

Uwe Preuss
A Hop, Skip and a Jump

Three Generations. Father, grandfather, the author himself.
Professional traders.

And many women. Busy. The men.

Places of this life: Dresden, São Paulo, Prague, Budapest, West Berlin.

Preuss becomes an actor.

Where do you actually come from? Where are you at home?
"First and foremost, with myself!"

Born in Dresden, 1961. Grandad a certified ne'er-do-well. Grandma makes every shopping trip an adventure. Five years in São Paulo with mum and dad. They had their own system. Thanks. Apprenticed as an industrial manager: I'm not stamping all five hundred of these effing dockets. I'd rather be a grave digger. A job requiring no previous knowledge. Main thing no more offices. Kathrin is at the theatre already. Perfect working hours. But unless I've done military service they won't let me near drama school. So Christmas 1984 it's the German embassy in Prague. Emigration. But straight back in for the carnival and for love. And straight back out. Lucky break.

*"Everything superfluous must be cut.
No-one wants it all explaining.
Not even the senses."*
Uwe Preuss

The son of a project engineer and a technical draftswoman, **Uwe Preuss** grew up in East Germany and Brazil. He tried a multitude of careers, with continual fresh starts: industrial management in the planned economy, boilerman for a church guest house, canteen manager for construction workers, warehouse manager at a steel works, crate builder at a steam sawmill, and accountant, before leaving for West Berlin. There he studied acting. From 1991 he joined the Dresden theatre company and the Berliner Ensemble. Since 2005 he has been freelance, performing on major German stages. For the last ten years he has mainly worked in front of a film camera.

Translated by Steph Morris

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Carnival

Nice and risky

Dresden 1986

Fell asleep again. With the phone. Hefty telephone bills last few months. Those long codes are all to the east. I get straight through to her at the hygiene museum. My love. Don't have to request a west-call. Official line, no exchange. She just picks up. We talk for hours. I picture her, sitting in the porter's lodge, a desk lamp the only light in the huge foyer. An open book. Sometimes she reads to me. Poems which speak to her, from the heart.

Yesterday we were in despair. This system, the wall. They weren't made for us. Who were they made for? A cupboard full of keys behind her. Each with a tag, punched with a number. The side wing houses Dresden Radio, with a guard at the entrance. – Yep, you know the view, she says. Not like you've never shared a night shift with me! In the ladies' room. Or done the rounds with me. Opening each door, light on, all as it should be, out again and on to the next. In the rooms with random things in formaldehyde we look more closely. Then back to the porter's lodge. She talks and talks, no idea how this can work. I have less. We're going to meet again next week, in Prague. – See you soon, my love!

First it's Lebenstrasse. At the near end the rent boys wait for tricks. Beyond them the railway mission. I want the building opposite, through to the second courtyard. Who knows, perhaps the gentlemen from East-Berlin will issue me a permit to travel through Saxony. Applied for the umpteenth time, maybe today I'll slip through. Wait to be called. A brown-uniformed comrade waves me to his table. I approach. An improvised counter. He sits, I stand. Just starting to ask my question, he already has his answer. A stock response now:

permission not granted. – Why? – I regret I am unable to provide information. Next please!

Out. Over Hardenberg towards the Amerika Gedenkbibliothek. Crash barrier down the middle of the road. Quick leap over and straight into the Press Café. Digest it first, the verbal rebuff. His smirk too, reciting his phrase off by heart. One last stool by the window free. Pot of mocha and the nice yellow of the 1950s tyre advert on the railway bridge. An S-Bahn crosses. Now the announcement from the platform, Zoo Station. Suddenly an evil racket from below. Oh it's the brigade who couldn't give me a stamp, turning the corner. Finished for the day, Barkas minibus stopped on a red. Cloud of blue smoke from the thin exhaust. There they sit, half out of their uniforms on the back seats, driver at the front, over the two-stroke. Always a joy from this vantage point, the sight. Like travelling back in time. Hanging from the coat hooks by the side windows, their shopping, in plastic bags. So their expenses go to Aldi. Obvious, right round the corner. Green. They rattle off towards the checkpoint. But now an emergency stop. All occupants lurch towards the windscreen, then sit back straight. The junky almost stepped in front of their radiator.

So I'll have to drive to Prague the long way again. Four hours more just because they choose to deny me a transit visa. Annoying. To put it mildly! But what can you do. Stash a few things in Sophia Charlotte and off. Stairway full of graffiti and posters, *Bum Bum Boris* is a new one. Past the stolen firewood on the ground floor. – Where you off to? Fred asks. – To the East. – Say hi from me!

