

Anna Weidenholzer: Why the Men Are Wearing Starfishes

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This sample translation by Katy Derbyshire contains extracts from pp. 26-40.

Nine

Right? The landlady is sitting on the corner bench, her hands in her lap. I've brought a questionnaire, you see, and we'll go through it point by point. Where did you get it from? Who's it for? The questions, did you think them up yourself? Partly, but mainly I've stuck to the questions used to survey gross national happiness in Bhutan. Bhutan? Yes. The landlady puts her hands to her head and then on the table; the tea towel she was using to polish glasses is draped over her shoulder. But the conditions here are completely different. I've adapted the questions and left some of them the way they are – sometimes it's good to point out differences. And why? We can talk about that later, it's better to just get started right away. The landlady reaches for the teacup in front of her. And you said my name won't appear anywhere? No, I promise you that, look, it will just say F1 here, so no one will know who you are, all that matters is the overall outcome. I don't understand why you're doing this, what's the point? We can talk about that later. Annemarie, get down from the bench.

The radio is playing quietly in the background in the empty hotel restaurant, the door to the kitchen is open and Karl sees the pans piled up in there. Annemarie has curled up in her spot on the floor and the landlady puts her hands back around the cup. So let's get started then. Karl clears his throat – Are you ready? Yes. Gender female, he says, and he asks: How old are you? Forty-five. Forty-five? Yes. What's your marital status? I'll forget it all afterwards. Divorced, says the landlady and reaches for the sugar packet on Karl's saucer, then taps it against the table. And you? At this point Karl could have said: The questions only go in one direction. He could have said: You can ask me anything you like later, but not now. He answers: I was divorced once too but then I soon found my Margit. During or afterwards? asks the landlady. Karl puts one

foot on Annemarie, strokes her back, she doesn't move. It's hard to draw clear boundaries, we were young. The landlady doesn't reply and Karl would like to explain exactly how it was with Susanne and Margit and that there's no need to reproach him in general. That she's coming up with an impression of him that doesn't match his real self and that precisely that can turn into a problem, these impressions that come about and get stuck, that spread further and further until the real thing starts blurring.

What's your highest educational qualification? Karl asks instead, into her silence. Commercial college, says the landlady and taps the sugar packet against the table again. Do you know what it feels like when someone leaves you? she asks, and Karl is afraid the packet might break and the sugar might scatter over the entire table. You can write that down, go ahead and write it. I was going to save questions like that for a later section. Karl flicks through the pages. Shall I tell you or not? It'll burst any minute now, thinks Karl, and he thinks that hotel landlords and landladies really shouldn't tap sugar packets against tables because they know best of all what happens then. All right, he says, I can enter it here if you like, there'd be more space in the later section but it's fine this way too. The landlady looks at Karl for a long time and then looks out of the window. From one day to the next the ground breaks away and all that's left is a house, a house, a dog and me. I wanted to go out into the world, see a few things. But what's keeping you here? asks Karl, not asking after the precise time when Annemarie the dog was left behind at the hotel. Take a look around. A dog, a house, a hotel, but let's keep going, this has nothing to do with your questionnaire. Karl is unsure whether to ask more or carry on; he doesn't know what Margit would say. Perhaps: If something belongs to you, don't get rid of it, or perhaps: If you start something you have to end it. Do you like seagulls? asks the landlady.

No, says Karl after a while. To be honest they're unpleasant birds that people only like because they remind them of holidays. I've never ever seen one, whispers the landlady. I don't believe that. You're right, but some days it feels like that. I miss their screaming when they argue, although I never know why, I miss their screaming when something gets in their way, I miss the water. I spent a summer by a lake, but that doesn't matter, it's not relevant, I'm talking too much. The landlady puts the sugar packet down on the table. Tomorrow afternoon is market day, did you know that? Karl wonders whether to ask her about the lake but decides against it when he notices the landlady's jittery hands. No, he answers, when? From two thirty. There's not a lot to buy but the honey's good, perhaps you could take some home with you, a little present. Yes, perhaps.

