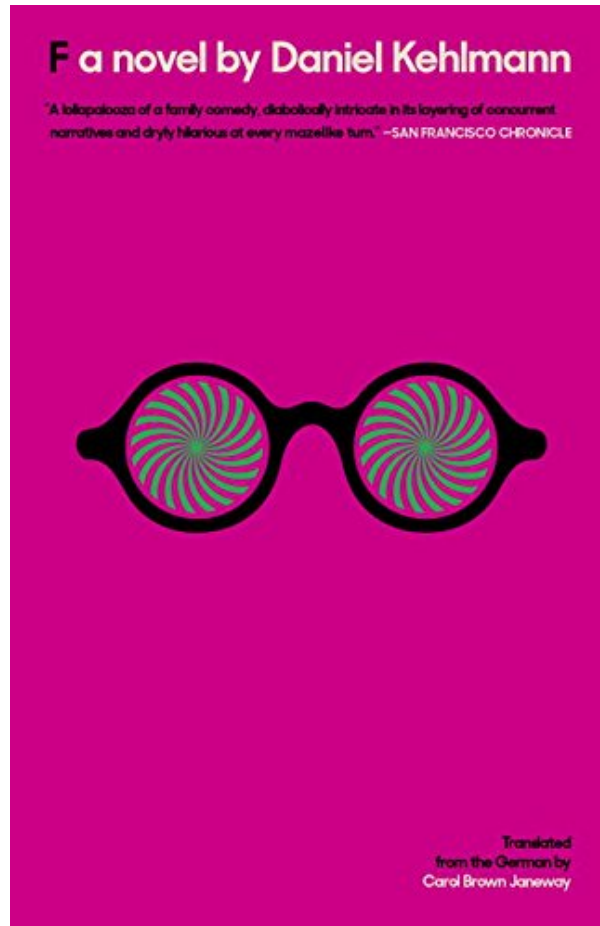


F BY DANIEL KEHLMANN



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F a novel by Daniel Kehlmann

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Translated
from the German by
Carol Brown Janeway

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I’ve already been hearing the sobbing for some time. At first it was a sound in my dream, but now the dream is over and the sobbing is coming from the woman next to me. Eyes closed, I know that the voice is Laura’s, or, rather, that suddenly it’s been hers all along. She’s crying so hard that the mattress is shaking. I lie there motionless. How long can I pretend I’m asleep? I would love to give up and sink back into unconsciousness, but I can’t. The day has begun. I open my eyes.

The morning sun pushes through the slats of the blind and draws fine lines in both carpet and wall. The pattern on the carpet is symmetrical, but if you look at it for a long time, it captures your attention, gripping it until you can’t shake free. Laura is lying next to me in perfect peace, breathing silently, sound asleep. I push back the blanket and get up.

As I’m groping my way down the hall, the memory of the dream returns. No doubt about it, it was my grandmother. She looked tired, worn out, and somehow not complete, as if only a portion of her soul had managed to force its way through to me. She stood in front of me, bent over, leaning on a walking stick, with

two ballpoint pens sticking out of her bun. She opened and closed her mouth and made signs with her hands; she was determined to tell me something. She looked unutterably weary, lips pursed, eyes pleading, until in the next moment some change in the dream washed her away and I was somewhere else, surrounded by other things. I will never know what she wanted to tell me.

I shave, get into the shower, and turn on the hot tap. The water is warm, then hot, then very hot, which is how I like it. I tip my head back and let the water beat down on me, listen to the noise, feel the pain, and forget absolutely everything for a moment.

It doesn't last long. Already the memory comes crashing back like a wave. Perhaps I can hold out for another couple of months, maybe even three, but not longer.

I turn off the water, get out of the shower, and push my face into the terrycloth of the bath towel. As always, my memory reacts to the smell, calling up images: Mama taking me to bed wrapped in a towel, Papa's tall figure outlined by the ceiling light, his tousled hair in silhouette, Ivan already asleep in the other bed, our sandbox where I always knocked over the towers he built, a meadow, a worm he found that I split in half, and he cried and cried. Or was it the other way around? I put on my bathrobe. Now I need my medication.

