

Ulrike Sterblich

DRIFTER*Drifter*

- Shortlisted for the German Book Prize 2023!
- Ulrike Sterblich's incredible narrative power takes readers into a world that is closely intertwined with reality.
- English sample translation available.



July 2023 · 288 pages

"Two friends and a mysterious woman in a golden dress, who has the extraordinary ability to mess things up in a way that creates something new." *rbb Kulturradio*

Wenzel and Killer have been friends for ages and are well-established in their lives. Killer works as a PR chief for a large company, while Wenzel manages social media channels for a TV network. However, everything changes when Vica enters their lives: a woman in a golden dress, often accompanied by two loyal adjutants and a huge shaggy dog. With each encounter, new questions arise: How does she know so much about Wenzel and Killer? Why does she possess a copy of the new book by Drifter, an enigmatic author, even before its release? And where did her dog learn to dance? As Vica takes over the apartment building of their childhood, the world of these two friends begins to shake.

With virtuoso storytelling, and even a touch of fantasy, Ulrike Sterblich narrates the tale of two friends whose reality is increasingly shifting.

"It's about enchanting the world in the best sense. An extremely funny, witty, surprising book and a beautiful story." RBB Kulturradio

Ulrike Sterblich, political scientist and author from Berlin (West), continues to live in her hometown where she also became known as hostess of the talk and literary event "Berlin Bunny Lectures". In 2012, her successful memoir *Die halbe Stadt, die es nicht mehr gibt* was published. In 2021, Ulrike Sterblich published her highly acclaimed debut, *The German Girl*.

Rowohlt Verlag

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DRIFTER

English sample translation by Ruth Martin

**“Everybody knows that our cities
Were built to be destroyed
You get annoyed, you buy a flat
You hide behind the mat
But I know she was born
To do everything wrong with all of that”**

Caetano Veloso, «Maria Bethânia»

Lightning

The first time I saw her was on the S-Bahn. She was sitting opposite us on that cursed day when Killer and I were going to the races.

It had been one of his hare-brained ideas – beer-brained in this case, since we were drinking to his promotion. “Have you ever been to the races?” he asked, and I said, “Don’t think so.” I’d seen so many films with horse-racing scenes in them that now I couldn’t be a hundred per cent sure where all those images came from; one of them might have been a memory of something I’d actually done.

Killer had just been promoted to PR boss at this grocery giant he worked for. “Then I’ll be PR Director instead of the PR Director!” he announced, and in fact it was a meteoric career trajectory, a real Killer success story. Only to be expected, of course. Before that, Killer had been at a drinks manufacturer, where he’d also risen pretty swiftly through the company, but not quite swiftly enough for his liking, and anyway he thought his boss there was incompetent and had had this face-off with him. He’d had no trouble moving on after that, and his new employer had spotted the Killer potential straight away.

In a spirit of celebratory generosity, Killer had bought a group day ticket for the two of us from the machine, when two singles would have done the job, that’s how it started (“Give me your finest ticket,” he’d said to the machine).

And then, on the S-Bahn, I saw her. Hard to say what I noticed first: the ridiculous, massive shaggy dog with the glittering collar sitting at her feet, her long, gold dress, or the book she was idly leafing through rather than actually reading. But what clinched it was probably the whole ensemble; without the eye-catching dress and dog, I might not even have spotted the book. But the book was the real spectacle. It was one I didn’t know, by Drifter; the title was *Electrotoad*. I peered closely at it, staring, narrowing my eyes. There was no doubt – the front cover said “K:B Drifter” and so did the back. The cover art wasn’t a toad, but an electrical circuit made up of small components, like the inside of a conventional hi-fi amp, painted in a photorealist style. A very nice cover. *Electrotoad*. It didn’t sound like Drifter’s other titles, of which there were now three: *I’m going out tonight, though I haven’t got a stitch to wear*, *At last the cashier is showing his true face*, and *The shitstorm against Joan of Arc*. I knew these. The book really confused me. How could a new Drifter have come out without me and my whole Drifter peer group hearing anything about it?

My eyes wandered to the dog, which I found strangely affecting. I had no idea what sort it was. When it came to dogs, I could only identify the famous breeds (dachshund, poodle, German Shepherd) and this one here didn't belong in any category I knew. It was the size of a Great Dane (okay, I could recognise them, too), but completely different, a friendly, shaggy creature, more llama than dog, and the dog itself seemed uncomfortable with its size, like it wanted to make itself smaller, with a slightly sheepish look in its eyes that said, "I can't help this, you know." Its long, clumsy paws were particularly striking, more like oversized rabbit legs than dog's feet.

