

# Because Of Him

Zora del Buono

Novel

German



*Zora del Buono's father died in a car accident when she was just a baby. An investigative novel that feels like a road trip exploring a family's history.*

*"Nobody that dies in a traffic accident leaves the house that morning knowing that this will be their last day (and no one thinks that they will kill someone that day)."*

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Excerpt translated by Romy Fursland

Rolling hills, lovely weather, a May day, everything lush and green. Suddenly, on the road to the mountains, road signs bearing the familiar place names: *Uznach, Näfels, Kaltbrunn*, heard so many times, permanently embedded in my young brain but never properly processed: where did the accident happen, where was the hospital they took the victims to, where was the trial held? Whenever those place names would crop up in conversation with other people, for whom they didn't have the same associations they had for us, I would flinch: *Uznach, Näfels, Kaltbrunn* – I hope Mother doesn't hear those terrible words.

For years, whenever I've passed one of these road signs, I've wondered if E.T. is still alive. He must be in his mid-eighties by now. How has he spent the last sixty years, living with his guilt? And then comes the thought: I have to look for him, I have to find him. The man who killed my father.

I only know his initials: E.T.

As a child I often fantasised about finding him and confronting him and thus avenging Mother. Pure melodrama, these little films I directed in my head – I hadn't grasped the enormity of what had happened. At ten years old we don't understand the finality of death (if we ever do). Later these thoughts went away.

Only recently have they returned.

When he was an old man, my father's brother-in-law – my godfather, owner and driver of the *VW Beetle* – once said it had been the drama of his life, that he had always carried it with him. Hundreds of what-ifs, mostly at night: *could I have turned the steering wheel harder, did I miss something, what if I'd reacted more quickly? If we'd set off earlier or later, just a minute earlier or later, it wouldn't have happened.* He, the innocent party, preoccupied with his guilt, while the guilty party was preoccupied with his reputation.

There were lots of lime-green *VW Beetles*. And the people sitting inside them knew nothing of our personal *Beetle* tragedy. It's a car people like looking at: a cheerful, colourful, brum-brumming creature. For many it was the first car they ever owned, the promise of freedom; for us it was death. The *Beetle* first went on sale in

the autumn of 1938 – it was the car Adolf Hitler wanted, and got, for his *Volk*. It was also the best-selling car in the world until 2002, when it was knocked off the top spot by the *VW Golf*.

How many people have died in a *VW Beetle* since 1938? Too overwhelming a question. But there must have been thousands and thousands.

In 1963 very few cars had headrests, despite the fact that an American called Benjamin Kratz had patented his headrest in 1921. If my godfather's car ('godfather' makes him sound so old – he was only twenty-three when I was born and twenty-four when the accident happened) had had headrests, then Father (whom I would surely have called *Papà*) would probably have survived. The crash broke his neck. This was another thing my godfather blamed himself for: if only the car had had headrests.

Karl Meier, a native of the Saarland who had learned his trade as a mechanic there and then moved to Switzerland to develop folding roofs for convertibles, returned to Germany in 1936 and got a job with *Opel* in Rüsselsheim, where he relieved the *Kadett* of its last piece of wood. Then he joined the *Gesellschaft zur Vorbereitung des deutschen Volkswagens*, led by Ferdinand Porsche. Meier's job, for which he was paid 430 Reichsmarks a month, was to design the car's interior fittings: eighteen patents are attributable to him. The *Beetle* became his *pièce de résistance*. After the war he left *VW*, set up a workshop in a wooden shed, and invented colourful seat covers for cars – his idea was taken up by *VW*. In 1952 he set up the company *Kamei* (Karl Meier), and then he came up with probably his most groundbreaking idea aside from the *bodyform seat*: the detachable *Schlummerrolle*, which could be used as a pillow or an armrest. It met with plenty of criticism: people said it might cause drivers to fall asleep at the wheel. But Meier argued that 'the driver needs to be comfortable, because the more relaxed he is the better he can concentrate on driving. The *Schlummerrolle* also protects the neck in the event of an accident.' This *Schlummerrolle* evolved into the world's first safety headrest, tested in September 1969 by the Technical University of Berlin: 'The strain on the head and spine is greatly reduced, and the risk of whiplash is mitigated.'