In my study everything is normal. This calms me. The desk with its big screen, the Paul Klee on one wall and the Eulenboeck on the other, the empty files. I have never worked here. Even the drawers are empty and not one of the reference books has ever been opened. But when I sit here and pretend to be lost in thought, no one comes in, and that counts for something in and of itself.

Two Thropren, a Torbit, a Prevoxal, and a Valium—I can't begin the day with too much, because I have to be able to up the dose if something unforeseen occurs. I swallow them all in one gulp; it's unpleasant and I have to use all my willpower to conquer the gag reflex. Why I always take them without water, I have no idea.

Already I can feel them working. It's probably my imagination, nothing could work that fast, but is that important? Indifference settles over me like cotton wool. Life goes on. One day you'll lose it all, the name Eric Friedland will be abhorred, those who still trust you will curse you, your family will fall apart, and they'll lock you up. But not today.

I'll never be able to tell anyone how much I hate this Paul Klee. Lopsided diamonds, red on a black background, and next to them a windblown, truly pitiful little matchstick man. Even I could have painted it. I know I'm not supposed to even think such a sentence, it is utterly forbidden, but I can't help it, even I could have painted it, it would have taken me less than five minutes! Instead of which I paid seven hundred and fifty thousand euros for it, but a man in my position must possess a very expensive painting: Janke has a Kandinsky, Nettleback of BMW has a Monet—maybe it's a Manet, what do I know?—and old Rebke, my golf partner, has a Richard Serra on the lawn, huge, rusty, and always in the way at garden parties. So I asked Ivan two years ago to get me a picture too, it just had to be something that was a sure thing.

He immediately pretended he didn't understand me. He likes doing that—it amuses him. What did I mean, "sure thing"?

"Sure thing," I said, "means that it impresses everyone. That no expert has something against the artist. Like with Picasso. Or Leonardo. One of those guys."

He laughed at me. He likes doing that too. Picasso? There were hundreds of experts who didn't take Picasso

seriously, and if you chose one of his wrong periods, you'd be criticized willy-nilly. Almost no one had a good word to say about his late work, for example! But Paul Klee, you could get one of his, no one had anything against Paul Klee.

“And Leonardo?”

“No Leonardos on the market. Take Klee.”

Then he attended the auction for me. At half a million he called me to ask if he should keep bidding. I would like to have yelled at him. But what if he thought I couldn't even afford a matchstick man? For a while it hung in the salon, then Laura suddenly didn't like it anymore. So since then it's been hanging over my desk, staring at me in a pushy way and doing damage in my dreams. I can't sell it, too many people have seen it in the salon where I have of course pointed it out to them, look at my Klee, what do you think of my Klee, yes of course it's genuine! As soon as the investigators start work, one of their first questions will be where the Klee is. Art is a trap, nothing more, cleverly dreamed up by people like my brother!

Still in my bathrobe I go along the hall and down the stairs to the media room. There's a screen and a video beamer. The black cubes of the speakers are powerful enough to service a football stadium. A soft leather couch sits in front of it.

The remote is lying on the table. Without thinking about it I sit down, reach for it, and press a couple of buttons. The screen hums into life: the early-morning TV programming—a nature film. A dragonfly lands on a stalk. Its legs are no bigger than a hair, its wings tremble, and its antennae touch the rough green. Interesting, but it reminds me about the camera.

There's one hidden in one of the appliances. It would be strange if there weren't one, because they're so easy to conceal, I would never find it among all the lenses. I push another button, the meadow disappears, to be replaced by some undersecretary standing behind a lectern and talking so fast that you'd think everything must hang on his finishing as fast as possible.

“No,” I say. “No, no, no, no. No!”

Luckily that helps. He slows down.

But unfortunately he's noticed me. Without stopping talking, he casts a swift glance in my direction. He did it very unobtrusively, but it didn't escape me.

I hold my breath. I must not make a wrong move now. Without question it's crazy, I know it, the broadcast with the undersecretary is a recording, nobody gives press conferences this early in the morning.

But I also know that he looked at me.

“Totally calm. Always keep calm.”

