

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

Peter Schmidt
A Valentine's Day Cactus
Autism and Love

.....
ISBN: 978-3-8436-0211-2
Hardback with jacket
224 pages with numerous photographs
Format 14 x 22 cm
EUR 19.99
English sample translation available
.....

© 2012 Schwabenverlag AG, Patmos Verlag,
Ostfildern, Germany

Translated by Tammi Reichel, APE Int'l



278 Forewords

Dear Readers!

Before you lies an unusual love story, written from the perspective of an autistic person. Love and autism, you might think, are mutually exclusive. That's like a spotted zebra, an impossibility. In fact, it's a little like being gay but still wishing for a family complete with a house, picket fence and garden.

The way to go about it is everything but ordinary. But where there's a will there's a way. And if you want to find new ways, you have to do without road signs! That's been my motto since I was a school kid.

Traveling this road means coping with competing desires. On the one hand, I always wanted to be alone in order to have everything under control. But at the same time I felt lonely, and I didn't want that. The longing for love and comfort ultimately allowed me to take the path – though I didn't know why it had to traverse so many sky-high, icy mountains – that finally led to my destination. The journey is its own reward! And even the longest journey begins with the first step.

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

At the National Autism Conference in the year 2008, my wife and I presented our personal journey – love with autism. I portrayed my emotional experience as a road through a landscape. The result was a lecture that was clearly equally moving for both autistic and non-autistic people. I had found a way to represent what happens inside me.

Since that time I've played with the idea of writing my story. But it took time to come to terms with my diagnosis of autism. A good book should be written with some distance, for only when you're standing on the mountain can you really see how the plains at the foot of the mountain are structured.

[...]

On Dancing to the Checklist

I continued my studies as a doctoral candidate at the university in Kiel, because there I am allowed to pursue my personal research interests to some extent, at least. Outside the lively city of Kiel in the middle of Gettorf I find my oasis of calm. I've rented a room from an older woman named Vogt. The atmosphere of her home is domestic and comforting.

[...]

Naturally, I immediately seek out the dance classes at the university in my new surroundings. And I have no problem finding dance partners. Over time it turns out that I constantly and regularly make dates to dance with Brigitte, a pharmacology student. Although she, too, already has a boyfriend, dancing with her is always fun. She opens new worlds to me.

With her, for example, I slowly but surely discover the discotheque. Whenever Kiel's biggest disco, the MAX Music Hall, holds a "Ball Night", most of the dancing is standard and Latin, with some disco-Foxtrot. So we go together to get some fun dance practice. For me it's a kind of disco therapy.

I quickly notice that discos are no place for me to find my partner for life. All the women who go there aren't my type. And the noise and the smoke get more and more unbearable as the hour grows later. And the music, unfortunately, is always much too loud.

Still, I manage to talk Brigitte into always taking our breaks between dances outside the disco, noise-free and rejuvenating. In winter we even retreat to my car, which is parked nearby. Of course, I have a supply of drinks stashed in it. That saves the cost of refreshments, too.

Dancing continues to be a lot of fun. And I wouldn't ever want to stop dancing. But for some reason, it doesn't seem to be my fate to meet even one woman through dancing. Apparently only four kinds of women go there:

1. those who have already been dancing for a long time and as a result already have a partner;
2. those who like to dance, but are going out with someone who hates to dance and don't want another partner for anything other than dancing;
3. those who only use dancing as a way to meet someone for short-term fun, and
4. those who are looking for a partner, but there's something about them that's already scared off others; in other words, those who don't get a partner.

Where I should ever find a girlfriend for myself, I don't know. I make many attempts to establish friendships at the university. We meet in student pubs where there's always so much jibberjabber, an indefinite confusion of voices. We walk through the botanical garden, dance together. Nothing else happens. Over and over again, apart from the leisure activity at hand, the women want no more meaningful contact with me at all. Casual friendships, sure, but deeper connections: no. For some mysterious reason, that never works out.

