Clemens Meyer

Die stillen Trabanten

Silent Satellites

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Tales from the night

A train driver who loves night shifts until a laughing man stands on the tracks. A night watchman patroling outside a home for immigrants who falls in love with a woman behind the fence. A burger-bar owner looking out at the city's shining satellites. Masterfully, trancelike and with the con_dence of a sleepwalker, Clemens Meyer's stories tell of lost battles and overwhelming wishes. They are stories from our time, as dark as the world, as beautiful as the brightest of hopes.

Translation by Katy Derbyshire

Silent Satellites

It's all a while ago now. And it coming back to the surface and me remembering those long nights that were actually short, because it was summer then, and those long bright days and that one night – that has nothing to do with all the religious and political gubbins, or whatever you want to call it, suddenly being current again. What's current anyway? Nothing. We're in a completely different place now. And I know what I'm talking about, I know all about current affairs, I run a burger bar in a little hut with a roof over it that used to be a petrol station.

Back then I lived in one of the tower blocks next to the park, up on the fourteenth floor, and when I looked out of one of the windows in the stairwell where I used to have the odd smoke in the evening and look out over the town, I could spot my little burger bar even though it was more than two kilometres away. I'd painted the outside of the petrol station red; it was my business partner Mario's idea when we opened the place up together.

'Who's Mario, tell me about Mario.'

'Mario's an old friend, we've known each other since our military days.'

'When were you in the army?'

'Few years ago now. We used to cook, on a ship.'

'On a ship?'

'Yeah, on a ship. We were in the navy. Up on the coast. And Mario was an even worse cook than me.'

'I don't believe a word of it.'

'It's true, we used to cook up a real storm together.'

'But you've got a chef's hands. And your Hamburger Special and your potato salad...'

'Yeah, they're good. You're right, the burgers are really good. And the potato salad is my grandma's recipe.'

'And your old friend Mario, where is he now?'

‘Went back to the coast, had some idea about a floating chip shop…’

‘A floating chip shop?’

‘Yeah, some kind of tourist thing. He always had crazy ideas, did Mario.’

We were standing by the window in the stairwell and smoking and looking out at the town.

We met by the window in the stairwell almost every evening; she was a secret smoker.

She lived on the same floor as me with her boyfriend, Hamed.

Hamed sometimes used to come to my burger bar at lunchtime and buy a steak sandwich and drink a Coke or a cup of tea. He worked in this huge internet café a couple of streets away, where the Arabs had their district. Mind you, district is a bit of an exaggeration. Actually it was just a very wide and very long road leading to the eastern edge of town, and on both sides of the road were kebab shops and phone shops and import-export places and bargain basement stores one after another, and there were plenty of internet cafés as well. And somewhere along there was the internet café where Hamed worked. I’d never visited him in his shop, it wasn’t a part of town I felt particularly at home in. The big internet café belonged to a cousin of his, apparently, but I didn’t really care either way. For a long time, I didn’t know exactly where Hamed came from either. Kuwait? Iraq? Or was it Lebanon? That wasn’t all that important either, although I did use to sit at our ship’s map table with Mario in the evenings, looking at the countries and the seas and drinking out of his hip flask with the engraved KGB emblem on it that he’d bought off an old Russian officer, that was at the end of the nineties and the Geezer, our captain who was actually just head of the galley, he used to tell us about the first Gulf War sometimes when he ‘cruised the coasts of the Orient’ in the Med, as he used to say. All a long time ago now, the first and the second and all of it. But I’ve said that already.

The first time Hamed came to my burger bar I was inspecting the carpet as usual, just before closing time. The carpet covered the floor from the counter to the door and every day it reminded me of my old friend Mario because it had been his idea to put down a carpet in my burger bar, which had been *our* burger bar to begin with. ‘Makes it more cosy,’ he’d said, ‘people feel instantly welcome, they feel like they’re at home, or even better, like they’re on a red carpet! And it’ll go nicely with the paint.’

