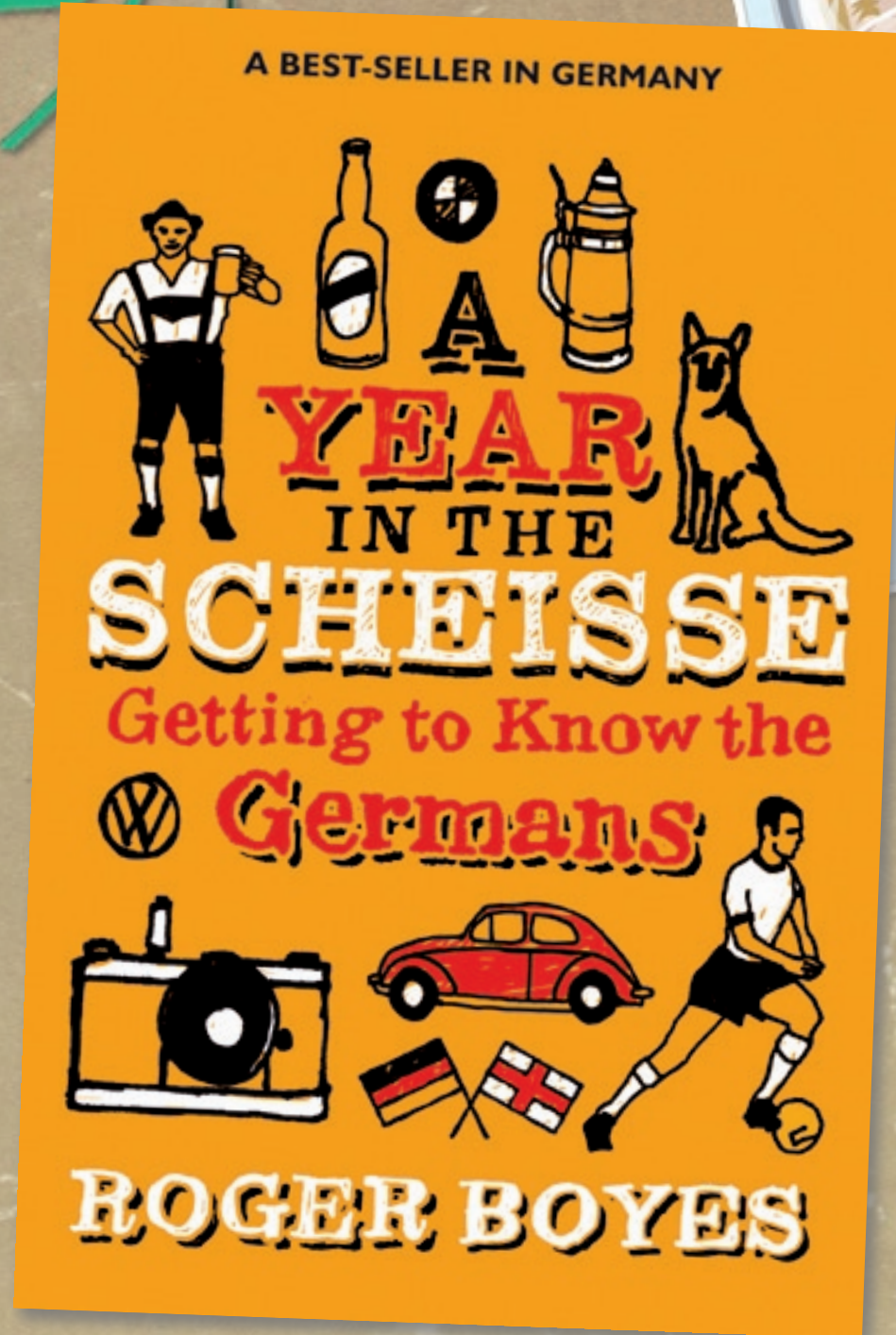


Roger Boyes

# A YEAR IN THE SCHEISSE

Getting to Know the Germans



– Chapter Three –

**An Indecent Proposal**

‘I’m afraid it doesn’t look good!’

Dr von Landauer’s reedy voice came drifting out of his office. His door, leather-padded to muffle financial secrets, was slightly ajar. The secretary looked disturbed, scratching the inside of her ear with a biro in a most unattractive manner.