With cold terror I realize that I said it out loud. I can't make this kind of mistake. And the undersecretary, whose name I suddenly recall—he's called Obermann, Bernd Richard Obermann, and he's responsible for power or education or something—heard it, for a mocking smile appears for a moment on his face. I don't let anything show; I don't lose my cool so easily. Keep calm, I say to myself again, but this time silently and without moving my lips, behave as if everything's fine! Somehow I have to manage to look away from the

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From the internationally acclaimed author of *Measuring the World*, here is a dazzling tragicomedy about the three sons of a lost father.

Arthur Friedland is a wannabe writer who one day takes his sons to a performance by the Great Lindemann, Master of Hypnosis. Arthur declares himself immune to hypnosis and a disbeliever in magic. But the Great Lindemann knows better, and after he extracts Arthur's deepest secrets and tells him to make them real, Arthur empties the family bank account and vanishes. He goes on to become a world-famous author, a master of the mystical. (F is for fake.) But what of his abandoned boys? The painfully shy Martin grows up to be a priest without a vocation. (F is for faith, and lack of it.) Eric becomes a financier on the brink of ruin (F is for fraud), while Ivan, hoping for glory as a painter, instead becomes a forger. (F is for forgery, too.) During the summer before the global financial crisis, they are thrown together again with cataclysmic results. Wildly funny and heartbreaking, Daniel Kehlmann's novel about truth, family, and the terrible power of fortune is a fictional triumph.

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A TRICKY BOOK --NOT EVERYONE'S CUP OF TEA BUT WELL WORTH THE READING

By David Keymer

This unusual, even eccentric novel isn't composed of a continuous plot line so much as a set of conjoined stories, linked by past history but not tightly so. There is no apparent reason why the sons who are abandoned by their father in story #1 should have become how they are (their characters) and where they are (their present situations) in stories #2, #3, etc. . . . In the first story an indifferent father who turns out to be an indifferent everything, including writer, which is what he most wants to be, takes his three sons -by two mothers- to a hypnotist's show. Arthur lets himself be hypnotized and after the show ends takes the children home. He drops Martin off with his ex, takes twins Eric and Ivan home with him to his current wife, and then, while they're sleeping, cleans out his joint checking account, leaves a note for wife and sons, and disappears.

There is no trace of him for years, until books -very odd books-- start to appear under his name too critical acclaim. The first one, *My Name Is No One*, is an odd book indeed. It's about a man, referred to as F. (thus the title of this book), and at first reads like an old-style roman de mœurs --think Balzac or Zola. But from the start, there's something not quite right about the narrative:

[T]he reader would be enjoying the text were it not for a persistent feeling of somehow being mocked . . . there is a sense that no sentence means merely what it says, that the story is observing its own progress, and that in truth the protagonist is not the central character: the central figure is the reader, who is all too complicit in the unfolding of events.

At that point in the book, I thought: it sounds a bit like Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* (1963) with its invitation

to the reader to read non-linearly. But that's not the way *My Name* progresses. F.'s story gradually implodes as discrepancies build up. Then the narrative just breaks off - "without warning, in the middle of a sentence." The second part of the book is a fifty-page-long, convoluted argument that the reader doesn't exist. Then F. appears again, only to have his character dismantled in a few pages -ultimately he is shown to a superfluous man. All three sons receive copies of the book, in brown wrappings with no dedication or details as to who sent it to them. (Although they know.) The book provokes newspaper articles, critical reviews, a cult of followers, suicides... A second book follows: a detective thriller about a detective who despite all efforts doesn't succeed in solving anything. Then a third book appears, a novel in which fate continually branches, leading to more and more narrative paths, most leading to sickness or death.

By now, you are reading the second narrative in the book, which is about Martin, the older son. Grown up, he's a priest who doesn't believe, but pretends he does anyway for the wellbeing of his congregation. The next narrative is a long riff on ancestry, a few paragraphs each allotted to each generation of Martin's, Ivan's and Eric's ancestors all the way back to, it's not clear, but it reads like the Thirty Years' War (1618-48, -59), father to father to father . . . Then follow chapters on Eric, an investment broker who sees ghosts and is haunted by the threat of failure and disgrace (he's been poaching his accounts). And then Ivan, a failed painter become art critic who has built his own preserve in modern art by discovering and promoting a fuddy duddy artist -but the works he promotes, sly commentaries on modern culture and art, aren't by the artist at all; Ivan is painting them, and then as executor of the now-long-dead artist, testifying to their authenticity.

