

Of Bad Parents

Tom Kummer

Novel

German



After the death of his beloved wife Nina, Tom travels back with his younger son from Los Angeles to Bern, while his older son stays in the USA. Tom works at night as a chauffeur and sleeps by day, mourning for Nina and trying to get his life under control. What is fiction, what reality? It doesn't matter. Tom Kummer is a magnificent storyteller whom we are happy to follow – even though he spares neither himself nor his readership.

"01:30. Country road, eastbound. No oncoming traffic. Dead villages, as if there's a curfew. I stroke the steering wheel and the leather of my glove squeaks gently. My passenger is dictating our destination. In my head I'm driving wherever I like."

Title

Von schlechten Eltern

Publisher

Tropen, Stuttgart

Publication date

March 2020

Pages

256

ISBN

978-3-608-50428-6

Translation rights

Frauke Kniffler

f.kniffler@klett-cotta.de

for Italian: Barbara Griffini,
Berla & Griffini Rights Agency
griffini@bgagency.it

Author

Tom Kummer was born in 1961 in Bern. As a journalist, he faked numerous interviews, unleashing a media storm in 2000. After several years in Los Angeles with his family, he now lives in Bern. His works include *Good Morning – Los Angeles – Die tägliche Jagd nach der Wirklichkeit* (*Good Morning – Los Angeles – The Daily Hunt for Reality*, 1997) and *Blow Up* (2007). The sequel to his novel *Nina & Tom* (2017), which was highly praised by critics and readers alike, is *Von schlechten Eltern* (*Of Bad Parents*, 2020).

Photo: Susanne Schleyer
autorenaarchiv.de

Of Bad Parents

Tom Kummer

Excerpt translated by Shaun Whiteside

01:30. Country road, eastbound. No oncoming traffic. Dead villages, as if there's a curfew. I stroke the steering wheel and the leather of my glove squeaks gently. My passenger is dictating our destination. In my head I'm driving wherever I like.

Straight road to Lausanne. The road has a dull sheen as if covered with ash. I turn off all the lights, take both hands off the wheel and glide into the darkness until a miracle happens: A face appears on the windscreen – masculine nose, full lips, blue eyes.

I rarely manage more than five seconds of wrong-way driving. The Intelligent Driving System warning signals are now flashing on the dashboard. I turn the dipped-beam headlights back on, stick my right hand between my legs and glance in the rear-view mirror. My passenger is asleep.

I picked him up from the Geneva headquarters of the Banque Nationale de Paris. Central office told me he was a businessman from Dakar in Senegal, a VIP. He spoke French. Destination: Hotel Bellevue, Bern.

I take the red tablet, which is supposed to keep me awake. I push my hand deeper into my lap. It feels as if electrically charged wires are spinning out of my fingertips and through my whole body. I slip on to the motorway near Vevey; further to the east outlines appear, like the ruins of a burnt-out city: Montreux. My eye falls on the photograph on the dashboard. It shows Vincent and Frank with their mother. I stare at them as if they owe me an answer.

Eventually my passenger wakes up. He coughs. I look in the rear-view mirror. He turns on his iPad. A heavyset African, early forties, in a pin-stripe suit that's far too small for him, with a red tie, a signet ring on his middle finger and a silver tooth gleaming in his half-open mouth.

Now he asks how long the journey's going to take.

Not so long, I say.

He nods and looks through the side window. On the hard shoulder road workers are pushing heavily laden

wheelbarrows northwards.

Whereabouts are we?, he asks.

Greyerz. Gruyère. They make cheese here.

That famous cheese with the big holes?

No, small holes.

He looks at his iPad again, then glances back at my rear-view mirror.

A lake appears in the darkness, its surface shiny as glass.

Lac de la Gruyère, I say. It's the longest reservoir in Switzerland.

He stares into the blackness.

I used to drift about on these waters as a child, in a rowing boat. My father fished for trout. There's an island in the middle, bare and godforsaken. The shore is lined with trees that stand out in the gloom like bones.

Where do you come from?, my passenger asks.

Bern.

You speak French with an English accent.

I nod into the rear-view mirror and pull my hand out from between my legs.

I lived in the States for a long time.

I turn on the radio; there's classical music on SRF 2. More oncoming traffic. I leave the motorway near Fribourg.