Whenever I see vintage cars without headrests I feel horrified, imagining the worst, picturing the crash, the skull flung backwards and forwards, the cracking sound, and I want to knock on the windscreen and warn the people in the car but I never do.

The first film I ever saw at the cinema was *Bambi*. Aunt Anni took me to the children's cinema on Zurich's Bellevueplatz, from which the cinema took its name: *Kino Bellevue*. It's a café now, famous for its kitsch décor. The cinema opened in 1921: almost every child in Zurich must have seen their first film on the big screen there. When you came out of the cinema you could see the *Riviera*, a flight of steps beside the Limmat which became famous in the 1980s. We, the left-wing, joint-smoking youth, would sit around on those steps for hours: we later learned that cameras had been installed overlooking them. The state was spying on its children. We were caught up in the 'Secret Files Scandal', which lasted for decades and ended in 1990. Over the course of that time, 900,000 memos were amassed by the security services. One particularly memorable excerpt from Max Frisch's file read: 'On 20.8.48, travelled to Poland to attend the Intellectuals' World Congress in the Cause of Peace'.

I remember *Bambi* as an occasion on which I cried a lot but was still happy in the end. I cried when the little deer's mother was shot, I cried because he was now a half-orphan (like me), I cried because Bambi had so many friends who cared about him – Thumper the rabbit, Flower the skunk, and Friend Owl. That day at the cinema I began to despise hunters, and my opinion of them did not change when, decades later, I read *The Hunter's Passion* by the great psychoanalyst Paul Parin – himself a hunter – in which he writes about ritualised violence, greed and lust. He claims hunting is an innate human drive, which I find astonishing when only 0.3 percent of the population hunt.

At the same cinema I also saw *Herbie, the Love Bug*, which came to German-language cinemas in 1969. Herbie is a white *VW Beetle* with a life of his own: he makes decisions, he drives on water. He is a sympathetic character, a machine with a soul. In the film he becomes a racing car, and has the number 53 mounted on his bonnet. A veritable *Herbie* cult sprang up, and there were *VW Beetles* everywhere – on billboards, in newspapers, in toy shops. 1953 was the year my parents met, the number 53 their destiny. I picture Mother being followed around everywhere by Herbie, Herbie who avoids crashes so merrily, who does multiple flips, who goes haring across roads. He's a hoodlum with a heart, that car – nothing can kill him.

Later, the preparations for my confirmation. The priest from the neighbouring town (ours only had a Protestant church, and I was Catholic) spends several weeks with us making a short film. Camaraderie, a shared experience. We're fourteen years old. I play

the main part. I don't remember much about the film, but I've never forgotten the central scene, the plot point. I'm sitting at the wheel of the priest's *VW Beetle* (!), on his lap (!), with his arms either side of my waist; he steers the car as unobtrusively as possible while I pretend to drive it. I remember a feeling of claustrophobia, his breath on my neck, but also the joyous excitement of being at the wheel. I remember having ketchup on my face, too. We were supposed to be simulating an accident. To this day I have no idea *why in God's name* that priest decided to cast me, of all people, as the survivor of a car accident. Knowing my mother would watch the film. Everyone knew our story – Mother was the most attractive young widow for miles around. Was the priest a sadist? Thoughtless? Or a man with a screwed-up approach to therapy?

AT THE COFFEE SHOP I (a conversation about murder):

Honestly! That's unbelievable about the priest, says Isadora, outraged.

Clearly a sadist, says Henri.

