

Michael Sieben: THE YEAR IN THE BOX

Das Jahr in der Box

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Today

The box is roughly the size of a shoe carton. It's made of wood – something elegant, maybe mahogany. There's a lid that you can flip open and two handles, on the sides. Theoretically you can lock it but the key got lost during our last move. If I were to open it again, I know I'd find it difficult to breathe. Every time it's like being kicked in the guts. And believe me, since living in Wicker, I know what that feels like. Nicki gave me the box two years ago for my birthday. At first I thought she'd hidden money or a gift voucher in it. I mean, what sort of mother buys her son a wooden box for their fifteenth birthday? But there was nothing inside. No hidden compartment, no fake bottom – nothing. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: What am I supposed to do with it? Nicki: You can put things in it.

Me: Thanks. Never would have occurred to me. Nicki: That's what I thought.

Steiger had complained that I shouldn't be so ungrateful and the piece had been expensive. Most of the time Steiger ignored me but every now and then he felt compelled to put on the stepfather act, the idiot. I had hardly been able to wait till Nicki dumped him. It had taken longer than I thought but you could rely on Nicki's

relationship phobia. Since she and my father separated, she had never held out long with a guy.

- Are you ready?, she calls up the stairwell.
- No.
- When the van's full, we'll head off on the first trip.
- Okay.

Out in the stairwell, the removalists shout directions to each other – higher, higher, a bit more, stop, the ceiling, STOP! Something crashes against the wall and one of the men swears. My bedroom is already half empty. The desk and the couch are gone and the bed stands dismantled in front of the window.

I sit there on the floor with the box on my lap not daring to open it. For how long, I don't know. At least ten minutes. If it were up to me I would have left it in the wardrobe, right at the back with the discarded T-shirts. But we're moving again. For the third time in two years. After Nicki ditched Steiger, we moved to a housing estate block in Berlin-Lichtenberg and then to Grandpa's house here in Wicker, Wickerland. And now, hardly thirteen months later, we're moving again – two streets away to the new development. I tried to change Nicki's mind but there wasn't a chance. When she gets something in her head, there's nothing you can do about it.

I really think Nicki has a screw loose. You couldn't dream of anything better than Grandpa's house. It's so big that each of us had a floor to ourselves: I had the first floor, Nicki the second. Then there's the hobby room. It's a proper bunker: you can crank the music up to full volume and the neighbours can't hear a thing. From the balcony, there's a view of half the town centre, and you can see the Wicker Forest and both towers of the Voss Brewery. Not only that but there's a crazy big garden behind the house, where everything grows higgelty- piggelty like a jungle because nobody has taken care of it since Grandpa died. 'Villa Stelter,'

Ken always says. I like the name, even if he meant it as a joke. Nearly everyone in Wicker lives in a house with a garden. That's why most people don't realise that it's actually a megaluxury.

Whatever, Nicki thinks that the ‘villa’ is too big for two people and too rundown. The house would have to be renovated from scratch and Nicki has neither the money nor desire to do that. She wants to move into a new building with properly insulated windows, where the floorboards don’t creak and the doors close without squeaking. Just somewhere totally conventional.

— We’re going, she calls. We’ll be back in two hours. There are sandwiches and croissants in the kitchen.

— Okay.

There’s a clatter in the hallway. Outside my window, a crow flaps up from the peach tree and vanishes into Palinka’s garden. Until we moved here, I never knew that peaches grew in Germany. I thought they came from Italy or Spain, somewhere like that. In any case, in summer you can pluck peaches directly from my window. Where we’re moving to though, there’s no garden and no peach tree, just a strip of grass behind the house that’s covered in dog crap. And hedges out front. The dark green spiky ones, which look miserable even in summer.

Sometimes I try to convince myself that another new beginning isn’t so bad maybe, after everything that happened last year. But for a proper clean break, we’d have to move out of Wicker to another city where these horrible memories aren’t lurking on every corner. Best of all to another country. Another country on a different continent. Moving to the new housing development will hardly make a difference.

Yesterday Steiger sent me an email that I shouldn’t despair about the move. Yeah, no kidding, he actually wrote ‘despair’. No person could take that seriously. I mean, ‘despair’ sounds like something out of the seventeenth century! But whatever, I shouldn’t despair because there are a lot worse things happening in the world. Good thing he wrote it, otherwise I never would have comprehended it. Seriously, how can you be so dumb? After all, Steiger knows what happened: lately he and Nicki have been phoning each other regularly again. And despite all that he still feels the need to tell me there are worse things than moving. He only emailed because he’s hoping to

get back together with Nicki, so wants to make peace. But not happening, buddy. It's me or Steiger, Nicki knows that's the deal.

