

ZBINDEN'S PROGRESS

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For lunch? Hot milk with bread. And genitalia in it. That's what Herr Hügli claimed they were, at least: some animal's genitals. He fished them out of his bowl and sat, making strange patterns on the table with them, until Frau Grundbacher and Frau Wyttenbach started telling him off. – On the bedside table? You're right, this photograph wasn't there before, there's no getting past that sharp eye of yours. Nurse Lydia noticed right away, too, when she burst into my room with a raincoat and umbrella yesterday, ready for our walk, armed against every kind of rainfall. Without being invited to, she lifted the photo for a closer look.

'Such a cheerful couple!' she exclaimed, her cheeks glowing like tiny apples, her eyes lighting up with excitement at her discovery. 'Where's that? Is that your wife? You'd think you were film stars!'

'This is the pond where she taught me to swim.' I took back the snap. 'Our son took the photo. He was ten at the time. Or eleven, maybe.'

'I didn't mean to pry,' Lydia said, apologetically. 'It's just: I've never seen the photo in your room before, and when I saw it, well, you and your wife seem so . . .'

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She didn't complete her sentence. Instead, pulled the stool up, sat down beside me by the window and took my hands. And do you know what I felt? I felt you. Your warmth. Lydia's hands are like yours. And I told her about the two of us, our hazardous excursions and bold swimming adventures. How we walked along that pond beneath the trees, following the shore until no one could see us. The pond was in the shade, the sun well down. We stripped to our underwear and waded into the water. You'd put your hair up with clasps. Our son was trying to catch frogs at the shore, for poison for his arrows. You swam in the pond, showing me the movements to make. Then, in the water, you held me up with your arms and I practised drowning. After a while, I'd got the trick of it and could swim half a metre before I went under.

'The main thing's not to be afraid,' you said.

We took each other's hand and climbed out of the water as dusk was beginning to fall. At that precise moment, Markus took the photo.

Nurse Lydia listened, smiling, when I told her we wrote to each other daily for four years. – 'How are you? I am well,' and you wrote back, 'My dear fiancé, I, too, am well, and know from all your letters that you are. Would you mind writing a proper letter?'

Lydia nodded, sympathetically, when I told her about your admirer on the bird-watching course, and the storm it had unleashed in me. I told her how silent I'd been for an endlessly long day after you slapped me across the face in Bonstetten Park. I told her about how, so late in life, I started being of some use about the house, after all – and Lydia seemed just as astonished as you were, back then. Only once did I put the Hoover bag in the wrong way, and all the dust came billowing out. The handle



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that had broken off the washing machine, it turned out, only needed some superglue. I put the photo back. Lydia offered me a coffee, in the Cafeteria, and threw the umbrella in the corner.

I love thinking about you, there's so much to remember. I can't remember a time when you weren't part of me. And these days – I don't look up into the clouds for you, I look close by.

Of course, I feel uncomfortable in this shirt – what do you think? I keep having to loosen the collar. It's mad, dressing like this in this heat, but the new civilian-service carer is waiting at the door for me, and I'd like to make a good first impression. Trustworthy. Lukas Zbinden: knowledgeable and respectable. He may always open his heart to the lonely and unhappy but, in the face of injustice, he's fearless and makes no allowances. I hope the young man might like to accompany me into town a little. That would be my greatest wish. And if I'm honest, I'd be a little miffed if he were to be in a hurry to leave again. It's always nicer if others also enjoy what gives you pleasure. Cross your fingers for me, Emilie.



Kâzim, I did catch your name correctly, didn't I? Give an ageing walker your hand, young man. I have terrible difficulty with staircases. Can you believe this home for the elderly was once a private home? That a family of just four, or five, lived here? The children would creep up to the railings, here, and crouch down to watch as their parents hosted a soirée downstairs. – Take what? You'll have to speak up. I've two hearing aids. With one, I can hear but it gives me headaches. With the other, I don't get a headache but I can't hear. – The lift? No, I never take the lift. In the lift, everyone



just stands there, rigid, staring straight ahead, or with their eyes down. The door opens, someone gets out and someone else gets in – but turns immediately to face the door and study it, awkwardly. Who is it orders them all to study the door? If I have to use a lift, I like to turn my back to the door, look into the others' faces and say, 'Wouldn't it be great if the lift got stuck and we all got to know each other?'

