

The Privilege of Being a Human Being

Marie Fenzl



Writing Matters

Waves break over ridged rocks on the mountain. It emerges out of the water as if it had simply appeared at some point and no longer wanted to move. Salty smells and seaweed residue cling to the lower steps, dark grey from the weather. Moss shimmers greenish through the seawater.

Jonathan grasps the horizon in his gaze. Quietly, he sits on the shore and watches a group of young people at the edge of the small kiosk that sells greasy chips and too-sweet ice cream. The young people match the colour of the cream-coloured exterior of the sturdy booth. They seem interchangeable, driven by youthful recklessness and daring thoughts of the future. His glance returns to the line on the horizon. By now he is aware that it is only here, on the slight curve of the horizon, that one can really see that the earth's not flat.

When he was five years old, Jonathan had realised that only his father had ever called him John. A smile comes to his face when he thinks about it today. Maybe a unique act of love? Six months ago, his mother died. At that point in her life she had prevented herself from seeing the vast sky above the sea. His brother Samuel had put his hand on his shoulder as they walked away from the cemetery on the day of her funeral. It was early summer and the wind blew rough. "This is summer here", his mother used to say. She had thrown the phrase into her kitchen once, too, after Johnathan had fallen against the rock shaped like a small Christmas tree. Now it's late summer, but the phrase seems like a chameleon – always fitting. You could still see the tiny scar next to his right eye, like a dolphin jumping with the waves. You could see it even better when





the morning light touched his face. When the house was suddenly empty and he imagined he could hear the wind from the sea through the walls, he often thought of the colour blue. In some way the darker shade has always calmed him.

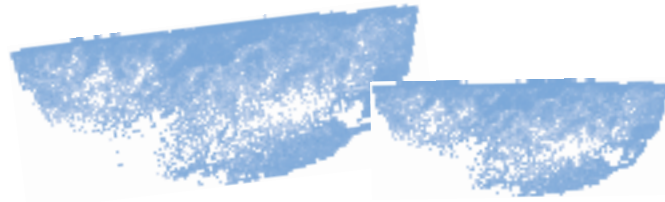
“How can I help you?”

The glass door fell silently into its lock and lingered. A salesman dressed in grey and dark blue smiled in Jonathan’s direction with enchantingly straight teeth.

“My mother died last winter.” Just say directly what you need, Samuel had advised. Not knowing exactly how to shop here, he had thought about his description on the way to the store. This sentence should cover everything:

“Oh, so you’re in mourning? We’ve got just the right thing for you!”

Grey-blue walked off towards the high shelves on the left side of the shop. On his right the counter, behind him the glass front. Elongated and sterile, bright lighting, almost as if they wanted to look under your skin. He stopped in front of shelf three, the one with a green wall as backdrop, and climbed three steps on the leaning ladder. Grey-blue to match the interior, somehow invisible. With him a jar, the inscription Conny Segman – Traveller in delicate letters, barely visible to the human eye from a bit away. “How about memories of a trip around the world, especially the one to Italy – Sardinia – I think’s said to be of particular beauty”.



Images of the holiday from a few years ago flashed into his memory. Samuel in the mountains of Germany, almost running away from him. No sooner had the air been breathed in than it had left Jonathan. Mother in the hotel, she had persuaded the two brothers to travel together and then preferred to stay among the books she had brought with her. This woman. How he had always admired her stubbornness, her search for the truth or any truth at least. And the love for her sons. Boundless, wide as the sound of the sea. “Those who know where they want to go don’t hide behind what the world wants”. Mother in his head. By now he had perhaps realised a little more that she was no longer here. However, he was thinking about her too much. A little oblivion should already work.

“I can tell you’re hesitant. Then it’s nothing, it has to fit from the start. We really take what we do here seriously. It’s only a minor procedure, but it’s still a medical one”. Chatty and polite, somewhere between monk and scientist. Jonathan nodded. Grey-blue turned to his left and searched once again actively between shelves. “This could fit”.

Darius Mistral – pianist. Jonathan at some distance, hands crossed, tripping with unsteady footsteps within centimetre intervals. “Something’s stirring inside you, I can see it! I think we have a winner”. With a light smile, descending the ladder in small steps, the salesman discreetly straightened in front of him and eyed him again.

“It probably fits”. “Thank you”. Jonathan felt well advised. His hands stopped sweating. It was annoying, maybe something would

change about that too. Grey-blue led the way towards the cash register. “When can I give it a try?” Somehow he still didn’t know how exactly this was going to work. Samuel had been ambiguous, which he usually wasn’t, but he’d put on Jasmina Gordon – Actress five months ago and had been a different man ever since. Faster at everything, more bewildered, sometimes nebulous. Always on the move. “Really the best time of my life, maybe you should give it a try!”

