

Sample Translation

By Jo Heinrich

1

Where uncertainty ends, my father once said a long time ago, dreaming begins. We were sitting on the banks of the River Unstrut as he murmured this under his breath, in the shade of a white willow, overlooking the vineyards which we both agreed made the landscape in our area special. He said it quietly and introspectively, as if he were talking to himself. The water we were gazing at was as shady and impenetrable as the behaviour of the fish he wanted to catch: golden shimmering rudd, pot-bellied carp or scrawny pike, which Father sometimes fished for with blinkers he'd made from old spoons.

It was carp he was after that day. I wasn't particularly interested in angling at the time and rarely accompanied my father, although he insisted on inviting me whenever he was packing up his fishing gear. Father never knew if the carp would feel like biting, if they'd be taken in by his sweet dough, which he at any rate thought was irresistible, or if we were even in the right place: just because he'd caught something on that bend in the shallow eddy a while ago, it was no guarantee that success would necessarily repeat itself.

Where uncertainty ends, dreaming begins. At the time, I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me. And maybe even he didn't understand it himself. But it sounded good, and right for that moment, and no doubt it had something to do with that elusive feeling he'd get when he sat by the water's edge waiting for a fish to take his bait – he'd often talked about it. So I settled for that explanation.

At some point, a carp actually did bite. As soon as it was in the landing net, I pounced on it with a childlike exuberance. The carp was enormous, probably between seventy and eighty centimetres long, and maybe around fifteen kilos in weight. Later, when we were telling my mother about it, my father reckoned it was twelve years old, so we were the same age, the carp and I. As it lay in the net before me, opening and closing its mouth with a fixed gaze, I noticed a row of large scales running horizontally from its head to its tail fin. I've caught a lot of carp in my lifetime, but that was the only time I ever saw a linear carp. Its flawless skin reminded me of Father's leather shoes; it had a bronze shimmer in the sun. I knew,

in theory at least, that these fish were enormously strong. I didn't realise how strong they really were until I tried to lift the wet, slimy and terribly heavy fish out of the net to hand it over to my father, who was already looking for the hammer handle in his army backpack. He was going to hit the carp once on the head to stun it. After that he'd use the sharp blade of his knife to stab it in the heart, which is the size of a grape and located behind one end of the gills. It would stop beating straightaway. We wanted to smoke the carp in our yard, as we always did whenever he caught one. But we didn't get that far. The carp wriggled, thumped its head and tail on the dry grass, pumping its gills open and closed, and eventually slipped out of my hands. Before I knew it, it was sliding down the steep embankment, over knotweed and white clover, and ended up in knee-deep water, where, after a moment's reflection and before my father could get the net back into the water, it disappeared into the depths, flicking its tail as it went.

Shortly before my mother died, I was sitting by her bedside with my sisters. Ute and Marion were already married, and I'd just got engaged to Katrin. Mother had been ill for months. She looked at each of us in turn, and finally said, in her inimitable way with a soft tone and almost whispering, that a long time ago, before the three of us were even at school, her only wish was that we children would grow up to be adults and claim our place in the world. That's exactly how she said it, with a smile.

When my mother was dying, she could look back over a long life. My wife was denied this good fortune. And my son too. Or at least that's what I thought until a year ago – and here's where things start to get complicated.

For a long time I tried to suppress my thoughts about my baby and Katrin. I didn't know what else to do – and it felt, if not good, okay at least. I now know that attempting to sweep events from the past under the carpet so I might be able to live what people call a 'normal life' was doomed from the start.

Many years after the big carp had slipped back into the water, when I'd left school and was about to move out to study in Jena, over a beer in our kitchen I admitted to my father that I might have given that magnificent great fish with all its splendour and beauty a little help back then, because I'd felt sorry for it. I simply didn't want it to have to die just because we'd decided out of the blue that we had a craving for

smoked carp that day. My father listened intently to me as I was making my confession, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully as if I were giving a complicated lecture. After I'd finished, I took a large sip of beer and looked at him uneasily, unsure how he'd react. He suddenly laughed out loud, and although his face was etched with deep wrinkles and I could see his crooked back brought on by rheumatism, he looked much younger: 'Do you really think I didn't notice?'

Provided they are spared from disease, predatory fish, voracious cormorants and anglers, carp can easily live to the age of fifty years. In contrast to us humans, they become more and more beautiful with age; their skin, sometimes a bronze or sometimes a coppery shade depending on the light, takes on a richer, deeper tone. With every passing year, they become more timid, eat less, and at some point, when they realise their end is nigh, they leave the shoal they've spent their lives with, become loners and eventually die in a sheltered place, among the stems of water lilies or in the shade of a mossy tree trunk that might have once fallen into the water. You could say this death isn't in vain: its lifeless corpse now serves as food for predatory fish such as eel and catfish.