Isadora is a psychiatrist. Not a psychologist – an important distinction, as she is at pains to emphasise. She wears colourful clothes, red lipstick, multiple rings in different combinations every day; her flat looks like student digs, a jumble of clothes and shoes all over the wooden floor. She talks fast and at length: a lively mind, an old-school German intellectual. She's the living embodiment of what the satirist Fanny Müller had her character Frau K say in a wonderful piece of dialogue: 'Frau M.: "I take it you've seen everything in your life?" Frau K.: "Twice."' Isadora has seen everything at least twice – *nothing that is human is alien to her*.

Henri went to art school and is now an interior designer and author, an elegant gay man with a striking face that's like a carving – the kind of face you want to gaze at. He and Isadora are both over seventy. They meet in a café after the market on Saturdays, and sometimes I join them.

A misogynist, perhaps, says Isadora, an early incarnation of the incel, like that Pommerenke back in the day.

Pommerenke? I ask.

A rapist and serial killer who preyed on women. Infamous. He spent decades in prison, explains Henri.

Came from the GDR, fled to West Berlin, and then lived in Zurich and Schaffhausen, says Isadora.

And then in our neck of the woods.

Where was that? I ask.

The Black Forest – that's where he started his killing spree.

We're both from around there, it wasn't far from where we lived. People used to talk about him all the time. He terrorised the whole area, says Henri.

He went to see an epic film at the cinema in Karlsruhe – in 'fifty-nine, it must have been, says Isadora.

*The Ten Commandments.*

That's it! *The Ten Commandments*. There was a scene where some scantily clad women were dancing around the Golden Calf, and he had a kind of epiphany and decided women were the root of all evil in the world and had to be destroyed. That he had to destroy them.

He killed the first woman that same night.

He went out of the cinema and murdered a woman? I ask.

Raped her, slit her throat. Evil.

He was on a mission.

Good grief! That's horrific!

Sweetheart, do you have any idea how people used to talk about women in the Sixties? At my father's painting and decorating company there was a man who constantly referred to women as bitches. Stood there painting pipes week after week and *bitches* were to blame for everything, says Henri.

Incels are everywhere, Isadora nods.

Have you ever had a murderer as a patient? I ask.

Not that I know of. But *would* you know?

We all order another tea.

I'm wearing Mother's ring. She got it from her parents-in-law when I was born, a diamond on a white gold band which everyone always told me was incredibly expensive, as valuable as a *Maserati* (!), a kind of emergency fund for times of crisis. Even better than gold. (As a kid I would daydream about it: if everything goes wrong, Mummy will sell the ring and we'll both start a new life in America). This was why she wore it all the time, day and night, year after year. *The safest place for a ring is on your finger*, she said.

The ring and I are taking the train to Antwerp, our first trip together. Antwerp, with its diamond district, seems a fitting destination. I've found it hard taking the ring from Mother and wearing it myself. I won't wear it when I visit her – she might recognise it and think I'm a stranger who's stolen it from her.

Last month she mislaid it, and we had to search high and low before we found it in a crumpled pill packet. That was the moment I decided not to give it back to her. She doesn't remember she owns a ring, a diamond, worth as much as a car. She doesn't remember her southern Italian in-laws, either, nor the husband

she's mourned for the best part of a lifetime.

On two occasions the diamond got lost: it fell out of its claw setting, which gaped on Mother's finger like ugly steel scaffolding. I was still a child then. The first time, we found it among the straw in the rabbit hutch; the second time it had fallen into a wooden sculpture by a modern artist at the museum my mother ran. Both times there was great uproar.