The stories continue, the lives of the brothers tangling and untangling, and the father appearing again, but it should be clear by now that it's not so much narrative that drives this novel as a particular slant on reality and on how books present and comment on it. Without having to embrace all the baggage of postmodernist critical theory, this novel is clearly a postmodernist work. It's also a well written work. Although the characters are in many respects ciphers, they are well presented, and occasional passages describing the world around these characters are elegant and evocative, especially this one, the faux painter Ivan's reflections on a subway ride just ended, his painterly eye absorbing all he sees as he exits the station on an escalator:

The lights in the subway shrink, become a single patch, then disappear. Beauty has no need of art, it has no need of us, either, it has no need of witnesses, quite the opposite. Gaping observers detract from it, it blazes most brightly where no one can see it: broad landscapes devoid of houses, the changing shape of clouds in the early evening, the washed-out greyish red of old brick walls, bare trees in winter mists, cathedrals, the reflection of the sun in a puddle of oil, the mirrored skyscrapers of Manhattan, the view out of an airplane window right after it[s] climbed through the layer of clouds, old people's hands, the sea at any time of day, and empty subway stations like this one -the yellow light, the haphazard pattern of cigarette butts on the ground, the peeling advertisements, still fluttering in the slipstream of the train, although the train itself has just disappeared.

Listing is always a perilous option in describing. The eye soon tires of monotony and skips over details. Kehlmann introduces just enough variety, in how he describes and in the pacing of it, that the reader's attention is kept fixed throughout. And the content -the loving description of physical detail--mirrors the thought passing through Ivan's mind, which is about the difference between beauty -which is observed even when not made--and art, which is fashioned, though, and in very modern art often unhinged from exact observation. In short, Kehlmann is a very talented wordsmith but also deliberately sneaky in what he presents and why he presents it. Though not an easy novel to absorb, I think *F.* works but I wouldn't be surprised if other readers didn't agree with me.

9 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating, Well Written and Unconventional

By Miss Barbara

F by Daniel Kehlmann (translated from German by Carol Brown Janeway) opens with failed author, Arthur Friedland taking his three sons, Martin and twins Ivan and Eric, to see hypnotist The Great Lindemann. Arthur, who does not believe in hypnosis, is called to the stage where Lindemann whispers something in his ear. Instead of returning home Arthur drops off his sons and disappears from their lives along with the family savings.

The story itself follows the lives of the three boys after they grow into men. Martin, master of Rubik's Cube, joins the priesthood although he does not believe in God. Eric becomes a Jordan Belfort wannabee and faces losing all of the funds of his investors through shoddy behavior. Ivan is an artist, art commentator and fraud.

The story unfolds in six chapters all of which are an integral part of the whole but many of which can stand on their own as a solid and well written short story. Each chapter has its own theme the most interesting of which is titled "Family" and is written in the style paralleling Genesis: Chapter 5, where the lineage of the family is laid out for many generations. The only thing missing is the "begats".

This is a fascinating, well written and unconventional story. I personally think that the perfect review is written inside the book itself, chapter 2: "The sentences are well constructed, the narrative has a powerful flow, the reader would be enjoying the text were it not for a persistent feeling of somehow being mocked....But there is a sense that no sentence means merely what it says, that the story is observing its own progress, and that in truth the protagonist is not the central figure: the central figure is the reader, who is all too complicit in the unfolding of events".

This is a unique and well-constructed read. I hope you enjoy it as much as I.

8 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

What does "F" stand for?

By R. M. Peterson

The conventional answer presumably would be "Friedland", which is the surname of the four males who dominate the novel. Arthur is a reclusive writer, whose most successful novel was "My Name Is No One". Arthur has three sons, one by his first wife, whom he abandoned, and twins by a second wife, whom he also abandoned. From time to time, he shows up unexpectedly in the lives of his family. His oldest son, Martin, is an overweight priest who is addicted to Rubik's Cube and is searching for Faith. One of the twins, Ivan, set out to be a painter, but he was not successful so he became an art forger of sorts and then a dealer and market-setter of the man whose art he forged. The other twin, Eric, became a highly successful investment advisor before succumbing to the temptations of operating a Ponzi scheme.