‘What’s that all about?’ I asked her, nodding towards the door. We had known each other for some time and I had never seen her so on edge. She took off her Gucci glasses, rubbed her eyes and replaced them. She seized a piece of scrap paper, crumpled it and threw it, with one vaulting movement, into a wastepaper basket. I felt like a student of Dr Freud confronted with an interesting neurological case-study.

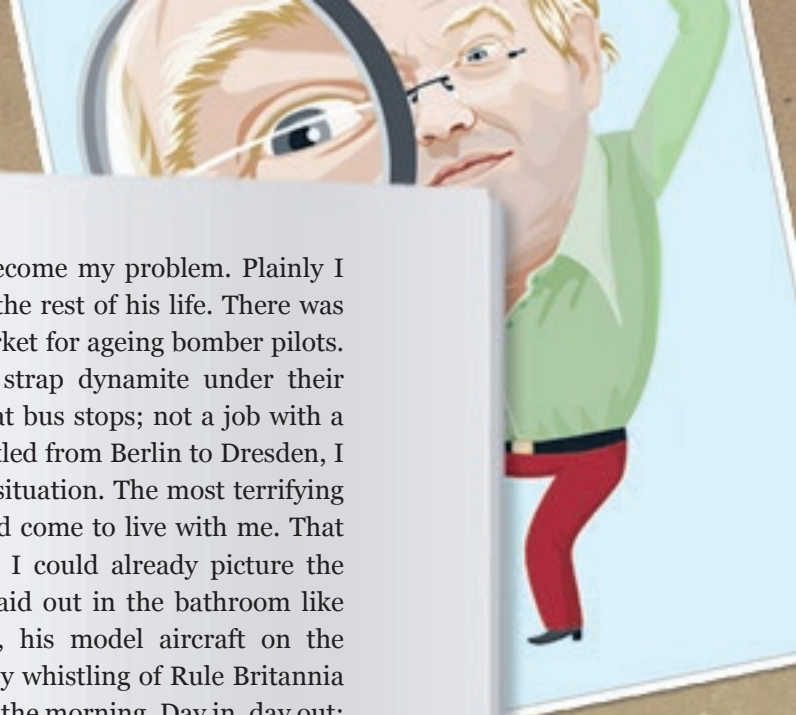
‘He’s expecting you,’ she blurted out at last.

‘Landauer wants to talk to me?’ She gulped. I gulped.

Dr von Landauer was my tax adviser. We had been at university together and he was certainly the most boring of my acquaintances there, unable to drink two beers without reciting some lines of Ovid. It was only after we all graduated that we noticed he had not once, in four years, ever paid for a drink. As a result our whole gang – even Steve, who was beginning to make millions with a website called kill-your-neighbour.com – trusted Dr von Landauer with their money. He may have been a bit strange but he was a genius of sorts. I certainly needed a financial mastermind. Yet another phone call from my father had convinced me that he was destitute. Since I had no brothers or sisters, and since my mother had long since

divorced him, my father had become my problem. Plainly I would have to support him for the rest of his life. There was not a booming employment market for ageing bomber pilots. Nowadays bombers tended to strap dynamite under their shirts and blow themselves up at bus stops; not a job with a financial future. As the train rattled from Berlin to Dresden, I tried to make sense of the new situation. The most terrifying option was that my father would come to live with me. That had to be avoided at all costs. I could already picture the daily struggle: his shaving kit laid out in the bathroom like grenadiers awaiting inspection, his model aircraft on the mantelpiece, his cheerful off-key whistling of Rule Britannia as he showered at five o’clock in the morning. Day in, day out: it was a fast track to insanity.

Even the gentler options sent shudders down my spine. Unless he had already sold it, Dad was the proud owner of a Tuareg safari caravan, which was parked in his back garden awaiting some extraordinary adventure. Dad never travelled anywhere in it but used to walk the few yards from the kitchen, past the dahlias, to the blue-and-white caravan and sit quietly, sunk in a dream world, drunk with the possibility of independent travel, bargaining perhaps with Bedouin camel traders or sheltering from the poisonous arrows shot from blow pipes by Congolese pygmies. Now I could see a different future for the little Tuareg safari caravan with its chemical toilet and head-bruising bunk bed. It would be parked outside my Berlin apartment block. In Dad’s fantasies, the caravan would give him autonomy. I squeezed my eyes closed and imagined what would happen next. First, he would ring the doorbell for sugar, then to use the toilet – the caravan’s sewage system was constantly blocked – then to use the phone, or to complain



about the neighbour's cats, or because the heating had broken down. My home, my work and my life would become satellites of my father's caravan.

