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Letter to Frau Lieder

Frau Lieder has died. I did not know her, she lived in the village. We walk through the house with a few relatives. Why did she live alone? Was she an independent woman? She also seems to have been very conservative. She said at some point that she was the only one who associated her depression with 1989. Apparently, she had never talked to anyone about it before. In fact, this woman wasn't actually Frau Lieder. Now I feel sorry for her.

Hello Frau Lieder,

Lately, I have been thinking about you more often. I don't know your first name; maybe I knew it once and forgot it again. It could be that your name starts with an A, like mine, or with an M, which is perhaps a little more probable, or with a C. I can rule out its starting with Z. You are between fifty-five and seventy years old today. Maybe you are already dead, like quite a few of your generation. In which case, this letter will not reach you.

I remember in 1990 I walked along a certain street every-day on my way to school, past the kindergarten where you worked until 1989. When I walked down this street, I would ask myself: what will I do if I meet you outside? Will I run away? Will I freeze? Or will I say hello normally? And how will you react? Will I even recognise you? After some time, I was sure I wouldn't recognise you. Your appearance and your voice were eventually erased from my memory. You could have sat next to me on the tram and I wouldn't have noticed you. I'm afraid you retained in this way some power over me, incognito. Not only did you disappear, but my memory plunged you into anonymity and I lost your trace there. Whether or not you were still in town, I hid you inside me. I kept you like an important document one puts in a special place so as not to forget it, one that won't be found again precisely because one has never kept anything of importance in this impractical place before. My body served as your perfect hideaway.

Frau Lieder is my dance teacher. She gives a workshop as part of a larger event that has to do with the digestive organs. We also spend the night there. I take part in the workshops but I don't do the last session, it's something with singing and jumping. I go to my room to roll a joint. Frau Lieder follows me later to check up on me. Oh, no, I didn't know that this was the last session. It turns out the person I talk to is not Frau Lieder at all. I get sad and say, "But we will get together again?" "Yes, there is still going to be a round of talks," she replies.

Frau Lieder, do you remember what happened between us? I would like to ask if you still remember who you wanted to be for the children. Do you still know what it felt like to be someone to whom the state had granted free use of any contactless form of violence? Have you ever wondered what it was, exactly, that you wanted from me – or for me? I could well imagine you never identified your own desires and actions as sadistic. I remember my parents mentioning at some point that you went into the leather goods business afterwards. You quit your job in the kindergarten after the opening of the border, or maybe you had to leave. In any case, you were suddenly gone and you started selling handbags made from crocodile and snake leather (real or fake). That is all I know about your career.

We are in a more or less self-organised seminar group, in a fight-or-flight situation, in an adventurous landscape. Frau Lieder, a young woman from Russia, writes something. The writing becomes scrawly, running diagonally across the paper, and blood starts dripping while she writes, two drops, but they are not coming from the finger, but from me, or from the image.

I'm writing this letter because I'd like to talk to you about sadism. There are various uses of the word "sadistic". They differ, first of all, in terms of whether or not sadism is linked to sexual pleasure. In my memory, nothing happened between us that I would associate with sexuality. I would describe our relationship as purely institutional, more or less impersonal. Between us, there was hardly any touch at all. Isn't it strange that you tormented people to whom you weren't emotionally or sexually connected or dependent upon? By your order, movement was forbidden during the

midday nap. Everyone had to close their eyes for the entire length of the nap. Those who opened their eyes were insulted and punished. You sat there to guard our nap, you didn't sit there to protect us. I find it difficult to imagine relationships you might have had outside work, in your personal life. Perhaps my behaviour was only a superficial trigger for your punishments, and it had nothing to do with me. In those moments, perhaps you were somewhere else with your feelings – with a lover? Did you have someone with whom you were tender or passionate? In any case, I can't remember any emotion you might have expressed to me over the course of those three years.

Frau Lieder and I find ourselves going home together again. The mood is playful, the erotic communication works perfectly and Frau Lieder says, with a certain astonishment in tone, "You are different than before, much more determined." I answer, demonstratively unimpressed, "Back then I was afraid of you." It's a simple sentence, much simpler than the truth. In bed, in the grey light of a Berlin morning, I say to Frau Lieder, "Wait, it's strange." "What is it?" "No, it's too strange." "Say, I want to know," he says. Maybe he thinks I'm going to say "I love you", or something like that. But I say: "It is as if you suddenly have no face. Your face is gone." And then we had to stop fucking for a moment because his face was gone. I had to try to kiss an empty head so that the face would come back. Some other face came.

