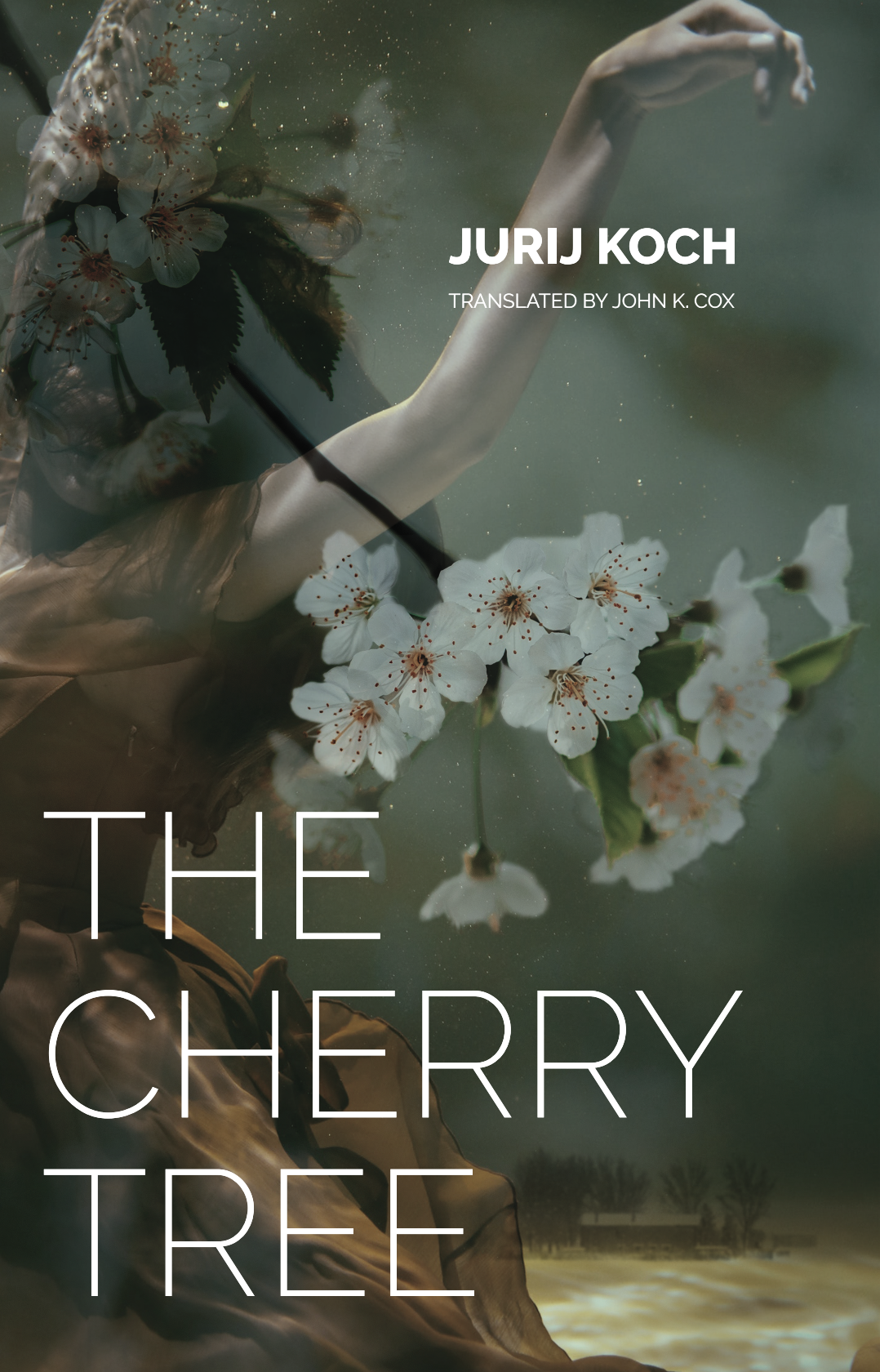
JURIJ KOCH
TRANSLATED BY JOHN K. COX
THE CHERRY TREE

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North Dakota Quarterly
Supplement 2

