

Short stories and poetry

WISHES AND GOALS

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***I wasn't aware that words could hold so much.
I didn't know a sentence could be so full.***

Delia Owens

born 1949 is an American writer and zoologist.

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Wishes and goals

HHe didn't think anything of it when he left the house with his dog.

He left the house through the back door. He took the same route as always. Down to the stream, along the edge of the wood, past the hamlet with its tiny houses, up the local hill – to the summer meadow and the cross, then down through the wood on the other side, past St Hubert's Chapel and back onto the country road leading back to the village.

He met some small children playing by the stream, the hunter Unterberger with his dachshund, a couple of joggers he didn't know, and the new neighbours from opposite, who were also walking their dogs. The stream gurgled, the woods rustled, the flowers in the gardens exuded their scent, the wind on the local hill blew through his hair, and the country road lay there as always.

The dog whimpered softly and nuzzled his leg. Something wasn't quite right. "Come on, Freddy! We're not stopping now."

He wondered whether he'd kissed his wife before leaving the house. Had he told her how much he loved her?

Freddy had stopped scratching his leg. He was now running briskly on. It was always like that on the way home. The pace was quicker then, because Freddy was looking forward to his next meal.

What has become of the love between my wife and me, the great love we felt for one another?

They had had big dreams, big goals. They wanted at least four children. They wanted to emigrate to France, to the Vosges, to a small, deserted village. There, they would run an old farm and plant apple trees. He wanted to work as a writer on the side. His wife was a soprano. Perhaps she could have taught the children to sing and play an instrument. And they might then have gone to boarding school and perhaps studied music later, like their mother.

It turned out that his wife couldn't have children. They couldn't emigrate because they couldn't leave their elderly, sick parents on their own. His wife couldn't find work at the music schools in the area because there were no vacancies due to the war. He had lost his job at the munitions factory because he had developed an allergy that meant he could no longer work with metals. And his writing didn't bring in as

much as they'd hoped. A lot has gone down the drain in recent years. Nothing has turned out the way they'd imagined.

He arrived at the house with his dog in the late afternoon. His wife opened the door for him before he could even put the key in the lock. She threw her arms round his neck and kissed him so hard he thought he'd be crushed. The dog leapt up at them wildly, panting with joy.

My crazy life

I'm not weird. I haven't even done anything crazy in my life so far. I'm an ordinary woman. Everything in my life just plods along. No highs, no lows. No major experiences. No moments of happiness, no disappointments, no bereavements.

Or have I?

It was in Year 1 at primary school.

There were about forty of us children. More girls than boys. There were four rows of desks. The boys sat in the two on the right. The girls in the two on the left. In needlework lessons, it was just us girls. Meanwhile, the boys had woodwork in another classroom. PE lessons were held separately.

Although I had a best friend among the girls, I always preferred to hang out with the boys. At break time and on the way home, in my free time. Most of the time I hung about with Fritz, the boy next door. He, his mates and I – we were a gang.

Everyone else was excluded. We stuck together like glue. For a while, at least. Until the autumn after Year 4. That was to change everything.

I passed the entrance exam for grammar school. Fritz didn't. From then on, our paths began to diverge. I spent my afternoons studying. I don't know what Fritz got up to during that time. He 'only' went to secondary school. That was crazy.

It was at grammar school, in the sixth form, that I had my first great love. I went to a girls' school and was sixteen.

My girlfriend at the time lived in the city. I came from the countryside. We had a lot of fun together. We were a bit in love with our English teacher.

My friend had a much wider circle of friends than I did. She also spent a lot of time with people from other schools. For me, that was unthinkable; I always went straight home after school.

Once, my friend invited me to a school play. My parents rarely allowed me to go into town on my own in the afternoons back then. This time, I was allowed to.

The play was performed by the boys from a boys' secondary school. They were performing Schiller's **The Robbers**. I was very excited. It was a magnificent performance. I greatly admired the only girl who was allowed to take part. But that

wasn't what really captivated me. Because Heinz played the robber captain. In my eyes, he outshone everyone else. What seemed artificial or wooden in the other actors appeared to him to be consummate acting. He impressed me! He wasn't tall, but he had broad shoulders, an angular face, a prominent chin and long hair. I fell in love with him immediately. My hormones were going wild.

My friend then set me up with Heinz. It wasn't difficult. He was one of her boyfriend's best friends. I was in seventh heaven. Heinz was my first great love. I went out with him a few times and we exchanged wild displays of affection. The last time was one afternoon when he was home alone, with the house to himself, so to speak. I managed to keep my virginity, but at what a high price! He stood me up early the next morning before school started, where everyone met up every day. He just said briefly:

"It's over."

That was it. I was completely taken aback. My love was not reciprocated. I was bewildered and hurt. It hit me so hard that I can still feel the pain today when I think about it. I was in shock, and all I could do all day was cry, at school and at home. A void formed around me. Life went haywire.

My great love for the theatre, however, has remained to this day.

It was in Vienna where I studied. I studied pharmacy. That wasn't too far off from my parents' wishes. My father was a doctor. My sister studied medicine.