Lieder, although our relationship was a purely institutional one, it still sometimes felt as if I was addressed personally when you coerced my obedience. I remember, for example, how you placed me with my cutlery and plate of lunch at a small table in the hallway and made the children from all the other rooms on the corridor form a group around me, including kids who barely knew me. Then you instructed everyone to point at me with their index fingers and then to wipe this finger in my direction with the index finger of the other hand. A rhythmic amplification of the pointing, so to speak, while singing "neh-ne-ne-neh-ne". And all that just to get me to scrape my plate.

You always liked to direct highly dramatic scenes like that one, in which we were both supposed to play a role. The outcome of these scenes was not open at all, rather was always

predetermined by you. Whenever you set up such a scene, for a short moment it certainly felt like we had a relationship, it felt like we had something to do with one another. Yet the interesting thing (and this is what I really want to tell you, after all these years) is that as soon as such a scene was set in motion – once I was sitting there with my meal; or with my red plastic cup of boiled milk with skin; or standing with my face to the corner; or lying on my flat bed in the toilet – you were gone. I was neither angry nor afraid of you. I wasn't thinking about you at all. I was alone in those places. You didn't really exist, you had somehow wiped yourself out through your abuse of power. I had nothing at all to do with you. The children sang: "Shame on you! Shame on you! Everybody sees you!" But the children were just some choir and you, Frau Lieder, were no more. I guess there was not much left of me either, in these moments. Perhaps I was keeping myself busy with practical questions: what will happen if I don't finish up my plate, don't drink up my milk, what if I don't take a single sip, not a single bite, how long can I bear to be excluded from play and from the group, is there a way to get out of this situation, when will all this be over?

Of course, all that happened a long time ago. Who knows how often situations like that occurred, how our dynamic developed over the years, how it really felt. I just want to tell you that you actually didn't get any closer to me in those heightened moments. That might be the difference from the lustful sadism in situations of sexual or creative intimacy. Powerful gestures can bring two people very close together, but only under the condition that both are present with their consciousness and old enough to choose whether they want to participate in intense, borderline-existential powerplay. Most likely, you didn't even want to get close to me. You were just going by the book, trying to properly discipline children, teach them the basic principles of what the government had defined as socialist morality. You were entitled to represent the state, truth, order, peace, life, work, future, punishment, mankind and the group. I was simply at your mercy. But the fact I was at your mercy had no meaning at the time, neither I nor anyone else knew about it. I did not tell my mother about what happened between us. It was not until 1989, when the border opened and you were suddenly gone, that I told someone.

I meet Frau Lieder one summer in Brandenburg, at the garden party of a friend's aunt. She is our mutual acquaintance. We sleep in the same bed. We spend the whole evening in disagreements and quarrels. Now we lie opposite each other and I actually want to touch him, but I can't. Suddenly he opens his eyes, we look at each other, quiet, in a stable lateral position. The gaze lasts long enough. I realise, it's time. After all these years, I finally look Frau Lieder in the eye, we recognise each other and then nothing happens.

The important difference between the two of us is that you have no reason to write to me. I am certainly the only one of us who still thinks of us today. This has to do with the fact that I was a child, one child among many, and you were an adult. You left a mark on me, I probably didn't leave one on you. Our relationship is asymmetrical. There has never been a dialogue between us. In our city, when I was a teenager, I once threw a message in a bottle into the river. It was a dramatic moment. I can't remember what was written on the paper, but I'm sure it didn't contain any particularly tempting offers of contact. Text, desperately thrown into the world, without an address, without any particular imaginary reader in mind, is pointless. It means nothing. Perhaps a letter is an inappropriate format, both for reaching out to an unknown person and for reaching out to someone I don't really remember, like you. When I try to think of you, I find nothing concrete. The details have faded. The thought of you mainly consists of homeless text, and this text tends to fall back onto itself until it collapses. Sometimes a remnant of this thought continues to move through my nervous system in a different form. Sometimes I feel my body, not as in the teachings of meditation and mindfulness, but in a very different way. I feel my body from within; I feel something in my belly that is not part of the normal digestive process; I feel some kind of substance, maybe even a living being, an artificial living being in my guts.