I needed a quick solution from Dr von Landauer. What does a room in an old people's home actually cost? And even if I could afford it, how was I going to persuade him to live in one, an Englishman among the Huns? It didn't bear thinking about. Out of the window of Dr von Landauer's out-chamber I could see a human centipede of Japanese tourists shuffling towards the Zwinger Palace, Nikon digitals at the ready. They had twenty-five minutes for August the Strong and then it would be back to the coach and on to Prague. I envied them. It was easier, I felt sure, to be an Asian in Europe than an Englishman in Germany; they were protected by a kind of innocence, a special immunity to the European virus.

'Life isn't supposed to be easy, you know,' said the secretary, as if reading my thoughts. Perhaps I had spoken aloud, a further symptom of my mental decay as a journalist. I could see that she was almost in tears. The piggy redness round her eyes, which I had taken to be a dust allergy, was now becoming watery.

'Is anything the matter?' I could not remember her name. Women were so complex.

'In there,' she pointed to the office and broke off her sentence. I took this to be an invitation to enter Dr von Landauer's sanctum. There was an odd whispering noise coming from the room, which I had earlier taken to be a defective air conditioning machine. A curious smell too, an obscure eau de cologne perhaps, or a Saxon gastronomic delicacy.

The sight that greeted my eyes can only be described as hellish. As a foreign correspondent I had been in some unpleasant

situations in the Balkans and other trouble spots. Dante's Hell had flatterers steeped in human excrement, false prophets with their heads on backwards and hypocrites in cloaks made of lead. What terrible sin, then, had von Landauer committed in his earlier life? As I walked in, the tall, distinguished financial adviser to Germany's celebrities, keeper of a thousand secrets, had his hand up the bottom of a black Labrador.

'It doesn't look good at all,' he called out again to his secretary. Slowly it dawned on me that his comment had nothing to do with my financial status.

'Stand still my beauty, this is hurting me more than it is hurting you.' The desk had been cleared of heavy, embossed tomes about EU directives and the ins-and-outs of inheritance. Even the light-up plastic globe showing all member countries of the Tax Accountant Association of the Western Hemisphere, even his precious globe had been shifted onto the floor. The black Labrador, squirming with discomfort, was straddled over the blotting paper while Dr von Landauer burrowed deep inside the animal like a rescue team searching for trapped coalminers. Slowly, very slowly, my accountant's hand, sheathed in a plastic washing-up glove, emerged from the bottom with a soft plop. This surely was a Dante-esque vision: a divine punishment for incompetent accountants.

'Aaah!' said Dr von Landauer.

'Aaah?' I said, a little shy of interrupting this very intimate operation.

'Oh, you're here.'

'Yes, Ingo,' – we had dubbed him 'Bingo' at University because of his ability to juggle numbers – 'we have an appointment. About my finances. I can come back later.' I was groping for words.



‘Anal glands,’ said Dr von Landauer.

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Can’t live with them, can’t live without them.’

Dr von Landauer chuckled to himself. He stripped off the glove and dropped it into the waste paper basket, next to a faded copy of the Tax Accountant’s Bulletin. ‘One hundred tips for clever investors’, it said on the front cover.

The accountant smacked the sore bottom of the dog. ‘Off you go, Rasputin.’ Then, as the dog gambolled stiffly to the door, Ingo raised his voice so that his secretary could hear. ‘It’s the glands, Julia. You’ll have to get rid of them! But don’t worry, it’ll be painless.’

‘She’s been worried all day,’ said Dr von Landauer, wiping his hands with moist tissues. ‘Just make sure he doesn’t sit on a damp pavement for a few days.’

Through the open door I could see the secretary, Julia, cradling her dog. They both seemed in need of therapy.

The accountant rubbed his nose with the hand that had recently been on canine safari and started to place his files back on his desk.

‘How’s Mac?’

‘Fine,’ I said, hoping the conversation would not turn to Mac’s anus.

‘Paying dog tax?’

‘No, he’s an illegal.’

‘Well, watch your step. Berlin is training the unemployed to be dog inspectors. Quite tough some of them. Ex-army. Kosovo, that kind of thing. They’re setting up a special dog-catchers camp. Every euro counts nowadays.’