But carpet in a burger bar’s a recipe for disaster. There were two high plastic tables by the counter, and when people ate their burgers or sausages there they’d

spill ketchup, mayonnaise and mustard on the floor – in other words on the carpet.

And in winter people would traipse sludge and mud into my burger bar, and even though dog-owners were gradually starting to wrap up their dogs' shit in little bags and then throw the bags in litter bins, there was still plenty of dog shit on the pavements, and all that dirt, with or without snow, with or without mud, stuck to people's shoes and the dark red carpet got dirtier and dirtier and darker and darker.

I'd already had it changed a couple of times and there was a company coming with a carpet-cleaning machine at the end of the month, and probably it was only the memory of my old friend Mario that made me hang on to the stupid carpet idea for so long.

'Tiles are better,' Hamed said, and I jumped. I'd been stabbing at the carpet with a burger flipper where it had gone hard again in places. I turned around and tried to hide the burger flipper behind my back but he didn't seem to see it and just said it again: 'Tiles are better.'

I stuck the flipper into my belt behind my back, turned around to this customer come in so late in the day and we both of us looked at the carpet. I said, 'Yeah, tiles would be better.'

It was only then I realized I knew him from the tower block, I'd run into him a couple of times in the corridor or the lift, and I asked, 'Fourteenth floor?' and he nodded and said, 'Fourteenth floor,' and then he introduced himself and I introduced myself and we shook hands.

'I see you sometimes,' he said, 'coming here early… very early.'

'Yes,' I said, 'very early in the morning. Almost still night.'

'For a while,' he said, 'I was on a building site. So I had to leave very early too.'

'In the summer,' I said, 'I like walking. I leave the car here. It's a nice walk through the town.'

'Your burger bar is good, very good.' He looked around and nodded in respect. 'I thought, we are neighbours and I…'

'Well, almost,' I said.

'Neighbours,' he said again. It was only later I understood that this *being neighbours* thing was important to him, that it was a tradition, an old custom to pay visits and that kind of thing, back where he came from. 'And I see you go in here, every morning…'

‘Every morning.’ I tapped my index finger three times on the counter, probably to make sure it all stayed that way, all the getting up early and my burger bar and so on.

‘And then I think…’

‘You’d come over. Do you want something to eat, or a coffee? It’s on the house.’

I wanted to offer him a beer at first but I’d seen his prayer beads, clutched between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He moved the beads very slowly between his fingers as he spoke.

‘You have tea?’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘Earl Grey.’

I put the Closed sign on the door, it was after eight, and we had a cup of tea together. I had to go out back to the storeroom first to fetch a pack of teabags. Most people who came in drank coffee or beer or Coke and I wasn’t much of a tea drinker either. Hamed wanted to know how you run a burger bar, where I got my meat and my veg and my salad stuff, and whether I had anything without pork in it.

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘I’ve got a whole lot of beef. OK, the Hamburger Special is half and half.’

‘Half and half?’

‘You know, mixed beef and pork.’

‘We Muslims,’ he said, ‘you know…’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I said, ‘I know. No problem. I’ve got... no, wait, the Thuringian sausages have got pork in of course.’

‘Thuringian,’ he said, ‘is that the famous bratwurst?’

‘Are they even famous where you’re from?’

And then I told him all the ingredients in a Thuringian bratwurst and how they’re made and how I grill them properly over charcoal.

‘You don’t have anything without pork?’

‘I do, I do,’ I said, ‘steaks, good beef steaks.’ We were stood at the counter on Mario’s grubby carpet, drinking our tea. I pointed at the big board above the till

showing the menu. ‘Look, my famous nine eleven steak sandwich.’

‘Nine eleven steak sandwich?’ He looked at me, tipped his head to one side and took off his glasses. He was clean-shaven with round glasses and he didn’t look like one of those Mullahs you heard so much about in those days. He looked up at the board of dishes and prices, put on his round glasses and took them off again, and then he looked at me and smiled.