North Dakota Quarterly, Supplement 2

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Jurij Koch

Translated from the German by
John K. Cox

The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

This publication represents, to the best of my knowledge, the first English translation of a Sorbian novel. It contains a delightful and unique story, one that the author calls a novella, perhaps because of its tight story and intense focus on just a few characters. The work is, however, as long as many novels, and it is as rewarding and thought-provoking as any work of fiction I can imagine. Jurij Koch (b. 1936) likes to say that he has two mother tongues, Sorbian and German. Sometimes he writes in one language, and sometimes in the other; but he does not "translate" between the two. When two versions of the same book are needed, he writes the work again in the other language. The book you are holding now was originally written in German.

This is, in fact, the first book-length translation from German that I have done. That is one of the reasons that carrying out this translation was such a distinct pleasure. I began studying the German language in junior high school in Raleigh, NC, in 1978. I have lived and studied in Bonn, Munich, and Vienna, but my career has taken me into the study of Eastern Europe and, specifically, the intellectual history of the Balkans. As a literary translator, I have published over a dozen book-length works and collections of short stories from Serbian, Hungarian, Slovene, and other languages. It has been a calming and joyous "return to German" on which Jurij's novel has taken me over the past year, as our world is beset by political turmoil and a pandemic.

The second reason that working on this book was such a pleasure is the author. I am lucky enough to have visited Cottbus in the autumn of 2019, where Jurij drove me around Lusatia for three days and introduced me to several members of his family. My correspondence with Jurij, stretching back now several years into digital time and space, has been fascinating. His generosity, civic courage, unassumingness, and wittiness make him a unique person. There is much more of his writing in his languages yet to be discovered by the Anglosphere. I sincerely hope this is just the first of his works to appear in English.

The afterword in this volume contains a number of thoughts about Koch's style and his language. At this point it should be noted, though, that the unique rhythm of the

book, its true lyricalness and its tension between ambiguity (which consists, matryushka-like, of its own tensions) and exactitude owe a great deal to his unique diction and punctuation. I have tried assiduously to keep the distinctive feel of his writing, using mechanisms that can also work in English. One of the few things I have consciously altered is the spelling of two words. What Koch wrote as "Siwa" and "der Braschka," I have rendered with their Sorbian (Slavic) variants, Živa and *braška.*

The source text for this translation is the following book: Jurij Koch, *Der Kirschbaum*. (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1984).

For their support and gracious assistance in completing this translation, I would like to thank Jurij Koch, Ilja Koch, Jeff Pennington, Kathleen Turley Cox, Mark Minette, Marcela Perett, Gregor Kliem, Claudia Schicker, Thomas Bell, and Sylvio May. And of course I should mention, with great gratitude, all my wonderful German teachers over the years: the semi-legendary Frau Fritsch, Marilyn Jenkins Turberville, Kim Vivian, and Doryl Jensen.

This translation is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Edward P. Lowe (1932-1999). The world knew well of his great love of and expertise in all things German and Austrian, and my fellow Guilford College alumni will know how hard it is to try to sum up Ed's limitless urbanity, irrepressible

humor, and musical brilliance. What can I say, other than that he was the person who introduced me to great coffee, opera, and Munich. He cared deeply about his students, for decades of their lives, staying in touch by means of amazing lunches and random, merry telephone calls, and by handing out baby gifts and writing letters of recommendation, by reliving shared adventures and impishly reviving old nicknames. And he passed away far too young. "The spectacle," he used to say, "enjoy the spectacle that is opera..." That, and also: "If you want to know, go Lowe!"

—John K. Cox (john.cox.1@ndsu.edu)

The Cherry Tree

"Practice, practice, the power of beautiful tradition—so that what is beautiful does not always become, again, nothing. Recount to each other images of life. What was good, should exist."

—Peter Handke, "Walk About the Villages"

CHAPTER ONE

Windshield wipers. A cutout of reality, which is what really mattered, was kept clear. The man was hunched over the steering wheel. The headlights crawled over puddles, holes, water-filled ruts, tire tracks. The motor was loud, and the windshield wipers added their noise—jeeps were not built for comfort. Only power, cross-country power. Jeeps can be dirty. Actually they should be. Hence the gray color. Everything is simple, of a utilitarian modesty. And on jeeps there's always something out of order. On this one the tachometer wasn't working. The man tapped the thin pane over the dial, but the hand remained positioned at zero. The road was getting worse. *If these windshield wipers should happen to*... he thought as he shifted gears.