A few days later I found it difficult to remember if she was in her mid-twenties or late forties or somewhere in between. She had this youthful ageless quality that mad people often have. Which is not to say that Vica was mad. Not in the conventional sense, at least. She was tall and athletic, with a dark page-boy haircut and a green squint. Green eyes and a gold dress. Over the gold dress, she was wearing a black jacket.

Eventually she looked up. Looked straight at me, at least with her right eye; you never quite knew with the left one, it had a life of its own. I would say her expression was friendly and interested, the way you'd look at a cute animal. I wanted to say something, or rather ask – about the book, obviously – but Killer was already saying, "Come on, we've got to get off here," and pulling me out of my seat. Her eyes followed this little scene, and before we stepped through the doors, she drew something in the air with her finger, from bottom to top.

I'm certain it was a flash of lightning.

With the light shimmering and the temperature rising, we strolled along a wide avenue towards the racecourse. Ahead of us, three girls wearing bright colours and hats were larking about, and I felt annoyed with myself for not having taken a photo of the book. The girls kept stopping to laugh at their hats, swap hats, take photos of themselves in the hats, and the distance between them and us gradually shrank until we caught up with them. Killer dug me in the ribs and said, "I like the white-blond one, what about you?"

"I find all six annoying."

"Ah, Wenzel, come on."

"Are they going to let me onto the racecourse without a hat?" Killer called over to them.

The girls looked at each other, made faces, and one giggled and called back, "No!"

"Only if you're racing," the white-blond one said.

"Racing?" asked Killer. "As a horse?"

"Yes, exactly. As a horse."

“Well that’s a fun idea.” He elbowed me in the ribs again. “One for you, maybe, Wenzl?”

I had no desire to be brought into this.

“Doesn’t look like your friend wants to be a horse,” another one cackled, and Killer, the old windbag, put an arm around my shoulders and said, “He’s just going through a little bit of heartbreak. You need to help me distract him!”

The truth is that I was completely immersed in this little bit of heartbreak, and no part of me was still visible above the surface of the self-pity swamp in which I was desperately flailing around. I woke up in the morning and my first thought was: pissing hell. I’d forgotten all about it in my sleep, it was so nice, another reality had taken over my consciousness, and perfidiously I was even having really good dreams at that time. In these dreams I felt I was roaming through a world full of possibilities. And then in the morning, after just a few moments of transition, I slid swiftly out of that merciful amnesia, straight back into the swamp. (“In good times, waking up in the morning is the best part of the day. In bad, it’s the worst,” as Drifter writes in *I’m going out tonight*)

To keep us all in good spirits, Killer immediately got us two bottles of prosecco and put some money on a horse, “to win” of course. He lost the money. After the first glass of prosecco I was finding our companions even more grating than I had before, but after the second or third it was okay. The sun pumped out light and heat quite generously, and the sky iridesced in a deep blue, a blue you seldom see at our latitude, a Greek, Aegean blue. Beneath it the horses ran doggedly in a circle, the slender little men on their backs frantically driving them forward, again and again. One race was much the same as another: the horses set off, some were faster than others, in the end one was fastest, the field opened up, sometimes one fell a long way behind. We bet on names we liked or specifically didn’t like: *Spandan Loreley*, *Tropicana* and *Doctor Mabuse*. One of our companions won seventy Euros on *Tarantino*, an overambitious grey who let rip like he personally had something to gain from it. Killer and I lost consistently, all the money we had on us, eighty Euros for me and more than two hundred for him, with the rest going on drinks, three bottles of prosecco and a few beers. Some scattered clouds appeared in the Grecian blue, party poopers, moving fast, spoiling for a fight.

“Look over there,” said the blonde one (in the meantime, Killer had remarked that as a cartoon character, she’d be a fish. Killer had a special talent for likening people to a cartoon character or an animal. In his opinion I was Daffy Duck, which aside from my slight lisp I couldn’t see myself, but everyone who heard it was surprised for a second and then started laughing: “That’s

right, I can see it too now, you're Daffy Duck!") *Over there*, in any case, a front of dark clouds had gathered, a monster of a storm it looked like, an almost sublime sight. Killer was delighted.

Then suddenly there was a commotion down on the course. Two horses had collided and fallen, and a sight screen was quickly erected, behind which the animals were presumably receiving medical attention. "Oh, no!" cried the blonde fish, and Killer placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "I'm sure they'll get them fit again."

"Not at all," I said. "Racehorses who break bones get put to sleep."

All four of them gave me a look of shock, as if *I* could do anything about that.

"Don't shoot the messenger," I said.

