

Gregor Sander

Winter Fish

It's morning, half past four and already brighter than twilight, past dawn but not yet day. I've slept well on the back seat of my car and I can hardly believe that I'm standing here. On Kanalstrasse in Kiel-Holtenau. The alarm of my mobile phone rang, still half asleep I pulled on my shoes and got out into the morning. Completely alone, not a soul to be seen. The houses are still dark. In front of me a couple of sailing yachts float beside a landing stage and beyond that, when one looks across the canal, the Förde glitters and in Kiel the street lights are still on. The leaves of the maple trees above me further mute the early light, but I'm certain it's going to be a fine day. A summer's day and very hot. A day like yesterday, when the air was dancing above the fields, the grass was honey-yellow and dry and I was surprised that the motorway didn't actually go as far as Kiel, that the last few miles are main road. I drove past the city centre and then across the bridge over the Kiel Canal, which lies far below, and it was bit like somewhere in America, a bit like the Hudson River, except that the river below here had been dug.

A car drives slowly along Kanalstrasse. A wine-red BMW estate. The man who gets out is wearing blue dungarees. He comes towards me and I think that surely a fisherman doesn't drive a BMW.

“Are you the son of my guy?”

“Your guy?”

“Well, Walter.”

We shake hands and I say: “That’s me. That is, not his son.”

“What then?” asks the fisherman and laughs. He seems already very wide awake, his face is regular and his hair stands up like a grey brush. His features are neat and he doesn’t look like someone who goes to sea. As if he knew what I was thinking, and as if he wanted to prove the opposite, he pulls a pipe out of his pocket and a small green plastic tobacco pouch. He fills the pipe, lights it and still doesn’t look the way I had imagined someone who spends his days alone at sea. We both stand there awkwardly and I point to the canal, where right by the lock a fishing boat is tied up. “Yours?” I ask and it looks exactly like a fishing boat. White, with a steel railing, a wheelhouse and the wheel itself is made of wood. That’s what I was prepared for.

“Yes, mine, but we’re not taking that today. I go out to the open sea with it. When it’s herring season or sometimes for cod. Today we’re taking the wee one. It’s in the harbour.” He gestures towards the lock island in the middle of the canal and I nod and wonder where we are going to fish.

“Perhaps Walter has slept in. That happens to him now and again. Lately quite often,” says the fisherman and that his name is Josef Neuer. I would really like a coffee. For a brief moment I would like to be sitting in my life, in my kitchen, and not be standing beside Josef Neuer.

Yesterday Walter had still wanted me to spend the night with him. “I kept an eye on you often enough, back then.” But that was too much for me after the evening together almost twenty years later, and so I said something about a hotel and was glad to be able to leave. “Don’t sleep in, my boy,” he called after me, leaning against the door, drunk and eighty years old. A curious picture for me, who didn’t really have one of him at all any more.

“Come on, let’s go. Walter’s been out with me often enough,” says Josef Neuer and taps out the pipe on the heel of his rubber boot. We drive in his car through the gate on the lock island. He holds up an ID and says without looking at me: “Because of September 11th,” as if that explained everything and even fishermen in Kiel-Holtenau had to register with the CIA when they enter a harbour. We cross the narrow iron bridge over the lock and the water of the basin bounded by metal walls is full of jellyfish. They crowd together like the sago in the cold cherry soup my mother made on summer days. “The wind’s from the east,” says Josef Neuer. “It pushes the creatures into the lock and into the canal. You catch hardly any fish in weather like this. It’s been like this for days now. Everything full of algae and jellyfish.” On a stretch of grass there’s a small red builder’s trailer and through the window at the rear one can see nets and buoys stacked up to the ceiling. Neuer unlocks the padlock and hands me out rubber boots and orange oilcloth trousers. “Should fit. They were my wife’s and she wasn’t big.”

What did he say and what does his wife do on board? Isn’t that bad luck? I think and then we go over to a small flat boat with an outboard engine and off we go, away from the lock, into the canal. Past warehouses, big concrete silos and a shipyard. In front of us the motorway bridge stretches

high above. Four freighters in a row come towards us on the other side of the canal, slow as giant beasts. They're almost silent, only our little engine can be heard. The sky is dove blue and the silhouettes of the trees on the canal bank are outlined against the yellowish-red strip of light on the horizon.