I wonder about this. Maybe I have to be more selective to reach my goal? Over time I work out a checklist with important qualities and characteristics a woman has to have to be a good fit for me:

- Honesty, openness and transparency
- Reliability
- A natural, family-oriented, domestic type
- Similar taste in music
- Someone who exudes calm
- Interested in joint leisure activities that strengthen the relationship for the long term, for example bike riding, hiking, dancing, travel; she should either join in these things or at least accept that I spend some time pursuing these activities alone
- Non-smoker
- Anti-alcohol stance

Inner values are much more important to me than external appearances. I especially don't want a disco diva craving a certain image of herself or continual flirtation who might be sexually stimulating on the outside, but doesn't have anything else to offer. In the end, I'll be much happier with a woman who maybe doesn't look so fabulous, but is a real "sweetheart".

From now on, whenever I make a new acquaintance I will immediately check to see if a woman fulfills these criteria before I have more to do with her. As time goes by I meet several potential

girlfriends. Most of them dance at the university, others somewhere else at the university. And I run an announcement in the Kiel *Stadtmagazin*:

“Ph.D. candidate, 24y/176cm (not a disco type), seeks non-smoking She (19-26y). Are you also thrilled by fantastic landscapes, dream roads and experiencing nature? If you also love to dance and consider yourself natural, romantic and open, then we should finally meet each other!”

In addition to a lot of dubious offers, there are a few women among the responders whom I meet. But none of them fulfills even the minimal number of points on my checklist. The woman I'm looking for doesn't seem to exist.

Winter is almost over. By now it's already light outside in the mornings. When I wake up I'm greeted by a bright, lovely twittering of birds that increases from day to day. It fills me with joy. And it deepens my longing for a partner.

[...]

A Dentist's Appointment with Consequences

It's that time again. A dentist appointment is coming up. It should be nothing but an inspection of your teeth, a simple checkup, but the dentist will probably find something again. That's almost always been the case in the past. Nonetheless, like every other time, I still hope to be given the “teeth look fine” seal of approval without further ado.

In the exam room I notice a woman who triggers highly unusual vibrations in me. Everything starts with her voice. And her white clothes, especially the pants. It's not the voice of a typical dental assistant that reaches me. It's a voice that broadcasts something that I've never received before.

I don't know what it is, but I feel it. I sense that even though she does this job especially thoroughly and well, she isn't made for this work, but perhaps for me. But how on earth did I come up with that? What is this? I don't find an answer, only strong, odd vibes.

I especially like looking at this woman from behind, because then she can't see me. And above and beyond the vibes it's her tight-fitting white clothes that literally excite me.

The other thing that speaks to me here is that this woman apparently doesn't belong permanently in this dental assistant world. She could be a doctor, but obviously isn't one. There's something about her that makes her different from the others. Just like I always feel different.

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

To make the dental inspection quick and painless, I make myself comfortable in the dentist's chair. A short time later the dentist appears. A.e., as expected, of course, he finds significant deficits in my teeth. Why, there is even an entire tooth missing. Yes, a tooth was pulled at one point and the gap is still there today. Now things get serious. I should finally get a bridge there. So the treatment will last a while longer, and it will be expensive, too.

But the gap in my teeth isn't all that needs attention. A small spot of decay he tackles immediately. While he is busy with my teeth, I study the woman. At first I follow every single seam, every detail of her clothes. And I try to look at her. Especially intensely, without looking right into her eyes.

Because I can't do that; instead of eye contact I have bridge-of-the-nose contact. I learned this in a rhetoric course once. To other people it seems like I'm looking right at them, but in reality I'm looking just past their eyes. Why I can't look another person in the eyes, I don't know.

The vibes that reach me are growing stronger. I am at the dentist and experiencing very strange emotions that want to stir in me. But I also feel this wall again.

