

Ulrich Woelk, *The Summer of My Mother*.

Verlag C.H.Beck, 2019, 189 pp.



11-year old Tobias discovers that there are more interesting things going on this summer 1969 than the landing on the moon. The new neighbour girl makes him quite nervous, but even more disturbing is that his mother shows interest in the neighbour too: The wife of the neighbour, to be precise.

Former books by the author:

Freigang, sold to Rothschild und Bach, Holland

Rückspiel, sold to Actes Sud, France

Die Reaktion, Colección Popular, Mexico

Die letzte Vorstellung, sold to Muza, Poland

Einstein on the Lake, Sistem Yayicilik, Turkey and New Sprouts, Taiwan

Sternenklar, Bomnamu, Korea and Phoenix-Power, China

Berlin nori (one story in this collection), sold to Akashic-Books, US

Excerpt translated from the German by Lucy Jones

2. New Neighbours

The house to the left of ours was the oldest in the street. It was one of a kind, dating back to the 1930s, long before the current trend to build housing estates. It belonged to Mr. Fahlheim, an old man with wiry, grey hair whom we hardly ever saw. He didn't mix with the neighbours, and in return, the neighbours didn't bother with him. We would sometimes spot him weeding in the garden, but he never said hello and or tried to make eye contact. I found him creepy.

On a grey day in the autumn of '68, an ambulance stopped in front of his house, its blue lights flashing. It took a while for the paramedics to come out with a stretcher. The body of Mr. Fahlheim – it couldn't be anyone else – was covered in a white cloth. There were

rumours later that he'd been dead for a few days. There was never any final agreement on what had happened exactly, nor on who had found Mr. Fahlheim and called the ambulance. Nobody seemed to care. I even had the feeling that many people, my parents included, were relieved that Mr. Fahlheim was gone.

At some point, the furniture was removed. My parents assumed that the house would be sold. My mother eventually told me that she had seen three people enter: an elderly man, perhaps an estate agent, and a man and woman whom she thought might be a couple interested in buying. By the time my birthday came, that was all that had happened.

In his free time, my father took care of the garden. He tackled it like an engineer. He had taught me from an early age that plants and animals were nothing more than very complicated mechanisms, like manmade machines that needed regular maintenance and care.

At the back of our garden, there was an apple and a cherry tree. It was unusually warm in mid-March, and my father decided like every year to spray the trees with an insecticide. He used a yellow pump bottle for this, which was kept like all the garden tools at the far end of the garage. My father filled the bottle with a mixture of water and E605, strapped it onto his back like a rucksack and screwed the nozzle onto the spray pipe.

We went into the garden together. I liked watching him spray mist all over the trees to kill pests, most of whose enigmatic names I had even learned: aphids and mealybugs, winter moths, spider mites and plum maggots.

My father pointed the long, thin tube with the pistol grip at one end and the nozzle at the other at the apple tree and opened the valve. He was standing in the middle of a shimmering mist when a woman I had never seen before appeared next door in Mr. Fahlheim's garden.

She approached the fence and stopped across from us.

She watched my father for a while, the way you do if you are waiting for someone to notice you. But my father was too busy and concentrated to see her; then the woman spotted

me. A smile appeared on her face, and she waved. She was slightly taller than my mother and looked slightly younger. But I couldn't really tell how old she was. I only distinguished between children and adults from their appearance; and in my system, she was an adult. However, the way that she was dressed made her an exception in my scheme of things. She was wearing a pair of jeans and an airy, colourful blouse, around which she had slung a wide leather. She seemed to be one of those adults like the assistant at the jeans store, but those kinds of adults didn't live in our neighbourhood.

I waved back guardedly because I didn't know her. My father switched off the spray; he had finished the apple tree. The branches dripped and glistened in the sunlight, and he turned to the cherry tree. In doing so, he noticed the woman in the neighbouring garden. She seemed pleased that he had noticed her and waved to him.

"Hello!" she called. "May I introduce myself? My husband and I are the new neighbours."

My father went over to the garden fence.

"Pleased to meet you."

She reached over the fence. "Uschi Leinhard. I hope I'm not interrupting you."

He shook her hand. "Not at all. Walter Ahrens."

"We're moving in at the end of the month."