But my father was also a hunter. He took me out on the hunt a few times. And he thought I should take the hunting exam. I was then allowed to attend a hunting school during the summer holidays. I met my first husband there. He was the head of that school. He impressed me because he looked so much like the two natural scientists Konrad Lorenz and Otto König. My father was an admirer of comparative behavioural research.

Much to my parents' dismay, I dropped out of my studies. Suddenly, I was making my own decisions. That was quite mad, wasn't it!

Both my children are from my first marriage. I don't know whether I should focus on the present or the past here, because not everything concerning the rest of my life fits into the present. My daughter is no longer alive today.

I had never imagined that things could turn out this way. Whilst my son is capable and now has a small family of his own, my daughter chose a different life. She never completed a single course of study. She was never happy with a partner for long. She fell into alcoholism. On top of that, she took sedatives to forget her unhappy life. Just

before she was due to start her second stint in rehab, her life came to an end. One morning, after a binge of alcohol and pills, she didn't wake up again.

I'm not young anymore and have been through a lot. I'm happy with my second husband. And I could tell you plenty more that seems crazy to me now. But the best thing in my life was my time at drama school.

I realised as early as secondary school that acting fascinated me. In German lessons, we read quite a few plays. My teacher didn't usually let me read a leading role, but I breathed a lot of life into the supporting parts. And my classmates always enjoyed it. It was a welcome change from the otherwise rather dry lessons.

Actually, I would have liked to train as an actress. But I never received the support to choose this career, neither from my parents nor from my teachers.

It was only much later that I fulfilled my own wish to attend a drama school, the 'Schule des Theaters' in Vienna. I learnt a lot there and laughed a lot. I learnt to express emotions off the cuff, and to tap into every ounce of imagination within me. Both physically and verbally. I had wonderful encounters with people who shared the same love of the theatre. It was fantastic, truly fantastic, and certainly the craziest thing I've ever done in my life.

At some point, however, professional life caught up with me again. I couldn't continue with my acting lessons. I now run a small firm, together with my husband, who studied chemistry, which advises pharmaceutical companies on the approval of medicines. Over time, I have returned to the science I once had the privilege of studying: pharmacy.

But my artistic streak – I've also painted pictures – certainly won't let me go. I'll experience something even crazier!

Strong feelings

Threat

This former winegrower's farmstead had an upper storey. The house must therefore once have belonged to a more affluent winegrower. But there were many signs suggesting that the fate of the last occupants could not have been a happy one.

In the utility room, the neighbours told us, the owner had cared for her husband until his death. He had died of a brain tumour six years ago in the summer. The house had stood empty for the last years. The utility room was the coolest room in the house, and it must have been reasonably bearable for the man there during the hot summer. Whilst cleaning, I found a dusty syringe in the alcove next to the washing machine.

The housewife herself was depressed and had made several suicide attempts. One of the stable doors showed signs of fire damage because she had tried to poison herself with fumes, and the iron door to the garage bore marks from a crowbar because she had locked herself in with the engine running. People had tried to save her. She survived.

We had now been living in this old farmhouse for a week. I awoke from a confused dream. It was a pitch-black night. After feeling my way in the dark to the toilet in the bathroom next to our bedroom, I looked out of the window down into the courtyard. And there my breath caught in my throat. Out of the dark void appeared a figure, gaunt, dressed in dark clothes, an old man, who was slowly approaching the house. An eerie encounter. Fear gripped me. Yet the longer I looked at the figure, the less threatening it seemed to me. And I had to think of the late master of the house. Perhaps this spirit simply wanted to tell me that he was not unhappy, because we were now looking after his house. Radiating peace, the figure vanished into the darkness as suddenly as it had appeared. And I lay back down in bed, pulled the duvet over both ears and soon fell asleep again. But I can still remember this haunting vividly today. We have now lived in this old winegrower's farmstead for twenty-two years and have always kept the house in good condition; during this time, we have breathed new life into it and erased all the evil traces that may have lingered within these walls.

Peace

It was on New Year's Eve. My parents had visitors. It was the Mahlers with their two children, their son Poldi and their daughter Gerti, who were our age. After midnight, my brother and Poldi were engrossed in a Perry Rhodan comic, whilst my sister and I went for a walk in the freshly fallen snow with Gerti. We walked towards the cemetery because we wanted to see the many lights that people had lit on the graves for the New Year. Every now and then we could still hear fireworks going off. And we were still laughing at the jokes that had been exchanged between our parents at the turn of the year. But slowly, silence descended all around us. Only the snow still crunched beneath our footsteps.

When we reached the cemetery, we opened the creaking gate and stopped in amazement. The whole cemetery was bathed in a reddish light from the many candles, and the graves, covered in snow, looked like soft beds with cushions and bedspreads. Everything radiated a deep sense of peace, as if all the sorrowful souls had fallen silent. And peace settled upon our hearts too. Very quietly and reverently, we left the cemetery again, and nothing could take that peace away from us that night.