It's as if I am driving along the road of my life in a gently rolling landscape, take a curve, and all of a sudden the jagged, snaggletoothed mountains that had been spotted off in the distance are much closer to me. They are the wall that must be overcome on the path to satisfy the longing for love. Is this where the road takes a turn that leads through and over this nearly insurmountable mountain range? At a point where rationally I would never have looked for a pass? At the dentist, rather than at a disco or a dance? But this place somehow doesn't look anything like it would be possible to cross the mountains here.

At that moment I remember a trip to Iceland shortly after I finished high school, where I helped a teacher cross a deep, ice-cold and quickly flowing glacial stream without a bridge. Back then I said to her, "You want to cross a strong river not at its narrowest point, but where it's widest." Because where the river is narrow, it is also fast and especially deep. Where the river is wide, on the other hand, it is slow and shallow.

Where it looks easy, it's most difficult. And where it looks complicated, it is easy. Is that also true here in the mountains of life? It's a very unique voice that comes from within that suddenly says to me, "You're in the right place. Not at the narrow, fast-moving dances where it looks more likely, but here is your path. And the paths of other people, they don't work for you anyhow! And the roads you have to take don't work for them. Always go your way. If you take your lead from the others, you'll never find your path!"

This mountain range is another image for my strange wall that alienates and blocks my communication. Dammit, how can I start a conversation with this woman in the white pants? At that moment I remember the first lesson my landlady gave me in the East Prussian art of flirting.

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

Smile. That was it! Smile. That's something! So I put on a wide grin. While the dentist fumbles around in my mouth with his drilling, grinding and suction apparatuses, I begin to test the theory from the flirting lessons.

I also have no idea if she has even noticed me, or if I'm just one of many patients for her. How on earth should I be able to tell? This isn't a disco here, where I could simply ask now if she is perhaps a woman that one can get to know and later marry.

At some point the treatment comes to an end. I stand up, make another appointment with the other dental assistant and leave the office. It is the first time that I look forward to being able to go back to the dentist soon.

Two weeks later I am there again. And the woman with the tight white clothes is there again, too. Wonderful! And the vibes reach me even more strongly than the last time. Again I put on my wide grin. And look at her very intensely.

But other than that, unfortunately, once again nothing happens. No reaction from her. Nothing but communicative silence reaches me. Loud silence lies in the air. Why does she attract me so magically?

Several treatments follow, during which I don't see the woman. What a shame. She must have been a young doctor after all, who was helping out the dentist temporarily. That my mouth has become a big construction site and I'm getting fitted for the first bridge of my entire life, all of that is beside the point.

Since I repeatedly failed to make contact, I tell my landlady about the previous encounters in order to find out if the woman might still be located. I am distraught that in spite of flirting I couldn't bring myself to begin a conversation with this woman.

Finally Mrs. Vogt says to me in her harsh East Prussian voice: "Mr. Schmidt! You must have flirted quite well. Surely you must have noticed how the woman reacted to it! Even if she didn't say a word."

"But how should I have noticed that?" I ask back.

"Mr. Schmidt! People notice things like that! Did she turn away, or did she return your gazes? Did she play with you?"

"No, she didn't play with me. What should anyone play with me when there's a drill in my mouth?"

"Do you know what, Herr Schmidt? I believe the woman flirted back at you. Do you know why I think that?"

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

“No?!”

“Because she didn’t say anything. Either the woman was also flirting with you, or she is completely irritated by you. But because she stayed in the treatment room, she seems not to be irritated by you, but rather taken with you. I will try to help you!”

“How would you do that?”

“I’ll come up with something. It would be a shame if the woman of your dreams was so close to you and then disappeared again. Mr. Schmidt, you have to take action now! Women like that tend to wait!!!” she finished with a flourish.

A few days later Mrs. Vogt sits down next to me on the balcony. “Mr. Schmidt, I have made some inquiries. I called the dentist for you and explained your problem to him...” Finally I am given unasked-for information about the young woman from the dentist’s office.

