

The Gypsy and the Flatworm

(Things become okay)

Howard Firkin

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Apparently they wasted the first half of their evening together discussing the chain of coincidence that led to their meeting in Wuppertal, a city with which neither of them had had any previous connection. According to Uwe they were both equally guilty of returning to this fruitless theme whenever the conversation flagged. He did try to explain to me the precise nature of their former relationship – he kept insisting on its being special – but I couldn't quite make out what he meant. They were nineteen when they met, I think, and it lasted three or four years. He wanted me to understand that it wasn't the usual nineteen year olds' relationship:

“It was special... We had a sort of understanding...Do you know what I mean?”

I didn't really, but I was prepared to believe him; it's always so much easier than an explanation in German.

Their affair had ended quite some time ago – six years, I think he said – and although he had tried to maintain some sort of contact, Franke had been completely against the idea and had not replied to any letters and wouldn't speak to him on the phone. So for the last four or five years they had lived entirely separate lives; for some reason, which he did explain but which I didn't follow, they had almost no mutual friends who might have kept him posted about her doings and whereabouts. Having no friends in common was one of the special features of their relationship, I gathered. Anyway, none of this was in Wuppertal, of course. They lived further north: Essen or Dortmund, perhaps. Doesn't matter. Franke got a job which took her to Bayern, partly to escape Uwe, it seems, and Uwe stayed in the north and got a job which he lost before getting another one which he keeps and which keeps him and his wife and first child and which had him transferred one day to Wuppertal. A promotion, of course: Why else would anyone come here? I didn't ask what had occasioned the break-up in the first place – there can't be many thirty year olds who are still shackled to their loves of ten years before – but from the way he spoke about it, I'd guess that Franke had been the one to decide to end things.

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You would like to know how this remarkable reunion took place? Well, nothing special, really. Just on a train. Somehow or other I was in the Smokers' compartment and hadn't bothered to shift, and Franke just appeared, coming through the opposite door looking for a seat. I hadn't stopped thinking about her ever, you know. I always thought about her. Every day, I think. And suddenly there she was. I had only just recently arrived in Wuppertal – I was arranging things for our flat before Barbara and the baby moved over – and I couldn't believe it. She looked exactly the same, not older or not... I don't know. You'd expect some sort of difference. She had a dark coat on and she looked so wonderful. She has dark eyes and thick brown hair; she's a gypsy, you know. Beautiful.

Well, what can I say? We talked a bit and exchanged the "vital statistics" as they say on the football shows – that's what I've come to now: I watch football on the television. Really! Follow it, too. Never miss it, we don't, me and the sixty million other... At school I remember an experiment we did in Biology. Pretty cruel, really; they probably don't do them anymore. But you know those little worms, flatworms? Well, they instinctively turn away from light. I forget the right words for it. Negative something photo... I forget. But you can condition them with electric shocks to reverse their natural behaviour and swim towards a light source. I don't know what it was meant to prove, but that's what television is; that's our light source. Television and sixty million flatworms. – and it ended up that we agreed to go out for dinner the next night. She was only going to be in Wuppertal for a few days, you see. Some training thing with her job. She travels around briefing the regional managers on the latest innovations and things and company policy and so on. It's a computer firm. She's got a good job, of course, but she hasn't got a family to worry about. She can move about a lot. We talked a bit about that, too, when we met later. She says she doesn't mind not having a family, I mean – but I'm not so sure. She came from a large family herself, and I think she must miss that. But who knows with Franke?

We went out to dinner the next night – it was an awful restaurant because neither of us knew the town and we just blundered into the first place we came to – and it was a fairly awkward evening. The surroundings didn't help either because it was so *bürgerlich*, you know, and we'd been students when we'd been going out together. We didn't feel comfortable there. We mainly talked about our jobs and our lives since we'd last seen each other – nothing intimate; only very "safe" things – and how strange it was to meet in Wuppertal. She found the city very provincial, and then had

to apologise when she thought I might be offended; thinking I might be staying here for the rest of my life, I suppose. But that's the sort of evening it was at first. Very awkward. And neither of us wanted to talk about the things that had happened since our student days. All we wanted to do, all I wanted to do anyway, was to talk about our old times together. It was really very special... not just for me. Don't think that. I know it was important to Franke, too. It really was.

