

PROPERTY

by Wolf Haas

sample translation by Jamie Bulloch

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Three days before her death – she was almost ninety-five and no longer all there – my mother enquired about her parents. ‘Where my people are now,’ she said. When I didn’t immediately get what she was saying she was more specific: ‘My mummy and daddy. I’ve no idea what it’s called, where they are now, but maybe you could give them a bell on your mobile and let them know I’m fine.’

I was hacked off. All these years my mother had led me to believe that her life was awful. And now, three days before her death, she was giving me the news that she was fine. It had to be a mistake. We were the ones who weren’t fine! It was something I’d got used to, having listened to the same broken record ever since the day I was born. Even in the amniotic sac I’d been prepared for the notion that our life was awful. Now she was suddenly fine.

The next day I wondered whether to say that I’d called them. It might make her happy, so why stick obstinately to the facts? I mean, I could simply say, they send their love back and they’re fine too. Your parents are fine and your dead siblings are fine too. The youngest one, who was killed by a horse when he was a child, is in particularly good form. What the hell – she probably didn’t have much longer to live (in fact she died two days later), the lie would pass with her and no longer exist. I just had to ensure I didn’t go overplay it or I’d be guilty of something else: I’d be accused of having made fun of her too. After all everybody deserves a certain degree of respect. Even those who might not notice if you don’t show it. You can’t say any old thing to those approaching a vegetative state, whose lights are going out, just because being with them is tedious. You mustn’t tease people inferior to you. You mustn’t make fun of the feeble-minded, you mustn’t make fun of children and you mustn’t make fun

of the disabled. Basically you mustn't make fun of anyone, I'm afraid. Least of all your dying mother. Who did everything for you, here we go again. And who had such a difficult childhood. How easy I'd had it by comparison. I didn't have to be put into care as an infant because of poverty and hardship. When I was ten I wasn't packed off for good to work as a slave for a farmer in the neighbouring village. I didn't have to spend an hour wading through deep snow to school, look after cows in summer and also patch up the socks of the farmers' four sons. They always wore white socks with their short lederhosen, white knee socks. And these socks had a pattern, see, which was a bit damaged and I had to work out that same pattern, restore it all the way down to the calf, and then use the beautiful, fine white thread to knit the calf. Knitting with that fine white thread was such a lot of work, so precise, it had to look beautiful.

Now I have to knit together her life. From some inner compulsion. I'll be finished by the time of her funeral and then I'll be rid of it, the memory and everything. A quick text and then it's done. A text that takes its succour from being in a race with death (only two more days). No time for fancy wording. Or self-censorship. Congratulations, a great idea. But that doesn't give me the right to tell her I've rung, they send their love back and say they're fine too. On the other hand, such a strict interpretation of the law is an obstacle to giving your fading mother a bit of happiness before she dies. Can't we see pulling someone's leg as the jolly cousin of putting an arm around them? Where exactly is the transition zone, where is the line, where are the border guards of good taste? It's possible to spend so long thinking about true love you end up growing a wrinkly Hitler moustache. If I'm careful enough I might be able to make her happy but stop before the threshold of mockery. I could simply say, 'They send lots of love back and they're fine.' Full stop. What I mustn't do is go overboard and indulge in

too much detail. So I can't say, 'Your father's got a cold. But he's on the road to recovery.'
That would probably be disrespectful.

