

Gernot Wolfram

My little uncle

I've been looking out at the red minibus for days now. When I come home I make myself some coffee, lean against the window frame and observe the red minibus; sometimes there's a small brown dog with shaggy fur asleep on the steering wheel. The minibus on the forecourt in front of the petrol station belongs to a man who obviously belongs nowhere. He gives the appearance of being old. He wears a brown jacket, wraps his scarf tightly around his stringy neck and gets out of the minibus every two hours to smoke a cigarette. He waits at the side door while his dog waddles around in puddles; he sucks in the smoke and looks up into the sky, awed by the glimmering violet dusk. He stands there for an unusually long time, looking upwards. Sometimes he plays solo boules, throwing all the bowls himself. There are times, though, when he is disturbed by the cars coming out of the petrol station. When the drivers pump their horns, he raises his arms with a smile, as if in surrender.

The registration plate shows that the minibus comes from a small town in central Germany. It's a town I know; I once bought a book there – Uncle's Dream by Dostoyevsky. Passing through the town one winter I came across the book in a shop window; I can remember it very well. Apart from a palace-like building, the name of the writer and the title of the book there was nothing else on the cover. I finished the book in one night and thought it was an excellent book about a peculiar man. With that in mind, and

because he was small, I decided to refer to the man who smoked cigarettes with such pleasure outside his minibus as my little uncle. I look down and say to myself, ah, my little uncle's smoking again, or, my little uncle's stroking his dog again. Or I think: when will my little uncle disappear with his minibus. Yesterday I even opened the window to take a photograph of him. He looked up briefly and waved to me. I immediately stepped back into the room. Not that I would be afraid of making his acquaintance but the wave burst forth from him like a gesture of challenge. As if he wanted to say, what are you doing there, explain yourself. So I had definitely gone too far by taking photographs.

He'll soon disappear again. He's one of those people who travel around. At least I imagine him having time to travel. Is travel the right word? And why has he come to our town? Admittedly, we've got a splendid river and a museum that boasts a national treasure (a painting depicting a battle in a forest – soldiers with silver helmets, faces that can hardly keep their eyes open for exhaustion and horses slowing sinking to the ground). There's also an old brick church worth visiting, with an altar upon which stands a broad hulking cross that looks as though it has been cut out from a frying-pan. But are these sufficient reasons?

I've always wanted to live in another city: Rome, for example, or Madrid. Prague with its castle floating over the Moldau is another city that appeals to me. But instead here I am living in a clean, well-lighted room with a desk upon which sits a flat foldable computer. I like to make pasta, I drink loads of coffee, I enjoy reading for hours on end and I write lots of letters on

my computer. Mostly these letters contain accounts of my day. However, I tend to talk not so much about myself as about the things I see. As a result a lot of people know about the little uncle who lives in a red minibus. I am extremely curious about everything he does. And I imagine him travelling on to one of the cities I admire.

Today little uncle marched up to the minibus carrying a blue plastic bag which contained two pieces of wood. Luckily I had no work to do in the afternoon, so I was able to watch how he sawed up the pieces of wood in the feeble spring sunlight. The sawing went on for some time. I went into the kitchen and made myself some pasta. I lit myself a cigarette and read in a magazine that the town where I was born was deep in debt. That's what it said. I wondered whether you could conclude from this that a town was like a person: that it does things like waking, sleeping, getting into debt, stretching out, bending down and going for a walk, just at the moment when they occur to it. Of course, these were childish thoughts, but as I sat there with a saucepan of hot pasta in front of me, I took pleasure in such thoughts. When I had finished eating, I went to the window again. By now the man had sawed one of the pieces of wood into a table top. The other piece lay around like a useless bit of rubbish next to the front wheel of the minibus. Holding the board on his knees, he then put a sheet of paper on it, took out a pencil from his jacket and started to draw. Obviously I couldn't make out what he was drawing. I only saw how every now and then he would scratch his neck, smoke a cigarette and rest his arms on the board. At that

time of year it was definitely too cold to be doing things like that in the open air. After half an hour little uncle got up, stuffed the board under the minibus and disappeared inside the vehicle. I lay down on the couch, closed my eyes for a while and wondered what he was drawing. The petrol station, the forecourt, the house or was it a picture taken from imagination or memory? Probably memory because I hadn't seen him look up once. Eventually I fell asleep. I had a confused dream. I was given an animal as a present. It reminded me of a koala, but it wasn't; it was more like a mixture of a koala and a dog or a cat. At any rate the animal's fur was very soft; it was light grey and tender and slipped smoothly through my fingers. I was stroking the animal, holding it close to my breast when suddenly a hand held out a knife for me. The trembling creature was to be shorn. I didn't know what I was supposed to do and I was afraid of lacerating its warm pulsating skin. But the hand was urging me to begin shearing. Finally I dropped the animal and woke up with a strange feeling in my stomach. Outside it was dark. I was annoyed because I had missed the twilight. Probably because I was feeling unwell I decided to go outside again.