"That's good. The house has been empty for almost half a year."

"We've been looking for a while," she said, "and this is perfect for us. So quiet, but everything's within easy reach."

"The area is coming up."

"I like it. It's got a taste of the countryside." Then she waved at me again. "And you are?"

I went over to the fence and introduced myself.

"Tobias," she nodded. "That's a nice name."

“Everyone calls me Tobi.”

“Can I call you Tobi too?”

I nodded. I liked her; she seemed cheerful and interested. My father pulled his arms out of the straps of the spray bottle and set it on the ground.

“That looks very professional,” said our new neighbour.

“I waging war on the garden pests.”

“I haven’t got a clue about gardening. But now that we have a house, I’m going to get into it. Maybe you can even give me some tips.”

“You’re going to need insecticide spray like this. The principle is simple. To generate pressure, air is pumped into the bottle like into a bicycle tire. Of course, you could generate the pressure electrically, but for two fruit trees, it’s not worth buying an electric pump.”

“You really know your stuff,” she said. “Are there lots of pests here?”

“The worst are mites and lice. In the past, they caused entire harvests to fail, and famines. But nowadays, it just takes ten minutes of spraying, and they fall off the branches like snow. Trees are like machines. It’s a matter of the right tools – insecticide, in this case. I’m an engineer.”

“Fantastic,” she said. “Then you can do all the work around the house yourself.” She swept a loose strand of hair behind her ear. It was light-blonde, straight and shoulder-length, flicked out at the ends. In contrast to my mother’s hair, which was always set with hairspray, the neighbour’s hair swung freely back and forth when she moved her head. Her fringe covered her forehead down to her eyebrows.

“I never find the time,” said my father, qualifying. “But basically, I have a grasp of technical things.”

She narrowed her eyes mischievously.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have told me that. I’ll probably be coming to you and asking you questions the whole time. Our house is very old.”

“Feel free.”

“We’re going to renovate a few rooms before we move in. On Monday, the painters start with the walls. And a plumber is renovating the bathroom.”

She paused briefly. “By the way, I do have a favour I’d like to ask, but it’s embarrassing to spring it on you like this after ten minutes. The problem is that my husband isn’t here, and he won’t be back from a business trip for a few days.”

“I’d be glad to help,” my father said. “What is it?”

“I’ve bought a few crates of beer to keep the workmen happy, and they need carrying up to the house. The shopkeeper was kind enough to put them in my boot and back seat of my car. It’s the Volvo in the driveway.”

“I’ll be right over,” said my father.

She beamed at him gratefully. “The driveway’s open.”

I was impressed by my father’s willingness to help this woman he’d just met, but it also made me pensive. I wanted to be like my father, but after what I had just witnessed, I found it difficult to imagine. Girls did not feature in the boys’ world I lived in, or if they did, they were mostly a source of annoyance. Sometimes I thought that we didn’t know anything about girls, but I kept that to myself. I could still remember a time when I liked playing with girls. But at some point – I didn’t know why – I had just stopped. There were even some boys’ things I didn’t like, for example, fighting or contests to see who could pee the furthest. As I had once heard my parents say, I was a quiet, thoughtful child. I didn’t know if that was a good thing either. When I was with my friends, I tried to be like them.

I went into the house. My mother was standing at the kitchen window from where she could see the Volvo. My father was just heaving one of the beer crates out of the boot. I told my mother what had happened.

She nodded and after a few seconds, said: “It’s better if the house isn’t empty.” She continued to wash the dishes from the lunch. “You can take a tea towel and dry up.”

She rarely asked me to do things. Suddenly it made me happy, and I took a towel off the hook. I felt like my father because I was helping her.

At the weekends I was allowed to stay up later than usual. That night, there was no special programme on space travel: Apollo 9 had landed in the Pacific after completing all its tests on Thursday. The next flight, which would be Apollo 10, was scheduled for May.

I went to my room. On the table where I did my homework lay a model of a Saturn V rocket, 1:150 in scale, which I'd got for Christmas. It was seventy centimetres high. I had put it together from a kit during the Christmas holidays. The most difficult part had been fastening the conical engines, which were only connected to the fuselage by thin wires. My father had helped me with that part.