The novel consists of six chapters. The first is set in 1984, and in addition to introducing Arthur and his three sons it features Lindermann, a hypnotist who reappears later in the novel as an aged soothsayer. The next four chapters are narrated in the first person by a different one of the four Friedland males. The one narrated by Arthur is a genealogy of the male forebears, going back to the Middle Ages. The three chapters narrated by the sons all take place on the same fateful day -- August 8, 2008 (8/8/08 for those looking for astrological explanations, which the novel seems to invite). Each of the three sons experiences a crisis of sorts and each has a separate encounter (for one of them, a fatal encounter) involving a youth named Ron wearing a T-shirt reading "Bubbletea is not a drink I like." The last chapter, where the narrative mode reverts to third-person, takes place at a memorial mass for one of the four Friedlands.

F is a clever novel; it is modern; and it is hip. It also is manipulative in ways impossible to explicate without

giving away too much of the story. I found it, despite its intricacies, rather shallow and superficial. Its view of the world is a nihilistic one. In it, "F" also stands for -- take your pick -- fraudulent, futile, or feckless.

Daniel Kehlmann is a relatively acclaimed and relatively young (thirty-nine) German/Austrian author. (F is set in Germany and was written in German.) This is my first experience with Kehlmann; it did not spark a desire for another.

See all 36 customer reviews...

F BY DANIEL KEHLMANN PDF

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Review

“Elegant. . . . A subtly yet masterly constructed puzzle cube. . . . With its sly Möbius-strip-like connectedness, [it] doesn’t just hint at the possibility of a plan behind the scenes; it enacts that plan in the very telling.” —The New York Times Book Review

“A lollapalooza of a family comedy, diabolically intricate in its layering of concurrent narratives and dryly hilarious at every mazelike turn. . . . F is splashed with vivacious, hilarious characters and incidents that, with distance and time, transmogrify into something quite sinister indeed.” —San Francisco Chronicle

“Kehlmann’s strange and endlessly provoking novel . . . [is] not merely clever but suggestive and powerful. . . . But the deepest delights—delights that offer consolation in a faithless or fake world—are to be found in the novel’s beautiful and cunning construction, and in its brilliantly self-interrogating form.” —The New Yorker

“Kehlmann’s . . . musings on religion, art and life are intellectually rigorous, and his plotting masterful in the linking of the story’s separate narratives with overlaps that, when revealed, surprise and shock. . . . [His] rendering of life’s mysteries . . . allows the reader a window to another world.” —NPR, All Things Considered

“Each son’s tale reads like a satisfying novella, and the three eventually dovetail in a way that surprises without feeling overdetermined. . . . [Kehlmann] shows off many talents in F. He’s adept at aphorism, brainy humor and dreamlike sequences. And he keeps the pages lightly turning while musing deeply.” —The New York Times

“A rich, absorbing and well-orchestrated narrative.” —Boston Globe

“A comic tour de force, a biting satire on the hypnotised world of artificial wants and needs that Huxley predicted, a moving study of brotherhood and family failure, F is an astonishing book, a work of deeply satisfying (and never merely clever) complexity. . . . Yet F is also much more than an intricate puzzle: it is a novel of astonishing beauty, psychological insight and, finally, compassion, a book that, in a world of fakes and manufactured objects of desire, is the real article, a bona-fide, inimitable masterpiece.” —The Times Literary Supplement (London)

“The hallmarks of [Kehlmann’s] style are speed, wit and a nuanced appreciation of the absurd. . . . He’s a specialist in the kind of irony that tells us more about a character, and ourselves, than sincerity ever could.” —Guernicamag.com

“A testament to the fact that conceptual novels need not be devoid of people and that family novels need not be devoid of ideas and that some darkly funny, smart absurdity is always a good idea.” —Flavorwire

“A tightly constructed exploration of filial tension and adult struggle. . . . As Kehlmann’s characters lay bare their troubled souls, we get a view that is comic and affecting.” —Minneapolis Star-Tribune