Messedamm junction and onto the Avus, down to Drei Linden checkpoint. Racecourse for the incarcerated. The West-Berlin guards in their glazed toll booth wave me through with a smile. 'Your onward journey continues through Germany' says a sign. They know full well East Germans see it differently. Then a patch of no-mans-land and a queue. Sit there. Steering wheel in front of me. On the east side someone is collecting up the passports ready for inspection. Flicks



through, looks important and inspects the car. In a minute he'll open one of the various hatches. He places the passports on a covered conveyor belt the width of a folder, so they arrive in the border guards' barracks before the approaching cars. Very inventive they are. But the time it takes to process! Triple. It goes on and on.

I am to drive forward. Now he acts as if my passport has only just arrived. Opens it up. Makes a copy of the photo page. Then leafs through without a care in the world. Flips each page with the tip of his thumb. They buckle slightly. Discovers stamps from far-off countries. Then that look when he finds my place of birth. Looks me in the eyes. Uncomprehending. And with an outstretched arm passes the document back. Almost reaching the side window. Another long wait till the barriers are lifted. At last. Release handbrake. Comforting sound of the springs easing. The corners of the uniformed man's mouth manage a brief upturn. – Safe journey!

Through my old home.

Eventually I get half way through. Hermsdorfer junction, exit right. In the gents I exchange some West Marks. For a ten-pack of Club cigarettes. Routine or ritual? Who cares! Hearing the familiar dialect does me good. Then it's a cassette in the car stereo, 'Love hurts'. Slow turn round the school disco. – Turn it down for the passport check please. All I see is the buttons on his uniform. I am to look at him. – You need a new passport photo. Quick point of the finger. His hand does the minimum necessary. – On your way! Finally reach Frankenwald services. A beer with a view of four lanes. Back on the road again.

Leave the motorway just before Bayreuth. Then the third border crossing. – Family? I smile briefly. The Czechs know exactly what's coming. Everyone ahead and behind me, showing their visas and getting them stamped, is meeting their nearest and dearest friends. Or relatives.

In Prague the track bed around the tramlines is tarmacked, the trams the same model as in Dresden. Otherwise it's cobblestones



everywhere. I drive towards Troja. The zoo is right nearby. Maybe Emil will be in the kitchen at Mrs Petrovka's, our landlady, telling stories. About his Olympic victory, and which shoes he wore to run the forty kilometres. He came over last time. – He won all these medals for our country, she tells us, and they put him out to pasture. The officials. After the 68 protests on Wenceslas Square. Sent down a mine as punishment. And then kit manager, as a pensioner. Since then he's been caretaker of the sports club. – Right down there, at the end of the street, he points. And me a world record holder. He winks. Earn a bit on the side. Needs must. Not far to work. No bad thing.

He enjoys telling stories. Once he's got as far as he can with his mischievous face, he talks with hands and feet. Emil steals your heart. Zátpek. I knew the name already.

Finally in the room. She goes here just ahead of me, of course. Sitting on the bed. Shorter hair, suits her. A speechless second. As always. Neither of us are hungry. Tomorrow morning we'll walk into the city perhaps. And later we forget which end of the bed is which.

It's wonderful to wake up together too. As always. And then out of no-where her idea. – Let's go to the Dresden Art School carnival tonight. – Sorry? – We can go over the hills by the Elbe, it's doable. – Both of us? – Yes. – But you know I only have a visa for this country. – Doesn't matter. Here's the hiking map.

I recognise it immediately! Dad has a copy, bottom drawer of the wall unit, his map collection. – You must fold it right out, he would say, and you need to know how to read it. Every path has its own colour. And here's the key to the symbols.

I don't dare go near the border in daylight. – Me neither, she says. But we can travel nearby. We get the local train to the last station! – And then? It's been snowing. We're easy prey in our clothes. I'm really not dressed for hiking. – And I am? she asks. Come on, let's go. You know who's going to be there? Now she starts going through names. Like place settings at a wedding. All people I'd love to see. – So let's go!

At Dolní Žleb station we get out and look around. We have the platform to ourselves. The sky is overcast. Beyond the buildings is a path leading uphill. Another quick look behind us. We're the only ones heading for the forest slope. Always this looking around you. But no-one is following us. – We have to get going, she says. Dusk sets in. My feet start to freeze. – It's your circulation. Moving helps. She smiles quickly as she says it. We can take a break when we've got to the top! The ascent takes an hour. Into the woods and into the gloom. It gets creepier all the time. Not a soul. The odd startled bird. Sometimes a stream flowing under the snow. Frozen leaf-litter falls away in chunks under our feet. We lose our footing. She finds her feet just in time. Lucky. She nearly slipped out of my hands. Down below us courses the Elbe, like a toy landscape.

Ahead of us 'POZOR' in large letters on the Czech border sign. Our breathing speeds up. Just don't blow it now. Look each other in the eyes a second. She's so up for it. Pause a second, focus, and on. Like the red mountaineers fighting the fascists. School textbook stuff. Yes! We're bringing leaflets over and a typewriter, we tell ourselves. We're nearly through. After a few metres the boundary stone with the three letters. DDR. Onwards. It gets lighter. The moon is out, the forest edges almost a relief. The Zirkelstein rock. We have to head to the right of it. Down below there's light. Where we need to go. Walking downhill we constantly slip, scattering scree as we brake our fall. The path gets wider, a clearing and suddenly open country. All exposed again. As if free to be shot.

