

Illustration: Bernd Schliffedecker



That Thing

Column

By Birgit Ehrenberg

It was the summer of hope, ripe with the prospect of two hearts eternally beating as one. I worshipped him. We were going to ride off into the sunset together—even to the end of the world; I was ready and willing for just about anything. He came to pick me up, and I crossed my fingers, hoping he'd still have the right car. Bingo. He drove the way men should—with poise, elegance, and vigor. I could feel how he loved his car, and how he enjoyed being in control of it. The temptation was irresistible. I spread my tanned, naked legs, letting my skirt slid up a little higher. I looked into his eyes. We had the same thing on our minds. We said nothing. The next time he shifted gears, his hand slipped over to my thigh. Then came his fateful words: "His name is Mr. Neidel."

I was devastated. Oh, no—this guy gives his thing a name. He's the total opposite of a divine being: he doesn't even know one of the basic rules for a real man. The one that says: Thou shalt not give a name to something that is just supposed to perform its duty. That's the kind of understatement that distinguishes a real stud. I turned away in disgust. What exactly does this joker expect from me? "Neidel, you know, like its previous owner," he added eagerly. What was that supposed to mean—the thing was used? And then it dawned on me. He was talking about his car. This was a double disappointment. He drove a used car. And the car was called Neidel. He couldn't have thought of a better way to destroy an erotic mood. We might just as well have gone for a cruise on reclining bicycles.

I can understand people's desire to ennoble an object that is important to them by giving it a name. To thereby remove it from the realm of anonymous existence. The first example in human history occurs in the Bible: Adam knew his mate. Eve. That is the highest and most civilized form of love. Not blind desire—knowing her. And naming her.

I can even understand this in the case of car owners who in their pride wish to elevate their vehicles to a level above all other cars of the same brand by bestowing a name on them. After all, a man's bond with his car is a very personal matter—malicious tongues call it the most intimate relationship a man can enter into. An automobile with unique talents certainly deserves a name. There is a tradition to this: Before men drove cars, they rode horses. A horse without a name would be unthinkable.

But horses, full-blooded, speedy, wild horses, are called things like "Black Arrow" and "Desert Wind." I can relate to that. They are never called "Mr. Neidel." If it must have one, a grown-up car should bear a name that suits it. One that elicits respect. Irony is completely out of place here. It would be like having your lover call you "Mommy." No matter what, extreme caution is advised whenever a man reveals that his car has a name. Whether it's jealousy or a lack of understanding, women tend to react with irritation to such disclosures. He should just keep it to himself, a sweet little secret between a man and his car, the kind that does wonders for any love affair.

But the owner of Mr. Neidel was being way too obvious about it, suspiciously ostentatious. He wanted me to know it. Maybe it was a test. Perhaps he just wanted to know if I was capable of dealing with the fact that things have names before placing his hand on my thigh. Because everything in his life has its proper place—and its own name. ◀