The muddy ground made the vehicle dance. You could tell from the movements of the steering wheel where the tires wanted to go. He removed his foot from the accelerator and turned on the high-beams. The light shot far out into the darkness, frayed, and hit nothing. Nothing but soggy night. The movable spotlight on the exterior also found nothing that might demarcate space, or distance, or a stopping place.

"Damn it!" he said out loud. The sound of his own voice startled him. Even it seemed strange to him—thin, alien, and long unused. He stopped the car. Something wasn't right. Something with the direction, the lay of the land. He unfolded the map that lay on the seat next to him. "But yes," he said. "I'm on the designated route." Sliding his thumb and forefinger across the paper landscape confirmed what he knew from experience. Don't go off the rails. Stay the course.

"At the end of the world there's just a simple wooden fence," he said to cheer himself up. "And I'm not there yet."

Onward! Now the vehicle was dancing again. In the little cutaway of reality that the wiper blades kept clear with their even back-and-forth, the shining strip of squishy ground slid under his vehicle. The droning of the radio failed to reduce the arduousness of the journey. A few foreign voices in foreign languages, with interference from other stations.

Then the wheels began spinning. They churned a rut in the mud. Switching to all-wheel drive didn't help. The vehicle was no longer standing; it was sitting. The light from the headlights rested on knee-high grass.

"That's it. We're done here. *Fini!*"

He got out of the cab. The rain soaked him through. Every step made him nervous.

"Shit, shit!" He slammed his fist down on the hood, and the metal clanged and vibrated. Then he walked around the vehicle, kicked the tires, as if the certainty that they were still in place might calm him down. When he reached for the door handle again, he lost his balance. It felt like there was a conveyor belt running under the soles of his shoes. He fell to his knees. Cursing, he stood back up and made it to the cab. He reached behind him, into the cargo space. The sleeping bag was there. Just in case.

At that point he turned out the light. The battery! You have to use it sparingly. Rain was drumming on the metal. He had never experienced darkness like this, such an implacable black closeness. More windshield wipers! He wanted to sense their movement. It was good to know that the vehicle in which he sat still had reserves of energy, and that with the push of a button you could use it to make this rotten night transparent.

Am I afraid? he thought. *No, I'm not. But at any rate the very question of whether…* Then he caught sight of a yellow point in the distance. A light. No doubt about it. The windshield wipers rendered it visible again and again,

plainly and distinctly. So he wasn't lost! Just stuck. As a matter of principle, he didn't get lost. And he'd get the jeep out yet, too. But what now?

He cut on the interior light, pushed the sleeping bag back into the cargo space, pulled on a rain slicker, and exited the jeep. As he left, he smacked the hood once more with the flat of his hand.

The battery in his flashlight was weak. The meadow was untended, but passable and he made headway. The point in front of his eyes grew larger by the minute. Now he knew that he'd made the right decision. No night so dark that it doesn't exhibit at least one point that prevents absolute darkness. One has to ferret out this point. That's the whole trick.

Initially he had thought that the point would be joined by other lights as he approached; a clutch of buildings would appear, a village. But the destination remained what it had been for him since the beginning: a window. The closer he got, the more distinct the outline of a house became; the light belonged to a farmhouse, the roof of which hung down very low. It was almost touching the ground, nearly poking into the garden. Enough light was coming out of the window to see how neat and organized the garden was. But that orderliness did not hold the man's attention. The things visible to him in the weak light registered only randomly, casually. Later he would recall some details, but not in the order in which they presented themselves to him upon his arrival; they were thoroughly

swirled together, like unsound witnesses on whom you could not rely. And the flowers will come to him, and the tall grass-like reeds, with its lance-shaped blades reaching as high as the window. The cherry tree, which remained in the darkness, is also going to come back to mind. Strange, that it would, too. But as witnesses they were all going to be useless. What court has ever had a cherry tree appear before it as a witness?

