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Opening Extract from...

The Gordian Knot

Written by Bernhard Schlink

Translated from the German by Peter Constantine

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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The Gordian Knot

BERNHARD SCHLINK

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
PETER CONSTANTINE

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON

I

GEORG WAS DRIVING HOME. He left the highway by Aix and took a back road. From Marseille to Aix there are no tolls, from Aix to Pertuis there is a charge of five francs: that's a pack of Gauloises.

Georg lit one. The trip to Marseille hadn't panned out. The head of the translation agency that sent him jobs now and then had had no work for him this time. "I said I'd give you a call if anything came up. Things are a bit slow right now." Monsieur Maurin had assumed an anxious expression—what he had said might in fact be true. It was his agency, but he lived off jobs from the aircraft factory in Toulon, the Industries Aéronautiques Mermoz. When the joint European venture for a new fighter-helicopter in which Mermoz was involved stalled, there was nothing for Monsieur Maurin to translate. Or else he had once again tried to get better terms and Mermoz was teaching him a lesson. Or the factory had made good its long-standing threat and hired its own translators.

The road rose steeply beyond Aix, and the engine stuttered. Georg broke out in a sweat. This was all he needed! He had bought the old Peugeot only three weeks ago—his parents had come to

visit him from Heidelberg and given him the money. "I think you really need a car for your job," his father had said, and dropped two thousand marks in the box on the kitchen counter in which Georg kept his money. "You know Mother and I like to help all we can. But now that I'm retired and your sister has a baby . . ."

Then came the questions Georg had heard a thousand times: Couldn't he find himself a better job nearer home? Why had he left his job as a lawyer in Karlsruhe? Couldn't he come back to Germany now that he'd broken up with Hanne? Was he going to abandon his parents in their old age? There was more to life, after all, than finding oneself. "Do you want your mother to die all alone?" Georg was ashamed, because he was happy enough for the two thousand marks, but didn't care in the least what his father was saying.

The gas tank was almost full, and he had changed the oil and filter not too long ago, so there couldn't be anything wrong. As he drove on, he listened to the engine the way a mother listens to the breath of a feverish child. The car wasn't jerking anymore. But wasn't there some kind of thumping? A grinding, crunching noise? Georg had driven the car for three weeks without experiencing any problems. Now there was that noise again.

At noon Georg parked in Pertuis, did some shopping at the market, and had a beer at a pub. It was the beginning of March; the tourists hadn't yet arrived. The stall with herbs of Provence, honey, soap, and lavender water—swamped during the summer months by Germans and Americans until late in the afternoon—had already been taken down. In other stalls, the merchandise was being put away. The air was warm and there were heavy clouds. A gust of wind rattled the awnings. It smelled of rain.

Georg leaned against the wall near the entrance of the bar, glass in hand. He was wearing jeans, a frayed brown leather jacket over a

blue sweater, and a dark cap. His posture was relaxed; from a distance he could have passed for a young farmer who had finished his business at the market and was now unwinding before lunch. Close up, his face showed hard lines on his forehead and around his mouth, a deep groove in his chin, and a nervous fatigue around the eyes. He took his cap off and ran his hand over his hair. It had gotten thin. He had aged in the last couple of years. Before, he had had a beard and could have been anywhere between twenty-five and forty. Now one could see his thirty-eight years, and might perhaps guess him older.

The first raindrops fell. Georg went inside, and bumped into Maurice, Yves, Nadine, Gérard, and Catrine. They too were struggling to get by, taking on odd jobs, living off wife or girlfriend, husband or boyfriend. Gérard and Catrine were managing best: he had a small restaurant in Cucuron, and she was working in a bookstore in Aix. Outside, the rain was drumming, and as they ordered round after round of pastis, Georg began to feel better. He would make it. They would all make it. In any case, it had been two years since he had left Karlsruhe. He had survived. And he had also survived splitting up with Hanne.

