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PAULA KÖHLMEIER

## Postcard Sea

*translated from German by Maria Fink*

WE RODE A BIKE around Vienna. I sat on the carrier. My sweetheart held a cigarette between his teeth. It was burned down to the filter. With my hands, I held on tight to my sweetheart. Like in the movies. Sometimes my brain turns outward.

We sat down at a table in front of Flex. I closed my eyes and acted as if someone had shot me. My hands were glued to the gunshot wound. I tried to get up, but that was difficult with the gunshot wound in my stomach, and I collapsed back onto the bench. My sweetheart rolled his eyes. He had seen it before.

Then he was gone.

I waited.

He had said, "Wait here!"

A woman wearing a much-too-big coat, much-too-small pants, and with her face buried under three hats, sat down next to me.

"In the past," she said, "weed was much better. I like weed better than hash. It doesn't scratch your throat as much. The hash you get today, it crumbles. In the past, it was softer. I was able to roll another joint with the hash that got stuck on my fingers. Would you smoke with me, if I went out and bummed some? Only if you want to. I don't like smoking alone. It makes me depressed. I'm at war with myself when I smoke a joint alone. It makes me think too much. There should be a button to switch off your brain. I can only do that when fucking, but even then, not really. Would you smoke with me?"

She had a scratchy voice. Like the barmaids in old black-and-white movies. I felt the bullet in my stomach again. I was the wounded heroine in a ketchup-colored pool of blood.

"Yes, I would," I said.

"You have a pretty scarf on your head," she said.

I adjusted the scarf on my head. I always do that when someone gives me a

compliment: I highlight the compliment. My first boyfriend, for example, told me I had a pretty mouth. He was a photographer. He took pictures of candles. They were used for funeral and wedding cards. He said I had a pretty mouth and I puckered my mouth for the rest of the night. I wanted, after our date, for the pretty mouth to turn into a gorgeous mouth in his mind. That's what I mean when I say I highlight a compliment.

"I have a probation officer," she said and pulled the bottom hat farther down her face. "I was in prison," she said.

I couldn't see her eyes anymore. They were buried under her hats. I was having a conversation with a nose. Her mouth was behind her hands. The rest of her was only an assumption.

"Because of attempted assault," she said.

"But only two weeks in prison," she said.

"I'll have the probation officer for three years," she said. "Once a month I have to go see him. He said, if I only miss a single time, I have to go back to prison. Is that true? I've already not shown up twice. I think he doesn't care about me. Is he actually off work when I don't show up?"

I shrugged. Then it was quiet around us for a second.

"What's your job?" I asked into the silence. Immediately after I had asked the question I felt like a probation officer. I wanted to take the question back. Like in a game show under spotlights with a jingle for "correct question" and a jingle for "wrong question." I can ask three incorrect questions, the fourth one counts. You can win an all-inclusive vacation to Crete. A trip with sweaty people who smell like suntan oil.

"I used to sell comic books, novels, and toys in Prater. By the hot dog stand right at the entrance," she said. "Someone stole my stuff. Two big plastic bags and a blue duffel bag, all filled with toys, comic books, and novels. In the evening, I always hid my stuff in the bushes. Close to the free restrooms. One time, someone pissed on my stuff. Another one of those pigs. Who does that? Pissing on toys behind a bush, when the restrooms are really close and free! Anyway, the bags were gone one morning. I thought, Who the hell would reach behind the bushes to see if there are bags filled with toys there?"

I didn't know what to say.

"I felt like I was being watched and ran around all paranoid," she said. "Now I don't care. I'm still paranoid, but I don't care about the stuff anymore."

Again, I didn't know what to say.

"I like you," I eventually said, but only to say something. I wanted to make up for my question about her job.

"Who paid you to say that?" she asked.

No, that's not what she said. She didn't say anything at all. But she made a face. We were sitting there and she didn't say anything. I looked at her, and in my head, I wrote the following conversation under her face:

I said, "Paid me for what?"

She said, "To like me."

I said, "No one."

She, "That's suspicious."

I, "Why?"

She, "Because there is nothing in it for you."