The man walked up to the window. There was no curtain. People didn't need curtains here, because no one expected anybody to look in through the window during the evening, when everything could easily be made out—the furnishings and the people amidst them. At the large table sat a woman and a man. They were seated across from each other, a young man and a young woman. Their arms lay on the table, as if they had been discarded after finishing their hard work for the day. Their arms alone showed how much they were enjoying the repose that the evening offered. In the middle of the wooden table their hands were almost touching. But only almost. The man and woman belonged together, and yet there was something between them that demanded the existence of this tiny distance. That was one way of looking at it. But other interpretations were also possible. Naturally the two of them belonged together. In a moment they'd get to their feet and go to bed. Then they could touch each other in ways that left no space between them. They were sitting on opposite sides of the table, beholding each

other. Maybe they were looking past one another. Their lips weren't moving and yet they were speaking. The woman, who was almost still a girl, had black hair that reached down to her shoulders. It lay there as if waiting to be taken, bunched together, in order to come apart again under coaxing fingers, and fall back into this same position, in which it covered half of her face, that face that needed its other half to demonstrate its full beauty. The man sitting across from her was older. He had broad, sloping shoulders, and the burdens of the day seemed to be lying on them still. He wore a shirt that was unbuttoned all the way down to his stomach. It was collarless and made of rough fabric, as if it belonged to a long-gone sense of fashion. But in some inexplicable way, it suited him. It made him look like a hero, although there was no indication of what kind of heroic acts he might have carried out. The shirt was simple, and the man was simple—a man who was at home here, in this landscape. His hair was short, in the way farmers like their haircuts. No particular styles were required, because there was no one here to pay attention to them. So it was just short and wild and suited for any type of weather. You just needed to spread your fingers and run your hand through it, and it was all set.

That exact movement involving hand and hair alarmed the stranger standing at the window. He had forgotten where he was, and why he had come there, forgotten that

the images before him were real, although they were playing out like a fairy tale in their stationary beauty that had the power to intoxicate.

He knocked on the pane. Both of the people at the table turned toward the window. The woman stood up and went to the door. In a moment an outside light came on. Now he saw the wooden gate. It was like an arch that connected the house with an out-building. A latch flew back and then the narrow door opened cautiously, as if it were just then being hewn into the gate to permit his entry.

"Who are you?" asked the young woman. The floodlight lit her up from behind, and he could make out only the outline of her body and her defensive posture, the readiness to close that little door again if she did not receive a satisfactory response.

"My vehicle broke down out there," he answered. "This weather … if you could help me … "

"Come in!" she said. She walked in front of him.

As he moved through the courtyard, he could not tell how large it was. The outdoor light atop the little arbor at the entrance to the house rocked in the wind as the woman approached it. A huge shadow occupied the wall on the opposite side of the yard. It crept up and down the side of the outbuilding. A few tools were visible: a scythe, a rake, a fish-net hung up to dry.

To dry? he thought. *That's pretty much pointless*.

In the arbor the woman stopped. “How can I help you?” she asked. He saw that she was willing to do whatever she could. At this point, she wasn’t just going to send him away.

“A lodging for one night. I can even sleep on the floor,” he answered. “In the jeep, you know… it wouldn’t be very… ”

She nodded. His path across the meadow in the night, towards that yellow point in the distance, had paid off.

She asked him in, finally, invited him to enter the house where he was enveloped by warmth as if two invisible hands had thrown a blanket over his shoulders.

The man at the table stayed seated. He nodded across the room. The chain of events did not seem to be of any particular interest to him.

The woman brought over a large cup. She placed it on the table. It was clear that it was for him and he went over to drink it.

“My name is Sieghart,” he said. “I wanted to get over into the valley. Our trailers are there. We’re doing some research… I left too late, and I guess… ”

He drank the tea, which in turn carried the warmth of the house into his core. He drank the tea out of that large cup from which aromatic vapors rose, as if every herb in the garden had been brewed up together. He didn’t know how to show his gratitude for being taken in like this. It was not a daily occurrence but seemed to be such a matter of course for these people. They didn’t ask for any details;

it was like they already knew everything. So he drank their tea in great gulps, and they looked at him the way one looks at a welcome guest who has not dropped by for a long while. But now he was there again, sitting at their table drinking tea out of that large cup that not everyone got to use. That was Sieghart's perception of what was happening to him. It was all fairly odd.