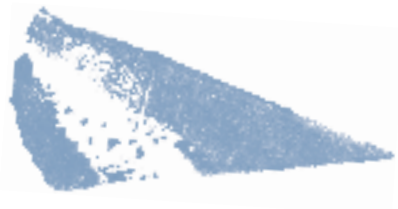
“Cash or card?”


“Card.” He would be able to get over the cost, but perhaps not over disappointed expectations. “If you’re ready, then we can do the installation procedure right now, or you can come back another day when it’s more convenient for you”.

“Gladly now”. Enchantingly straight teeth.

“Follow me then”.

New room, new shades of grey. Who could have guessed that grey was the colour for new beginnings. A chair in a capsule, at least that’s what it looked like. But it was dark green, just like the background wall colour at shelf three. “Please have a seat, it won’t take long”. “And the doctor?” “Machines are doing most of the work now. A few years ago it was very different, oh how time flies”. He shook his head in amusement, then the smile stopped. Probably reminiscing about the past ten years and what they could have become. Jonathan sat down, Grey-blue lingered a moment before a button, pressed something and hurried out of the room. The capsule closed. The sound of the quiet metallic cutting of a small saw blade blurred with the feeling of growing tired. Jonathan’s vision became cream-coloured kiosk walls.





The next morning, dewy grey clouds no longer dampened the mood. Thoughts flew like courting great tits just below the ceiling, barely crouching before the approaching moment of getting up. Somehow it was easier.

A short look at the alarm clock, time for coffee. A sonata jumped into his head, Mozart's Number 1 in C Major. Grey-blue had advised him to enter notable changes into the app provided by the company. "They do that for optimisation, you know". Not a tear in the morning. Even the black-brewed coffee did not change the fact that no pain of grief returned. His reflection in the mirror of the upstairs small bathroom less sunken in. Did he see laugh lines around the edges of his eyes? The small scar was fading, but the dolphin still jumped a little. His phone blinked again. Flash - Samuel. "How are you feeling?"

"Something's missing and I know exactly what, but can't remember"

"Told you! Amazing isn't it!"

"Yes, truly amazing." Actually, it was a wonder that his brother was still affected by any kind of gravity.

On his way to work, the birds sang differently. More in time with his step. Faster though, within sixteenth time. He remembered a concert five years ago in Berlin, a great success. Jonathan had read about it in the newspaper. Pianist, something with the letter D. Music was supposed to help, he had once read. Against sadness, against many things. If you could let yourself fall, like into a wave pool, you could control your feelings better and were no longer at your own mercy. Now he knew why the salesman had assigned

him the pianist. Never learned an instrument, tons of notes in my head now. A raindrop hit his forehead, the wind had already picked up the morning. “This is summer here!” No sadness, a little melancholy. Maybe he would crack open some wine again tonight. Mother had stashed the red down in the cellar and always talked about how precious it would be. He believed the bottles were his father’s. He wasn’t sure.

Arriving at the bookstore, Vivian immediately rallied around him. “Sam told me yesterday! Who did you get? Someone you know?” “I think Mistral. And something with the letter D. Daniel maybe? At least I know Mozart now”.

“Mistral, wasn’t that pianist who celebrated his last tour last year?” Her eyes turned a little grey, perhaps it was the reflection from the cloudy windows.

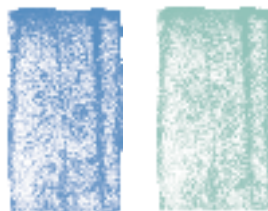
“Could be”.

He couldn’t help but grin; Mother would have been pleased. Even more probably about a writer, but who could choose what was offered at the moment. “We don’t work like an assembly line. Every combination is tested for functionality, adaptability, and ethical correctness.” Enchantingly straight teeth and the smell of sterile sprays and metal in his head, more on the left side of his brain. True, he had been told.

“And you’re all right? You don’t feel anything bad anymore?”

“No, really. Went quickly, painlessly”.

He put his bag behind the counter and surveyed the purchases already made that day. The screen looked bluer, in a good way. Vivian scarpered into aisle five and put away the guidebooks. Should have done it last week, he’d probably neglected to tell her.



“Be patient for one more day, the last thoughts of your mother will be a thing of the past”. Remembering the seemingly infinitely distant months that had been only yesterday, he thought of Mother one last time in sadness. “We’ll arrange the operation so that it will be inserted right where your centre of grief is!” Enchantingly straight teeth and the smell of fish in his head.