Nothing in our life embodies the aura of the familial the way this ring does. And now I'm the one wearing it. Mother had prettier hands than me: on her it looked elegant and right, on me it looks slightly out of place. I feel guilty on three counts: firstly because it's Mother's ring (but am I meant to lock it in a safe till she's dead?), secondly because I can guess at the conditions under which the diamond was mined in 1950s South Africa, and thirdly because I sometimes think of all the good you could do with the proceeds if you did sell it. But I can't get my head around the thought of this stone on a stranger's hand. I'd rather throw it in the sea than cash it in, I think. A symbol of my parents' love. Of which I am the fruit. The goldsmith to whom I took it to be checked and cleaned told me: *You'll get used to it. The two of you will grow together.*

In Antwerp I want to buy a little ring to wear in front of the diamond, *a stopper*, the goldsmith called it, so I don't keep worrying about it falling off. The Diamond Quarter is behind the train station, shop after shop, everything sparkling and glittering. Valuations are offered, jewellery bought and sold, easy money beckons. Some shops look slightly dodgy, others honest and above board. Twice I emerge empty-handed. The third shop is the right one – the owner agreeable, customers coming and going, *goe-dendag, goedendag, shalom, shalom*. The owner takes a closer look at the diamond and puts it at nearly 2 carat, *K* colour, *VS* clarity. Her husband comes in, says the stone is *jack*. What does that mean, I ask. Much more valuable than *K*, she says, 50,000 at least. He puts the ring on a machine to weigh it. But he needn't have bothered, the owner was right: 1.9 carat, *VS*, but not *jack*, just *K*, and worth about 9000. I'm relieved – it's only a small used car I'm wearing. And straight away it feels lighter.

\* \* \*

*I hope he hasn't killed anyone.*

Another sentence with peculiar resonance. It was spoken by a man visiting the old people's home – he was sitting at a big table with several of the residents and he answered my hastily posed,

obligatory question following my conversation with Victoria: *Oh yes, I know him, my pal worked as an apprentice under him. Me and my pal were in a band and Traxler found us a room to practise in.* The man told me his pal's name, and when he saw my pleased reaction he clearly started to wonder if he'd made a mistake, if he'd given too much away to this stranger – about *the apprentice*, about Traxler. And then: *I hope he hasn't killed anyone.*

I sit here on this blue-painted wooden bench by the side of the road, the Kerenzerberg behind me, in a strip of car park which must have been created decades ago for this very purpose, so that people could look out over this gorgeous landscape. Father and Uncle might even have stopped here for a cigarette in the summer of 'sixty-three. You can see everything – the broad Linthebene valley with the tamed river flowing through it, Schänis in the background, Mollis down there on the left, still in shadow, and behind it the valley stretching away towards Glarus; you can even see the beginning of the Klöntal, green meadows and fields, and great chunks of mountain everywhere, as if they've fallen from outer space into the valley. It all lies at my feet. It's early in the morning, the light hazy like delicately billowing white smoke, the air fragrant: this is beauty in its purest form. And another pleasing thing: when you look northwards the sky gets bigger, the mountains smaller, the land flatter – somewhere far beyond lies Zurich, and beyond that lies Germany, my other life, the place that once set me free: Berlin.

Astonishingly, *the apprentice* does not seem surprised when I call; on the contrary, he says: I always wondered how the victim's family were doing. This is a very interesting conversation for me.

Straight out of the gate – as if to protect himself from my toxic thoughts – he explains: *You gotta know, Traxler was one of the good guys.* He speaks in dialect. And then he tells me what he remembers: firstly, that Traxler never talked about the accident, although everyone in the area knew about it. That it happened on a Monday morning (strange that I never looked into which day of the week it was), early in the morning (I didn't know that either, I never spoke to Mother about it), because Traxler lived in St. Gallen and drove to Glarus every Monday to the foundry where he worked as a dispatcher, and on Friday evenings he drove back to St. Gallen, an hour and a half's drive along the country roads, Näfels, Schänis, Kaltbrunn, Wattwil etc. That he initially lived in a hotel and later lodged with a family in Netstal and only moved into his own flat just before he retired. So, he was driving to work that Monday morning and he overtook a horse and cart and saw a car coming towards him. He tried to brake but the brakes failed, because his car had