Right, on to the next point, I'll bring this one forward. It takes a while to answer this one, it's about your daily routine. Right, Karl repeats, and clears his throat. We'd like to know: *How did you spend your day yesterday? Start at the time when you woke up and describe your day as precisely as possible, stating how long you needed for each activity.* We? asks the landlady. Yes, we, the research group is more than just me. Karl considers telling her about Margit, the way she shook her head back then at the kitchen table when he said: I'd be interested in how you answer the questions, please. But he decides against it because it might divert the landlady's attention in the wrong direction. The landlady looks out of the window again, raises a hand to greet a passer-by, then says: I'm sorry, but I find your questions unpleasant. You can decide what to tell me and what not, says Karl. Would you like more tea? she asks. Yes please.

Alright then, yesterday. It was still dark when I threw off the covers. I always throw off the covers in one go, it's horrible for a

brief moment but then it's over quickly. In the winter I use the big down duvet and I hang it out on the balcony to air once a week. Getting up – five minutes? asks Karl with the pen in his hand, and the landlady nods. I wake up without an alarm clock. I wake up and have to get started on the day, do you know that feeling? Karl nods. Yesterday was a good day, it started with a good mood, if you know what I mean. Karl nods. After I get up I have breakfast, I need a while for that, I listen to the radio, I arrive in the day. After breakfast I go into the bathroom, but this is all completely boring, why do you want to know all this?

Karl puts the pen aside and says: Some people wake up and have to get up immediately, others don't want to get out of bed, never, some have long drawn-out breakfasts, others leave the house on an empty stomach. It's possible that all this also has an effect on our attitude to life.

Skipping breakfast is bad for you, says the landlady. Yes, I've heard that too, but there are people apparently who feel so sick in the morning they can't eat. It's their circulation, says the landlady, mine is fine.

In the afternoon I lay cards. *Laying cards*, Karl enters in the table under two pm, then he puts the pen in his shirt pocket. What do you mean by that? Tarot cards, answers the landlady and stirs her tea. With archangels? No, that's not my way, I tried it but the cards are usually linked to asking them questions and requests and I'm not one to believe in angels. But everyone responds to their own method, everyone has to find their own path, she adds, reaching for the sugar packet again but this time smoothing it out. But you do believe in your tarot cards? asks Karl. Yes, they give me inspiration, they motivate me and they can help to find a path or

carry on along a good one. Karl nods and thinks briefly about whether to ask about her activities in the late afternoon. He says: I take a bath when I have problems, and he instantly regrets it because the landlady frowns and Karl remembers her telling him to be economical with water on his arrival. But I'm doing fine here, he adds quickly, it's a nice place, I've only taken showers so far. He doesn't mention the cold he felt two days ago. The landlady nods and goes back to talking about how the tarot only gives pointers to where the right path might lie. It's like when you go out hiking, she says, there are signposts, and sometimes you do take a different turning, take a short cut or a different path entirely than you originally planned. Do you often go hiking? Karl would like to ask, but the landlady is quicker: Do you want to see my cards? Karl nods and she goes over to the bar.

Tarot, Karl notes down, and chews the end of the pen. We've got toothpicks, the landlady calls over. Thank you, Karl answers, removing the pen from his mouth. Why he ought to replace the pen with a toothpick is unclear to him; he only uses toothpicks occasionally, always swiftly and inconspicuously behind a raised hand, and Margit doesn't like it even then. Karl, she says when she catches him, must you? Karl does reach for one of the toothpicks now though, wrapped in paper. At unobserved moments at restaurants, he used to poke toothpicks between his incisors to make Helmut laugh when he was little. In a way he might say that was what made Helmut start to like him, that Karl became Helmut's father through that little trick. That's how I came to have a son, thinks Karl, and he thinks that it wasn't the usual way to become a father.