All this was on my mind when I entered my mother's room in the old people's home. She'd fallen asleep at the dining table by the panorama window. I was full of admiration for the carers who, wherever possible, would heave the geriatrics out of bed and into a wheelchair, then push them a couple of metres just so that the old people could eat sitting up at a table. They wouldn't feed people in bed if they could get them out of it. And you weren't accused of insufficient effort if you fell asleep at the table after only three spoonfuls of soup. ('Watch out! Most people drown in shallow waters!' An old British advertisement from the 1960s, warning people to take greater care at the beach – illustrated by a drunkard who falls asleep at the table and drowns in his bowl of soup.) Dignity and respect, interesting concepts that, with the Grim Reaper in attendance, I discussed with myself (he wasn't interested). The care staff probably racked up three spinal incidents per patient. This wasn't like me at all – I tended to block things out – but today my head was brimming with profound thoughts, a whole host of them. It occurred to me that as a student I'd even attended a lecture on ethics at the Institute of Philosophy. Was it right that a young carer should ruin her back just so that someone who wanted to stay in bed anyway could be respectfully lifted out of bed and pushed to the table in dignity? Absolutely it was right, and you absolutely mustn't dish up fairy tales to your mother, who for the first time in ninety-five years was your mental inferior.

'I called them,' I said after I'd woken her. 'They all send their love and they're fine. Your father's got a cold. But he's on the road to recovery.'

For a while she let the news seep in. Then, with great effort, she leaned back in her wheelchair and levered herself up on the left armrest until her scrawny torso shot back into the desired position. Or even beyond this; the wheelchair had a mind of its own. She was by now a very thin bird and her exaggerated reclining position gave her a view of the highest mountain peaks. With her better hand she shielded her eyes from the blinding daylight, reminding me faintly of Stephen Hawking critically examining a black hole.

She cleared her throat and gazed pensively into the distance. I was very familiar with this. An innocuous clearing of the human throat is the prelude to an imminent utterance, but my mother would follow it with an alarmingly long pause for thought. ‘A cold?’ she said eventually and sighed. Then she put on dreaded facial expression number 1. I knew what was coming; I could have spoken along like a voice-over artist, and maybe my lips were moving faintly as she said:

‘Because he never looks after himself!’

To be on the safe side I said nothing. Attempts to placate her only made the whole thing worse. I was hoping that she would drop the subject and allow me, like an army scout, to creep back out of the danger zone unnoticed. I was hot-headed, a bad quality I’d inherited from her. I could have kept the cold to myself. Now came the just punishment. The topic, once mentioned, could no longer be stopped. It would have to be discussed down to the finest detail. In this respect my adversary was a tough cookie.

‘Has he got a cough too?’

‘No, no. He’s on the road to recovery.’

For me, the way out of all situations, the path to salvation, the emergency exit from all battle zones always bore this name: road to recovery. As a child it was my greatest trump card. To avoid being treated like an invalid for no reason, say immediately: I'm on the road to recovery. Even with pneumonia, a bashed skull, even when I was carried into the flat with bones sticking out, I never failed to utter this blessing: I'm on the road to recovery. And before I forget it, I'd like to stipulate that these very words should be carved on my gravestone:

I'M ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

'Sore throat?'

'What?'

'Has he got a sore throat too?'

'No, his throat isn't sore. Just a slight cold. And he's better now.'

'I bet he got a chill in that workshop,' she said in a mixed tone. Half reproachful, half sympathetic. Although the sympathetic half itself consisted of two halves. I couldn't help but think of the famous Tractacus numbering that fogs you with so much clarity:

1. The tone of the dying mother comments on her long-dead father's cold.
 - 1.1. The tone of the dying mother is half reproachful (against the patient).
 - 1.2. The other half is sympathetic (in support of the patient).
 - 1.2.1. The sympathetic half itself consists of two halves.
 - 1.2.1.1. One half of the sympathetic half is sympathetic.
 - 1.2.1.2. The other half is reproachful again (principle of recursiveness).

It was probably her Stephen Hawking pose that led me to such flights of fancy. Besides, she'd fallen asleep again and I had to make the time pass somehow. At any rate it was too simplistic to state that her tone had been three-quarters reproachful. The main reproachful half was aimed at her father who hadn't been careful in our unheated workshop (main reproach). But the reproach that was harboured in the sympathetic half was aimed at someone else: the people (secondary reproach). My mother had a score to settle with the people. The more you talked to the sleeping Stephen Hawking, the more you realised that the secondary reproach was actually the main reproach.