“What a strange and beautiful novel, hovering on the misty borders of the abstract and the real. Three brilliant character studies in the brothers—religion, money and art—what else is there? The answer, Kehlmann suggests, without ever saying so, is love, and its lack is the essence of the failures of all three. But while these fates unroll in the idiom of psychological realism, there is a cooler geometry working on the reader, a painterly sense of the symmetry in human fates. It’s a deeply writerly novel with a stout backbone of wonderful characterization. High achievement.” —Ian McEwan

“With the wizardry of a puzzle master Daniel Kehlmann permutes the narrative pieces of this Rubik’s Cube of a story—involving a lost father and his three sons—into a solution that clicks into position with a deep thrill of narrative and emotional satisfaction. Kehlmann is one of the brightest, most pleasure-giving writers at work today, and he manages all this while exploring matters of deep philosophical and intellectual import. He deserves to have more readers in the United States.” —Jeffrey Eugenides

“An intricate, beautiful novel in multiple disguises: a family saga, a fable, and a high-speed farce. But then, what else would you expect? Daniel Kehlmann is one of the great novelists for making giant themes seem light.” —Adam Thirlwell

About the Author

Daniel Kehlmann was born in Munich in 1975 and lives in Berlin and New York. His works have won the Candide Prize, the Doderer Prize, the Kleist Prize, the Welt Literature Prize, and the Thomas Mann Prize. His novel *Measuring the World* was translated into more than forty languages and is one of the greatest successes in postwar German literature.

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I’ve already been hearing the sobbing for some time. At first it was a sound in my dream, but now the dream is over and the sobbing is coming from the woman next to me. Eyes closed, I know that the voice is Laura’s, or, rather, that suddenly it’s been hers all along. She’s crying so hard that the mattress is shaking. I lie there motionless. How long can I pretend I’m asleep? I would love to give up and sink back into unconsciousness, but I can’t. The day has begun. I open my eyes.

The morning sun pushes through the slats of the blind and draws fine lines in both carpet and wall. The pattern on the carpet is symmetrical, but if you look at it for a long time, it captures your attention, gripping it until you can’t shake free. Laura is lying next to me in perfect peace, breathing silently, sound asleep. I push back the blanket and get up.

As I’m groping my way down the hall, the memory of the dream returns. No doubt about it, it was my grandmother. She looked tired, worn out, and somehow not complete, as if only a portion of her soul had managed to force its way through to me. She stood in front of me, bent over, leaning on a walking stick, with two ballpoint pens sticking out of her bun. She opened and closed her mouth and made signs with her hands; she was determined to tell me something. She looked unutterably weary, lips pursed, eyes pleading, until in the next moment some change in the dream washed her away and I was somewhere else, surrounded by other things. I will never know what she wanted to tell me.

I shave, get into the shower, and turn on the hot tap. The water is warm, then hot, then very hot, which is how I like it. I tip my head back and let the water beat down on me, listen to the noise, feel the pain, and forget absolutely everything for a moment.

It doesn't last long. Already the memory comes crashing back like a wave. Perhaps I can hold out for another couple of months, maybe even three, but not longer.

I turn off the water, get out of the shower, and push my face into the terrycloth of the bath towel. As always, my memory reacts to the smell, calling up images: Mama taking me to bed wrapped in a towel, Papa's tall figure outlined by the ceiling light, his tousled hair in silhouette, Ivan already asleep in the other bed, our sandbox where I always knocked over the towers he built, a meadow, a worm he found that I split in half, and he cried and cried. Or was it the other way around? I put on my bathrobe. Now I need my medication.

In my study everything is normal. This calms me. The desk with its big screen, the Paul Klee on one wall and the Eulenboeck on the other, the empty files. I have never worked here. Even the drawers are empty and not one of the reference books has ever been opened. But when I sit here and pretend to be lost in thought, no one comes in, and that counts for something in and of itself.

Two Thropren, a Torbit, a Prevoxal, and a Valium—I can't begin the day with too much, because I have to be able to up the dose if something unforeseen occurs. I swallow them all in one gulp; it's unpleasant and I have to use all my willpower to conquer the gag reflex. Why I always take them without water, I have no idea.

Already I can feel them working. It's probably my imagination, nothing could work that fast, but is that important? Indifference settles over me like cotton wool. Life goes on. One day you'll lose it all, the name Eric Friedland will be abhorred, those who still trust you will curse you, your family will fall apart, and they'll lock you up. But not today.