Then something rumbles in the distance. It's nothing, she says. Must be a goods train. Quiet again. We can just hear the expected sounds. The forest path leads to the village. Not far now. Twin headlamps suddenly. We freeze for a second, then duck. Has someone seen us and grassed us up? All over already? Everything? Then someone gets out and walks off. Nothing else is clear in the blinding light. Now a door slams, and the lights go out. What is this? On the roof of the car is

a taxi sign. It's not a dream. Pretty neat in fact. We walk straight over. Must be about two hundred metres. Now or never. Walking tall at last.

We approach but we can't see anyone. We've nearly got to the car when we hear clattering from a garage. – What are you doing here? the man asks, totally shocked. – Lost our way, I say. – Ah I see. Yes, easy to take the wrong turn at the Gelobtbach stream. No wonder in this weather! Were you really hiking? – Could you take us? We need to get to Dresden. Short pause. – I've finished for the day. Königstein at a pinch.

We sit in the back. – I'll put the heating on full for you. Funny to hear his accent. I guess it's my accent too. I guess. Our hands come together. Finding this old heap was a stroke of luck. Sitting there being chauffeured. – Sixteen eighty. You've only got Krona? You've got to be kidding! – Ten West Marks instead? Now he turns round. Holds our gaze, then: sure.

The old Reichsbahn to Dresden. I soak it all up, left and right. A long time since I was here. Tram to Fetscherplatz. We feel so bloody cocky. Up to the flat. Susanne knew we were coming. – And so punctual! On cloud nine. – Let's get to work, she says. Here's the face paints. And for you Uwe, the only option is a full mask. She fetches a paper bag from the kitchen, eyeholes cut out. I look around. Everything just as I remembered. But we'd better get going. Through Dresden in the dark. Always a joy. Brühl's Terrace. The Art School. Everyone wants to get in. Massive queue. A scramble at the door. We're in.

The corridors and studios are decked with brightly-painted packing paper. Hanging from the ceiling, metres of it. Canvases. Drapes. Sculptures, or maquettes for them. A stage in the foyer. The official one. Parading is the thing. On the stairs to the life-drawing studio a man in a black suit slices eggs and raw fish with a circular saw. In the dim-lit corner are mattresses. People will be sprawling around there. And, if they want, doing more than that. Nothing new, this is how it always was here. The long hallways are full of people. Constantly seeing folk I know,



coming towards me. Have to walk past and say nothing. A strange, slightly unpleasant feeling. But what can I do? At one point we're standing around and Falk asks who's under the mask. Poor man's Venice. Everyone laughs. Now she's taking me aside. We go upstairs and make out. Not all the way. I'm too excited. Back into the throng. It's fun. Incognito on the dancefloor. Good music. I give my all.

Kathrin comes up to me. Right up to my ear. – Is that really you? I recognise your dancing. A shock. I answer instantly. – Maybe, but keep quiet! She is totally bewildered. – It's two years since we were together, I add. Please don't make a scene. Then I take a turn through the building. Oncoming traffic all the time. Totally rammed. Different music in each room. I miss this kind of abandon since living in West Berlin. There she is again, my love! – I was looking for you, she says, then, shall we go to mine? – Sure, where else?

We head out. In silence. Just before we reach her door she says, it could be this way all the time. You here. In the stairwell we start giggling. I count the stairs in my head. Back in her long hallway again, kitchen left at the end. The shower cabin is still there. Once we're lying down I realise how exhausting happiness can be.

I wake. Heard something. The flat door! She gets up and looks. Her ex still has the key. – He said he'd be passing through. Now he knows you're here. He'll be off again first thing. My eyes close. A tram stops below on Fetscherplatz. The familiar bell, then the doors close. Soon it's quiet again.

Images from the last few hours race through my head. I snuggle up. Another sound. Someone walks down the hallway. The floorboards respond, and the door closes on the latch. We're wide awake again. The ex has left. Maybe he won't be back again at all, she reassures me. Sleep at last. Starting to dream.

A knock. It sounds urgent. She goes out and opens up. – Police. Sergeant Dietz. And the rest. We have reason to believe a citizen of the Federal Republic of West Germany, Herr P, is staying here without

permission! Through the crack in the door I see the cops' outlines. And her. – Naked. Could we take a look? She begins in the room opposite, light on, takes her time, no-one there. All the other doors, clockwise. Three more times, light on and off. I spread the covers and smooth them out to look like a made bed. With me underneath. Flat as a pancake and holding my breath. Now they're here. – No-one in this room either, I hear, and the men leave.