Do you know what happens then? When the door opens on the next floor, they all get out.

I know. I ask people the most impossible questions. I ask my son to explain how the automatic gearbox works. I ask the manager, here in the Home, who knits his socks. Frau Grundbacher, do you think you're being sensitive but, in fact, are just in a huff? Herr Imhof, can you look at a cleaning lady without instantly wanting to get physical? Herr Ziegler, do you *enjoy* underestimating your ability to hurt other people's feelings? Herr Hügli, do you get up off your backside to go and see if it's raining? Or do you whistle for your tomcat to come in and feel whether he's wet?

If I head down Thunstrasse – its gentle gradient – towards Helvetiaplatz, wishing the numerous on-comers a good day, it's not unknown for someone – unsettled by this harmless act – to ask, 'Do we *know* each other?'

'No, but I'd like to learn a little about you. What spurs you on? What do you consider important?'

And sometimes someone replies, annoyed, 'Shameless idiot.'

Don't think the rejection leaves me cold. But I cushion my pain. What a pity, I think, making allowances, that

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he doesn't feel like getting to know me. If I see him again tomorrow, I'll give him another chance.

Who do you have to thank for ideas, Kâzim? I like to eavesdrop on conversations in the street. Expressions of affection always trigger a smile in me. I listen especially attentively if the voice in question sounds troubled. For ten minutes, I can be dragged through the abysses of life, to continue afterwards, grateful for my own good fortune. My wife, may she rest in peace, didn't like that. She'd say, again and again, I shouldn't need the stories of strangers, snippets from other lives, to give myself a boost. I told her once, while it was still fresh, about a phone conversation I'd overheard – an excited French-speaker at the station, whose Saint Bernard bitch was locked in his car, in the car park of the Dog School in Lausanne – and when I started to stutter and lose my thread as I tried to repeat the scraps of French, Emilie just said, calmly, 'You're getting lost in the detail, Lukas.'

This is the sixth step, if I'm not wrong. A splendid step, isn't it? The next step is number seven on the way down, eighty-eight on the way up. Immaculate, isn't it? – Please, why do you think I keep putting my hand behind my ear and shrugging? You have to speak up more, Kâzim. Speak slowly and clearly. – Thank you, it's hardly worth mentioning. At a leisurely pace, but it's possible. Apart from when I put my weight on the wrong hip.



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Last Wednesday morning, I was walking around the local area here. That early in the morning, no one feels like a conversation, apart from Bobby who distributes the free papers at the tram depot. Once, in the snow, my feet slipped away from under me, I fell on my back, and Bobby helped me up again, saying, 'A less agile old man would surely've got a broken neck.' With this flattering remark began a casual friendship that both of us cherish.

I sit down beside him. The pile of free papers he's supposed to be handing out is on his lap. I inquire about his well-being; Bobby, bleary-eyed, inquires about mine. Then he asks if I'd like a paper 'for the tram'.

Bobby's dressed the way, in his opinion, someone doing his job in early summer should be: trainers, jeans, baseball cap, a windcheater, to which his ID is clipped.

'People aren't going to come up and snatch the paper from the hands of a seated distributor,' I say.

Bobby sighs.

'Give me the rest. I'll hand them out in the Home. There's your tram coming.'

'That's good of you, Herr Zbinden.' Bobby raises his baseball cap and calls back 'Thanks', over his shoulder.

The stop empties, the tram drives off. Then the stop fills with people again. A girl sits down beside me: a girl with braces and a school bag and dangling legs. I ask would she like a paper 'for the tram'. The girl declines, politely. She doesn't read newspapers, so I ask what she normally reads. Then I wait: I can see she's examining me, taking her time before she answers. I'm dressed the way, in my opinion,

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someone going for a walk should be: a sailor's cap; a tucker bag with tassels; shoes, badly worn at the heel.

'I like reading fairy tales best,' the girl says, finally. '*Hansel and Gretel* at the moment.'

'Breadcrumbs were supposed to lead them home,' I recall.

'The witch gets burnt to cinders,' the girl says.

'Do you like school?'

'I'm good at Arithmetic and Writing. Really fast – like a machine. I'm top in GIS too.'

'What's GIS?'

'No one knows, exactly. To do with maps.'

'I used to be a teacher. GIS didn't exist in those days. What age are you?'