Actually, I'm meant to be cleaning out the wardrobe so they can bring it down later. Nicki only rented the van for the day. I've already taken out most of the clothes but when I came across the box, all of a sudden I ran out of steam. Since then I've just been sitting here, feeling like I'm holding a box of weapons-grade plutonium in my hands. Pack the thing away and keep going, you need to be finished by the time Nicki comes back, a voice in my head says. To hell with the voice. I have to look inside at some point, there's no getting around it. I owe it to Marko.

I steel myself and lift the lid. This time it's not so much like being kicked in the guts as the feeling that someone is grabbing me from behind and squeezing so hard I'm about to pass out. I clap the lid shut again and take a deep breath. Jesus, that was a terrible idea.

I push the box aside and get to my feet. Best to let it disappear in one of those big packing boxes. There's still lots of space in the book cartons. But you're not supposed to pack boxes of books completely full, otherwise they get too heavy to carry and the bottom eventually falls out. So maybe the box of clothes? Or just throw it in the rubbish? I mean, why not – there's nothing actually valuable inside it, apart from ... I feel dizzy again just thinking about it.

To distract myself, I pull a book out of one of the boxes and flip through it. '111 Reasons to be a Vegetarian.' Earlier, Nicki had been holding the book when we emptied out the bookcase. 'It's a whim, that won't last,' I said and Nicki half died laughing. That phrase is a

running gag between us. 'It's a whim, that won't last' had been my Aunt Miriam's response when Nicki told her that I didn't eat meat anymore. At the time, it had made me so furious. I'd just turned fourteen and wanted to be taken seriously, not hear about whims, which come and go like fevers or toothaches. For a whole week, I didn't speak to Nicki because she hadn't stood up for me against Aunt Miriam. Just to show them both, I haven't eaten one gram of sausage, meat or fish since. The most

I've done is accidentally swallow a fly when riding my bike, but nothing you can do about that.

— We're on our wa-ay!

— Okay-hay.

Nicki always has to say goodbye three times before she leaves. The heels of her cowboy boots clomp over the tiles, the door clicks into the latch and suddenly it's quiet. No more furniture being moved noisily about, no more swearing removalists. Almost without a sound, the crow lands in the peach tree again.

I can't help but sit myself before the box again. My Psycho-doc said I should pack all the memories that hound me into an imaginary box, tie it up and put it away. I should be the one in charge, I get to decide, when I take the box out and open it. Yup, I thought, nice idea but not quite so simple. My thoughts can't be just captured and locked away. They come and go when they want. So then I tried it with a real box, that is, Nicki's birthday present. I put all the things inside, which reminded me even remotely of Marko. And actually, it had helped. That was in November, so nine months ago, and since then I haven't looked inside. I've tried two or three times but never got further than what happened just then.

It's different today though. Today the box just isn't letting go of me. Alright then. Enough running away, Paul Stelter. Next attempt: 3-2-1. I squeeze my eyes shut and open the lid a second time. I feel a pressure growing in my gut and my chest but it keeps itself in check. See, it's okay after all.

Ken's knife is lying right on top. The letters K and P, Ken's initials, are etched on the blade. He bought the knife himself and had it engraved. He put down almost two hundred Euros for it, which is a pretty huge sum for something that I never really understood what it was useful for. Wicker isn't exactly Fallujah or Kabul or anything. Why would anyone here need a frigging survival knife? 'That's not what it's about,' Ken always said. But what it actually was about, he didn't say either.

I take out all the things from the box and line them up in front of me: Ken's knife, a stack of movie tickets, a box of Mentos, Marvin's sunglasses, the broken iPhone with

the bubble letters on the back, a red wristband, a folded-up printout of my story ‘The Incredible Adventures of Dr Flint’, a Pizza King menu, a programme flyer for the Drama Club, a beer coaster with a tally list, and two chocolate-flavoured condoms, Lucky Dude brand. Why I saved those I have no idea. There’s no way I’d ever use them. It would be far too embarrassing. I mean, hello, chocolate? Anyway, if things keep going the way they had recently it won’t be an issue in the near future anyway. Sad but true.

The day Ken had pressed the condoms into my hand was one of many that I cursed Wicker and wished upon the city an apocalyptic downfall of biblical proportions. Complete obliteration like at the end of ‘Watchmen’ when New York City gets wiped out. It had been pretty much exactly one year ago in August, in the second or third week of school. That was when I was still new and above all: class loser Number One.

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