“So you're still there,” Walter had said, when he called me in Hamburg a few days ago, at my chambers. It was early evening and it was not unusual for me still to be sitting at my desk and working. The secretary had gone and as usual put the telephone directly through to me. The case in front of me was straightforward and the documents unambiguous, when the telephone rang and Walter spoke the sentence without any greeting.

I can no longer remember whether I was expecting someone to call, whether I was surprised that the telephone was ringing, or simply reached for it without thinking. Normally only Sarah rang at that time and we talked briefly. And if I was going to be much later, then she passed on the children to me, so that I could say good night to them. But Sarah wasn't calling me any more, not for weeks now.

I didn't recognise his voice. Perhaps that isn't even possible after such a long time. Walter talked to me as if I must know who he was and had been waiting for his call. “That's long ago,” I heard myself say at some point, and I saw him in front of me in Güstrow. As he was loading boxes into the pale blue Ford Escort he had just bought in Hamburg and I was

standing there and watching him. “Why are you going now?” I had asked him and he had replied: “You probably won’t understand it.”

“It’s all over,” I said. “You can go wherever you like and as often as you like.” The garden in front of his garage was colourless and leafless. The year was drawing to a close, and I think I was particularly confused because he was leaving just before Christmas and as if he didn’t have any more time.

Walter was sixty then. I was thirteen and he was an old man as far as I was concerned. We had only just got to know one another, six months earlier in Güstrow. My mother had moved there with me, as soon as she got a reference, just as she had done every time. We had lived in Leipzig for three years and now she wanted to give Mecklenburg a try. “It’s nice and quiet. We’ve got Insee lake right at the door. The hospital has found a one and half room apartment for me. And in the summer you can already find new friends.” She tried to cheer me up, but she didn’t need to. I was glad to get away from Leipzig. I had no friends, or at least no one whom I would really miss, and the only thing I held against her was that in her hasty changes of location she never moved to Berlin again. Back to where she had given birth to me.

It was always easy for her to get a new job as a nurse and I don’t really know what she was escaping. Whether it was restlessness, boredom, her way of dealing with being imprisoned in the GDR, or whether it was after all just a flight from the failed relationships in Leipzig and in Jena before that. She was only 32 when we moved to Güstrow, I had been born when she was 19, and none of her affairs got to the point that she had a second child. We remained alone in a way. None of the men moved in with us,

she kept me out of that. The cost was that I had to stay alone at home relatively early, because she had night duty or because she was with her boyfriend of the moment. When I woke up in the early morning, however, she was always sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. She was still wearing her nurse's uniform with the name plate pinned above her breast, and she looked tired and somehow content. When I was at school she made my breakfast and in summer, in the holidays when we both came to Güstrow, we both slept until midday.

We went together to the swimming pool by Insensee lake and I dived headfirst from the nine foot board, I hadn't dared do that in Leipzig yet. I bounced up and down a little on the board, looked down and was only afraid that I would do a somersault and land smack on my back on the surface of the water. The town was small and seemed like a village in comparison to Leipzig, even if it had a palace. Our apartment was in a panel construction building which had only four floors, and I really got a room of my own, small and narrow, with a view of the street and a lamp right in front of the window.

Walter lived nearby in a dilapidated villa. He occupied the ground floor and his garden had fruit trees, bushes and a big meadow. Behind our house the residents had little allotments on which they grew vegetables.

Walter worked in bed preparation at the hospital. That is, they brought the used beds down to him in the cellar, the beds in which a sick person had lain for days or had even died, and he disinfected them, made them up again and put them in front of his cubicle like cars in a parking lot. He had applied for an exit visa five years earlier and they had exiled him down here in the cellar. He had been head of the sterilisation section for

years, then they had demoted him and put him in the remotest place there was in his department. He could have got out of the way, withdrawn and looked for another job somewhere. But he didn't want to do that. Holding out in the cellar was probably part of it. My mother got talking to him after another nurse had said to him in that windowless neon-lit corridor: "So you're still here." And he had roared back: "It's not my fault."

The fisherman throttles the engine and then turns it off completely. He probes the bottom with a long metal hook. We are close to the bank, which consists only of some raised sand and a couple of meagre bushes.