"Maybe they didn't break any bones," said the blonde one, and Killer backed her up, which annoyed me; I mean, he did earn his considerable salary from people who slaughtered hordes of animals. So I maliciously turned the screw even further by saying, "And then I'm sure they get turned into sausage-meat in your sausage factory." I'm afraid that's what alcohol does to me, sometimes.

"Rubbish, Wenzel, we don't make horsemeat sausage."

"It would be a good thing, though, because at least you wouldn't have to fatten horses up specially in narrow stalls and then slaughter them; they'd be being put to sleep anyway, like I said, and you could make some meaningful use of the meat and let two pigs go free in their place."

"Well, I don't want to eat horsemeat sausage," said one of the girls, whose very upright posture reminded me of Gesine, though she wasn't Gesine, not at all, and I shot back, "Why not?"

"I like horses."

"But you don't like pigs?"

Killer groaned. "Wenzel, please."

"Nope, I don't like pigs."

While the action on the racecourse continued to stagnate, the storm grew more dynamic. Gradually, the spectator stands emptied out. I don't know if it was my talk of horsemeat sausage that made three of the hats head off as well, without Killer even managing to bag a phone number from the blonde fish. Still, Killer might be a loudmouth (often) and a show-off (sometimes) – but he wasn't quick to get angry or bear grudges. ("You shouldn't take the universe personally," Drifter writes, somewhere). And if he'd really put his mind to it, he would have got that number, he was the Killer after all. The Killman.

“Sorry,” I bleated, feeling quite drunk, when they’d gone. Most other people had gone, too, but we were still sitting there, each with half a bottle of beer left and our betting slips. “You again,” was all Killer said, and then we watched how things were progressing, which seemed to us to be the most interesting part of the spectacle so far – the breakup of the spectacle. Superseded by a new spectacle. The stands were glowing with an ominous ochre light as we finally traipsed down the central stairs, passing rows of deserted seats, while behind us there was a rumbling sound and the shadows of racing clouds haunted the course, looking like they had always been the real threat that the horses were running from as fast as they could. (“People don’t place enough value on clouds,” writes Drifter. “They are wandering sunshades; above them, blazing light.”) No rain was falling yet, but it was already in the air.

When we got to the bottom, Killer raised his beer bottle in a toast to the storm, leaped over the railings and galloped friskily along the track, the idiot.

Back to that heartbreak business for a moment. Gesine and I had started at the broadcaster at around the same time; I was working there alongside a degree that was slowly meandering towards its conclusion, and she had graduated with top marks from the journalism school. I noticed her at once, self-confident and stylish as she was. I also recognised the debutant in her, which unfortunately kept rousing a trauma in me. When I was young, I used to go on the kids’ trips to the North Sea coast organised by the church. The younger age groups were just made up of kids from less well-off families whose parents both had to work and were glad that their children were getting inexpensive care over the holidays and going somewhere nice. Among the older ones, however, there were always some of the other sort who lived in the church’s catchment area, the children of lawyers and pharmacists and scientists, who no longer wanted to go on holiday with their parents. Leila was one of these. We were both fifteen and fell in love over those three weeks, in a very tender teenage way, undisturbed by anyone. Leila didn’t wear make-up, she had brought books to read, and everything she said sounded clear and convincing. She knew a lot about history and marine biology, but also listened to cool music. I don’t know what she saw in me, but I did make her laugh. In the big cops-and-robbers game I was disappointed at first that she ended up on the cops’ team and I was in the robbers, but then she chased me, ran after me, I ran away for form’s sake, she kept up, she was fast, and I didn’t have to run deliberately slowly so that she could keep up. Eventually I stumbled theatrically down a dune, rolled over the sand, and Leila rolled

after me. At the foot of the dune we lay in the sun, she took hold of my arm and said: “Caught you.”

That was probably one of the top five happiest moments of my life. If not the top three. Or number one. Unfortunately, the memory of it is somewhat spoiled because that happiness only functioned where the sand and the dunes shielded us from what we otherwise were, where we came from.

After we got back, to our real lives, we went to the cinema together once, wandered around the streets afterwards and got iced tea from the corner shop, and I had the sense my life was just beginning. The next thing that happened was that I called her and she said she was meeting some friends in the park and I should come along. I sat there and realised I didn’t belong. Not just because I didn’t know her friends, but in a fundamental way, a really shitty way.

There was no split. We saw each other once more, at her place, staircase with red sisal runners, high stucco ceilings, a living room lined with bookshelves right up to the ceiling, we sat on the floor doing crosswords, and she was nice, but somehow inhibited. Then we spoke on the phone, she was a bit offhand, there were fewer text messages, and then she barely replied to my texts, or only very briefly. Eventually my own pride made me break off contact, or stop trying to maintain it.