The five jets were arranged like the five dots on a dice, and each one, my father had said, was larger than my room in real life. This made a huge impression on me. When I was lying in bed, I used to think about it. My room would fit into one jet of a Saturn V rocket! It could have flown up with it into space!

There was a transistor radio next to my bed. It was smaller than a book and had a telescopic aerial. On short and long wave, there were programmes broadcast in languages I didn't know; or in German, but from other countries or cities, like Moscow, London or Peking. You set the frequency with the grooved dial, and then the red bar would move in a narrow window along the ether scale.

When I was lying in bed and supposed to fall sleep, I often held the radio to my ear under the covers. The casing was made of light-brown plastic with a perforated area for the speaker. I liked listening to the distant voices against the rising and falling static of the ether.

On the evening of the day my father met Mrs. Leinhard, I tuned into a German-language programme that was being broadcast from London. A space expert was asking if the Apollo 10 flight in May could be expected to land on the moon. Oh, I had to listen to that – a

moon landing, maybe as early as May! Technically speaking, I learned, a landing on the next space flight would be possible. NASA had now tested all the components and modules of the Apollo programme. While the different aspects of a preferred landing were discussed, the volume on my radio got quieter and quieter. The batteries were dying – now of all times when this incredibly exciting question was being discussed!

I knew we had a supply of batteries in the kitchen drawer. However, my parents didn't like it when I got up again after going to bed. But I assumed that they were watching TV and that I should be able to sneak into the kitchen unnoticed.

As quietly as possible, I opened my bedroom door and immediately realised that I was wrong. My parents were not sitting in front of the TV; I could hear them having a conversation in their bedroom. The door was ajar, and every word was loud and clear. At that particular moment, my mother was speaking.

“Why can't you just respect what I say?”

“I *do* respect it.”

“No. You're harassing me.”

“Can't I say what I want?”

“You're putting me under pressure.”

“But I want it.”

“And I don't want it so often,” my mother said.

“You don't want it at all,” my father said.

“How would you know?” she replied.

“Whenever I'm in the mood, you're not,” he said. “There's always something wrong: you're too tired, you had a busy day, you have your period, there's pain down there, it's not romantic enough, I'm too demanding... Jeez, Eva, what am I supposed to do? Tell me. Should I fall to my knees and beg you? Is that what you want?”

“I told you. I want you to respect me and my wishes.”

“But I do.”

“Then what are we talking about here?”

“I show consideration. I ask how you are.”

“And I tell you.”

“Other men don’t go into long debates in the bedroom. They think it’s their right.”

“And that’s what you think too?”

“Many women like it that way.”

“Oh, please! That’s what you men want to believe!”

“I’m not saying that’s the way I want it. I want *you* to want it too. How long am I supposed to wait?”

After a short pause, my mother said: “Do you think it’d be easier with the new neighbour?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Eva?”

“It was just a question.”

“But a pointless one. I helped her out, so what.”

She said nothing for a while. “Do you think that with every woman? ‘If only I had her. Then I would get what’s mine.’”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But that’s what you think.”

“Why do we even bother talking?” he said and added after a short break: “It’s a miracle that we have *one* child.”

My mother lowered her voice. Although she was assuming I was asleep, perhaps she was afraid that in my dreams – or nightmares – I would sense that they were talking about me.

“Leave Tobi out of this!”

“We could have had more children! Two, three or four – like other couples!”

“I won’t be blackmailed.”

“I don’t want to blackmail you! I want you want it to!”

“I don’t work at the touch of a button!”

“No,” he said. “You don’t work at all.”

And then they were silent. I held my breath, but soon I needed to breathe again. Why weren’t they talking any more? I had waited too long to close my bedroom door. Now I was trapped: they would hear it.

I wondered if their pent-up anger would turn against me if they knew I’d been eavesdropping. And then what would happen? I knew that other fathers hit their children. My father had never hit me before. Maybe he would do it now for the first time. He would do what other men did.

I pulled the door to as far as possible without springing the latch. It remained open a crack. Then I snuck back into bed and lay down. I looked out of the window. The moon was out there somewhere. I wished my room were inside the jet of a Saturn V rocket. The next morning, my door was closed. Maybe my mother had come into the room again, but by then, I had already fallen asleep – I, her only child.