At university it was always clear that Ingo wanted to be a vet. His father, however, was paying for his studies – Oxford

was not cheap – and insisted that only women should make a profession out of animals. It was Ingo’s personal tragedy. Animals were his passion but the rules of his caste were that one did not bring passion to a profession. That was vulgar. ‘I’m a vet trapped in the body of an accountant,’ he would explain to us. And now, with his father long dead, it was too late to change his life. He expected, though, that all of his clients and his staff should be animal owners. The greatest triumph of his hybrid career so far was to treat the tame but arthritic leopard of an Italian soprano while simultaneously liberating the singer from her duty to pay VAT. I explained my father’s precarious situation and my reluctance to become his carer. Dr von Landauer nodded his head with understanding while fiddling with the computer that had been put back on the desk. He whistled through his teeth.

‘I can only repeat: it doesn’t look good.’

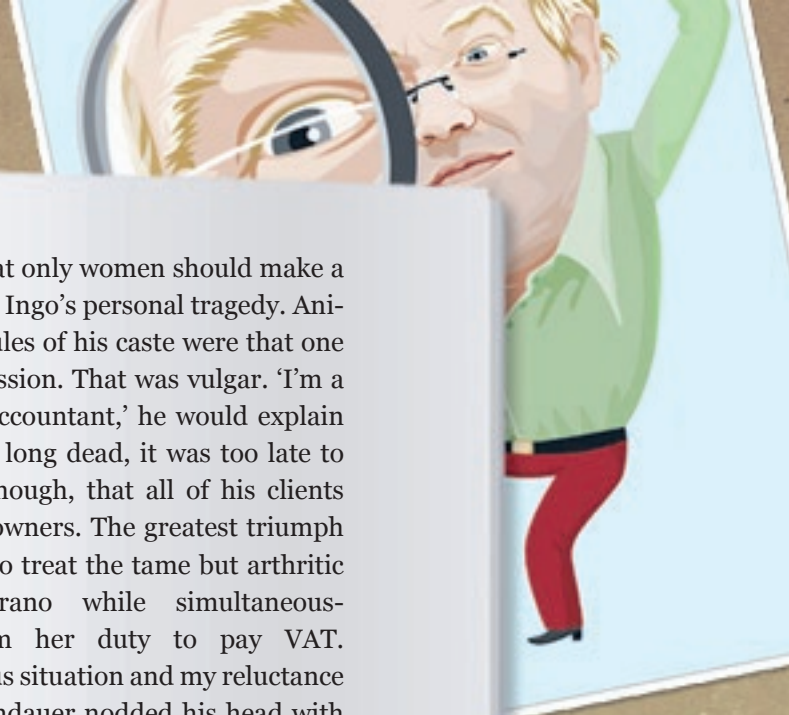
‘No, Ingo, that was Rasputin. I don’t, thank God, have a problem with my anal glands.’

‘I was talking about you too. Look, your father is broke and old, which means, in the Anglo-Saxon culture, that he has to survive on a state pension that can barely keep a Chihuahua in biscuits. And that means, old chum,’ – he said this in English, in what he imagined to be an aristocratic drawl: ‘o-l-d c-h-u-m’ – ‘you have to pick up the bill. How long has he got?’

My chin dropped.

‘That’s a rather heartless question.’

‘Realistic. West-Highland terriers, lifespan fourteen to sixteen years; Dobermans, eight to eleven years; male humans, seventy-three to seventy-seven years; British male humans, sixty-eight to seventy-three. Got to know these things in my business.’



'He was a pilot. Got through the war OK.'

'Ah – the survival gene! You've got him until he's eighty-five. What is he now? Mid-seventies?'

I nodded.

'We're looking at €200,000 in care costs alone. Does he eat a lot?'

'Ingo, this is my father we're talking about, not one of your bloody Dobermans.'

'Calm down, it's just a question of working out how much extra income you will need. Because, quite frankly, you are already living well beyond your means. I was about to send you a letter on this very subject. You're eating in restaurants, taking taxis. These are thin times and you have to adapt.'

'I just want to do my bit to support the Berlin economy.'

'Berlin will go bankrupt with or without your help. It is the last proletarian fortress yet it has no factories. Do you know how many Berliners regularly visit restaurants? Thirty thousand! Out of a population of three million. Why do you think you should belong to the tiny minority and not to the majority? Why don't you learn to cook properly and stay at home more?'

I acknowledged the advice with a sharp nod.

'So what should I do? I mean, apart from starve and travel by tube.'

'Save, save, save. That is the spirit of the times.'

'How?'