Sorry it took so long, says the landlady when she sits back down next to him. I'd put yesterday's newspaper over them, I'm sometimes very untidy, you know, I have to work on that. A pale

pink box, which the landlady opens. Karl nods and drinks another sip of tea; it's cold by now. Tea doesn't taste of anything without rum, says the landlady and fetches the bottle from behind the bar. No thanks, he says, sometimes I just have it with sugar. Too much sugar's bad for you. You're right there. Would you like to take a card? Karl nods, feeling scared even though he doesn't believe in tarot cards. He does believe in signs, though, in a way, for example that a new stage in his life begins when he comes across a hearse. In the week before his retirement he saw two, which he took as a sign that everything would be different from then on. Margit said: The world's full of signs, Karl, stop it. The driver of the second one lifted a coffee cup to his lips as he waited at a traffic light, and Karl liked the idea that the driver of his hearse would be drinking coffee as he lay in the back. Cosy, calming, he repeated when he sat with Margit. I don't like this ad, she answered, leaning over her magazine, and they left it at that.

Karl inserts his feet beneath Annemarie, scared of the landlady and her cards. He feels uncomfortable at the thought that she might find out something about his life, something he wants to keep hidden. The landlady shuffles the cards quickly; he can tell she has a lot of practice. Wait, it's best if you do this yourself. Alright, says Karl. Mix the cards carefully, take your time, the moment is supposed to be special. That's fine, says Karl.

On the radio, someone's singing about the weather and days when it rains, and the landlady says: Right, now place the cards in a fan with the picture sides down, wait, I'll just light a candle, it's supposed to be a solemn moment. She takes a lighter out of her pocket and leans over the candle behind the salt-shaker, which Karl hasn't noticed previously. It's important, the landlady repeats, flowers or a picture of a loved one would be other options, but seeing as it's here it's fine, it's bound to have an effect. Don't let

anything show, thinks Karl as he shakes out his hand to release tensions that might block the energy flow. Pick a card with your left hand, the landlady explains, but first you have to ask a question. What question? asks Karl. That's up to your judgement. What was the last one you asked? The landlady looks over at the window and speaks quickly. Sometimes Karl isn't sure she's actually heard what he said, but she comes back to the starting point. To begin with, questions about the present are beneficial, about the here and now. What does this situation have to teach me, or: Where am I standing right now? I thought tarot was about the future? asks Karl, jamming his hands between his knees. What are you doing there, you'll cramp up like that. Sorry, says Karl and shakes his hands again, his elbow cracking slightly but only on the left.

Questions about the future are the most tricky, the tarot refuses to answer those asked out of mere curiosity or distrust, or, how do they put it? The landlady flicks through the book on her lap. *Or that arise from an attitude of rejecting responsibility for one's own life.* Perhaps you could shake your hand again, good, now let your breath flow and trust your hand to seek, yes, very good.

Karl picks the moon. Oh dear, says the landlady, and then: Sorry, of course there's a good side to everything. Just as there are no bad star signs, there are challenges, and if you're aware of them you can face up to them. In my case, I was born just before a cusp. Gemini begins on the twenty-first of May. I was born on the night of the twentieth, so I have something of Gemini and Taurus in me, I'm at home between the earth and the sky, which can be hard but also harbours huge potential, even though this to and fro between the two elements means a life in two worlds. Taurus is always pulling at me, you can't get rid of it, but when you know what you've got you can learn to deal with it.

Karl holds the card in his hand and reads the Roman numerals printed at the very top: *XVIII*. He could have asked: You're interested in astrology? But he doesn't say anything. He sees two black towers on either side, in front of them two guards with wolfhound heads, jackals at their feet. Karl has a bad feeling; he asks: Can I take another card, I was distracted. The landlady shakes her head, says: Take a good look at the card and think about what it triggers in you. After that she disappears; Karl hears something beeping in the kitchen and wonders what machine might make a noise like that and why it's even necessary to beep to inform everyone it has finished its job. When he was still teaching, the break-time bell would annoy him every day, because it would throw him off course hour after hour and his words had no more meaning. The lesson was over, thinks Karl, the card on the table in front of him. The colourful part in the middle might mean something good – colourful is good and black is bad.