'Eleven. And you?'

'Count the wrinkles on my face. Like the rings on the horns of an antelope.'

'Do you know what I want to be when I've finished school? I want to have a jewellery shop in every single country in the world.'

'Every single country in the world? That's great!'

'Maybe not New Zealand. I've nothing against New Zealand. We were there last year. But it's too far away for a jewellery shop. What are you doing with all those papers?'

'I want rid of them.'

'Give me a few. I'll hand them out at break time. There's my tram coming!'

'That's really kind of you!' I raise my sailor's cap and shout 'Thanks!' as she walks away.

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A businessman sits down beside me, and for the next ten minutes fends off my questions. Would he like a *Gazette* ‘for the tram’? – a hand waves it away. What his favourite subject at school was – a suspicious look. Why, in his opinion, New Zealand is avoided by jewellers – he moves away, as if I’d something contagious. Whether, professionally, he’d made it to where he’d dreamed of as a boy – he stares straight ahead. Many I encounter find it difficult to come out of their shell.

Today seems quiet, at least. Other days, activation therapists and nurses in white tunics and great-grandchildren whizz past at such a rate, you have to cling to the banister as you would a ship’s rail when huge waves crash on board.

Listen, Kâzim, I don’t want to keep you back, but would you do me a favour, young man? Would you accompany me on a walk outside? I know you’ve lots to do, but I assure you, you won’t regret a walk! Precisely *because* you’ve lots to do. Walking is the oldest form of mental and physical exercise. Adam and Eve walked out of Paradise. Socrates strolled along a newly inaugurated street on the look-out for curly-haired boys to kick. Jesus and the Devil took a walk in the desert and, inspired, talked shop. Eighty-seven-year-old Lukas Zbinden may no longer be strong enough to pull a plough; not wanting to plummet into the void, he does a recce before each step; still, he strides along the street undeterred, avoiding its many dangers, like Moses through the Sea of Reeds.

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I give an example that contradicts the view, very prevalent here in the Home, that old people would surely suffer heart attacks were they to subject themselves to the exertions of a walk.

What is granted, do you think, Kâzim, to those who go for walks? Incredible *joie de vivre*, that's what! Happy – in a way that's almost laughable – relationships! Incredible solutions to problems of Physics! Icelanders walk, naked, in the snow – and manage to maintain their body temperature without ever breaking into a run. And do you know the best of it? Out walking, you could meet a partner for life, one who won't want to marry you just for tax reasons and your pension.

As a young man, a trainee teacher, I visit the home of a fellow student. Before the shoe rack is a pair of – muddy – high boots. When, furtively, I lift them, I see the sole's almost completely worn out. I put the boots back and later – it's a big family – ask, 'Whose boots are those?'

'They belong to our Emilie.'

We look at each other – and in no time engagement rings are being exchanged.

But will you accompany me outside, Kâzim? Into the fresh air?

I have to tell you: I'm a social animal, not a loner, I like to have company when I go for a walk. For many, being alone may be the point of a walk. They don't want to have to bow to others, prefer to walk when and where they please. They

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don't want to hear other people's commentaries on views; they're unsociable. Herr Ziegler, for example, in Room 219, will protest, defiantly, 'One walker is a walker. Two walkers are half a walker. Three walkers are no longer a walker at all.'

Have you already come across Herr Ziegler? He says hello to no one, and wouldn't thank you for saying hello. He's not in the least interested in meeting people. A small, dry figure who makes his way around the Home careful to keep at least two steps between him and anyone else. His head's always lowered a little, as if he's just solving the last mysteries of humanity – the origins of the Nazca Lines, the significance of the stone heads on Easter Island and the crop circles in Wiltshire. On a mild day, he'll sit down on a remote bench in the courtyard with an archaeology book, and if I join him and start to speak, he'll clap the book shut and get up and go, without a word in reply. He frightens me a little. His wife lives not far from here, in *Domicil Elfenau*. For reasons you're best not asking about, they wanted to be assigned to two different homes. You can believe me when I say this, though: at least occasionally, even lone wolves like Herr Ziegler like to go for a walk with someone else, or as part of a group of like-minded people. As you know: no one is so perfect as not to need someone else to point out a charming bed of red carnations on Florastrasse, or a delightful little wind from south-south-west up on the Gurten, or a sleepy sawmill in Bümpliz.