My son died just a few hours after he was born. His death was nothing more than a dark twist of nature, or at least that's what I thought at the time. But sometimes you only realise the true shape of things over time, whether you like it or not.

2

It was a Sunday almost exactly a year ago when something strange happened. I'd been down to the river for a few hours and late that afternoon I came back to the house where I live with Anne, and where my parents and their parents before them lived.

Anne and I have no plans to marry. The idea of standing at an altar again at our age – I'm sixty-five, Anne is sixty-two – seems funny to us.

On the days I spend in my basement, making blinkers from old spoons I buy at local flea markets, just like my father used to do, and shaping floats out of

expensive balsa wood and then painting them painstakingly, Anne leaves me alone, as if I'd asked her to. If she's still in bed at midday, which does sometimes happen, I know she'll stay there until the evening. I put a bowl of soup on her bedside table without a word, and when I gently open the door again later to see if she's asleep, the bowl's usually empty.

On that Sunday in May, I put my muddy fishing backpack down on the floorboards, which I knew Anne wouldn't like because it went against our agreement that I keep my fishing gear and all the dirt that comes with it in the basement. Then I took off my shoes, slipped out of my dripping waterproof trousers and hung them on the hook together with my raincoat, which was wet too. Taking the backpack upstairs would seem like a provocation to Anne, guaranteeing a small, harmless altercation. But one of the backpack's leather straps had ripped off, and I wanted to sew another one onto it that evening. That was why I'd brought it upstairs, but I wasn't going to tell Anne that. Sometimes I really enjoyed winding her up or testing how far I could push my luck.

She came out of the living room and walked up to me and the backpack, but instead of inspecting it with a critical eye, she gave me a hug, a little tighter than usual, and then fixed her eyes on me, intensely and anxiously, or so it seemed to me. She hadn't noticed the backpack or the mud. Something about the way she was looking at me got on my nerves. A few seconds passed while we just stood in the hallway, still and silent, as if we were the picture someone had painted of this scene.

Then, all of a sudden, she looked away, as if something had happened. And it had, but I didn't know that yet.

It took her a while to look at me again; although I'd never ask her, I wonder if she was thinking about just keeping quiet about what had happened because she knew it would shatter everything I'd ever believed in. Just as I was about to lose patience, I noticed she had a note in her hand.

'Daniel rang,' she said, her voice dry and brittle.

Daniel: my only child, who'd been dead for forty years.

'What did you say?' I asked, much too loudly, I realised straightaway.

I'd obviously misunderstood her. But she said it again: 'Daniel rang.'

Her words sounded both solemn and worried, as if she didn't know how I'd react, and as if she was also afraid in some way of what those two words might trigger.

She held out the note which had a phone number on it. I don't know how long I looked at that note, but I felt incapable of anything other than looking at that number. It seemed like a long Latin word I'd had to learn syllable by syllable, only to realise I hadn't understood it at all.

'I said you'd call him back,' Anne said. Her voice had almost gone back to its usual soft and even tone by now.

Then she turned away, walked past the dresser, past the wall calendar with pictures of her goddaughter who rarely visited us on it, and every step she took was deliberately sluggish; it was as if she were walking in slow motion, unhurriedly, tentatively, ready to turn around at any moment and do whatever she had to do, depending on my reaction.

At some point, she disappeared into the living room. I heard her turn off the TV. She was probably sitting on the sofa, looking out of the window with a view towards the vineyards to the south and the Unstrut with its waters glittery in the sun behind the narrow strip of trees, and waiting.

3

At the beginning of May, when most anglers are celebrating the end of the pike close season by throwing blinkers and wobblers into the river, I usually spend a few afternoons sitting by a slow-moving tributary of the Unstrut, not far from Memleben, watching the bream spawning. The large, heavy males pounce on the females, rubbing against them in their daredevil way. I'll happily drive for half an hour to be able to attend this spectacle. The bream seek out that shallow and weedy area of the river with a dependability that surprises me every time. All the males have spawning nodules: white growths on their foreheads the size of grains of rice, which could be mistaken for a fungal disease. I saw one of the males in this tributary for three or four years on the trot. It was easy to recognise: its dorsal fin was missing, and its right flank was marked with an almost vertical scar, probably from a cormorant attack. But at some point the male stopped coming back here. It

probably didn't survive the winter or fell victim to a large predatory fish, or maybe it's simply spawning somewhere else now. I'm tempted to believe the last option.