‘Bit of a gag,’ I said, ‘New York steak sandwich, see?’ I pointed at the board. I charged three ninety for it. I hated those ninety-nine prices.

My favourite was fifty prices, like three fifty for example, or nice round prices like one mark, one euro now of course, but I often remembered a bratwurst stall from my childhood, it was next to a cinema and the sausages cost a mark each. But you had to move with the times and I didn’t make enough at three fifty. My one-euro coffee was a classic, mind you. There were still enough building sites, always will be, and the builders came every morning and every lunchtime.

‘Nine eleven steak sandwich,’ he was still smiling and shaking his head.

‘You have to try my famous nine... New York steak sandwich.’ I went back round to the grill. I still had a pretty fresh steak on a piece of silver foil that was going to be my dinner. I had a charcoal grill and an electric grill. My burger bar was really tiny, I noticed as usual while I made Hamed my famous steak sandwich. It had been a really small filling station, from the days when grilled sausages only cost a mark. My steak sandwich for three fifty wasn’t really famous either, most people came for the Hamburger Special or the potato salad. Hamed leaned over the counter. ‘Excuse me, sir,’ he said, ‘but…’

‘Weren’t we on first name terms,’ I said, ‘and what’s there to excuse?’

I was slicing tomato and pickles; they were part of my steak sandwich, even though the really famous steak sandwich in New York worked without pickles and tomatoes. My old friend Mario had told me about steak sandwiches. He was in New York for a while at the end of the nineties, or at least he always said he was.

‘I just want to ask,’ he said with a slightly uncertain look at the grill and the worktop where I was slicing the tomato and pickles, ‘whether the pork meat and the steak… they must not touch.’

‘No,’ I said and pointed the knife at the grill, ‘it all has its own place. The hamburgers go there and the bratwurst go there… and I usually do the steaks here on the electric grill.’

That wasn’t quite true, I only used the electric grill when I couldn’t keep up with

the charcoal or if I had to do a couple of orders in advance, but what did it matter if the steak for my steak sandwich got a couple of splashes of pork fat…

'No, no, you mustn't see it like that. Hamed's very precise, we're very precise. We want to be pure.'

'And you reckon God doesn't like my bratwurst?'

We were smoking by the window. I'd opened the little window in the stairwell as usual, with the square spanner I had on my key ring. The windows were all secured so no one could jump out, and there were smoke alarms on all the floors, just not in the stairwell. It was made of concrete, the walls, the steps, and it was almost always empty and quiet because we had the two lifts, but in the evenings came the smokers who weren't allowed to smoke in their flats any more because their wife or their husband wouldn't let them or because they had children. The clicking of the lighters, the banging of the doors, the coughing, quiet conversations sometimes floated through the neon-lit stairwell in the evening, like the smoke of the cigarettes.

For a while I used to run up the fifteen flights of stairs when I came home from my burger bar after work because I thought I had to keep fit, I was standing all day, and because my back doctor had told me climbing stairs was good, it would keep my lumbar vertebrae nice and supple.

She smoked and pushed her headscarf back a tiny bit, a few strands of hair falling onto her forehead. She closed her eyes, exhaled the smoke and held her head into the wind, leaned her head back and the wind moved her strands of hair. We stood by the open window while night came slowly outside, but it was still light, the sky went pink and red and then it seemed like it was getting brighter again, just before the night broke, pale pink, pale red, and we were surprised how long the daylight stayed during those nights.

She pushed her headscarf back into place, over her forehead, stroked both hands over her headscarf, and for a moment it looked like she was covering her cheeks with the fabric.

She had acne scars, they really stood out because her skin was almost white, like chalk, you'd say, like white chicken meat, *I'd* say, and she pulled her headscarf over the little red marks and scars on her pale cheeks. She was a few years younger than Hamed, early, maybe mid-twenties, and very tall and very thin.