"Do you usually come out here with your wife?" I ask in the morning stillness, which is suddenly there after the engine was switched off. She isn't alive any more, I'm sure of that. I want him to tell it, and can't say why. He said, "She wasn't big". Wasn't

Josef Neuer has found the net and begins to haul it up. "We always went out together. For twenty years. When our lad left home, she came with me. 'What am I supposed to do at home?' she said. I wasn't at all keen on it, at first. And then she did know a thing or two. You set the nets here and the next day they were full. Man, I thought," he says and doesn't finish the sentence and doesn't pull the net in any further either. "And last year she didn't come with me once, because she wasn't feeling well, and when I come home, she's sitting there. Quite cold."

I look at him and don't regret my question. A car ferry with a bright red rump and the words "Danube Highway" on it passes us. Neuer follows it

with his eyes and then hauls in the net again. He's wearing blue rubber gloves and the torn bodies of the jellyfish in the netting glitter in the sun like lumps of ice. At last a fish, one with dark green stripes on its back. It's not wriggling, but seems rather to be stretching. Neuer slowly untangles it and says: "Catch a perch, miss the rest." And then we both laugh.

"So what are you, if you're not Walter's son? My lad's coming, he said to me, and that you always used to be fishing."

"We were neighbours in Güstrow, perhaps more than that. Friends I mean."

"Perhaps friends?" Neuer folds the empty net like a piece of laundry and throws it down in front of him. He fills his pipe again and looks at me.

"Walter didn't say much about Güstrow and over there. But when he did say something, then it was about you and your mother. Never about the Stasi or any of that stuff. Always about your mother and what a stroke of luck that was for him. Such a beautiful woman at the end of his life, and that he could be like a father to her son. A fine boy he called you. Only that your mother didn't want to come to the west with him, even when the Wall came down. That she was too much of a coward."

"He was too much of a coward to stay," I respond and then I feel as uncomfortable as I did then, when I only thought it, as Walter was loading his things into the car and a little later disappeared for ever. I didn't want him to go, but how could I have said it to him?

“What did you mean earlier: My guy?” I quickly ask Neuer.

“That’s just what one says. Walter helps me from time to time. When I sell the fish in Holtenau. Or sometimes he gets bait for me, things like that.”

“My best friend is a fisherman here,” is what Walter on the other hand had said, when he called me at the chambers in Hamburg, and that I should come and go out with them and fish. I agreed. I was greedy for everything which interrupted my routine, my work at the office and my life at home. Since Sarah had moved out, I didn’t feel good there. Six months earlier I would have found a way to put him off.

On the day Sarah left me I went home as usual. Only later. That was the way we had arranged it, as we had arranged so many things in the past six months. Let the other have his say, ask questions, talk about oneself. The family therapist, whom we consulted at Sarah’s request, at some point asked her: “Do you love your husband? You have to want to, otherwise we can save ourselves all this here.” She really didn’t know what to say to that and a few weeks later she moved out. The children lived alternately with her and with me, and when they were with me, I felt alien. As if I wasn’t their father at all, more of an uncle. At least they still had their children’s room, it looked the same as always.

The worst thing in the flat on the day she moved out were the impressions left on the carpet. A circle for a plate on which a flowerpot had stood, a rectangle for the Biedermeier chest of drawers, the small impressions

made by the dining table chairs, that looked as if made by dog paws. I couldn't stop looking at them. It was as if my family had gone shopping or to some sporting activity somewhere. Only these impressions were new.

Yesterday Walter only wanted to talk about my mother. That was soon clear to me, once I was sitting in his attic flat in Kiel-Holtenau. I had driven from the canal bridge towards the water. The street wound downhill through a quarter of brick houses. Some had two gables and looked like two houses which were joined together. I drove right down, as far as the canal and parked by the lock island. Just where Kieler Förde meets the Kiel Canal there was a little café, an isolated building, likewise made of brick and stuffed full of sea-faring objects. It was late afternoon and inside a young couple were dancing the tango in a room in which chairs stood against the wall just as at a school disco. They were completely alone and the man wore a sand-coloured suit and the woman a knee-length dark skirt. Most of the guests, however, were sitting outside in the setting sun and drinking beer or wine. They didn't look like tourists, but not like people who belonged here either. Perhaps they were simply from Kiel and come across the Förde, just to drink a beer in the evening after work. I sat down too and soon didn't want to go again. A Russian ship docked right in front of us. The containers stacked on top of one another looked like toys which had turned out to be too large. A sailor jumped ashore in order to moor the ship. It was refuelled from a small boat and after a few minutes had departed again.