'Do you remember what your father's profession was?'

'Of course!' she said, her eyes closed, dabbing the left corner of her mouth with a napkin – a long-winded procedure. 'Why wouldn't I?'

When I entered this room she had no idea that she'd greeted me five times this weekend with the words that I hadn't been to see her in ages. She didn't remember that I'd already been there an hour ago. And last weekend. While before that and after that my brother had been to visit ('I haven't seen him in ages'). But obviously she could recall the profession of her father who'd died shortly after the World War (in the previous millennium).

'Master wheelwright!'

I'd always liked the idea that my grandfather was a wheelwright. As far as I knew he was the only one of my ancestors who'd learned a profession. And not just any profession, but a wheelwright. Although he died two years after I was born something rubbed off on me.

Wheelwright. As a child I felt it spoke to me. Moreover, in the village surnames were rarely used – the children from farming families took their farm name, while the children of the craftsmen took the name of their father’s guild. That’s why my mother, as the daughter of the wheelwright – Wagner in German – was known as Marianne Wagner. Some people still called my brother and I the Wagner lads by the time Ringo Starr was on television, playing drums on a roof. Even though wooden wheels had long disappeared from this world, I liked the word wheelwright. It’s a craft that sounds special. Who’s able to make wheels? You have to be pretty skilful technically. When I’m old as my mother, perhaps I’ll believe that my grandfather invented the wheel. I’m already looking forward to that day. But for my mother the key thing was the word that preceded it: master! Her father wasn’t just a wheelwright, not a wheelwright’s apprentice or even assistant wheelwright, he was a master wheelwright. Even though it seems he always practised his craft on his own and in great poverty, moving from farm to farm, begging for work (in my mother’s tales, at least, there were never any apprentices, only hunger, cold, makeshift hovels and shelters, farmers who didn’t pay, all the misery of a rural novel), she derived great narrative gratification from the fact that he was a master wheelwright. Four syllables that took up a fair amount of space. My father, for example (her husband), hadn’t learned a profession, whereas her father was – have I mentioned this? – a master wheelwright. She might have been able to get herself a master craftsman too, or even a teacher, doctor or lawyer. Sadly, however, all the men of her generation had been shot dead so there wasn’t much of a choice. She had to be content with a much younger rascal who hadn’t finished school. Not that this mattered to her anymore; she’d quickly forgotten her husband who was long dead now. Effectively, all memory of her husband vanished a few days after the funeral. But she remembered her father very well. She loved talking about him.

[...]

‘Nettle tea,’ my mother says.

‘What?’

‘If he’s got a chill he ought to have himself a nettle tea.’

It was always difficult to prise my mother off a topic she’d got stuck into. The more you tried, the deeper she’d work her way in. Just as a wheel becomes tighter with every turn of the screw. But I’d thought it would be easier: surely I’d be able to overpower her in her much weakened state. I had no choice other than to assume my rearguard action: ‘He’s on the road to recovery.’

She shook her head impatiently. ‘That’s what you always say. I’m on the road to recovery. And then you go on sniffing for weeks.’ In her head her father and her son fused into one person. Pains in the arse, endlessly sniffing because they didn’t dress warmly enough.

‘Maybe he’ll get himself a nettle tea there,’ she thinks out loud. ‘Or do you think I should take one along for him?’ She sighs, a sigh that means something like: Where am I going to get hold of a nettle tea? Seeing as they’ve taken everything from me in the old people’s home. And stolen my watch. Whenever my mother couldn’t find anything immediately, she reported it as stolen. Who would have stolen your watch? The people! The carers weren’t angry about being the target of her accusations. They put up with a lot and would simply keep searching – under the pillow, behind the mattress, in the drawer of the bedside table – until the watch turned up. Or the purse. Or the wedding ring. For several decades (half a century?) I’d avoided the mistake of using the words *chill* or *cold* or even *coughsnifflessorethroat* within earshot of my mother. Normally I was extremely careful. I’d never have risked paying