The person waiting for the lift back there is Herr Furrer. Former engineer. An open, broad-minded man, and much more friendly to you civvies than Herr Ziegler, say. He'll take



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the greatest pleasure explaining to you how the fountain in the courtyard works.

Among the advantages of walking in company is that it's not so easy to accost *yourself*. That's especially important for walkers who are easily distracted by their own thoughts. Those who brood over the slights suffered at the Police Headquarters on Waisenhausplatz, and so crash straight into the hapless pensioner who chooses that very moment to shuffle his way round the Oppenheim Fountain.

Take two sociable country walkers – my late wife and me: we experience, together, the shift from colourful natural meadows to shady pine forests. We talk about the upheaval in the last Ice Age when the glaciers pushed way beyond the borders of our cantons, creating prominent moraines. Emilie describes the din of the massive rock slides that filled the valleys with debris when the glaciers retreated, and suddenly we're back in a vast moor. We walk along narrow boards, half submerged, jumping from one firm patch to the next. The boggy ground beneath our feet squelches, sometimes, and gives a bit. Wooden crosses mark spots where someone lost their footing and got bogged down, but what's Nurse Alessandra doing there, in the corridor? Why's she crawling around on all fours? Come along this way, Kâzim. Alessandra! You see, she'd like to run off, but she's kneeling on her tunic.

Nice to find you here, Alessandra. What are you doing on your knees? Don't you feel well? – Pardon? Well, what if you were maybe to squeeze your hand in carefully, who



knows? Have you met this young man already? Our new civilian-service carer, it's his first week here. His name is Kâzim. Side by side, we're taking the stairs, one at a time. – Correct. You said it. A substantial part of my life takes place on this staircase. I've passed this plant so often, I can already call her a close friend. – Good question, Alessandra, I don't know, do you like it so far, Kâzim? – You should try to feel at home here. It's not half as bad as you imagine, maybe. Perhaps you're a little afraid, I was the same. The first time I stepped into the entrance hall and saw all the old people, I'm telling you, I felt quite scared. Alessandra, what if you were to get back onto your feet? You could join us. – No, no, don't let us disturb you then. See you later! Back to the staircase, Kâzim.

No doubt you'll soon take a shine to them all: the respectable ladies and eccentric gentlemen, the talkative widows and the taciturn bachelors, the seasoned walking-frame users, shuffling stay-at-homes with faces like dried meat. The confused ones, whose thoughts roll around like peas on a plate. Those on medication, with a cocktail in their veins of which blood's just a minor ingredient. Veteran engineers, tradesmen and -women, office workers, housewives, civil servants, army personnel, fire extinguisher inspectors, bus drivers, over-achievers, service workers, stationery shop staff. People who started allowing themselves a holiday only once it became a legal entitlement. Therapists and kitchen staff. Great-grandchildren that are always skipping two or three

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steps. Nurses, with a resident in each hand, leading them to the lift, taking the trouble not to forget we had a life before we moved here. Anxious sons and daughters who – on an excursion to the mountains – phone the management here and ask them to keep an eye on the money their elderly relatives have with them.

I was sitting in my room, yesterday, on the stool with the woven seat, waiting for Nurse Lydia who had promised me a walk to the Zoo. She comes in, still wearing her cagoule, and says, 'Herr Zbinden, the walk's cancelled. We're going for a coffee, in the Cafeteria,' and, linking her arm in mine, pulls me to my feet.

'I don't mind rain,' I say, shuddering at the thought of ordering a coffee, only to be given a Nescafé. For which, by the way, we all pay ten francs a month into the kitty. At ten in the morning, the place is always full to the brim with people trying to get their money's worth without dying of heartburn.

So I put my cap on and leave Lydia to Frau Rossi, who needs pushing to the Prayer Group. – Tired? At Lydia's age, you aren't tired, Kâzim. – The air? The air here in the Home, you mean? That's what makes Lydia tired? If Lydia were to go for a walk and have to avoid all the umbrellas put up by visitors to the Zoo, she wouldn't have the time to feel tired.

I then had a rather long way home ahead, carrying my tucker bag with unused umbrella in it, to boot. The benches in the Zoo were long out of sight, there was no market square decked with flags to rest in, and the only person to pass by was a young, maybe forty-year-old man.