has written a wonderfully empathic and thoughtful depiction of a period in life that's characterised by insecurity, limitless self-confidence and trust.

André Kubiczek was born in Potsdam in 1969, studied German literature in Leipzig and Bonn and has been writing and living in Berlin since 1994. 2002 saw the publication of his acclaimed novel *Young Talents*; *The Good and the Bad* was published in 2003. His well-received book *The Stars Shine Above* and a further novel followed. He was awarded the Candide Prize in 2007.

➤ **An elegy for a time none of us will forget.**

English sample translation by Rebecca K. Morrison

Chapter 2

Far from any tempest

The day before my sixteenth birthday, my father flew to Switzerland. Not on holiday or to visit a friend – that was impossible obviously. He was to attend a conference in Geneva. And here's the best part: the conference would run for seven weeks, practically until the end of August. Almost the entire summer break in other words.

Don't ask me what the conference was about. My father did tell me, of course, but I'd been listening with half an ear as usual. All I knew was peace was on the agenda. Disarmament. The folk in the West had atomic weapons, and we had some, too, or our Soviet friends did. After both sides had stockpiled them for years and sent them all over the place, it had finally dawned on a couple of bright sparks that they'd got a bit carried away.

Fair enough having nuclear weapons enough to destroy the world three times over. But six or nine times over?

Illogical.

The end of the world meant the end of the world.

It would cut costs, too, having merely enough weapons to destroy the world three times over. Cash that could be used for more sensible things.

Such as the construction of stylish atomic bunkers, for example.

Okay, I know, it is no joking matter, but to be honest I'd overdosed on all the sweet nothings about peace. Which is not to say, I was in favour of war. Who is in favour of war? It is just I'd have welcomed at least some other subjects on the news and at school. Something original to read in the newspaper and on the advertising bollards beyond the same old, same old:

“My work place, a place to fight for peace.”

Fight for peace, come on!

Just try it out for size!

But I didn't mean to get all heated up. Really, I couldn't have cared less about those bollards – and don't let me get started on the teachers. I'd had almost sixteen years to get used to the full palette of slogans. And do you know what? I really had got used to them.

Whenever one of us was called on, Dirk, Michael or me, in State Citizenship class, which we spent in the back row, usually playing a game of dividing the world up differently with maps we had cut out of our history book, we would leap to our feet as if bitten by a tarantula, click our heels together, hold our hands straight down by the seams of our trousers, and crisply deliver the answer.

For example, Soviet mightiness plus electrification equals Communism. Which, as everyone knew, Lenin had already understood. Or that the aim of the evolved Socialist society, in which we were living, was the merging of economic and social policies. When we had spoken the mantra to its end, we clicked our heels together again, and sat ourselves back down. The class would laugh and the teacher, fresh from the college, turned red. She had wanted to scold us, but instead had to praise us for giving the right answer. She initially tried to appeal to our reason, pointing out that matters such as the electrification of social policy were too important to talk about with such levity, however factually correct.

But we remained deaf to such appeals.

At any rate, one month after taking on the mantel of teaching us State Citizenship, she no longer called on any one of the three of us. This gave us more free time in her lessons and we moved on to tearing out all the big maps of the world from the geography atlas.

What I'm really trying to say is that the slogans about peace, and beyond, went in one ear and out the other. Pronto. Fast forward. That's probably why I was so vague about the conference my father was flying to.

The word *disarmament* was enough to make me switch off. It was a matter of luck if any information of import did stick.

This business trip had made itself felt first in the winter half a year earlier in the guise of Herr Kohlschmidt from the fourth floor. He came to our door at seven o'clock one evening.

Herr Kohlschmidt was what my Gran referred to as a capable man. A bus-driver by profession, he worked shifts, his wife was a nursery teacher, he had two small daughters to his name, and they were all terribly nice.

When my mother was still alive, Herr Kohlschmidt had sometimes procured us spare parts for the Wartburg, or helped repair a wardrobe door hanging from a single hinge, or lent us his drill when we had a picture to hang. Since my mother's death, we didn't bother repairing broken cupboard doors. We simply propped them up so that they wouldn't fall out, and then didn't use them any more.

And pictures?

Who needs pictures?

Not my father, at any rate.

Anything that was not instantly useful, objects with no immediately obvious function, items that were simply pretty or pleasing for the eye, he described as dust-gatherers.

Be that a garden gnome or a sculpture by El Lissitzky.

There was one exception, to be fair: books. We had masses of them. Not the really good ones, though, if you know what I mean.

