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SELF'S
DECEPTION



Bernhard Schlink

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
Peter Constantine

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*I**A passport photo*

She reminded me of the daughter I've sometimes wished for. Lively eyes, a mouth prone to laughter, high cheekbones, and rich, brown curls hanging down to her shoulders. The photograph didn't indicate whether she was tall or short, fat or thin, slouching or poised. It was only a passport photo.

Her father, Under-Secretary Salger from Bonn, had called me. For months he and his family had not heard from Leonore. At first they had simply waited, then they put in calls to friends and acquaintances, and finally notified the police. No luck.

'Leo is an independent sort of girl who likes to go her own way. But she's always stayed in touch, visiting, calling us. We were still hoping she might turn up for the beginning of the semester. She's studying French and English at the Heidelberg Institute for Translation and Interpretation. Well, the semester started two weeks ago.'

'Your daughter didn't sign up for her courses?'

His voice sounded irritated: 'Herr Self, the reason I'm resorting to a private investigator is because I'm hoping he

might be the one who will do the investigating – not I. I have no idea whether she signed up or not.’

I patiently explained that every year thousands of people were reported missing in Germany, but that most of them disappeared and then reappeared of their own free will. They simply wanted to get away for a time from anxious parents, husbands or loved ones. As long as you don’t actually hear anything there’s no reason to worry. When something bad does happen – an accident or a crime – that’s when you hear.

Salger was aware of this. The police had already gone over it. ‘I respect Leo’s independence. She’s twenty-five and not a child any more. I also understand that she might need some space. In the past few years there has been tension between us. But I have to know how she is, what she’s up to, if she’s OK. I don’t suppose you have a daughter, do you?’

I didn’t see that this was any of his business and didn’t answer.

‘It’s not only me who’s worrying, Herr Self. I can’t tell you what my wife’s been through these past few weeks . . . So I want quick results. I’m not asking you to confront Leo or embarrass her. I do not want her or any of her friends to know that there’s a search on for her. I’m afraid she would take that very, very badly indeed.’

This didn’t sound good. You can tail a person in secret once the person has been located, and you can look for a person overtly if you don’t know where that person is. But not to know where a person is and to look for that person without her or her friends catching on is difficult, to say the least.

Salger was growing impatient. ‘Are you still there?’
‘Yes.’

‘I want you to start right away and report back as soon as possible. My number is . . .’

‘Thank you, Herr Salger, but I must decline. Have a nice day.’ I hung up. I don’t really care whether my clients’ manners are good or bad. I’ve been a private investigator for almost forty years and have come across all types, those with proper upbringing and those without, timid types and audacious types, poseurs and cowards, poor devils and big shots. There were also the clients I had dealt with back in the days when I was a public prosecutor, clients who would have preferred not to be clients. But indifferent as I was, I had no wish to dance to the tune of the imperious under-secretary.

The following morning when I arrived at my office in the Augusta-Anlage, I found a yellow post-office notice hanging from the flap of the letterbox in my door: ‘Urgent. Express Mail. Please check your letterbox.’ They needn’t have left the notice, as all the letters pushed through the slot fall on to the floor of the former tobacconist’s store where I have my desk with my chair behind it and two chairs in front, a filing cabinet, and a potted palm. I hate potted palms.

The express letter was heavy. A bundle of hundred-mark bills lay inside a folded sheet of paper covered with writing.

Dear Herr Self,

I hope you will forgive my abruptness on the phone. My wife and I have been under great strain over the past few weeks. I do not, however, imagine that the tone of our conversation could have led to your refusal to help us, so allow me to offer the enclosed five thousand marks as a deposit. Please stay in touch with me by phone. Over the

next few weeks you can reach me only on my answering machine; I must take my wife out of this hell of uncertainty. But I will be picking up my messages regularly and can call you back any time.

Sincerely,
Salger

I opened my desk drawer and took out a box of coffee beans, a bottle of sambuca and a glass, and filled it. Then I sat down in my chair, cracked the beans between my teeth and let the clear, oily sambuca roll over my tongue and down my throat. It burned, and the smoke of my first cigarette stung my chest. I looked out of the former storefront. It was raining in dense grey streams. In the murmuring traffic the hissing of the tyres on the wet streets was louder than the droning of the engines.

After my second glass I counted the fifty hundred-mark bills. I looked at the envelope on both sides. Like the letter, it didn't have Salger's address. I called the telephone number in Bonn he'd given me.

'You have reached 41-17-88. Please leave a message at the sound of the tone. All messages will be answered within twenty-four hours.'

I also called Information and wasn't surprised to hear that there was no number listed for a Salger in Bonn. Presumably his address wouldn't be in the phone book either. That was as it should be – the man was safeguarding his privacy. But why did he have to safeguard his privacy from his own private investigator? And why couldn't he have at least cooperated to the extent of letting me know his daughter's address in Heidelberg? Besides, five thousand marks was far too much.

Then I saw that there was something else in the envelope. Leo's picture. I took it out and leaned it against the small stone lion I had brought back years ago from Venice and which stands guard over the telephone, the answering machine, the fountain pen, the pencils and notepads, the cigarettes and lighter. An overexposed photo-booth picture on cheap paper. It must have been about four or five years old. Leo looked at me as if she'd just decided to grow up, to no longer be a girl but a woman. There was something more in her eyes: a question, an expectation, a reproach, a defiance. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it moved me.

Young Translators

When a person is reported missing and relatives want an investigation, the police go through a routine. They draw up a report in a number of copies, request photographs, staple them to the report and the copies, and send the whole dossier to the local criminal bureau, which files it and waits. Nowadays the information is often entered into a computer. But either way the file remains closed until something happens, something is found, or something is reported. Only in juvenile cases or when the police suspect foul play do they go public. An adult who hasn't committed a crime can pitch his tent when and where he likes without the police getting involved. That would be all we need!