I felt as if I was in Holland or in England or in Denmark. I didn't know exactly but it was as if my reality had been slightly displaced, as if I was no longer on track. I liked it, it was all I had wanted from the day and had hardly hoped for.

But then I did set out and looked for Walter's address. He was very pleased when he opened the door to me. His pale blue eyes lay beneath bushy grey brows, there were tears in them and his voice shook a little as he embraced me and said: "How nice that you're here."

A little later in his kitchen he pulled an octopus out of the pot. I had just sat down and he lifted this huge creature up with a fork and placed it on a board like a trophy. I saw the little red suckers on the octopus' arms and the massive skin-white body. "You have to cook it with three red wine corks because of the tannic acid," said Walter as if he was revealing a family recipe to me.

He cut up the octopus and poured a mixture of olive oil, garlic and parsley over the small pieces. It tasted wonderful, hardly like fish at all, and it had a much more tender consistency than would have been expected from its appearance.

"That's the best fish that I've eaten recently," said Walter and just to say something I asked: "And you catch that in the Baltic?" - "Not at all," said Walter and ignored the question and then talked uninterruptedly about my mother. He had loved her and I knew it, could see it with my thirteen year-old eyes, and also Walter made no secret of it. He was out of the question for my mother and that too was clear to me. I knew the type of men she preferred well enough, and they never looked like Walter. She

liked him, but kept him at a distance. But he didn't let himself be put off, brought her flowers and in the evening stood at the door with a bottle of wine. We were never with him in the villa, and I think Walter also felt safe with us. He was not only fleeing his loneliness. On the first floor of the villa lived his successor, the new head of the hospital sterilisation section and he used every opportunity to harass Walter. Sometimes the lock on the front door had been changed, sometimes he played military marches at two in the morning and now and then the light was on in Walter's flat, even though he knew he had switched it off on leaving.

“And your mother? What's she doing now?” asked Walter and cleared the remains of the octopus from the table. It was still very warm and he was wearing a white short-sleeved shirt over a somewhat baggy pair of black cloth trousers. He had undone quite a few buttons of the shirt and one could see his soft old skin with its liver spots.

I turned my wine glass in my hand and looked at the rim which refracted the light of the candle. “She's doing well. She's living in Munich. Started a private care service and is making good money. She married again, an Austrian, who also works with her. And she had another child at the age of 38. ‘I was a normal mother in the East, and now I am in the West as well,’ she always says.” I looked at him and knew that he didn't want to hear it, but I didn't want to make any allowances for Walter's feelings.

We went on to talk about the old days. How he had taught me angling, using a spinner for perch and pike, and how I squatted down and came very close the first time he showed me how to gut a fish. It was a silver roach, the fine scales of whose body made it look as if it was wearing chain mail.

I remember a day that summer particularly well. Long before the demonstrations in Leipzig and also weeks before the Hungarians opened the border. It was very warm, it was the weekend. The fence of our housing block beyond the allotments bordered on a park and in a field there men were playing football. Fat, unshapely men in loose knee-length shorts. In front of the fence I was sitting on the roof of the rabbit hutch, which belonged to one of the tenants of the house. I had one of the rabbits in my arm, a grey-white one which I had kind of adopted from the day of our arrival till when it was butchered just before Christmas. The roofing felt beneath me was warm and I was sitting cross-legged and my mother and Walter were standing behind me and we roared and shouted and spurred the players on. Then I saw the man who lived above Walter and did all those unbelievable things coming through the garden. He was wearing gym shorts and a white vest and he was holding garden shears in his hand. I had never seen him so close and as our eyes met, he briefly stopped short. At that moment my mother put her arm around Walter and also looked over, and that was the only affectionate physical contact there had been between them in those six months.