After the restaurant we were just walking back to find a taxi for her and I felt very sad, somehow, that nothing had come of it... that meeting again had been such a miracle, such a longed-for miracle, and yet it had led to nothing. To less than nothing. Then suddenly Franke took my arm and pulled me into a pub we were passing and suddenly, you know, we were just like we were years ago. Laughing and joking just like students again. And we talked about things we had done, and people we had known then and laughed at them as we had done even then, and talked about our feelings for each other. Of course we had a good few drinks to help us along. She always used to drink a Korn before each beer – you know, Prost! – in the old days, anyway, and we drank like that again. Like students again.

It was great... great fun. When the pub shut she said she'd like to see the flat I was going to live in and... well, of course. It was only half-furnished and I was still painting a couple of the rooms – Barbara was still in Dortmund with her parents – and it was a mess, but that wouldn't matter to Franke. A gypsy, even now when she's so well-paid and successful. So we walked back to the flat, arm in arm, and sort of cuddling and laughing. I was so happy; it was as though nothing had changed; as if all those years in between were just wiped off the slate and we were the young lovers again, the strong ... Except, of course, that Franke looked even more beautiful than before. As beautiful, I mean, as when I first fell in love with her: perfect.

Everything changed at the flat. I don't know what happened, but as soon as we were inside the flat the whole mood seemed to change. The smell of the paint; the little furniture there was scattered about; the, I don't know quite how to put this, but the whole... the whole grown-up, middle-classness of the flat – does that make sense? – all seemed to combine to spoil the feeling we had had as we walked back from the pub. We were suddenly constrained again. I felt obliged to offer her a cup of coffee. I mean, I just wanted to go to bed with her. Desperately, really. Do you understand that? I would have left my wife and child then. If she'd asked me, I mean. And I

pulled the old sheet off the couch and made her sit down. A perfect adult again. In the old days we would have just laughed about the mess and the lack of decent cups and cutlery and things, but it's strange but those things seemed to have become necessary. I was embarrassed. With Franke, of all people. I tried to laugh it off and pretend I felt in the same high spirits as earlier, but it all fell flat, of course. We drank our coffee, spoke a little more, and went to bed; and it was awful. I wanted to cry, I was so sad. But instead I just blustered and carried on like a middle-aged executive having a quick tumble with his secretary; rolling my eyes like an out-of-work actor in a porno movie, paid by the groan. And I couldn't stop myself. All the time I was thinking that this will only confirm in her mind that it's all over, that it all belongs in the past. But I couldn't help myself. I couldn't do anything. But it doesn't it shouldn't belong to the past. We were really something so special.

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It must have been when they were fumbling on the couch like a middle-aged executive and his secretary that she lost one of her silver wire ear-rings: it fell behind one of the cushions and neither noticed. Uwe found it later. Uwe wanted to keep in touch, even if only while she was in Wuppertal, but Franke thought it best to return to their former separate lives. She wouldn't even agree to call him if ever she were in Wuppertal again. The evening ended late and with a scent of bitterness. Franke caught a taxi to her hotel and Uwe has heard nothing more of her.

I went back with him to meet his wife, Barbara, and their daughter, Lydia, who giggled at my Anglo-Saxon pronunciation of her name. While Barbara was in the kitchen making coffee, Uwe talked softly about Franke again.

"It suddenly struck me after she'd gone that that evening was just like our whole love affair condensed into one night. The sort of awkward start, the happiness, and the sadness of when we broke up. Everything happened just like before, you know. I wish I'd been able to tell her that... she might have... she was the sort of person who could understand and find explanations for things like that. She was very good... she knew about people, somehow. Now I just tell it to people I meet at the bar... but, well I don't know how to explain it ... "

Then, thinking I hadn't understood much of what he had been telling me, he said sadly in English,

“Franke and I... it’s all right really, I suppose,” and he waved his hand vaguely around at the flat, “I mean, Barbara and I... well, things become okay, you know... with time... it’s all right really...”

He went over to his desk and showed me the ear-ring he’d found months after he’d seen Franke when he’d had to make up the couch as a bed for a business colleague. He keeps it as a token and is a bit embarrassed by it and says he’s sure it’s hers. Barbara came back in with the coffee, Lydia went to bed, and the ear-ring was slipped back into a drawer of the desk. When I left, Barbara said goodbye at the door of their flat, but Uwe came and saw me out onto the street:

“You know, I never think about our earlier times together anymore, only about that one last night. As if that’s all that’s left now. Nice to have met. Tschüß.”