There are usually ten or eleven bream that come to this small oxbow. I can hardly think of any other fish whose body takes on such unconventional shapes: the bream is strikingly elongated and narrow, as if a flat flounder had risen from the seabed and taken an upright stance. Their backs rise up sharply, and it's no stretch of the imagination to think that a bream might start suffering from a pronounced hump as soon as it enters this world. There are fish that vie for attention, fish that parade their beauty – the red-finned, shimmering golden rudd, for example, or the grayling, which proudly flaunts its large, flag-like dorsal fin like a mohawk and whose purple glow, once you see it, you'll simply never get out of your head. Bream, on the other hand, keep a low profile in these matters – their fins are grey, and their bodies, enveloped in a remarkable amount of slime, are a dull, nondescript bronze shade.

Once the bream have moved on, two hundred thousand eggs per female, each egg one and a half millimetres in size, will be sticking to the leaves of the fennel pondweed, which at that point still hasn't grown very tall, and to the hornwort's foliage. A large amount of them will be eaten over the following few days. No fish has as good a sense of smell as the eel, and no other has such a voracious appetite for roe. In the end, perhaps just a few dozen of these bream will manage to survive and grow up to spawn themselves at the age of three or four, not necessarily where they hatched, although it's not out of the question.

After this spawning season, lasting two weeks or so, many of the bream will have sustained gaping wounds, which often become infected and will mean death for some: one life ends, many new ones begin.

While I'm sitting completely still between the two crooked field elms with their branches almost touching the water, and I'm watching what's happening just two or three metres away from me, it's not uncommon for me to think of Katrin and my son. Sometimes I suspect this is the only reason why I visit this place every year in May, the month when Daniel was born and died. Then again, sometimes I think I'm only interested in fish, in the life in the shadows. Both are probably true.

When I first saw Katrin, I was twenty years old and I'd just started my teacher training in Jena. We'd met at one of the seminars. As far as my appearance is concerned, I'm more like a bream than a rudd. I knew my chances of being able to arouse her interest in me in any way were devastatingly slim. I had more than two brain cells to rub together, but I couldn't really say I was much brighter than anyone else. I had a sense of humour, of course, but then again I wasn't so funny that I could have become the class clown. I was good at speaking off the cuff, but ultimately, I wasn't eloquent enough in the seminars to impress the others, Katrin for example. My eyebrows have always been bushy and almost untamable, which earned me many unflattering nicknames back then. My nose is also a little too long and flat, with a significant bend to the left, and it's often red, as if I had an alcohol problem. I felt that all these little shortcomings, all these faults, were the reason I'd never had any women interested in me.

We were together for five years, Katrin and I, from the beginning of our studies to their end and a few months beyond that, until that day, six weeks after Daniel's death, when she left the house, never to return.

Katrin had been the one who approached me after the second or third seminar we had together. I assumed her interest in me would be short-lived, and everything would come to a halt as soon as she encountered all my shortcomings. But that wasn't the case. When she came to visit me for the first time, she brought her toothbrush. From then on, everyone said we were inseparable, and we were, at any rate until that day in May 1978.

My recollections of Katrin and our time together before the birth are nothing but wonderful memories. I'm sure we had arguments over the years, both big and small – why wouldn't it be like that when two people spend time together day in, day out? Friction is in our nature. But I can't remember any of that at all. Even now, when I focus my thoughts and go back to the past, I can't think of any quarrels we had, any hostile silences or any reconciliations after hours of rage. I know I'm deluding myself about this, and I wonder why there's something in me that's so anxious to only expose the good from those five years, as if I couldn't be expected to tell the truth, or as if what happened after Daniel's birth was already outrageous enough.

The death of a newborn baby is one of those things that lies at the very limits of our powers of imagination. It goes against the natural order of life so monstrously that even now, the merest thought of it can throw me off balance.

If someone asks me if I have children or grandchildren, I usually tell a slightly softer and shorter version of the story, without all the contradictions and inconsistencies, finishing where it ended – in a small cemetery in Grössnitz, not far from the Unstrut.

On 7 May 1978, three days after my son was born, I dug the grave where he would be buried. It was usually done by a firefighter who lived in a large house overgrown with ivy at the edge of the village. But he was away.

Early that morning as I was making my way to the graves, dodging molehills in the dewy grass and walking past blossoming apple and quince trees scarcely taller than me, I already knew I'd never be able to forget that day. From time to time the air had a sweetness to it, and from time to time something bitter and aromatic, depending where the gusts of wind catching my hair were coming from. Step by step, I neared the cemetery gate. I was being very careful not to imprint any details of that morning onto my memory – and that, at least I think now, was probably my mistake. The more I focussed on not registering anything, the more details I noticed. The chestnut brown cat with the thick tail darting into a privet hedge, two blackbirds sitting by one of the molehills, a rattly two-stroke engine, and I'll probably never be able to forget the light that morning: the sky was obscured by dark, heavy clouds, as if a thunderstorm might be on its way, and at the point where there was a misshapen hole between the clouds, a little way above the horizon, the sun was shining, and it made for a strange light, both soft and harsh at the same time.