"There's a room upstairs where you can sleep," the woman said when he had finished the tea. She showed him the way.

He was already at the door when he heard the voice of the man at the table, who had not yet said anything.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow we'll get your car."

Sieghart turned back to him and saw that there was a smile on the man's face. The offer was unnecessary, but decent. He didn't mind it. In the past he had always been able to make do by himself when he'd had car trouble. Somehow or other. But he responded: "Thank you. We'll see. Good night."

Sieghart followed the woman up the stairs. There were just a few steps and then they were standing in front of the room where he was going to bed down for the night, a bivouac of the kind that can always be found somewhere. He opened the door. She turned on the light.

He was surprised when he saw the furnishings, the table with flowers on it, the dresser, the window, and the slanting ceiling below which stood a bed, freshly made up, and two chairs. It was warm here in the attic. "I don't know about this," he said. "Maybe it would be better if… "

"All of our guests sleep here," she interrupted. "There's only the issue of a sink… We don't have running water up here. In the summer we wash up at the pump in the garden. If you need anything else… "

"No, thanks," he said, glad to be finished with the time and effort being spent on him, glad that now everything was in place for this one night. He would have been satisfied with a pallet on the floor, with an easy chair, with a spot in the barn. As long as he could stretch out his legs. He apologized once more: "To be in the jeep in this weather, in the middle of the field… " So he had simply made for the point of light. Gone toward people.

"What's your name?" he managed to ask. It sounded like awkward gratitude.

"Ena," she answered. Then she left, as if to avoid any further questions that would not be capable of communicating anything. What can a name tell you anyway!

Sieghart closed the door. He could finally shed his soaking wet clothes. He opened the window. The rain had stopped. He looked out into the darkness. Somewhere out there, in the direction he was peering, must be his vehicle. "It'll be visible from here tomorrow." And tomorrow he would find the right route, the way to his colleagues.

He got into bed and knew immediately that a long time was going to pass before he would fall asleep. In unfamiliar beds he was used to lying awake a long while, and the more comfortable the bed, the longer and more annoying was his wait for the salutary unconsciousness that was needed for the next day and its bustling agenda. He regarded the darkness in the room and saw the contours of objects. Some light was coming in from somewhere, perhaps from below, where Ena and the man still were.

They were sitting at their table, and on it were their hands, almost touching. It might be like that. Or maybe not. Perhaps they had long since thrown in their lots together, man and woman, groom and bride, or perhaps not man and woman, perhaps not groom and bride—maybe they were two people who had already come asunder. Who could know?

"Ena," he said out loud, but softly. He reflected on that name, which he'd never heard before.

Ena! It sounded strange, but indistinct memories stacked up around him, pleasant ones, he knew that much, but he couldn't get a clear read on them amidst the muddle of images from his past.

"Ena. Odd. Never heard that one," he said quietly to himself, as if he wanted proof that he was considering things in this way, as though it were some kind of check. But even so. "I did know an Ena. It was when we… No, that wasn't it… There wasn't anything… "

Sieghart got back out of bed and shut the window. The wind was playing with the shutters. It might pick up even more around midnight. Exactly at the moment he intended to return to bed, he heard Ena cry out. It was an unmistakable exclamation of protest, of pain.

Sieghart weighed whether or not to go downstairs, to see what had happened. Did she need his help? But then again: the cry could have a completely understandable cause. *There's been a girl or two in my arms who…* But it actually sounded as if an indignity had been inflicted upon her.

The quiet that prevailed after the cry disturbed his considerations. It was a mysterious quiet. It was deceiving.

He needed only to open the door quietly, go down one or two steps, and he would know what was happening. The floor didn't creak; a sallow light fell over the staircase. It was coming from the room downstairs, where the two of them were lingering. The door was ajar. They were standing in the middle of the room, with their backs to Sieghart, and looking at something in the opposite corner, the obscurity of which revealed nothing.