What do you like about Switzerland?

I adjust the mirror.

The night. It calms me down.

The night? Is that all?

I sleep during the day.

Now he's staring at the photograph on the dashboard.

Is that your family?

Yes.

Drizzle. Smearred windscreen.

The Intelligent Driving System gets back in touch.

Turn on windscreen wipers.

I look into the rear-view mirror. He isn't about to let go.

So your wife is with the children while you're at work?

No. She's dead.

The African looks to the side and loosens the knot of his tie.

I'm sorry.

For a moment I see him hanging from a tree by his tie. Maybe it's the boredom.

You're a single father?

Yes.

No wife in prospect?

He goes on playing with his tie.

I'm not alone, I say and study the red patterns on the thing, which is far too wide.

I have a Swiss home help that I book over the internet.

Silence. The Senegalese coughs as if he's got something caught in his throat.

Then he leans forward, sweat on his brow, and rests his hand against the back of my seat.

A Swiss maid, really?, he asks in English.

Yeah, she even looks like my late wife. An avatar.

He blinks.

An avatar?

Yes.

And what are they like, these Swiss home helps that you can book through the internet?

The spark has caught.

They're totally wild on Senegalese guys, I reply and grin.

My passenger stares motionlessly into the rear-view mirror. Then he falls back into his seat and claps his hands with amusement. Mon Dieu. You're making fun of me! I nearly believed you. Swiss home helps? No such thing.

He looks at the photograph again.

Silence.

My wife died in Dakar three years ago. Of yellow fever, he says.

He gazes into the Swiss night.

Do you believe in life after death?

I look into the rear-view mirror.

I don't believe in that, Monsieur.

Why don't you believe in it?

Human beings are biological machines. We work.

After death we rot. That's it.

You believe that?

I'm lying to him. I lie to them all.

The Senegalese man leans forward again.

Don't you believe that we're divine beings, with an immortal soul and an eternal spirit?

No, I don't believe that.

I do. We can return to a past life where we can talk to our dead.

He points to the photograph. I don't react.

Other drivers put a cross there. Or pictures of pets. Although central office has forbidden us to display anything personal in the car. When I look at my photograph for long enough, the bolts of electricity shoot into my throat.

She shoots threads through me. Sometimes I feel her choking me so tightly that I can't breathe. Of course the Senegalese man knows the truth: the dead come back. They control your life. Out of revenge. Perhaps she wants to kill me.

02.55. We're approaching the city. The tower of the incineration facility gleams in the artificial red light, looking like a huge concrete ship. My passenger can't make anything out. He's immersed in his iPad again. He doesn't see the columns of old people. They move, small and bent, supporting themselves on their black sticks, towards the incineration facility. Then the long boulevard leading into the city centre.

Bern is a ghost town, cold and comfortless. I see homeless people standing around a fire near the Universal Post Monument, praying. Ash floats across the tarmac. Flocks of crows line the Bundesgasse. Stray dogs trot towards the Central Station. Behind the government buildings the Alps gleam in the moonlight. Then we have reached our destination: Hotel Bellevue. A night porter is waiting at the ready. I get out. The Senegalese man hugs me like an old friend.

Swiss maids, he whispers in my ear. He claps me on the shoulder with a grin.

You're one great joker, mon vieux!

He tries to give me twenty francs as a tip. I turn it down.

When I enter the children's room, Vincent is lying on the bed, arms outstretched, like an angel. Outside the crows circle above the house. They have followed me to the Ostring. I undress, gloves last, and lie down beside my son. As I always do when I come home from work, I listen to his breath, stroke his forehead and then his

bare chest. I consider the shape of his navel. Then I kiss his delicate throat. Eventually Vincent's hand seeks my face. It fees its way from my neck to my mouth. It gently touches my eyebrows, as gently as if my twelve-year-old son were already aware that I need him more than he needs me. I don't get tired until it's bright outside. I should make breakfast. A new school day begins. Plumes of smoke drift by outside the window of the children's room. Further to the south the Eiger, the Mönch and the Jungfrau gleam in the morning sun. I kiss his forehead and rest my head against his. A defenceless baby who needs his parents. Sometimes his closed eyelids twitch. There have been nights when I have started crying at the sight of his sleeping face.