The half-decent ones rather: Dostoyevsky and his ilk.

We also stopped going to the house parties that took place in the drying area behind the block in the summer with bratwurst and beer. And it goes without saying we were never espied at the work initiatives, the so-called *Subbotniks*: raking leaves and looking in the ornamental shrubs for broken bottles. But I didn't mean to complain about all that now.

It is simply a fact: since my mother's death, we lived a little like lepers.

Wrong word.

Like hermits. That is how I would put it – that is how we lived.

“Can I speak to your father, René?” Herr Kohlschmidt asked on the aforementioned evening half a year ago.

“He is not in,” I said, although my father was lying out on the sofa watching the West German news programme.

He had to keep an eye on it for work reasons, my father always claimed with a grin. The same went for *International Morning Pint* on Sundays, and *World Mirror*. I don't want to brag, but thanks to *World Mirror* and the *Morning Pint* show I had a fairly good grasp of, number one, what was going on in the world and, secondly, what was going on in the Federal Republic. I wasn't actually allowed to watch this, but I simply stayed put once when my Dad switched over to the West channel, and he had never tried to usher me out. Au contraire: when I tuned in to Sunday's *Formula One* with the music videos, he discreetly left the room, went over to his study, so-called, and pretended to mark his pupils' homework. He only re-emerged when he heard me go to the toilet.

Without our ever discussing it, the flushing of the toilet signalled the end of *Formula One*.

"It is rather important," Herr Kohlschmidt said.

"Shall I pass on a message when he gets back?"

One of my most important housekeeping tasks was to cover for my father, you see, whenever possible, deny his existence. To claim he wasn't at home when he was. I was usually the one on front-door-opening duty when the doorbell rang. And I was the one who normally answered the phone. There were only three people, their names listed on a scrap of paper by the telephone, for whom my father was always in. These were two of his bosses and, of course, Gran. Everyone else had to beg or wheedle or leave a message with me scribbled onto the margins of a newspaper and twenty seconds later illegible even to my own eyes.

Not that I was ever reprimanded for it.

If it's important, they'll try again, my father declared.

"Come on, lad, your Wartburg is parked out front," Herr Kohlschmidt insisted.

"Ah, yes," I said, "But do you know what? Today my father..."

"Now don't tell me, today of all days he decided to catch the O-bus to work," Herr Kohlschmidt interrupted. "Pull the other one."

"But he did," I said quickly, grateful that Herr Kohlschmidt had saved me the trouble of inventing a lie of my own.

"If you say so," said Herr Kohlschmidt, and scratched his left elbow with his right hand. He was obviously close to giving up.

I was about to say 'bye and quickly shut the door when my father's voice carried through from inside the apartment, "What's up, René?"

"You are at home after all," I shouted back.

I drew my eyebrows up as high as I could. You know, making a show of my utter amazement to Herr Kohlschmidt.

I almost got cramp in my face.

"Come on, lad, I wasn't born yesterday!"

"Gently does it, Herr Kohlschmidt," my father said, stepping in behind me, "Can I help you?" He even gave my shoulder a little squeeze, something he hadn't done since I was very small, I guess. So far back in my memory it was.

"Yes," said Herr Kohlschmidt. "Or rather, no. – I just wanted to tell you something." Instead of starting on that, though, he started in on me for having lied to him.

"The lad wasn't to know I was back already," my father said. I turned around and looked at him in astonishment. "I left work early today," Dad continued. "Migraine. I almost always get them when there's a low-pressure front. I had taken myself off to bed for a nap and René didn't know that when he got home."

Now it was my father's turn to pull faces, probably to show how tormented he still was by his migraine.

It looked so fake it was almost painful.

We were each as bad as the other, a dreadful pair of mimics.

"If *you* say so, it must be true." Herr Kohlschmidt seemed appeased.

Note to self, I thought: two lies are better than one.

"Well, have a nice evening," my father said, stretching his hand out to his neighbour. Herr Kohlschmidt shook it heartily.

"Oh yes, the reason I came..." Herr Kohlschmidt said, interrupting the fond farewell, and indicating he would prefer me to make myself scarce before he continued. It looked as if he was flicking an invisible crumb from an equally invisible tablecloth, in my direction.

"René!" my father said.

“Bye,” I said and took myself off to my bedroom. I heard my father inviting Herr Kohlschmidt into the sitting room. When, three-quarters of an hour later, I was hungry and went into the kitchen to spread a slice of bread with sausage paste, Herr Kohlschmidt was still there. I heard his gales of laughter. It was almost nine when he finally made tracks.