Her name is Martina Piepgras, she has a college prep degree and is in training to become a dental assistant. My landlady has even researched her telephone number and written it on a piece of paper for me. “You can call her here tomorrow! I think she would be happy to hear from you!”

But the next day I have a brief checkup at the dentist anyway. Again I see the woman whose name I now know to be Martina Piepgras. My name she can just look up in the patient files, I think. The landlady said repeatedly that it was up to me to start establishing contact.

So I smile at the woman again. But again I don’t notice any visible reaction. But she doesn’t go away, either. Strange, strange. Man, it would be much, much easier if she would just talk to me! But that doesn’t happen. Not only does that not happen, nothing happens. Absolutely nothing.

Finally I leave the practice once again without having accomplished anything. In my mind’s eye I again look at the snaggletoothed mountains. I don’t see a turnoff in front of me. While the main street leads along the valley, a smaller, but good, street turns off to the right and leads straight to the mountains. And in the distance you can even make out the serpentine curves with which it winds up into the foothills before the main ridge.

I pause: the road isn’t marked, but it leads in the direction I want to go. No one can tell me whether I should turn onto it. But to find a girlfriend, that means change. After thinking about it for a long time, I am ready for this change. I make a pact with myself to face all the challenges that wait for me along this path and that will get me in shape to cross many more mountain ranges.

[...]

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

The strategy of exchanging memories is a big hit. It seems to work perfectly. For days now we've spent every day together. We've already made lots of little bicycle tours around Gettorf and day trips to the Baltic coast between Kiel and Eckernförde.

The calendar already shows October 23, 1991. That's a red-blue day against a rust-brown-white background. The trees still have their leaves. And with them, the very last hint of summer lingers in the air, although autumn is clearly approaching. We're out on our bicycles on a gorgeous day to gather in this natural energy. First we'll go to the Schlei, then up into the hills of the surrounding area.

We ride through an autumn-enchanted forest outside Lehmsiekberg. Then we reach an observation point near what's known as Hermannshütte. There stands a wooden bench, inviting us. From here the view encompasses meadows and hedges, fields and the waters of the Schlei. And you can see the moors and the farm where Martina grew up.

So we sit down on the bench to soak in the amazing panorama. As my gaze sweeps across the landscape and then toward Martina, I feel like one of those guys in many a "Heimatfilm" out and about with his beloved. And the viewer, now he wants to know when and how the two will finally kiss each other for the first time.

At that moment I realize the conditions are essentially dream-like to take exactly that next step. Even the glowing red setting sun is in place. Whenever there was a setting like that in the films, things got romantic. God surely can't do any more to tell me what I need to do next.

Although I had only expected the first kiss to take place after several months of getting to know each other, I feel that the moment has arrived. But at the same time, I don't know how to go about it. On the road of my life I see a turnoff. If you want to find new ways, you have to do without road signs. I decide to turn into the new, entirely unfamiliar street. At least to find out if this could be the way I want to go, or a dead end.

And so we watch the red glow of the setting autumn sun together. As it sinks lower, unfortunately, it gets cooler and cooler. Of human warmth there's not a trace. Still, I continue to receive strong vibes letting me know that exactly here and now will determine whether or not something can develop out of this friendship. If we just stand up and ride away now, nothing will change. I feel that.

So I wait. But nothing happens. It is quiet and sublime. By now the full moon is even rising on the eastern horizon. The firmament now displays everything it has to display. Even more kitschy film scenery is no longer possible. An unmistakable sign?!

Martina is sitting next to me on the bench, but is still much too far away for what has to come next. I decide to use the deepening coolness.

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

“What can someone do to get warm? Take a guess,” I prompt her.

Her answer is unfortunately not very helpful for my purposes: “I don’t know – dance the samba?”

“That’s one possibility. But there’s another one,” I persist.

“I haven’t got the vaguest idea. Tell me!” she says. Regrettably, she still hasn’t slid the tiniest bit closer to me.