'Move your apartment, get out of that ridiculously fashionable slum in Prenzlauer Berg.'

'Actually, I am about to move. To somewhere grander. The newspaper decided I need to live next to the rich and famous.'

'Where exactly?'

'Grunewald. Part of a big old house.'

Von Landauer sighed.

'It won't be cheaper, I take it.'

'No, it won't.' The rent was in fact double what I was paying. 'I thought I could write off the study against taxes. And the sofa where I read newspapers. And the dining room where I cook for politicians.'

'And the lavatory where you flush down the tabloids? And the bedroom where you entertain aspiring film stars? Those times have gone, you know. We live in a cold climate.'

Something cold and wet was pushing at my crotch. It was Rasputin's nose. I pushed him away and immediately felt guilty: the dog, after all, had a sore bottom and was about to lose his anal glands.

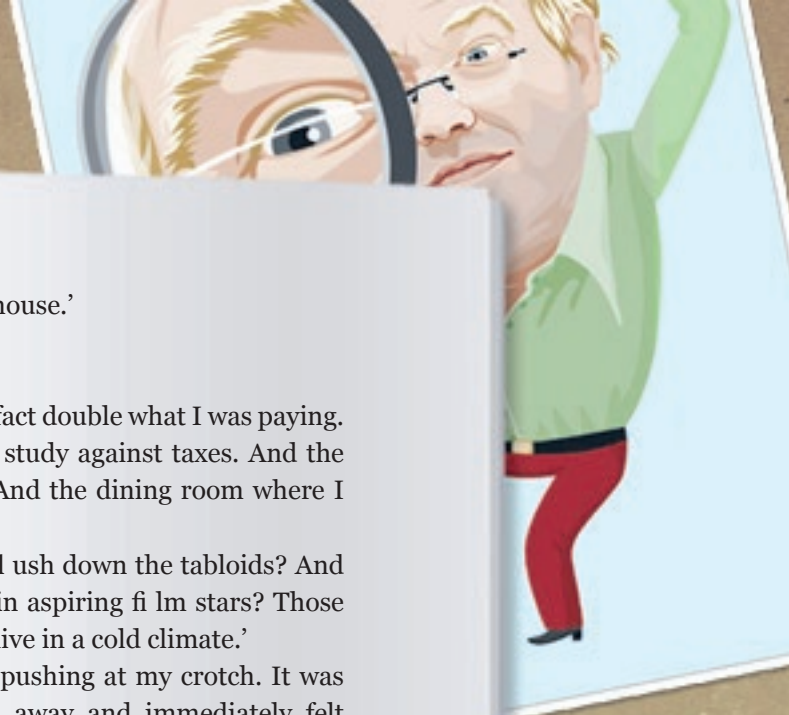
'Your fundamental problem is breaking up with Becky. I don't think you understand that a change in lifestyle means a change in financial health.'

'I hardly pay her anything anymore. Becky is about to become a news anchorwoman. Or at least she has applied for the job. They have told her to lose eight kilos.'

'She told me.' Becky, my former wife, had been at university with us.

I suspect, but cannot prove, that she slept with Ingo back then. She was certainly his type: well-bred, horse-loving and overweight. The modern English argot for male bonding based on shared experience of a woman is 'one-away friendship'. I didn't like the idea of being Ingo's one-away chum. He was unorthodox enough already, with his curious mixture of the fiscal and the canine.

'Becky always had a weight problem. She was born with a



silver spoon in her mouth and just carried on eating.'

'She seems happy enough now.'

'Yes.' Becky was living with a wiry woman archaeologist who sported a US-marines haircut. 'I want to bear her child,' she had told me recently. Predictably, I asked how this could possibly be arranged and she had glared at me as if I was being deliberately obtuse. 'I'm a Catholic,' she said (which was true), 'I believe in immaculate conception.'

'The point about the divorce,' said Dr von Landauer, speaking in his slow, plodding manner as if he were paid by the minute, 'is that you have been reclassified as a single man. Your tax bill has gone into orbit. It's a fiscal Sputnik.'

'I thought you were supposed to stop that happening.'

'No, you have to stop it happening. In the new Germany, the individual takes over more responsibility for his individual destiny. The collectivist Germany is dead. Almost.'

'So what's your role then, Ingo?'

'To help you understand the law. By the way, did Becky leave you any of the tapestries? I remember there was a rather fine Gobelin?'

'Everything went with her to the archaeologist's love nest.'