“What was that about?”

“Nothing,” my father said. On the coffee table was a bottle of *Napoléon* from the inter-shop and two cognac tumblers.

“Is there something to celebrate?”

“Who can say?” My father grinned and poured himself another measure. He normally didn’t drink any spirits; he had yet never managed to drain one *Napoléon* bottle before the next arrived from Gran on every notable day of celebration. Christmas, Easter, birthday. We had built up a proper stock in the cupboard beneath the washing-up counter.

“Well, maybe *you* can say,” I said.

My father sank back down on the sofa, cradled the tumbler, nipped at the contents, swirled the glass again and took another sip. No idea if he wanted to build the tension or had simply forgotten me. His eyes were certainly a little glazed. When that had gone on for half a minute or so, I said, “I’m going back to my room.”

“Two men were asking about me.”

“Eh?”

“Asking Herr Kohlschmidt about me.”

“What kind of men?”

“Policemen, allegedly. Kripo – the crime squad. Herr Kohlschmidt has his suspicions, though.”

“And they are?”

“MfS.”

“State Security?”

“Ministry for State Security, you’ve got it.”

“What did they want to know?”

“What kind of visitors we get, if there is anything that seems out of the ordinary, et cetera.”

“And what does it mean?”

“Indeed,” said my father, taking another gulp.

I wondered if he felt pangs of guilt. On account of news programmes from the West. Or because years ago we had met up in secret with his cousin from the West, which was strictly forbidden in his line of work. Or because of other things I had no idea about.

Really bad things, I mean.

“And what did Herr Kohlschmidt tell them?”

“Nothing much, he says. Irrelevant nothings.”

“That’s alright then.”

“Do you fancy one, then?” my father asked, pointing at the *Napoléon*.

“Unusually, not today,” I said and went to the bathroom where I pondered whether he had been serious about the brandy.

“The cops were round our place last night,” Mario told me on the way to school the next day.

“Two out-of-uniform guys. In coats and scarves, that sort. And hats – the works.”

“No, really?”

“Yep. And leather gloves. And do know why?”

“Nope.”

“Because of your Dad. – I’m supposed to tell you, that’s what my Mum says, and you’re to pass the message on to him.”

“Will do.”

Mario stopped walking and I stood still, too.

“Is your old man up shit creek, or something?”

“No idea.”

“You seem pretty relaxed about it.”

“Whatever.”

“Yeah, well. It’s none of my business.” Mario seemed disappointed by my lacklustre reaction to news he thought sensational.

“True,” I said, “But thanks anyway for the heads-up.”

Frau Wegener, who lived beneath us, had also been visited by the police, or was it really the State Security people, and been pressed on our day-to-day lives. But Frau Wegener hadn’t told them anything either, she assured us that evening at our front door. This was probably down to a lack of gossip material, rather than any lack of willingness to provide information.

Our one misdemeanour was not joining in the work initiatives, I considered late that night, and we somehow balanced that out by not attending the house parties.

No work – no schnapps.

Where was the problem?

Until the beginning of March – one whole month – we lived with uncertainty. Nothing happened. I mean nothing out of the ordinary happened, just the usual boring bits and bobs. I don’t know how my father fared with it all because we didn’t speak about internal, emotional stuff.

For my part I gradually forgot about it when Mario stopped speculating at last about all the possible misdemeanours of my father, from the criminal to the political. And so I was caught somewhat by surprise when one fine spring evening I found my father ensconced in the sitting room long before the end of the working day. He announced in a portentous voice that he would be travelling to Switzerland as part of a delegation, to negotiate on the disarmament of mid-range nuclear rockets, or some such.

Peace!

The men asking about him in the winter had indeed been from the Ministry for State Security. Their brief had been to check his suitability as a socialist comrade and fellow traveller who would be handed a diplomatic passport in the near future.

My father wanted to celebrate by inviting me to the Bulgarian specialities restaurant, on Bassinplatz, which had grilled meat and chips on the menu.

First, though, I was to deliver a bottle from our never diminishing *Napoléon* stock to Herr Kohlschmidt. As a thank-you because he was the first one to come to us about it.

“And why do I have to go?”

“Because there is currently a low-pressure front coming in from the south,” my father said with a grin, and pressed the bottle for Herr Kohlschmidt into my hand.

I have to say at that moment he was the very picture of contentment.

And that is how it came to pass that I came into the possession of a peaceful bolthole, far from any tempest, for almost two months.

And they started when?

Exactly: *now!*

And do know the best thing of all?