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Day three afterwards. The milky light at the end of the street was reminiscent of the day, still shining a little through the window next to the front door. Jonathan sat at the dining table with a glass of water and a marinated carp. The lamp above the table hung so low that he could not see if a person was opposite to him. The house was very quiet and inside the storm of the day was dying down. A blinking light at the edge of the table, “Be there in five minutes”. He had known, all day. Repressed perhaps, but how could he forget.

Another bite, then the key in the lock. His head remained staring forward and his eyes fixed on the cool light of the lamp until something ached. Apparently neither the jacket was hung up in the hallway, nor the shoes taken off, because he heard the squeaky door in the hallway leading to the kitchen right after. Some kind of knot formed in the lower part of his stomach again. His head felt as if it was empty, at the same time a flood of thoughts crushed him. “If you just said something, a piece with you would’ve been great”, his brother already took the chair to Jonathan’s left at the table and naturally sat down next to him. “Of course I wanted to



see you and congratulate: finally you've jumped over your shadow". Jonathan continued to fixate, even forgetting a little about the knot. Samuel looked around the room. His gaze lingered on the carp for a long time. "Bit like mother made it", he commented. You haven't tasted it, Johnathan thought, but drifted away with thoughts of day's work. Monochrome. Unusually dark grey. Vivian must have noticed it too, but had held back. Something deeply dark emanated from him. "Always nice chatting with you". With that smug smile. How he hated it. His brother stood up, gave him a quick pat on the shoulder a little too hard and disappeared. "There's an event tonight, next time you'll come with me". Two artists' brains together, that should actually have worked. At some point Jonathan thought he felt the key in the lock and the knot disappeared. He continued to eat. The carp had gone cold.

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Individual rays of clouds break through the sky. Somehow he has the feeling they are partly responsible. The incessant focus on things, on him, on his little life. Like a grain of sand in history. The teenagers have long disappeared. Somewhere to another place, probably more enticing than the looming sunset. In unison, they have gone as loudly as they have arrived. The sky clears a little, but not so much that the light could be called bright. Jonathan moves his fingers through the golf-ball-sized stones he is sitting on and grasps an egg-shaped one. It is wet. It is time.

Jonathan moves slowly towards the sea, almost forgetting the joy he had felt the first morning after. It had been pure then. Perhaps



like a newborn baby after the first strains of coming into the world. The very next morning had already been different. Heavier. By the third morning, his head had felt too small for all that was inside of his mind. His whole body seemed to break out in a sweat from one moment to the next. Then leaden heaviness poured over him relentlessly like the change of seasons. And this morning he had almost been unable to get up – although the day promised to be a sunny one. His limbs were in shackles. If they had told him better about the side effects, he might have reconsidered, probably tried it anyway. After all, the first day had been terrific, or at least better than the six months before. After that he started thinking, and finally researching on the internet. Darius Mistral – pianist. Last tour – will the genius return? Interview with Mistral – How his pieces came into being! The thing about geniuses and their depressions.

Jonathan continues walking towards the sea. “Our promise is that only the most truly incisive quality will be a new part of you. Good choice with that pianist, you won’t even notice the rest!” Perhaps it was meant to be. Even when the water is already up to his shoulders, he does not stop. Grief would probably have passed someday, but the longing for non-existence was never to go away. “You won’t even notice the rest!” A wave comes towards him, breaks. Somewhere his thoughts rest. Mother had shown him.



WRITING MATTERS

Workshop Led by Jan Carson
Coordinated by Dr. Petra Zaus & Antonios Smyrnaio

The mission of the Writing Matters initiative is twofold: exploring “matters” pertaining to writing practices and underscoring that writing “matters” as a powerful means of engaging with the world.

During the 2021 summer semester, the award-winning author Jan Carson convened a Writing Matters workshop for students at the JMU Würzburg. Carson emphasized developing structure, characterization, and narratology, but also community. When writing together, Carson observed, you find “a whole community of other people who see the world a little bit the same as you and suddenly it doesn’t feel as lonely anymore.” The short stories that emerged in this workshop are published here as chapbooks in the first of an ongoing series of publications that feature student work from the Writing Matters workshop series.

The workshop was made possible through the support of the American Studies department at the University of Würzburg, Irish Studies Würzburg (ISWÜ), and WueGlobal - Writing, Learning, Digital Connection, funded by the International Virtual Academic Collaboration Program (IVAC) / Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) / Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF).

