

Always Two and Two

Tabea Steiner

Novel

German



Natali balances her time as artist, teacher, mother of two and wife of a supportive if somewhat overbearing husband, when she falls for another woman. Her life starts to unravel laying bare the controlling mechanisms of the religious congregation her family is part of. A careful and caring study of a woman's quest to liberate herself from the constraints of a manipulative society.

"Aglow the alabaster stood in the room. She walked around it tapping it gently with the hammer on the chisel's head, taking off fine layers. Particles splintered through the room, one hitting the protective glass. Natali squinted."

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Tabea Steiner, born in 1981, studied German literature and ancient history. She grew up on a farm in eastern Switzerland and now lives in Zurich. Her writing discusses on the difficulty of the simple things in carefully composed, high-resolution linguistic images. In harsh realities and small-scale worlds, the traits of the interpersonal that are as rough as they are delicate are revealed. It is often the inconspicuous gestures that are observed, as if under a magnifying glass. The author spent the summer of 2014 as an artist-in-residence in Genoa, and the summer of 2019 as a fellow at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin. Her first novel, *Balg* (Brat), was published in 2019 by Edition Bücherlese and was shortlisted for the Swiss Book Prize. Tabea Steiner is also part of the teams who curate the Thun Literature Festival and the Bernese Aprillen reading festival, and was a jury member for the Swiss Literature Awards.

Photo: Werner Geiger

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Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor

Advent

It was cold. People were frozen stiff, but as soon as they went into a building their noses began to run. Tears, too, thawed and dripped. People hurried along the high street. As if by some strange law of physics, they moved slowly through the revolving glass doors, but as soon as they stepped outside they sped along as if flung out by a centrifugal force.

One woman slowed her pace. She took a slip of paper from her coat pocket, examined it, looked about her and headed for a shop in the next side street, somewhat hidden.

In the same moment two very young women exchanged glances. One of them nodded, the other seemed to follow her. As if by chance, they made for the first woman, who had now walked two or three paces towards the shop. She hadn't really sped up again though, and so she immediately stopped, in spite of the cold, when one of the women spoke to her: Excuse me?

Yes? The few words hung there, small clouds in the icy air. The older woman waited, and the two younger women exchanged glances again; one of them gestured towards the other with her elbow. The eyes of all three met at the crook of this elbow, on the cloth of the woman's coat—dark, sturdy cloth that looked as though, if it couldn't keep the clothes underneath warm, it could at least protect them from the raw chill.

The older woman looked the two younger women in the face. She noticed that one of them had a red tip to her nose, and pulled her coat tighter about her shoulders. Yes, she said again, and another tiny cloud rose from her mouth. One of the young women returned her gaze and said with little air in her voice: May we pray for you?

Midsummer

Kristin opens the door to her flat, slips off her high heels and stands barefoot on the wooden boards of the hall. The blister on her right foot is painful; she isn't used to wearing heels. She leaves her clothes on the floor and gets under the shower—warm, freezing cold, then warm again.

The bride had come in at the door on her father's arm, a black shadow against the light. As if on thin ice, she had walked past the packed pews towards the groom who was sitting at the front waiting for her, white with nerves.

As always, Kristin had spent days writing the sermon. She liked to give the couples she married something individual, something that touched them both. As usual, she had met this couple several times before the wedding. She liked to know what kind of people they were, to understand what they loved about each other, why they wanted to get married. Why it was important for them to have a church marriage, a protestant marriage. And at the same time, she tried to find out why the couple wanted to be married by her.

Once she was up in the pulpit, though, she usually ended up talking about generosity, humility, freedom. At university she had made jokes about the inanity of this overrated speech act, imitating the unctuous tones of the professor.

When Marlen began to play, the families looked at each other, the way families do. Some made a show of raising their eyebrows; others only stared ahead, pretending they hadn't noticed anything. Their reactions contained whole novels. But the bride had wanted drums at her wedding, not organ music, and the family accepted that.

It grew hot in the church; people sighed and sweated. A bee buzzed around somebody's updo, and a collective effort was made to shoo the thing out. Such incidents create a sense of community among wedding guests.

People were still on their first drinks when the photographer began to wave his list around. He herded them up like a sheep dog to capture the ephemeral for all eternity. He took several photographs of Kristin from a distance, when Marlen was standing nearby. As if she wouldn't notice.