Right, says the landlady as she sits back down. I don't want to know what meaning the card has for you, but I'll read you a couple of suggestions for what it might say. You have to find your own path though. So: *This tarot card represents the waning moon. It is in the process of dipping further and deeper into the dark parts of the soul. It is a time of final and often toughest tests. The risk of losing sight of your goal in the darkness is great. Illusionary perceptions and alluring temptations line the path and try to lead the traveller astray.* Perhaps you can look at all this in peace, she says after reading on silently, biting her bottom lip. Just one more thing: *Where the night is at its darkest, there the day is closest.* That's a good thing, says the landlady and brushes her hand against Karl's arm. Thank you, he answers, would you like a go now? No, I've taken my card for today. What did you last pick? The landlady takes Karl's card and sorts it into the pile, which she puts back in the box with the book on top. She shrugs and asks: Shall we go on

with your questionnaire? Yes please, answers Karl. He shakes out his hands, his arms and last of all his head.

Ten

Test, Karl hears himself saying, and he thinks: Forget the card, the moon, the jackals. He presses the record button. In the supermarket they made a sign for one fruit: Please treat the bananas like raw eggs.

Thank you. Please treat the bananas with special care. Thank you. The landlady promised to help with the telephone book. I open it up and she reads out the addresses. Sixty-eight, Oberau. She asked: Mr Hellmann, do you want to have another try? It was only a test.

Eleven

Elsewhere there'd be a church, but here the central square is framed by a bank, a retirement home and the village hall. Karl looks up to the third floor, where someone is closing a window. *Where the old people are allowed the most central place in the village, we can assume a balanced social structure*, he notes down on the reverse of the questionnaire he's carrying under his arm. Karl says hello to the young people passing him. He thinks of the landlady laughing and saying: We wear head coverings here as follows. Karl sees the mountains, the bank and the retirement home and decides to follow the group, trying to adjust his steps to theirs, but he soon notices he can't do it. He thinks of the landlady saying: You can tell where someone grew up by the steps that they take.

The young people say goodbye to each other at the bus stop and Karl waits next to a girl who puts the second ear-bud in her ear

once the others have turned the corner. He flicks carefully through the questionnaire but the girl takes no notice of him anyway. Good transport infrastructure plays a key role in life satisfaction, whispers Karl as he reads the timetable. During school terms, one bus an hour calls at O1. *Infrequent but at least regular*. Karl takes a seat next to a woman on the waiting bench. She's speaking into her telephone, saying: This is how you get a healthy mother: Vaseline on the breasts so the skin doesn't peel, heat mustard in a pan and then spread it on a cloth, it has to be hot, the poultice, but it shouldn't burn. The windows of the ice-cream parlour are covered up with newspaper and Karl shifts a few inches further towards the edge of the bench while the woman goes on talking about poultices and the girl taps something into her telephone. You have to work your way through an area, do you hear? A dog barks itself hoarse.

Return please, says Karl when he gets on the bus. Where to? asks the driver. The last stop, Karl answers, because he doesn't know where the bus goes. Last stop and back again, please. In the front row, Karl puts his jacket on the seat next to him, holding the questionnaire on his lap with his hands covering it. He learned to take a front seat from Helmut: Make sure you sit as close as you can to the driver, that way you won't get cold. Why, does the driver turn the heating down at the back? asked Karl, his travel bag by his side. It was just before he set off for a week's outing with the school, the last before his retirement. The driver's climate zone is always the best, answered Helmut and asked if he could use the car while Karl was away; Margit didn't need it either.

Lovely, exclaims the woman previously talking on the phone, and she raises one arm. Bernhard, I haven't seen you for ages. I was on holiday, answers the driver, dropping Karl's change in the holder. The schoolgirl says a brief hello and pushes past the woman,

holding up her pass. Not until she's sat down does Karl get up to fetch the coins.