Ena's head rested on the man's shoulder, and her left arm was wrapped around his waist. She was holding him tight, enjoying his closeness. In the stillness was arousal. It was enough for her that the man stood there in all his height, in his elemental lordliness. More important for Sieghart, though, than observing these people's demeanor was finding out why they were standing in the middle

of the room and what they were staring at, spellbound. Their bodies must be concealing something. One small shift to the right would have sufficed. He wasn't in a position to carry on this secret observation for long. It would have been embarrassing for them to catch him behind the door. Now he was irked that he had come to investigate the strange cry, because he could see no threat to the beautiful woman.

Just as he was about to retreat, he bumped into the door with his foot. It moved. Ena turned around. She knew what was going on. There was disdain in her eyes. He felt like they were going to rush at him, filled with wrath. But he also saw something else. He saw the man move quickly into the corner of the room and close the door on a narrow cabinet, as if a secret had to be rescued from revelation. But he hadn't been fast enough. Sieghart had spotted a face, a dark wooden face, a monstrously strange countenance, round, with bony features and dead eyes, an unfinished face, flat and baleful. Not a real face and yet one that belonged to a human being, or at least to the representation of a human. Who, what—was that in the cabinet?

"I'm so sorry," he said as he stepped forward. His voice was husky. "I heard a cry. It sounded like … "

Ena smiled. She approached and invited him in, so he could convince himself that nothing had happened that would require his help. "It's nothing," she said. "You can go back to sleep. Mathias would have protected me."

"Good night," said Sieghart. He was glad to be dismissed, glad that they didn't reproach him for his curiosity.

"Good night," Mathias said too.

Sieghart went back to his room. Level with the top stairs he noticed a hunting rifle on the wall. It only caught his eye now, although he'd already gone past this spot a couple of times, past this combination gun. It was a double-barreled shotgun with a small-caliber rifle attached to its side. He knew his way around guns. This one was a beauty.

So, his name is Mathias, he thought. With that, he tried to put the incident out of his mind. It had been an awkward, unforeseen thing. But when women scream…

Now he really was tired. When he wanted once more to think back to that strange wooden face, which was round, bony, and had those unseeing eyes—the face that looked so unfinished, flat and baleful, which he'd caught sight of only so briefly before it disappeared behind the cabinet door—the images got snarled, and he fell asleep.

At some point he heard hoofbeats. They awakened him. He didn't know what was going on. At first he thought it was morning… A light blazed somewhere. He got to his feet and walked to the window, from where he could look down into the courtyard.

Mathias had led a horse out of the stable. He swung himself up onto it, and Sieghart could tell he knew how to mount and handle a horse. The animal pranced on the stone-flagged courtyard. Ena opened the gate, and

the animal shot out into the night as if it had been waiting the whole time for this ride home. The young woman latched the gate. Before she turned out the floodlight, she looked up at the window where Sieghart stood, as if she sensed his presence.

CHAPTER TWO

The morning came, and it did so in a way that matches our expectations of beautiful mornings: with clusters of sunbeams marching diagonally through the room. In the light hovered motes of dust. The crow of a rooster very close by, so close that it seemed the colorful bird was sitting on the window sill. It was singing with exhilarating aversion. Nothing was in a hurry. Even Sieghart lolled in his bed, as if enjoying the leisureliness.

Then the jeep crossed his mind. It must be visible from the window on this fine morning. He reached for the binoculars he always kept with him and looked out. His vehicle popped into view. Its rear tires had sunk up to the axle in the soft earth. Now he could see the error

to which he had fallen prey. This is going to take some doing, Sieghart thought. Then he let the binoculars roam over the meadow and come closer to the house, until the fence around the garden came into view. There was the rooster that had just crowed, the trees—and the cherry tree, which was not blooming though it should have been, because this was the season for it—and the pump with its curving iron handle. Then Ena came into view, walking over to the pump and washing her face and hands. He lowered the binoculars, almost alarmed at how the woman's illusory closeness reminded him of standing behind that door the night before. He didn't want to get caught yet again observing her in secret. Ultimately, though, he wasn't slinking up on her; she kept coming into view by herself. And no, he could not take his eyes off of her. As the water ran over her arms and her blouse clung, wet, to her body so that her breasts protruded and everything was prominent and recognizable, he saw what this woman was made of: youth, pride, mystery, attraction and defensiveness, concealment and revelation, nature, an innate sense of shame. That made her desirable in a way that no explicit proposition ever could have. Sieghart knew the ropes.