The apple and quince blossoms had a dazzling white glow, and everything – the lush green grass, the church I'd seen which had only just been painted a pastel yellow shade, the red tractor that had been there for years by a crooked woodshed – everything was so intensely bright that I had to squint as I walked, so I could only pick out hazy outlines.

Eventually I stepped into the shade of the little church, picked up the spade, dug and dug, and when the tape measure I took out every so often showed a depth of one and a half metres, I threw the spade on the mound of earth behind me, which was almost the height of a grown man, sat down on the flattened grass and closed my eyes.

I'd been digging for six hours without a break. At first, I'd been thinking manically and earnestly about our house, which had belonged to us since Ute and Marion had moved away. I could see it all right in front of me: the house, our garden, the yard with Father's old smoker, each individual room, and meanwhile the pile of earth behind me grew bigger and bigger. We'd have to renovate the house, Katrin and I, a year for each room. Before my eyes I had the floor plans which we'd often examined, engrossed in conversations about which room we wanted to redesign and how, while Katrin's belly was constantly growing. I thought of the wall in the living room that needed to go, of the paint which wasn't as easy to find as I'd first imagined.

Then those thoughts faded, I paused for a moment, and as I took shallow breaths, panting with exhaustion, I realised I'd been talking to myself the whole time. There was nothing wrong with talking to myself at a time like this, I'm not ashamed of it, and there was no one there to hear me anyway. That morning, however, I was suddenly seized with rage, intense and seething. I stopped pushing the spade into the earth with my foot as I'd been doing all that time, instead literally beating it into the ground; I pounded the earth with it with all the strength I had back then as a twenty-five-year-old.

I must have been sitting in front of that hole for half an hour, the rustling of the beech leaves accompanied by the robins' song, and suddenly that quiet place seemed very loud to me. I began to cry.

It was the first time since Daniel's death that I shed tears.

When I'd calmed down a little, I drove home, showered, looked for and found the book I was meant to take to Katrin, threw a fresh towel in my backpack and set off for the hospital in Naumburg.

Daniel no longer being alive hadn't sunk in until the day I dug his grave. It wasn't until I broke down in tears that I was able to translate that fact into a concrete

feeling, into something I could grasp. My child had died, and everything I'd imagined together with Katrin – our house, maybe a second child soon, a marriage that would make us both happy – had been nothing more than a passing idea that two people had about a life.

For a long time, I'd assumed the moment when the doctor entered the room where Katrin was lying while I was holding her hand was the moment when I grasped things in the way Katrin grasped them. That was the day after the birth.

The doctor, her voice serious and her hands clasped behind her back, said Daniel had died on the way to the children's hospital in Jena. She was very sorry. His heart had simply been too weak. She really was very sorry about that.

'What?' Katrin asked quietly, hesitantly, tentatively, as if she didn't understand the words that had just been said.

The doctor managed to hold her gaze, but her face seemed to have become a mask.

Katrin asked again, 'What?'

There was sudden anger and incredulity in that one word, as much as someone could muster if she had just become a mother and then was no longer one, from one moment to the next.

She shrugged off my hand and tried to straighten up, which didn't go well as the wound on her belly hurt and pulled tight, I could tell from her pained face; she contorted her lips and sucked in a breath through her teeth.

The doctor didn't look like the bearer of bad news. She had an open face, fine features and full lips, and I wonder why I was thinking about things like that at that very moment, why I, unscathed as I was, well-rested and my senses about me, did nothing – I could have resolutely taken her outside, that doctor, so we could clear up the misunderstanding that had obviously just occurred. Other men probably would have done that, or they would have started sending the right signals to their wives straightaway, just as the first bitter grief was rising up within them: I'm here. We share this pain. Skin to skin. But I didn't do anything. I sat in my chair, which was hard and uncomfortable, looked out of the window, saw the clouds, saw the shapes they were making and thought they were really beautiful, saw the chestnut tree in

blossom – everything was blossoming right then, life was everywhere, and grasping that made me feel strangely tired.

After the doctor had left the room, Katrin's anger began to turn on me.

'Say something!'

Over the past few years, I've often thought about why I did what I did at that moment: nothing. My job, or at least how I understood my role as a father, was to rejoice in the fact that there was now this child that I'd had with a woman I loved and who loved me. Now, though, the role I was meant to take on was completely different.

Even when Katrin said my name, that day in the hospital, with a voice distorted by anger and despair, I didn't say a word, didn't take her hand in mine, didn't hug her and didn't cry with her. Instead, I got up, opened the window, sat back down by her bed, rested my head on the mattress by her knee, and if it hadn't been for a doctor I'd never seen before, I probably would have fallen asleep there and then. He asked me to sign some forms, and I did.