This being is able to transform movement into speech. It winds itself about inside me like a thick snake and I have to use all my strength to let it spin and do what it does. When I wilfully try to stop it, it begins to whisper words to me and that is even more unpleasant. If I were to associate this gut feeling with an emotion, I would say disgust.

But this disgust is not directly linked to your name. Your name is associated only with stories, familiar narratives of an asymmetrical power struggle that no-one won; with spatial fragments, the cold stone floor, corrugated tiles under bare feet, the smell after someone shat themselves and it wasn't cleaned up during the entire nap for educational reasons, a fragment of the street entrance of the kindergarten seen from the inside. Do you remember? The groups of children, sorted by age, started at the top and then moved one floor down each year. Once we had finished with the mezzanine, we finally reached the door. I don't remember the soldier and peace songs we sang, but I read they were required, so most probably they were sung.

Frau Lieder has died and we are at the funeral. I am not sad and try to refuse the ritual. But the group is more powerful than me and it is more powerful than the mother and so in the end I give my condolences to the relatives and then escape the situation as if I had done something terrible.

In recent years many books have been published on the subject of the former German Democratic Republic. *Who We Are*, for example, by Jana Hensel and Wolfgang Engler, or *The East Germans*. Do you read such books? I do identify as an East German and I do find all of this very interesting, yet only up until the moment I remember that, theoretically, you are also included in this category. When I say "we" and when, by that, I mean "East Germans", I include both of us! I find this idea rather disgusting and wonder whether I should leave this category to you or whether I should try instead to exclude you from it using a rhetorical trick. I could say, for example, that your cruelty does not belong to the GDR but is to be understood as a late effect of the Nazi atrocities. I am sure the Nazi regime haunts your family history in some way or another. It definitely haunts mine. But, as a kindergarten teacher, you would surely refuse any link to that past.

In 1986, the year I was handed over to you, new guidelines for national child education were published. The Council of Ministers stipulated that children should "learn more in kindergarten about how the people of their home town lived and worked in earlier times, how they fought for a better life and against war and fascism. They should know that there are

no exploiters and fascists in the GDR, as there are in the Federal Republic of Germany". Since it was impossible for fascists and exploiters to appear in the GDR, someone like you would probably not agree to interpret your actions as a Nazi spectre or as a return to fascist violence. What you did would have been fully in line with the socialist ideal, since you were only doing what all kindergarten teachers were allowed and supposed to do in the name of education. My answer to this would be: OK. I believe that whatever you did was entirely reasonable within the cosmology of the GDR, this brave new world that had risen from the ruins of the war and that ceased to exist thirty years ago. I was the one who failed to adapt. I leave the GDR and the general category of East Germanness to you. I'll find myself a new minority of origin. That's definitely possible and it's probably for the best.

At present, I often encounter the assessment that East Germans unfortunately stylise themselves as victims time and again, as a collective of victims. Together they are either victims of the Stasi, the party, the authorities, the government, West Germany, the *Treuhand*, the media, so-called foreigners, or even all of that at the same time. Do you sympathise with this idea? Are you tempted to associate yourself with a collective of victims, possibly as a replacement for the lost community, the lost *Volk*, perhaps even the long-lost *Führer*? I don't expect you to answer this. I know that, for the people of the GDR, it was hard to say "I". One may well desire to be relieved from this new duty to learn how to say "I" successfully, in relationships, on the market. One may need to find one's way back to a state in which responsibility for one's suffering is not found in one's own life, in humanity, in nature or in chance, but in an imagined authority. One may long for relief and refuse to acknowledge one's own vulnerability or one's narcissistic fantasies of greatness. One may desire to project these unconscious fantasies onto a nation, or half a nation, instead. One may also feel the need to remember a person like you – a real-life fucked-up authority figure named Lieder.

I take the ferry, but not to another country. I cross the border of my supposed strength and reach a point where I am infinitely weak, but not yet completely gone. There I can't say no, there I can't answer at all, there I've got used to participating

on a transitional basis. There I have to learn to speak again and again. My animal body must learn to say no and yes, not years later, but exactly at the moment when a decision is made. It must distinguish itself from the world and become an individual, responsible for every single one of its decisions, liable as an autonomous ego.