As Georg drove up into the mountains bordering the valley of Durance to the north, the sun broke through. The view opened out on to a broad valley with vineyards, orchards, vegetable fields, a pond, and single farms, with the mountains of Luberon diminishing toward the south. There were a few small towns not much bigger than villages, but they all had castles, cathedrals, or the ruins of fortresses: the kind of miniature world one dreams of as a child and builds with toy blocks. Georg loved this view in the fall and winter too, when the land lies brown and smoke drifts over the fields, or rises from chimneys. Now he was enjoying the green of spring and the light of summer. The sun flashed on the pond and

the greenhouses. Ansouis appeared, a defiant little town on a lonely rise. A road lined with cypress trees led to a high stone bridge and a castle. Georg drove under the bridge, turned right, and a few miles later, right again onto an overgrown gravel path. His house lay by the fields outside Cucuron.

2

GEORG AND HANNE HAD MOVED in together two years ago. His departure from Karlsruhe had been problematic: a quarrel with his boss at the law firm, recriminations and tears from Hanne's ex-boyfriend, a fight with his parents, and a nagging fear that he was burning all his bridges. What should have been a liberating escape had almost become an all-out flight. Georg and Hanne couldn't find work in Paris, where they had first wanted to settle down. They lived in a run-down tenement, and their relationship seemed to be at an end. Cucuron offered them a new beginning. Georg had fallen in love with the little town on a vacation, and he was hoping he would find a job in Aix or Avignon. The first few weeks were bad. But then Georg got a part-time job as a projectionist in Avignon, and they had found the house.

They were pleased that their new home lay on a southern slope, isolated, surrounded by cherry and plum trees and melon and tomato fields; they loved that their garden and balcony had sun from dawn to dusk, and that it was shady and cool beneath the balcony that ran the whole length of the second floor. There was a lot of space, with two rooms downstairs and three upstairs, and an

addition to the house that Hanne could use as a studio. She sketched and painted.

They brought over their furniture and Hanne's easel from Karlsruhe. Georg planted an herb garden, and Hanne set up her studio. When he was no longer needed at the cinema, Hanne got herself a part-time job at a printer's. In the harvest season they both worked as field hands. In the winter Georg got his first translation jobs from Monsieur Maurin. But try as they might they couldn't make ends meet, and she went back to Karlsruhe to stay with her parents for two months. They were wealthy, and happy to support their daughter—as long as she wasn't in Paris or Cucuron, and as long as she wasn't living with Georg. Two months turned into four. She only came back over Christmas, and then one more time to collect her belongings. Her new boyfriend was sitting at the wheel of the van into which she loaded the cabinet, bed, table, chair, fourteen boxes, and her easel. Hanne left Georg the two cats.

When he was twenty-five Georg had married Steffi, his high school sweetheart from Heidelberg. By thirty he was divorced, and over the next few years had various girlfriends for shorter or longer periods. At thirty-five he had met Hanne, and was convinced that she was the one for him.

He liked deliberating: about high school sweethearts marrying; lawyers in partnership; smokers and nonsmokers; doers and ponderers; natural and artificial intelligence; adjusting to circumstances or turning one's back on them; about the right kind of life. He particularly liked theorizing about relationships: whether it was better for both parties to fall head over heels in love, or for love to develop gradually; whether relationships evolved the way they began or whether profound changes were possible; whether they demonstrated their quality by lasting or to some extent fulfilling themselves and coming to an end; whether there was such a thing in life as the right woman or the right man, or whether one simply

lived different lives with different people; whether it is best for both partners to be alike or not.

In theory, Hanne *was* the right partner for him. She was very different. She wasn't intellectual and abstract, but spontaneous and direct, a wonderful lover, and also stimulating and independent when it came to planning their projects. She helps me do everything I've always wanted to do but didn't dare, he thought.