When I'm hired in a missing person's case, the idea is for me to go farther out on a limb than the police ever would. I called the registrar's office at Heidelberg University and was told that Leonore Salger was no longer enrolled. She'd registered for the winter semester, but not for the spring semester. 'Not that that means anything. Sometimes students simply forget to register, and only think of it when it comes to work or exams. I'm sorry, I can't give you her address. She's no longer in our system.'

Work – that gave me the idea of calling the university chancellor's office. I could talk to the human resources department and see if Leonore Salger was on the books in some part-time position at the university.

'Who is making this request? According to our regulations, all personal information is confidential . . .' Her tone was as strict as her chirping little voice could manage.

But I didn't give confidentiality a chance. 'Good morning, this is Gerhard Self from the Federal Credit Union. I have Leonore Salger's file in front of me, and I see that the employee savings bonus has not been entered. You must take care of this right away! Frankly, I can't understand why . . .'

'What did you say her name was?' The chirping voice had become shrill with indignation. All confidentiality was swept aside, Leonore Salger's file was opened, and I was triumphantly informed that Frau Salger had not worked at the university since February.

'How so?'

'That's what it says here.' Now she sounded snippy. 'Professor Leider didn't send in a request for an extension, and in March the position was reassigned.'

I got into my old Opel, drove up the autobahn to Heidelberg, and parked the car near the Plöck, where I found the Institute for Translation and Interpretation. Professor Leider's office was on the first floor.

'How may I help you?'

'Gerhard Self from the Ministry of Education and Science. I have an appointment with the professor.'

The secretary looked at the appointment calendar, at me and back at the calendar. 'One moment, please.' She disappeared next door.

‘Herr Self?’ Professors too are getting younger by the day. This one cut quite a stylish figure. He was sporting a dark moiré silk suit, a pastel linen shirt and an ironic smile on his tanned face. He invited me into his office and offered me a chair. ‘Well, what brings you to us?’

‘After our successful initiatives Young Scientists and Young Musicians, the minister of education and science has set up other youth programmes over the past few years. Last year he initiated Young Translators. You might recall the information we sent you last year?’

He shook his head.

‘Ah, you don’t remember – I’m afraid Young Translators simply hasn’t received the kind of publicity it needed over the last year in schools or universities. But this year I have taken the initiative, and I’m particularly interested in reaching out to universities. One of last year’s participants recommended you to me, and also one of your assistants, a Frau Salger. What I have in mind is—’

The ironic smile had not left his face. ‘Young Translators. What’s that all about?’

‘It seemed a natural enough progression after Young Scientists, Young Musicians, Young Architects, and Young Doctors, to name just a few of our programmes. In the meantime, I would say that for 1993 Young Translators will play a particularly important role. Our Young Pastors programme has received the blessing of the divinity schools, and Young Lawyers has been approved by law schools. As for translation departments, or I should say institutes, unfortunately things haven’t really taken off yet. But I envision an advisory committee – a few professors, one or two students, someone from the language department of the European Community.

I was thinking of asking you to participate, Professor Leider, and perhaps also your assistant, Frau Salger.’

‘If you only knew . . . But I see you don’t.’ He launched into a lecture about how he was a scholar and a linguist, and that he didn’t think much of translation and interpreting. ‘One day we will figure out how language actually works, and then there’ll be no need for translators and interpreters. As a scholar it’s not my job to find a way of muddling through till then. My job is to figure out a way to end the muddle.’

A professor of translation who doesn’t believe in translation! How perfectly ironic. I thanked him for his openness, extolled critical, creative variety, and told him that I would like to stay in touch about the committee. ‘And what would you think of my asking Frau Salger to be the student representative on the committee?’

‘I must tell you that she is no longer working for me. She has . . . you could say that she has in a sense left me in the lurch. After the winter break she simply didn’t show up again – no explanation, no apology. I did ask colleagues and lecturers if they knew where she was. But she was no longer on campus. I even thought of calling the police.’ He looked concerned, and for the first time his ironic smile disappeared. Then it returned. ‘Perhaps she simply had had enough of studying, and enough of the university and the institute. I can’t say that I’d be surprised. I guess I felt a bit hurt.’

‘Do you think she would make a good candidate for Young Translators?’

‘She was my assistant, but she was never affected by my bleak view of translation. She’s a hands-on girl, a good interpreter with the kind of quick tongue that is a must in this job, and was well liked as a tutor by first-year students. No,

absolutely! If you find her, you should definitely bring her on board. And please give her my regards.'

We stood up and he walked me to the door. I asked the secretary for Frau Salger's address. She wrote it on a piece of paper: 5 Häusserstrasse, 6900 Heidelberg.

3

Catastrophic thought

I had come to Heidelberg in 1942 as a young public prosecutor and moved into an apartment on the Bahnhofstrasse with my wife, Klara. In those days it wasn't a good neighbourhood, but I liked the view of the train station, the arriving and departing trains, the locomotives puffing steam, the whistle and rumble of the nocturnal shunting of freight cars. Today the station has been moved since the Bahnhofstrasse now runs past office blocks and court buildings with their smooth, grey functionality. If the law reflects the architecture in which it is proclaimed, then law in Heidelberg is in a bad state. If on the other hand the law is in any way reflected in the rolls, bread and cakes that the court staff can buy around the corner, then one need have no fear. The Häusserstrasse branches off from the Bahnhofstrasse, and right past the first corner was the small bakery where over forty years ago Klara and I used to buy grey bread, a bakery that has now turned into an elegant and enticing bread and pastry shop.

Right next to it, at 5 Häusserstrasse, I put on my reading glasses to see the buzzers. And there was her name, next to