Since on the one hand I have absolutely no idea if Martina is really ready, and on the other hand I want to, no, *must* take advantage of the present scene, I start to revive her memories of the past weeks:

“Well, you remember in that farm museum you told me that the cow shed is right next to the house so everyone can keep each other warm.” Once again, sadly, I get no utilizable reply.

“So bodies give off warmth. And when there are two people watching the sunset and they’re cold, then...”

“Then?”

I simply don’t receive any signal as to whether for her, too, the time has come to touch each other with more than just a hand. No counter question. Nothing – nothing – nothing. Inside I’m slowly starting to get desperate. If I were alone here, I would express my emotions outwardly with strong jerking and flailing. But I can control myself. Martina doesn’t know me well enough yet that she would understand everything, I suspect.

In the meantime, the sun sinks lower and lower, faster and faster. Soon it will be set and I will probably have missed the chance of my lifetime. Dear God, Manitu or whatever your name might be, I need help. I understood, but HOW should I do it? The firmament continues to send me the unmistakable signals of a higher power insisting I act. In me echoes a harsh, demanding voice speaking English: “Now, it’s your turn! Now OR never!”

Outside it’s still like being in a film, there is even more scenery than in a film. But not for long. What on earth should I do? No, how – how – how on earth should I do it? Again I sit there. Nothing. Then something important occurs to me: a very important condition my future wife should fulfill is that she accepts me as I am. Because if that’s not possible, we wouldn’t be right for each other.

While I think about that, it becomes clear to me that I actually don’t have anything further to think about. If I think the moment has come, then I should just let it be there and act. Somehow. Regardless how. Regardless of how I do it, if we are meant for each other, she will like it. So I

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de

PATMOS
ESCHBACH
GRÜNEWALD
THORBECKE
SCHWABEN

The publishing group that
captures the spirit of life

gather all my courage and put my arm around her. And in fact there is no “Are you crazy?!” reaction. So I go further and with a “Then we could also do THIS,” pull her onto my lap.

Afterwards I ask her, “Did you think so, too?” She says yes, but something still seems to be missing. On the one hand, there’s no rejection in response. But at the same time, what I’m doing is just not like in the movies yet. Something is missing. The cuddling and kissing. But can I really kiss her now? Just like that? More than an “Are you crazy?!” can’t really result from it.

At that moment it occurs to me that there was once some kind of lesson about the ideal kiss. Unfortunately I can’t remember that lesson anymore. Then an inner voice says to me, like one last warning:

If you want to cross a raging river and there is a bridge, cross it. Who knows if and when the next one will be! Even if you feel unsure of yourself and unprepared!

So I have to cross over now. I give myself the all-decisive kick to make that step over the bridge. Carefully I draw closer to her face. One last glance at the kitschy film scenery with the western sky glowing red from the setting sun and then my lips adhere to hers.

The people on earth write the 23rd of October 1991. And I manage the first kiss with Martina. Romantically, according to a spontaneously planned script. It quickly becomes clear that Martina had only been waiting for it the whole time. And me, dimwit that I am, almost missed the opportunity again.

Because I always want to plan everything just so. The scenery was right, the place was right. But the kiss, a sign of love, it just didn’t want to be planned. Feelings don’t let themselves be planned. And if this relationship is going to work, apparently I’ll have to divulge many more of the emotions I experience to the outside world. But I cannot. Why?

Even as a child, Curls [a name the author calls his mother] always challenged me, reprovingly and eternally repeating herself, with the words: “You have to come out of your shell much, much, much more!” Back then I asked myself what on earth she meant by that. In this moment it becomes clear, crystal clear. I want to, but I can’t – can’t – can’t – not yet. You have to make it! No, more: You will make it! Sometime! Yes! Believe it!

Contact:
Verlagsgruppe Patmos der Schwabenverlag AG
Claudia Stegmann, Foreign Rights Manager
t: +49 711 4406 148
f: +49 711 4406 177
claudia.stegmann@verlagsgruppe-patmos.de
www.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de