Frau Lieder, I have one more question: do you think your torturous methods took power from me, or empowered me, eventually? In the past, I always thought you staged my exclusion in order to weld the rest of the group into a collective. What happened to me in the process was more or less irrelevant. I was just the deterrent example, the warning to everyone, the interchangeable victim – until it was someone else’s turn. But maybe that is the wrong interpretation.

Perhaps you isolated me from the group and punished me in front of everyone because you had in fact chosen me as the one to whom you would give a particularly profound and detailed lesson in your techniques of touchless violence. Perhaps you wanted to teach me something very special and considered me a suitable master student for your hardest lessons. Alas, the state you represented happened to collapse and you could not complete your plan. You ran off and were replaced by another kindergarten teacher, a funny older woman named Quack, with black and grey hair all the way down to her bottom, who was not so familiar with your special methods. We lost sight of each other. Naturally, I didn’t miss you. I didn’t know that it had been your secret plan to give me a final, resounding lesson at the end of my training, which would show me what had been the point of all the agony, endurance, perseverance. No-one told me it had been your plan to grant me a prize for my desperate resistance, or at least an honourable mention, before you sent me off to school. That’s the romantic version of the story.

Frau Lieder walks through the park. Suddenly a boy comes running to her and says, anxiously: “There is a bad dog over there, help me, I am afraid. Can you walk beside me?” Frau Lieder: “Yes, I can.” They walk next to each other to the exit of the park, then they say goodbye. Frau Lieder was tall and adult, the boy was small, a child. They didn’t know each other, their relationship was purely institutional, there was nothing to dis-

cuss between them. Frau Lieder was proud of herself because she knew she had done the right thing. Luckily, they both had to walk in different directions after the task was completed.

Back then you had power over me, now I have power over myself. I also have power over others – at least temporarily – when I influence people who are open to me in professional or personal contexts. But it is strange, it seems that the more others open up to me, the more alienated I feel from my own will to power. The more my power is wanted, the more I get the feeling that power is actually indistinguishable from care. When in a position of power, I am required to take care of those who are open to me or weaker than me. I must nourish them, strengthen them, make space for them. To be charged with this kind of power seems rather exhausting. Protecting and supporting others is an extremely demanding job. The strangest thing about our power struggle was the recent realisation that you didn't need to enter into a struggle at all. You already had all the power. You were an adult surrounded by small kids. Your contract was unlimited, nobody controlled you, there was no evaluation of your methods.

I would like to ask if you were sure all resistance was futile. Did you violently provoke my resistance in the blind certainty that you had not only the right but the means to defeat any resistance whatsoever? Frankly, I believe you were not at all that sure of your authority. Your use of force implies you were in combat mode. For some reason, you felt compelled to put your power at risk again and again, like a boxer who must enter the ring time and time again to hold her title. In boxing, though, the opponents are equal and compete against one another in the same weight class. As an adult woman, you chose to challenge a three-to-six-year-old girl. Through your theatrical acts of violence, you were choosing to put yourself at risk, at least theoretically. In practice, I am not sure what effect my resistance had on you. In the nihilist version of the story, you never asked yourself how you would like to use the power you were institutionally granted. Your job was boring and you waged war against the kids just for the thrill of it. There simply was no ultimate goal of your attacks. You, yourself, were the end that justified the means. I don't know exactly why I think this, but I guess the main reason you raised me into your opponent was the

loneliness you felt up there. However, it is not in my interest to investigate the details of your loneliness, current or past.

Frau Lieder takes a fasting cure, alone. At first, she slowly reduces her consumption of rabbit hearts, chicken liver, aspic, scalded sausage, smoked pork, bacon, sour eggs in mustard sauce, barley soup, potatoes with curd cheese and boiled milk with skin. Step by step, she quits alcohol, coffee and cigarettes. She buys a pack of detox tea and an irrigator for complete bowel emptying. She gets castor oil, swallows a tablespoon full, shakes herself to disgust, goes to the bathroom and closes the door.

Frau Lieder, I'm glad I don't have to understand you. It suits you well, being a fiction I can empathise with as far as I want to, and no further.

Best wishes,

Anna