

Daniel Mezger

Stay Alive

(an extract from *Country Games*)

translated by Stefan Tobler

And the village teacher sent the village children home day after day. And the village teacher stayed in the village teacher's flat. The teacher was eager for the autumn holidays to arrive, so that he would no longer need to find excuses. And the teacher begged his wife. The teacher didn't stop talking to the wife he had just broken up with. The teacher uses tried and tested phrases to entreat her. Stay alive. Please. Sweetheart, love. My one-time lover. Stay alive. Put down the knife you're attempting to cut yourself with, see how deep you get, I don't want to see, I can't lick your wounds any longer. Stay here, if not in this world, then in another possible one, I know you don't believe in that, not any more, you say, not right now, I try to say, as we sit on this sofa, *Armageddon*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Godzilla*, *The Storm*, *Dante's Peak* in front of us. All the films that aren't about love, nor life, but only about a group of people looking for each other, finding each other, pulling a few people they know out from under the rubble in spite of the disaster, before moving on. They can no longer save the world. That's the only thing that you understand now and me too, here on this sofa, where you and I carry on sitting, although I should have got up long ago. I should have said: not with me, you don't! Find yourself another shoulder to bawl your eyes out on. Find someone else to tell you that you shouldn't hang yourself. Find someone to drag you into a taxi and hold out the Valium for you, to make you leave the room, because we did say separate beds. Separate lives, you said it yourself. It was your idea. I cried over us for half a night, and half a morning. And then someone had to be saved. Floods of tears had to be mopped up, knives pried out of hands. Doors locked so that you couldn't jump from bridges outside, instead of pulling doors closed behind me to say that I'm now a single person again. Instead of lying on spare mattresses in the houses of strangers, called friends, I listen to your questions on our sofa and always answer in the same way, soothingly. Stay alive. Please, please, please, don't do anything to yourself.

Don't do it to me. Even when your threats are long past. Now you only whimper, beg, plead, can't I sleep in your bed just this one night have I ruined everything wouldn't you be glad to see me gone wouldn't it be a relief. I want to knock them out of your mouth, those words, I want to be my own man again, I don't want to feed you like a little child and undress you and put you to bed. I'm not allowed to say you're a little child, I'm only allowed to send you to work, yes, you'll be all right, but please go now, go on, don't let yourself go, take responsibility for yourself, don't make me be strong, just because I can be. The world smoulders, is struck by meteorites, or destroyed by aliens, freezes over, is trampled underfoot, and we understand what is meant. From our sofa we are happy that we are understood, would be happy for a giant wave to wash us away too. Instead I ban you from whining, I ban you from crawling into my bed, which is only a spare mattress in my study. I send you away when you come before midnight, pretend I haven't sussed your trick of coming at three in the morning. I carry on sleeping, or pretend to, while you pretend not to be there. While you plan how it could go, the going away, the dissolving yourself, the disappearing from the world, the passing from this world. Until you wake me up with your crying, your shaking, your withdrawing, turning away, cracking up. Or your keeping silent, which scares me the most. Your lucid moments, in which you realize that it was all a misunderstanding: the bit about being born. That there are simply people who are too weak for this world. That all this stuff just can't be asked of you. That everyone always thinks you can do all this stuff. But you can't. It's too much, too difficult, too heavy. Too much of a burden on others, and on me. You'd be glad to see me gone too. You say. What am I still here for. You ask. And you aren't asking rhetorically. I'm no longer shedding tears, not since salt water started flooding the flat. I put myself off until later, I function, organize, rescue, keep to routines, am controlled, don't leave you hanging, call your work, call a psychologist in town, drag you into the car, drive you to town, carry you up the stairs, while you no longer know what your name is and why a psychologist has just referred you to a psychiatrist, and why a psychiatrist has just prescribed these pills for you, that make you sick, that I force you to take, just as I also beg you to please become your normal self again, to take your burden off me, without immediately freeing yourself of the burden called life. I tell you that you should confide in

someone else. And then I tell you again that I'm always here for you in an emergency. I promise. And in so doing bring about the emergencies. Am partly to blame, because I help you back onto your feet, on which you're unable to stand on your own. Because I suggest you build dens under the living room table, when nothing else helps. And then you crouch under tables covered in blankets, listen to children's cassettes and invite me to come in. I say no, I leave the housework undone, I'm glad you're busy. I organize your life, in as much as it is still a life. I take the disaster movies back, I rent new disaster movies. So the evenings pass, finally, in the end. So that you're finally, in the end, so exhausted from crying, begging, screaming and giving up that you give up and fall asleep. I carry you to bed. It's routine already. Life functions like this too. You get used to this too.

I've got other things to do than take my own pulse. I take yours. It's quiet, fast. It's your life, the one I'm fighting for, sweetheart, love. My one-time lover. You narcissist, you egomaniac. You wallower in misery, you amasser of pain, you pity-seeker. Blackmailer with your tears, your knives, with your love of high bridges and of talking about them. I believe you because you're already somewhere else, while you don't want to be anywhere any more. Because you no longer feel any pain, because you now only think about which method would be the most effective. Because you dissolve into your moaning, your nagging, your crying. In spite of the Valium, with tears in your eyes you sway, no doubt because of the Valium, through the town, and ask me to buy baby food, because that's the only thing you still eat. Kilo after kilo falls from your body, which was already all-too-thin before this. Baby food, Ovaltine, on good days a banana as well. On good days I feed you. And when I refuse to feed you, which I tend to do, then you only eat if I supervise you. Every spoonful I have to beg for. Please just this one, and just this one more, no, you have to eat, you can't just starve yourself out of this world.