Now, alone with two cats in a house that was too large and too expensive, and a book project that had ground to a halt in its early phase in which he was to write the story and she to illustrate it, Georg lost his taste for theorizing. Hanne had left him in February—the coldest February any of the neighbors could recall—and Georg often had no idea where he would find the money to heat the house. There were times he would have liked to talk everything over with her, to figure out why their relationship had floundered, but she never answered his letters, and his phone had been cut off.

He made it through the rest of the winter and the following year. Perhaps he could eke out a living with the translation jobs Monsieur Maurin might send. But there was no relying on when or if these jobs would materialize. He sent out a flurry of letters, soliciting literary translations, technical translations, offering French lawyers his German legal expertise, and German newspapers reports and articles from Provence. All to no avail. That he now had more than enough leisure time didn't help either.

In his mind there were endless feature articles, short stories, and mystery novels that he would have liked to write. But the strongest element was fear. When might Monsieur Maurin call again? Or when should I call him? Maurin had told me the day after tomorrow, but what if he has a job for me tomorrow and can't get in touch with me? Will he give the job to someone else? Should I call him tomorrow after all?

Like all despondent people, Georg became irritable. As if the world owed him something, and he had to speak up. Sometimes he was more at odds with the world, sometimes less: less, when he had written letters to potential employers and taken them to the post office, irresistible letters; or when he had completed an assignment, had money in his pocket, and was hanging out at Gérard's restaurant, Les Vieux Temps; or when he ran into people who were struggling as much as he was, but not giving up hope; or when there was a nice fire in the fireplace and the house smelled of the lavender he had picked in the fields and had hung from the mantle; or when he had visitors from Germany, real visitors, not just people who were using his place as a rest stop on their way to Spain; or when he had an idea for a story, or came home and his mailbox was filled with letters. No, he wasn't always despondent and irritable. In the fall the neighbors' cat had a litter, and Georg acquired a small black tomcat with white paws. Dopey. His other two cats were called Snow White and Sneezy. Snow White was a tomcat too, all white.

When Georg arrived home from Marseille and got out of the car, the cats rubbed against his legs. They caught plenty of mice in the fields and brought him the mice, but what they really wanted was food out of a can.

"Hi there, cats. I'm back. No work for me, I'm afraid. Not today and not tomorrow. You're not interested? You don't mind? Snow White, you're a big cat, old enough to understand that without work there's no food. As for you, Dopey, you're a silly little kitten who doesn't know anything yet." Georg picked him up and went over to the mailbox. "Take a look at that, Dopey. We got a nice fat letter, sent by a nice fat publisher. What we need is for there to be a nice fat bit of news for us in that envelope."

He unlocked the front door, which was also the kitchen door. In the refrigerator there was a half-empty can of cat food and a half-

empty bottle of white wine. He fed the cats and poured himself a glass, put on some music, opened the door that led from the living room onto the terrace, and took the glass and the envelope over to the rocking chair. All the while he continued talking to the cats and to himself. Over the past year it had become a habit. "The envelope can wait a bit. It won't run away. Have you cats ever seen an envelope running? Or an envelope that minds waiting? If there's good news inside, then the wine should be at hand for a celebration—and if it's bad news, as a consolation."

Georg had read a French novel he'd liked that hadn't yet been translated into German. A novel that had the makings of a best seller and cult book. A novel that fit perfectly in that specific publisher's list. Georg had sent them the book and a sample translation.

> *Dear Herr Polger,*
> *Thank you for your letter of . . . It was with great interest that we read . . . We are as enthusiastic as you are . . . indeed fits our list . . . we have negotiated the rights with Flavigny . . . As for your proposal to translate this work, we regret to inform you that our long-term relationship with our in-house translator . . . We are returning your manuscript . . . Sincerely . . .*

"The damn bastards! They snatched my idea and sent me packing. They don't even feel the need to pay me, or offer me another job, or at least something in the future. For two weeks I sat over that sample—two whole weeks for nothing! The damn bastards!"

He got up and gave the watering can a kick.