Kristin reaches for the shampoo and lathers her hair, closing her eyes so the foam doesn't sting. He had forgotten to photograph the children's choir; the mothers had to fetch the kids from the playground. A boy in a penguin tailcoat collided on the slide with a girl in a pink flamingo frock. The children ended up gathering in front of the cake stand; they stared defiantly at the camera, their mouths smeared with wedding cake.

Every few minutes the organiser gave instructions over a megaphone, explaining the rules of a game or how to fill a balloon with helium. In one game the bride had to choose a new opponent for every round and prove herself in a new challenge with each one—sewing on a button, beating egg whites by hand. Later she had to catch crockery thrown to her by the blindfolded groom, and the guests went wild with delight whenever a cup was smashed. Kristin never ceased to be fascinated by the way these games were repeated from one wedding to the next.

She leans her forehead against the tiles and massages her shoulders and behind her ears. A thought makes her smile. Marlen's grandmother had made a beeline for her, leaning on her walking stick. She had put both hands on the knob of the stick, looked up at Kristin and said, You spoke very nicely. Then, already turning to go, she had twisted her head back and said, Marlen likes you. Kristin had watched her walk away, her white hair coiled into a little nest on the back of her head.

Marlen's aunt had driven them from the church to the hotel, annoyed that she had to transport the flower arrangements. Marlen went with them; they sat in the back like children. The flowers in the boot smelt dank.

Kristin had felt sick in the car, though she'd only drunk one glass, maybe two. Sometimes she was only booked for the church ceremony and could go home after an aperitif. When that happened she was careful not to drink any alcohol at all. When the bride and groom asked her to attend the reception, she charged more.

What kind of person expects to be paid to attend parties? Kristin turns the water cold again; it runs over her. This time she's the one paying; she's going to have to take another headache pill.

The seating plan had put her at the singles table. Kristin hadn't noticed; it was Marlen who pointed it out to her. In future she'd have to think twice about staying all day. No one needed her once the ceremony was over, and as long as she stayed she was stuck in the role of vicar, especially when she didn't know any of the guests. And yet she always let herself be persuaded to stay on for the reception, the couple's big day. She didn't want them to get the impression it was only a job for her. But what else was it.

It would do her good to have a whole weekend to herself now and then. The requests piled up—she was often asked to stand in for other vicars too—and because they were spread across the week, she had little time to call her own. Maybe she should raise her fees.

No one ever knew what to say to a female vicar at these occasions. Once, the father of the bride had asked if she had a husband and when she said no, had asked if she was celibate.

She had sat opposite Marlen. The men had behaved themselves. Next to Kristin was a young biologist who worked with invasive plants and folded his napkin neatly every time he wiped his mouth. Another man asked Kristin to dance three times; later, on the car park, he wanted her phone number, although past a certain point in the evening she'd only danced with Marlen. She looked at Marlen who cocked her head to one side—and then the taxi came.

Kristin massages the pain points behind her ears again. All she'd wanted after the party was to go home. She shouldn't have looked at her phone after switching it off; she knew what she was like. She just wanted to read Natali's last texts again. But she saw immediately that she'd changed her profile picture. Everything was a blur; she squinted at her phone with one eye and zoomed into the pixelly image with two fingers. Manuel was clearly visible, walking up a hill with the two kids, Abi holding his hand and Suli on his shoulders, lopsided, as if she were asleep.

Kristin rinses off the lather. Then she gets out of the shower, removes her nail varnish, disinfects her blister, puts on moisturiser. She had switched her phone straight back off and put it in her bag. For the second time that day she was in a car with Marlen. This time it was night and when Marlen got out, the driver turned to look at Kristin. Then Kristin got out too; it was only then she realised that Marlen was sitting on the bonnet. Marlen took Kristin by the hand and made tea for her; the next morning she was fast asleep, snoring softly. Kristin woke far too early with a raging headache. She tried to get back to sleep, then left at about midday, leaving a note in the kitchen. Her feet ached in the high heels; she changed trams; the sun pricked her eyes. Kristin laughs; she has suddenly remembered that she had sunglasses in her bag, and flat shoes. In the taxi Marlen had told her about a woman who burnt her husband's shoes after the first argument of their honeymoon. Kristin had only known the story about the man who threw his wife's shoes out of the window to stop her from leaving.

She looks for tablets in the mirrored cabinet, takes two, fetches a big bottle of water and goes and lies on a deckchair on the veranda. She leaves her phone switched off; she can have another look at it tomorrow.