You eat a spoonful, forget what you're doing, I remind you, you consider whether you want to do what you're doing, I order you to. My voice becomes firm: now just eat and stop crying. Please, I add, but you don't hear that. You don't love me any more, you say, otherwise you wouldn't talk to me like that. I say, it's not about that.

And you cry and scream, until the neighbours ring and ask if everything's OK. I open the door and say, nothing's OK. And I thank them for asking. I'm not beating her, don't worry, she gets herself like that, I don't add. And I close the door. And a day later the next neighbour comes, asks for a drop of milk, there's plenty of milk here now that you only eat baby food. Today you managed to go to work. I wait to see how long you'll manage, glad to have a short time to myself. To do the laundry, vacuum, gather up the videos, tidy away forts, hide knives.

The neighbour pretends not to see the devastated flat, the missing pictures, the mountains of boxes reaching towards the ceiling of the hall and into the living room. On the very first evening you packed up everything of yours, and a week later you realized that it's impossible to live like that, not even temporarily. So you looked in the boxes for substitute items for what had been there before, put things out for the sake of appearances, to stand in for normality. In this sketch of a flat we make ourselves comfortable enough to just about survive. But you can't fool us, every glance into the living room is like an insight into the state of your mind, everything is just for appearances, just for show, and actually already gone from this world.

And nor do you fool the neighbour; he pretends he didn't come just to see for himself, just to have a look in our flat. I nod to him; he thanks me for the milk and goes. And I'm left in this chaos, which the two of us have caused. Now we live as if the two of us had just moved in, I look for the pans in the pile of boxes, I rummage around for essentials, I look at the flat, it looks honest. Like you. Like us. I'm better at hiding the situation. They don't ask at the library why I need yet another disaster movie, they don't offer me Valium. No anti-depressants, which someone should finally please just prescribe for you, even if you are against it, even if you say that it isn't depression, just panic about being alone, about being lost, about being.

You beg, you plead, you want us to be a couple again, you want to be part of what you and I called 'you-and-I', before we drifted apart, before we admitted it to each other. The little bundle of you which is left wants to be loved again, would like to not be alone in the world, has no one except for me, just wants to feel safe and secure, hasn't done anything wrong, can't help it that things are as

they are. Have I ruined it all, you ask. Day after day, I no longer even press pause, Godzilla can rage on while I give you the same answers every time. What should I have done differently, you ask. Or you promise to be a real angel from now on, promise to buy me something, promise to do everything now the way I always wanted it done. To move to another place together, into town, for all I care, or to another village, and then start from scratch once more, without any friends, for all I care. I should just say that everything is going to be all right, that everything is going to be like it was before. It wasn't good before, I say, a jet fighter attacks Godzilla, just a fly to the monster, just one more evening on the sofa, we'll survive it, the two of us, just as long as your crying, pleading and begging wears you out. Your promising to change. Your asking: am I really that bad? Your asking: what's left for me? What should I do now? Wouldn't it be better if I were no longer here? Can I sleep in your bed tonight?

Life has worn you out, but never enough to sleep. Or there's a fear of waking up again. From a dream in which you dreamt that things were as they never were. Everything fine, you-and-I. Why can't it just once more. You ask and ask, and the routine begins again. I'm used to it now. I order you to go to bed, to leave my room, to go to work, to have a first admission discussion at a clinic. You go nowhere. I cancel lessons, postpone them and my life for one, two days, and know that it won't happen then either. Today I say you hurt your foot, that I had to take you to A & E, what I will say tomorrow I don't know yet. Anything except that I've been sitting next to you on my bed, which is a spare mattress, since five this morning and asking you to take a Valium or have yourself admitted. That I'm sitting next to you at a psychiatrist's, or in front of the television in the evening, when I say that the psychiatrist today was right in what she said, and by now you can barely remember having been there. And your thoughts go round in circles, we go round in circles, around our daily routines, as if time had stood still, as if your brain were a bird of prey, wanting to strike you down, you want to cut yourself out of life, the fact that the knives are hidden won't stop you. It just spares my scolding you because you've cut yourself again, and the threat that I'll have to have you admitted, because I can't deal with it any more. And I can't, I'm paralyzed, only apparently able to function, I wait for some salvation or other, for relief.

You hand in your notice at work, you barely speak to anyone any longer, I drive you into town every day. The psychologist has a knowing look on her face. Yet you don't tell her anything about the table forts, about your wish to tear yourself out of this world, until I tell you to, until I tell you to again and again, a thousand times. Until the psychologist recommends a psychiatric clinic for you, until you let me take you there, just so you can have a look, just to realize that you can't go there, you say that only broken people are there, who would just make you more broken. And it looks as if you're doing better now, as if you've seen that you have to take responsibility for yourself, if you don't want to surrender it, or is it just the new medicines, which make you feel sick and which you've already stopped taking, as soon as I stop pinching your nose closed so that you swallow them?

And the village teacher writes a letter to all parents, has the autumn holidays start one week early. The village teacher says he's ill, the village teacher talks about infection, the village teacher yearns for some end or other to come, except for that one. And the village teacher knows, that even when she gets a new flat, even when she lives in another town or where she once came from, even then he won't be free of her. She will ring every day, will ask the same old questions. And he will answer them, will say that she should stay alive. And he won't find any answer to the question Why?, except: don't do it to me. And he will stay on the phone until she has put one of the pills under her tongue, until the pill has dissolved, she finally lying down in bed with the receiver in her hand, the village teacher still on the other end, until he knows that this evening is passing too, that she has survived this day too. Stay alive. Please. Please stay alive.