I felt bad. I really felt very bad. I went to the restroom to cool off my butt on the cold toilet seat, hoping my brain would freeze. I sat there for a long time and imagined the toilet stall was a room. A room so small you had to stand. And roll into a ball if you wanted to sleep. Thoughts were left outside the door. We don't have a brain, we only stand or roll into a ball. I flushed my mood down the toilet and returned to my story.

"Would you smoke with me if I had a joint?" she asked, as if she hadn't already asked. I was looking for a spot on the bench that hadn't got wet yet. It was raining. Not hard, though.

"Sure," I said.

"I'll go look around. Would you keep an eye on my beer for me?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

She left and I sat there with a can of Ottakringer. What a thing to keep an eye on. I saw a man at the Danube Canal. I was convinced I had seen him the day before at the train station. With a woman, in close embrace. At the Danube Canal, he was also in close embrace, but with a different woman. Both times he was smoking a cigarette. You are an asshole if you light a cigarette with your wife and finish smoking it with your lover.

"I'm sorry, but it's not looking good with our joint."

The woman wearing the much-too-big coat, the much-too-small pants was back, and her face was buried under three hats.

I also wanted to tell her a story.

"I would also like to tell you a story," I said.

“OK,” she said and sat down, and acted annoyed even before I had said the first word of my story.

“There was a man in Bregenzerwald. That’s a forest in Vorarlberg,” I said.

“I know that,” she said.

That pissed me off. I knew that she definitely didn’t know that Bregenzerwald was in Vorarlberg and I would have liked to ask her a trick question but I couldn’t think of one.

“I don’t know if he’s still alive,” I continued. “This man started building a boat in the barn behind his house. The boat turned into a ship, complete with a cabin, a kitchen, and a bedroom. The ship got so big because he built all of his dreams into it and at the end, he simply couldn’t get the ship out of the barn. He packed his stuff, sold his house, and moved into the ship. A man in the mountain who wanted to be at sea. The ship was too big and stayed in the mountains, and from the deck of the ship you couldn’t even see the mountains because the barn was around the ship and the barn didn’t have windows. One day, when the flood comes and the world is turned into an ocean and the barn breaks apart, this man will be ready.”

“A bit cheesy for my taste,” she said.

“What’s your taste, anyway?” I asked. In my head, I heard the jingle for “correct question!”

There was a long pause and suddenly I wanted to build a boat with her. I thought then we would get along. If we were the only people left on earth, we wouldn’t have a choice. We would have to get along. I was sitting there and my thoughts were building and planning and I even wondered if I could somehow use the tables and benches in front of Flex for the boat. Bend them. For the sidewalls. The wood would probably be too brittle.

“I get seasick,” she said. I didn’t want to build a ship with her anymore. “When the waves topple over and hit the boat, I get sick,” she said.

“It’s just a story,” I said. “In a story, you can invent a sea that doesn’t make you sick.”

“I have a postcard of the sea at home,” she said. “The water on it was so blue, I felt like someone was messing with me. I mean, the sea isn’t really that blue, that’s all done with special effects and lighting.”

Why is this girl with the short pants and the way-too-big coat poking at my story, I thought? What does she get out of it?

“I felt like someone was messing with me with that postcard sea,” she said.

"You can't fool me with that kind of stuff anymore," she said.

"I don't even want to go to the sea," she said.

"I can die without ever having been to the sea," she said.

"What's your name?" I asked. Her face was hidden beneath three hats. One yellow, one red, and one black.

"Doris," she said. "My name is Doris. Most people call me Hey You, though."

"Yeah," I said and acted as if Hey You was a nickname.

Nothing more. Just like when someone's name is Edgar and people call him Eddie.

"My name is Rutha," I said.

"I think I'm cold," I added.

She said, "You can have my coat."

"I'm going inside for a minute," I said.

"Are you coming back?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know," I said. "I have to find my boyfriend."

"Do you need him?" she asked. "What do you need him for?"

"We have lots of plans," I said.

"Like what?"

"We'll go to Mexico."

"Is there a sea in Mexico? There's a sea there, right?"

She said, "I'll wait here for you. Should I keep an eye on your stuff?"

"I don't have anything," I said.