I'll never be able to tell anyone how much I hate this Paul Klee. Lopsided diamonds, red on a black background, and next to them a windblown, truly pitiful little matchstick man. Even I could have painted it. I know I'm not supposed to even think such a sentence, it is utterly forbidden, but I can't help it, even I could have painted it, it would have taken me less than five minutes! Instead of which I paid seven hundred and fifty thousand euros for it, but a man in my position must possess a very expensive painting: Janke has a Kandinsky, Nettleback of BMW has a Monet—maybe it's a Manet, what do I know?—and old Rebke, my golf partner, has a Richard Serra on the lawn, huge, rusty, and always in the way at garden parties. So I asked Ivan two years ago to get me a picture too, it just had to be something that was a sure thing.

He immediately pretended he didn't understand me. He likes doing that—it amuses him. What did I mean, “sure thing”?

“Sure thing,” I said, “means that it impresses everyone. That no expert has something against the artist. Like with Picasso. Or Leonardo. One of those guys.”

He laughed at me. He likes doing that too. Picasso? There were hundreds of experts who didn't take Picasso seriously, and if you chose one of his wrong periods, you'd be criticized willy-nilly. Almost no one had a good word to say about his late work, for example! But Paul Klee, you could get one of his, no one had anything against Paul Klee.

“And Leonardo?”

“No Leonardos on the market. Take Klee.”

Then he attended the auction for me. At half a million he called me to ask if he should keep bidding. I would like to have yelled at him. But what if he thought I couldn't even afford a matchstick man? For a while it hung in the salon, then Laura suddenly didn't like it anymore. So since then it's been hanging over my desk, staring at me in a pushy way and doing damage in my dreams. I can't sell it, too many people have seen it in the salon where I have of course pointed it out to them, look at my Klee, what do you think of my Klee, yes of course it's genuine! As soon as the investigators start work, one of their first questions will be where the Klee is. Art is a trap, nothing more, cleverly dreamed up by people like my brother!

Still in my bathrobe I go along the hall and down the stairs to the media room. There's a screen and a video beamer. The black cubes of the speakers are powerful enough to service a football stadium. A soft leather couch sits in front of it.

The remote is lying on the table. Without thinking about it I sit down, reach for it, and press a couple of buttons. The screen hums into life: the early-morning TV programming—a nature film. A dragonfly lands on a stalk. Its legs are no bigger than a hair, its wings tremble, and its antennae touch the rough green. Interesting, but it reminds me about the camera.

There's one hidden in one of the appliances. It would be strange if there weren't one, because they're so easy to conceal, I would never find it among all the lenses. I push another button, the meadow disappears, to be replaced by some undersecretary standing behind a lectern and talking so fast that you'd think everything must hang on his finishing as fast as possible.

“No,” I say. “No, no, no, no. No!”

Luckily that helps. He slows down.

But unfortunately he's noticed me. Without stopping talking, he casts a swift glance in my direction. He did it very unobtrusively, but it didn't escape me.

I hold my breath. I must not make a wrong move now. Without question it's crazy, I know it, the broadcast with the undersecretary is a recording, nobody gives press conferences this early in the morning.

But I also know that he looked at me.

“Totally calm. Always keep calm.”

With cold terror I realize that I said it out loud. I can't make this kind of mistake. And the undersecretary, whose name I suddenly recall—he's called Obermann, Bernd Richard Obermann, and he's responsible for power or education or something—heard it, for a mocking smile appears for a moment on his face. I don't let anything show; I don't lose my cool so easily. Keep calm, I say to myself again, but this time silently and without moving my lips, behave as if everything's fine! Somehow I have to manage to look away from the screen. I concentrate on the edge of my field of vision, and then somewhat blurrily I see something on the carpet, a disturbance in the symmetry: a red wine stain. Damn it, this carpet cost thirty-five thousand euros!

My fury helps me to look away from the screen. Out of the corner of my eye I register that Undersecretary

Obermann has disappeared. Some harmless man is now talking into the microphone and has no interest in me. Quickly I lift the remote, the picture flames up for a moment and is gone.

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