

There

Niko Stoifberg

Novel

German



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Dort

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Author

Niko Stoifberg, who was born in Lucerne in 1976, studied English and German and has worked as a waiter, newspaper deliveryman, journalist, cartoonist and editor. A selection of his *Vermutungen (Conjectures)*, which appeared as a column in the cultural magazine *O41*, is available as *Das Blaue Büchlein (The Little Blue Book)*. *There* is his first novel.

Photo: Hendrik Dietrich

Sebi Zünd has a project, 'Nature directe'. He wants to create a direct link between houses and nature with a series of wooden walkways. It's a trendy project with great promise. But then he meets Lydia and knows within seconds that, "She's the one, she's what I've been missing." So how can he attract her attention? Keeping out of sight for just long enough, Sebi Zünd pushes the child Lydia is with on the shore - her little brother - into the lake, not in order to kill him but with the aim of staging a heroic rescue in front of the woman. However, his plan goes awry: the little boy drowns. The unsuspecting Lydia sees Sebi as the tragically unsuccessful saviour of her young brother, and a love story develops between them. Yet, can Sebi keep his secret? Does he want to keep it? The tension is sustained from the first page to the last, and once you start reading this action-packed novel you won't be able to put it down.

"With time I will learn. There will be moments like this, again and again, but then they pass, like now. No pain can be so great that it doesn't stop, at some point, eventually."

There

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Excerpt translated by Amy Bojang

Here, now, on this platform, there are not just two, but at least a dozen eyes burning behind me – the ones I lit myself this afternoon in the cave chapel for the hotel workers or Ouvriers, as she calls them, and my loved ones. At least it is easier for me now than back then not to look at them, even though the red glow is reaching out to me across the snow.

I stomp straight ahead, not allowing myself to look over my shoulder and look out at the lake. *Catch your breath!* is what it says in the brochure Xenia now wants to print, with new photos, including the raised walkway. Dad offered to fly her to the rock face again; he really would do it as if nothing had ever happened. Lydia will no doubt refuse to go with them, to get into the Alouette again, someone else will have to. And Mirror – Mirror will steer clear of going out, that's for sure, he'll stay tucked up at home. If he's even there next spring – let's hope. He was so strange before. First his appearance, and then those words: BOYS, NUNS, PENS, and something else. What does he even want? The hotel. He would like the hotel.

No lights down on the lake, no ships, right up to the far end. There are no Christmas trips, or else they are already over. I scrape snow together piling it up between my boots to a narrow ridge, squeezing it firmly with my heels, until it is so high and thin that it breaks. No wind, not even out here, only the still, painfully stinging cold. He will have to be patient, Mirror, with the hotel plan. Xenia will not give it up just yet, not to him in any case, only to me, if I want it. I can imagine it, meanwhile, if Lydia would also... *Catch your breath!* It is not easy at all when you are standing so far out, out in the heavens, as it were; you almost get too much air, almost more than you can breathe in, it fills your lungs, hardly has room and slips downwards, into your crotch – a feeling that everyone knows if, like this, they've had a void, an abyss, in front of them. Mirror...oh, the poor dog; he can't blackmail me anymore, too late, I know too much for that. What did they

used to call it during the Cold War? A balance of terror. And we don't even have to threaten each other, we can come to an arrangement. He can stay, carry on cooking, I don't have a problem with that. The same goes for his Ouvriers. They have been here for five years now, and business, as far as I can see, is running as well as it ever has. Unbelievable really, how he managed it, sheer determination on his part and down to Xenia's insanity. You have to admire him for it. The Ouvriers generally: they should receive recognition, each one of them deserves a medal, not just Mirror, all twelve of them. They should be encouraged to step out of the shadows. Alas it is not to be. I turn around.

There they are.

They are standing in front of the cave, in a row, black shadow figures, veiled in red against the light, with little red lights between their black silhouettes, silent. They stand there in a semi-circle holding hands like a long human paper chain. They are getting bigger, coming closer. I sense the void behind me. Mirror! I want to shout – his outline is in the middle – Mirror! Nurja! Tomás! I want to shout their names, but I can't open my mouth, and the circle is closing in. My legs give way, I feel behind my back for the cable, steady myself, my hands immediately freeze onto it. I can hear a roaring sound in my head, it starts rolling in like waves. I don't hear their steps, but with every breath I take they get closer to me, bigger and bigger. One face after another steps out of the red of the cave, first black, then violet, then white. I can't get away, they are in front of me, Maiba, Dorli, Barbara, it's like I'm frozen to the spot, rigid. They reach out their arms, Yukiko, Özkan, Sundaran, I stop breathing, Olubenga, and they grab at me, Jens, Ines – no, behind me. They climb over the railing, float away over me, their faces like balloons. My eyes freeze shut. Their faces: like balloons floating by me.

Then I wrench them open again, and my hands from the cables, seeing nothing in front of me but the cave and the red lights in it. Start breathing again. Turn around to the railing again, look towards the horizon. I dare to look down: the lake, a smooth dark sheet.