her a visit if I had a cough or the sniffles. If I ever felt the urge to sneeze in her presence I'd race in the car to the neighbouring village so I could be sure of being out of earshot. But now, not only had I mentioned a cold, it wasn't even a real one. What on earth had got into me? I must have wanted to put it to the test again, two days before her death. I'd played with fire. I'd asked for a slap in the face. It was dead certain that I wasn't going to get out of this without nettle tea. If I wasn't careful – very careful – my mother would deploy Frau Treben too. I'd made two mistakes. Mistake number 1: I'd given my mother Frau Treben's book on herbal tea. (For Christmas forty years ago. The only present from me that she didn't throw back in my face. This rejection was a three-part speech act, expressed in a single sigh: first, she didn't need something like that; second, it was (always) wasted on her; and third, I must return it as quickly as possible because I didn't have any money anyway, which she could tell from my unhealthy scrawniness. Fourth (bonus implication), my scrawniness might be down to an illness, of course, but I couldn't afford a doctor. But who, fifth, wouldn't have a clue as to what was wrong with me anyway.) Mistake number 2: I'd mentioned the topic of the common cold.

Now: just punishment.

'I always had good nettle tea. I used to collect and dry the leaves myself. Using Frau Treben's recipe. You gave me that book and I was very pleased you did.' (Time and again she was touched by the fact that I'd given her this book on medicinal herbs. Sometimes she'd even shed a tear of gratitude, because when she drank tea she got very weepy.) 'I always made Dad a nettle tea.' My father had died almost twenty years ago of nettle tea poisoning. But I suppose it wasn't that risky for her father anymore, seeing as he was already dead.

‘Call him on our mobile and tell him I’ll bring along a nettle tea.’

‘OK, I will.’

‘Tell him I’ll be there soon and I’ll bring a tea for his chill. Or rather, against his chill. I collected the leaves myself. On the way to the house in the woods, you know, I picked them there. By the bend where you nearly died on your scooter, that’s where the best nettles grow.’

Or rather, against his chill. I particularly liked this pedantry of hers. After all it was obvious FROM THE CONTEXT, wasn’t it? You don’t need to start getting all precise two days before your death, or rather, one day and twenty-three hours before your death!

‘Yes,’ I promised. ‘I’ll tell him.’

‘But I need something to pack it in.’

‘Pack?’

‘The nettle tea! A tin would be best. You know, a tin with a lid. Or a paper bag at least.’

‘I’ll bring one for you.’

‘Where are you going to get hold of that?’

‘I’ll sort something out.’

‘You’ll sort something out,’ she said, slightly scornfully. Or rather, with unmistakable contempt. She was expecting me to turn up with something useless. A tin that was too small or too big, or one with a stupid lid. That you can’t open properly and can’t shut properly! She was lost in thought for a while, so I hoped the matter was now done and dusted. But she had another question:

‘By the way, where do I have to board?’

‘Board what?’

‘To bring him his nettle tea. Where do I have to board?’

I couldn’t think of an answer. Maybe I even pursed my lips preposterously so my facial muscles would abandon the idea of allowing a tear to run down my cheek. Or rather, two tears from two eyes. I couldn’t tell her where she had to board so she could take her father the bloody nettle tea. Even though we always knew where we had to get on. Boarding was central to our family’s existence. You could only survive if you knew when and where you had to board the bus to get somewhere. Her father had built wheels. A master wheelwright. But we didn’t have driving licences. On the other hand, we knew where you had board. Taking a slurp of some cold, old-people’s-home coffee, she pulled a face and mulled over which stop would be the right one. When, having already forgotten the question, I briefly turned my mind to the literature lecture I urgently needed to write (I only had the title so far), she awoke from her thoughts and sighed, half sceptically, half confidently: ‘They’ll tell me where.’