Josef Neuer starts the outboard engine with the press of a button. "Time to get going now," he says. In the last of twenty fish traps there was also no more than a couple of edible crabs and Chinese mitten crabs and no eels, just as before there were hardly any plaice or perch in the nets. "The Japanese and Spaniards already catch them as elvers and if you take away the wee ones, how can there be any adults in my traps here?" I sit at the front and he in the stern and in the bench between us floats the catch. One

can raise the top and Neuer threw the fish in. He is now wearing only the two pairs of trousers on top of each other and the orange straps of his oilskin ones are bright against his dark brown shoulders.

Neuer has finally decided to call me by my first name and strips off the formality like a tie that's been too tight. "I'm already looking forward to the winter. Then there's no more jelly fish and algae. With weather like this you don't catch anything," he said in a powerful voice against the engine. "But you know, then it may be cold again, but it doesn't bother me. Then you can catch something again and the fish don't turn white on you just from one night in the net and their flesh is all soft. And in winter there's cod. Cod is winter fish, the best there is."

We're approaching Kiel and now the canal's busy. A dozen sailing boats come towards us. Collected in the lock at Holtenau and now they're sailing one behind the other for a while as if threaded on a string of pearls, heading for the North Sea.

His tax papers were lying in a pile on the kitchen table, Neuer had said earlier. His wife had always taken care of that. And now in this weather he had to spend an hour just watering her plants in the garden. In part he didn't even know what he was watering. He would like if it could just look after itself for a day. And one cat had disappeared, after his wife died, and the other, the tom, the grey one, which had never liked him, he was now living with it in the empty house and they were slowly getting used to each other. He didn't even say that he loved her, and not even that he misses her, but it's as if he talks about nothing else this morning.

And now we're on the big fishing boat at Kanalstrasse and Neuer is selling his fish. I'm sitting leaning against the railing and smoking a cigarette. Walter gave it to me without saying a word just as he passed over his non-appearance in the early morning without a word. "Well, Walting, did ye have a guid sleep," Neuer had said.

The people come in dribs and drabs. They know when the fisherman is here and selling. Stay a little and chat to the men about the weather and the fish, which is not around at the moment. Neuer is wearing a woollen glove on the hand with which he holds the fish, and in the other has a knife with which he guts and cleans the creatures. The innards fly over the railing, where screaming seagulls squabble over them. He puts the fish in the bag, passes it to Walter and names a price. Walter takes the money and puts it in the small metal cashbox. "My wife taught me to be friendly to the customers," Neuer said earlier, and I cannot say that he is unfriendly. But he is obviously glad that there's Walter between him and the customers. A woman buys a couple of plaice and she wants to go on talking to the men. She has dressed up to go shopping, one can see that. The chestnut red hair has just been washed, she's unobtrusively made up and is wearing a denim skirt and a white t-shirt. Fifty perhaps, teacher perhaps or some other kind of civil servant. She takes the fish and stays there. There's no one behind her waiting to be served and Neuer is filleting the perch we've caught. He pulls off their skin and puts the pinkish white gleaming pieces in a pile.

"Have you heard something about the murder," asks the woman. I've read about the murder in the newspaper, too, yesterday in the little café. A man beat his wife to death here in Kiel-Holtenuau and the police were uncertain of the motive. The man let himself be taken away and the

neighbours said, what neighbours so often say: “They were friendly, kept to themselves.”

The woman doesn't give up. “Herr Neuer, you know everyone here, don't you? Haven't you heard anything? Why did he beat her to death? Did you know them?”

“Well, what does know mean,” said Neuer.

“You talk to everybody and his uncle here.” She crosses her calves and the fish bag dangles next to them.

“And you?” The woman looks at Walter and he shakes his head and doesn't return her gaze.

“Come on, Herr Neuer, Herr Walter, you know more than you're telling me.” Her hand plays with the pendant at her neck.

Walter says without looking up: “Perhaps she asked too many questions,” and the woman lets go off the pendant, her smile freezes and without another word she walks down the small jetty and then along the road.

Neuer continues filleting his perch and after a while looks over to Walter, who's leaning against the little wheelhouse. “What is it then?” he says and Neuer only “Man, oh man” and then they both laugh, more the way boys laugh and not men. I throw my butt into the canal and the tears come quite simply and for the first time since Sarah left me.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)