The arc lamps on the forecourt cast circles of light on the car park. The air was pleasantly mild, suffused with the smell typical of a spring night. I tried to make out the dog through the windscreen of the minibus; usually it would start barking when anyone came close to the vehicle. This time everything was quiet. I remembered that little uncle had his own special system with the dog. If he went into town briefly, the dog stayed in the minibus. If

he went on a longer trip, he took it with him. I don't know why I put my hand on the door handle to see whether the minibus was locked. When I realised that the door was open, I was seized by incredible curiosity. In the driver's cab there was a smell of cloves and beer. At the back, instead of a seat there was a couch strewn with newspapers, nails, pliers and scissors. The windows were concealed behind green curtains. In the middle there were some squashed rubber balls lying around, obviously playthings for the dog. Despite the disorder the impression was that the space was clearly organised.

Light from the arc lamps came in through the slits in the curtains.

I found the piece of wood. It was lying on a chair next to a small locker. There were bits from a rubber scattered like tiny breadcrumbs over the wood. I lifted the board up in the hope that underneath I would find the paper with little uncle's drawing effort. What would happen if the man suddenly came in? Would the shaggy dog even have the strength to hurt me? At the same time I thought that if necessary I already had enough justifications running around my head. For one thing little uncle probably didn't even have permission to keep his vehicle there. Nowadays anything standing around unattended is a potential source of danger. Taking an interest in what is going on around you can therefore hardly be made into an accusation. I opened the small locker. Books and magazines tumbled out towards me. Some of the magazine were old numbers of women's magazines from 1986. Even a couple of ballpoint pens fell out onto the carpet. In the top drawer there was a black folder. I remembered having

seen this folder during little uncle's open-air drawing sessions.

The folder contained one single piece of crinkled paper.

Since it was too dark to make out the fine, blurred lines and contours of the drawing, I drew back one of the curtains and looked at the paper in the light coming from the arc lamps. What a fuzzy drawing style he had! Dense shrubbery, the vague outline of an advertising pillar, two trees, some parked cars, behind which stood a house, four storeys high. Everywhere there was hatching, forming a kind of fog, as if it were early evening. In one of the windows, on the third floor, a man could be seen, or rather the narrow black phantom of a man. He was leaning against one side of the window frame, his head straining forward. He seemed to be drawing back the curtain with his hands. The flat behind him was brightly lit, so that the figure obtruded even more oddly. It almost seemed as if one of his shoulders was grafted onto the window. The more closely I looked at the picture, the more difficult it became to deny that little uncle had drawn a portrait of me.

There could be no doubt about it: my flat was on the third floor, I often liked to lean against one side of the window and I took a passionate interest in observing what was going on around me.

But no way was I such a sinister-looking dark line!

A few tiny letters had been scrawled along the bottom edge of the picture. At first I thought it was his signature. But in fact what was written was the word "monster". Nothing else. Just that word.

I became uneasy. What did it refer to? Apart from the figure in the window there was no other living creature to be seen. Had

little uncle given himself that name or did monster refer to me?

I looked out onto the forecourt. Nothing stirred. The only thing was that one of the neon signs had gone off. A strange anger came over me. How dare he make drawings of me like that? My silhouette in the window must have etched itself vividly onto his brain if he was able to reproduce what he had seen so easily, although it was of course distorted. I wet my thumb and slowly wiped out the word monster. It was a pleasure. The rubbing movement of my thumb turned the letters into a small, dirty grey cloud which now sailed along the edge of the picture like a ship shrouded in fog.

I quickly crammed the paper back into the folder, gathered up the magazines, stuffed everything into the locker and left the minibus. On the way back to my flat I came over a little dizzy. Never before in my life had I snooped on anybody or rummaged around in their things. It was unbelievable that an old man and a red minibus had produced this behaviour in me. I went into the kitchen and drank a glass of schnaps. The bottle had been standing unopened in the fridge for a year.

Since then an hour has passed.

Now I am sitting at my desk and I've calmed down a bit. A few moments ago I heard the door of the minibus being slammed shut with a loud bang. I daren't go to the window. Not so much because the old man might notice me and threaten me, but more because I'm afraid of once again becoming the person I saw in the drawing. That funny shadow in a brightly-lit window on the third floor of a house next to petrol station which has been

a blight on the neighbourhood for the last two years. What a stroke of luck! The engine has started up. The tyres are crackling over the gravel at the exit. I can hear the sound. My little uncle is driving away. It's like a sudden godsend; I can hardly believe it.