just been in the garage and they'd made a mistake somewhere with the repairs. And there was a head-on collision. I find this quite surprising, the bit about the mechanics bungling the repair: Traxler must have picked the car up before the weekend, so surely he must have realised then that the brakes weren't working, and also he'd already driven sixty kilometres by the time he got to the site of the crash. But I don't say any of this – I just ask what car he had afterwards, the repaired Chevrolet or another nice American car? He didn't have a car at all, says *the apprentice*. Apparently Traxler stopped driving immediately after the accident (and I notice that this makes a positive impression on me – so he wasn't just some insensitive lout), and that was actually what made him stand out in this rural area where every man owned a car: people were surprised, and they told each other the story. He commuted to St. Gallen by train for decades because he couldn't bear the stretch of road where the accident had happened (this reminds me of what Isadora said: so Traxler didn't do penance, didn't flagellate himself by passing by the scene of the crash week after week, like some kind of torture). Not until he was much older, when he'd settled in the Glarus region and given up his flat in St. Gallen, did he take driving lessons again – after almost forty years! – and passed his driving test and got a car, which was surprising really, says *the apprentice*, since he didn't even need one round here. Why would someone put themselves through all that stress, I wonder, why lead a kind of double life shuttling between two cantons for decades? Why didn't he just get a job as a logistics manager in St. Gallen if he preferred living in the city? Or was the distance precisely what he needed? Did he have something to hide from the residents of St. Gallen? Or the residents of Glarus? Was he in trouble with the authorities? Administrative issues, or debt, or was he mixed up in something seedy? Or –

Was Traxler gay, by any chance? I ask.

That's a funny thing to ask! cries *the apprentice*.

But yes, he says, there were certainly rumours. By all accounts Traxler had *lots of male friends*, people whispered about whether this man or that man was his type, they gossiped in the villages, at the factory. But! Traxler had been about forty when *the apprentice* had been his apprentice (a young lad of sixteen, seventeen, and not bad-looking either), and he could assure me Traxler had never made any advances to him. He'd never done anything inappropriate.

That's good, I say.

If I had to describe Traxler in a word, *the apprentice* continues, I'd say he was an *affable* man. I'll give you an example to show you what I mean. *The apprentice* and his friends used to make dance

music, and they needed a set of speakers for their gigs. But they couldn't afford one. Traxler asked: *How much d'you need?* 800 francs, *the apprentice* replied, and Traxler went to his locker, took out 800 francs in cash, put it down on the table and said: *If you've ever got the money you can pay me back.* After that they had several gigs and they always set aside part of their fee, and after a few months they were able to give Traxler his 800 francs back. He was amazed and said he'd *given away lots of money*, but this was the first time anyone had ever paid him back.

He was comfortably off, then? I ask.

Well... says *the apprentice*. Traxler did have to pay money out every month, because of the accident. For many years.

To who? I ask. Not to us, that was for sure! At least... not that I knew of (and here I think briefly of Mum, the great secret-keeper)...

*The apprentice* and I are baffled.

The man who was the boss of the foundry at the time supported Traxler financially, he says. That was why Traxler was so loyal not only to the boss but to the firm, and why he identified so strongly with the company and worked there till he retired. Superficially you'd say he had a successful life, a secure job etc., but there was always something lurking underneath - the accident, the dead man, it gave him a mysterious aura, a darkness, because he never talked about it. And that wasn't like him at all: he was a talkative and open sort, an affable man.

At the end of the phone call I ask about the dog. My two are here with me: the good-natured black one is sitting on the bench beside me, squinting in the morning sun, and the little ginger one is hunting for beetles, digging for mice and rolling around in the grass.

It was a German shepherd, says *the apprentice*. Traxler sometimes got someone to look after it over the weekend, and when he got back from St. Gallen on a Monday morning the dog would be in the office by seven a.m. waiting for him.

The dog came into the office?

Yes, he came into the office.

I look out at the view, at the roads and the tiny cars driving along them, south to north, north to south - somewhere beyond them is the right-hand bend (a left-hand bend from this angle). The sun has burned off the mist now, and I want to smoke a cigarette, which I haven't done in years. A gay dog-lover - that's all I need.