I’d probably learned some things since then. I was the first in my family to go to university, and even studied something magnificently useless. Okay, I dropped out, but I still became quite well-read, knew enough about art, film and music, could use good grammar to express myself and now inhabited an almost elegant apartment myself, with a few bookshelves in it. And yet. And yet there was still the feeling of an invisible wall that existed between us working class kids and the ones who had grown up with art, culture and academic study in those spacious apartments with the bookshelves. Subtle codes, a way of being in the world that took many forms but was impossible to imitate. I had a finely-tuned antenna for it.

I succeeded in getting Gesine to notice me. A smile here, a clever or witty remark there. I can muster a bit of charm when I make the effort. At some point I caught a look from her that seemed promising, and at the first Christmas party, after a vodka and lemon, I approached her. That was how it started.

It didn’t turn into a successful relationship; it didn’t turn into a “relationship” at all, and I probably should have foreseen it. It was a precipitous enterprise, which slithered unchecked from sympathy and attraction straight into pointless conversations, tears, avoiding each other, pining,

and drunken texts. I never gave up hope. Professionally, Gesine was solidly on the up during this period. She was competent, analytical and had ideas, and because on top of that she was articulate and attractive, she was in front of the camera before you could say knife, interviewing politicians and presenting our public debates on TV. Meanwhile, she was also in discussions for the main news, but she had no desire to do that, it was too fixed for her tastes.

I, on the other hand, managed to manoeuvre myself into a place where you could earn a low salary, develop a creeping hatred of humanity, and otherwise not move around too much: the Community Team. Where the audience got to have its own say: the phone-in formats, the social media, the below-the-line comments on our website. Sometimes we also organised little events, a panel discussion or a behind-the-scenes tour with a Q&A at the end. Events at which someone always asked why “the media” didn’t portray things in exactly the way they would like.

Anyway, after a long period of radio silence and no chance meetings at work (which became increasingly unlikely once the Community Team was moved to a dark side-wing of the building), I got in touch with her again. An all-staff email with the subject, “Repairs to the left-hand lift” provided an opportunity for a message: *Did you break the lift?*

This text took me half an hour. She replied with a cry-laugh emoji. Two days later, she appeared unannounced in our dismal office and looked around with interest. Then she sat on my desk and said, “I’ve got tickets for a premiere.”

We saw the new film by an old director, which featured a lot of sex. Afterwards we went for a drink. I had tidied up my flat to a gold standard and changed the bed. I was sure she would come home with me, I’d felt it clearly, and that was what had always happened before. Eventually she would want me again after all.

But I was planning beyond that: Killer had sent me these photos of a fantastic little hotel by a fantastic, clear lake. I wanted to whisk her away there for the weekend. Stay in the game, up the ante, create shared experiences.

So we were sitting in the bar, the two of us, and everything was wonderful, everything was right there within reach, all the chemistry, all the magnetism. I showed her the pictures of the hotel. She was delighted. “Awesome,” she said. “That’s really beautiful.”

“Do you want to go?”

“Definitely!” She tapped me on the chin with a finger and said, “You know what I like.”

The sentence prickled. “Definitely.”

“Will you send me the address?”

You don't need it, I wanted to tell her, I'll make the booking for us. But then she added: "It's Donato's birthday soon, that can be his present from me." I didn't understand.

"Who?"

"Donato."

"Who's that?"

Now she was surprised. "I thought you knew."

Who the hell was Donato? Why did he have such a crap name?

I was such an idiot. Such a pitiful fool.

The following day I overheard two colleagues say the name "Donato" several times as they looked at their screens. "He's so good-looking!" one of them cried. I turned around and saw, on the website of a gossip magazine, a picture of a tanned man on skis.

In the afternoon I joined a chat in the office kitchen – they were talking about Donato. And then, on our own evening news: Donato.

So it was true, this was exactly how it was: I was the only person for miles around who hadn't heard of Donato. Main reason: I had no interest in winter sports. Zero. None at all. When winter sports were on TV, I was overcome with an overwhelming lack of interest, a great weariness. Almost a torpor.

When no one was looking I brought up the website my colleagues had been reading before, found him, and read: *Double happiness: Donato Cruzeiro Glauber is not only the winner of the major downhill ski competition on Kitzbühel's Hahnenkamm for a second time, he has also found love with his girlfriend, German journalist Gesine Tusche. Double congratulations!* Beside the text, that photo of the tanned man on skis again, and below it a picture of the same man in a smart outfit, arm in arm with Gesine.

Winner, Kitzbühel, Hahnenkamm, found love – I had no claim to stake here. Gesine was evidently in a relationship with a professional skier, a recent winner of something in Kitzbühel. And I was just Wenzel Zahn, below-the-line-comment minion and Daffy Duck.