'Sad. You could have sold off something to pay for your father.'

'She left me with nothing apart from Mac.'

'Well, that can't be all bad. Women impoverish, dogs enrich.'

'I don't think you can make a universal principle out of that.'

'No, you're right. In fact, I'm thinking of a way out of your predicament that involves focussing on the innate wealth of womanhood.' Ingo talked like this when he was embarrass-

sed; in big, rotund sentences that sounded as if they had been translated from Latin.

'Do you mean, find a rich lover?' I studied my frayed cuffs, my stained corduroy trousers that now smelled of Rasputin. 'To be honest, I don't really think I'm gigolo material.'

'Goodness, no,' said Ingo, 'no, no, no – we don't want you selling your body. Or even body parts. Even if you sold a kidney,' Ingo clicked onto Google, 'you would be lucky to fetch €5,000, and that, quite frankly, wouldn't really solve anything at all. Apart from being illegal, I mean. What I had in mind was you selling your soul.'

I stared aghast at my Faustian accountant.

'Well, perhaps I'm over-dramatising a little. It's simply this: under German law, you cut your tax bill in half if you marry someone. It's called Ehesplitting, marriage-splitting. You get taxed on your average joint income. So it would be quite absurd to marry a rich woman – unless she was so fabulously rich that taxes became irrelevant. Germany is run secretly by wealthy widows, you know,' – he ran his fussy eyes across my jacket and egg-specked tie – 'but I don't see you as widow-fodder.'

This was getting a bit too intrusive.

'Am I being a bit dim here? You want me to get married to sort out my tax bill?'

'Let's say, it's my very strong recommendation. I'm not saying you should get married for money. On the contrary, the poorer your spouse, the lower your joint taxes. Don't make such a ridiculous expression. Marriage is a contract, who cares about the motivation? One third of all marriages in Germany end in divorce – and do you know which third it is? The 33.33 per cent of couples who were foolish enough to marry for love.'



‘It stinks, Ingo.’

‘No, marriage is a modern convenience, no more and no less. Remember Jane Austen: “A single man in possession of a good fortune...”’

‘It’s immoral,’ I said and drew back the chair. It was time to leave. I had come to his Dresden chambers expecting hard-nosed advice about investing in Mutual Funds and pork-belly futures and ended up being told that my only market capital was to shed my status as a single man. ‘I’ve been married, it meant something, it ended and it hurt. If I’m going to do it again, it at least has to be an act of free will and not something to please the Inland Revenue.’

‘Marriage is like being in the army – everybody complains but you would be surprised at how many people re-enlist. Don’t worry, I’ll draw up the contracts.’

‘Contracts made under duress are invalid.’

‘No one is pointing a gun at you.’

‘It’s a basic violation of morality.’

‘I never thought I would hear a journalist use a phrase like that,’ said the custodian of my finances. I flinched. ‘What’s immoral about this? Find a woman whom you like, whom you can live with and who is in a similar situation to yourself. Someone who can make you happy. Preferably someone who likes dogs. Tell her the truth. Sign the deal. What’s immoral about that? Immorality only comes into play if you have children. They have the right to know about the foundation of the relationship between father and mother – they have a right to a childhood grounded in truth. But this is a problem that can be solved over time, with care and intelligence. So you see: we can have a conversation about marriage, you and I, without once mentioning the word “love”. Love is optional; taxes are not.’

Where Ingo had developed his ideas on marriage, love and parenthood, I don’t know. His father loved his golden Retrievers more than he loved his wife, more than Ingo, more even than the Land Rover which he used to transport himself to the weekend hunt. Ingo’s father was prepared to send his son to an English boarding school at the age of eight, exchanged perhaps six sentences a week with his wife, but wouldn’t be parted from his two hunting dogs, Max and Mum, who would snore and fart in front of the coal fire at the von Landauer castle. Ingo was not an expert on happy families.

I stood up and rather stiffly offered my hand. Then, remembering where his hand had recently been, let it drop.

‘Ingo, thank you for everything. It’s all a bit too much for me to take on board right now. I’m more or less happy at the moment. I don’t need an emotional counsellor. I need cash.’

Ingo unfolded his lanky frame. ‘I don’t think you understand. You have responsibilities now. You have a child to look after – your father. What is more immoral: to let him die in poverty or to make a tax-friendly marital alliance that could one day open up the possibility of love?’

**extract from the book "A Year in the Scheisse"**

**by Roger Boyes,  
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