He got dressed, for the day had begun. He went down to the pump himself and washed up. He also let the water run down his arms, and when he turned around he saw the old man. The fellow had a stubbly gray beard, and his eyes smiled merrily as he watched the effect of his water, which seemed to be a source of pride for him.

"I'm the grandfather," he said. "The wind and the water belong to me."

Sieghart introduced himself and they shook hands.

"Did you sleep well?" the old man asked.

"Yes, I did. Splendidly," Sieghart replied. "This is a gorgeous spot. It's like a fairy tale."

"In fairy tales, miracles occur. Not here though," said the grandfather. "Not for a long time now."

"So miracles used to happen here, earlier?"

"Yes. Earlier."

Sieghart laughed. "For sure, though, it's a gorgeous morning."

"Earlier the storks would sometimes even spend the winter here," offered the old man. "They are giving up on Africa. One time we had an entire family of them in the chicken coop."

He directed his eyes upward, to the gable peak of the barn, and his conviviality passed. The joking was at an end. A stork's nest was clinging to the roof. The weather-beaten black boards of the gable were marked by the chalky droppings of the migratory birds.

"This year it didn't return," he said. The old man's voice was different all of a sudden. It sounded helpless. "For the first time, the bird didn't come back. For the first time."

Indeed the nest was empty. Over the winter a few of the boughs had come loose and were now hanging down. No stork would have tolerated such slovenliness. Sieghart pondered how to respond to the grandfather. A

few possibilities came to mind, but all of them seemed pointless. Then his jeep occurred to him again, his jeep that must at last be rescued, for the clock was ticking. This conversation with the old man was pure politeness, which one felt obliged to observe after so much hospitality. Therefore, one says something so that something is said.

"Maybe along the way he found a new love," Sieghart remarked casually. "And he flew off to be with her."

But now Sieghart was startled. The grandfather didn't think much of this casual remark. He stood there, serious and cut to the quick, disappointed, betrayed, abandoned; his hands hung at his sides as though they were a pair of useless tools on a body that was also becoming less and less useful.

"My God," Sieghart said under his breath. He was sure the old man could not hear him. "All of this on account of a stork. You don't even see that in movies."

"Maybe he'll still turn up," he added in a loud voice. But the old man stood there, fixed to the spot. Sieghart was all set, finished with his morning ritual (*morning ritual—don't make me laugh!*) and wanted to be on his way.

He patted the grandfather on the shoulder. "Another one will be along eventually."

Ena was standing in the yard. "You didn't have breakfast yet," she said.

"It's gotten late," he responded. Sieghart was glad that Ena had appeared just at the right moment. He would not have left without thanking her for the lodging, but

time was flying. When he looked her in the eyes and felt happy that she had come, carrying a pail of that water in her hand, that wonderful water from the well, it seemed to him that he was rooted to the spot while the rest of life took its orderly course, keyed to speedy advances and continuity. It was not only the woman who caused his hectic pace to hit the brakes. Here everything was arranged so that nothing would happen precipitously. He was mortified when he saw the rooster that had woken him up striding across the courtyard in slow motion.

There was absurdity in everything, and yet it was funny enough to laugh at. Damn it all, what was wrong with him?

"What do I owe you for the … the night?" he asked, stumbling over the words. He knew it wasn't like that here; he should not just ask for his bill like at the front desk of a hotel. But he asked like that because no more fitting formulation occurred to him; exasperatingly, there was nothing better to be found. At some point the supply of polite phrases is exhausted.

"Well, go get your car, and then we'll all eat breakfast together," Ena announced.

He finally headed out. He walked towards the sun. Now and again the black point, backlit and glistening, showed up, the point he was headed towards, the old clunker, this evolved product of the colossal Mr. Otto, inventor of the internal combustion engine, which was intended for tough terrain and yet did not possess the strength to get through a rain-sodden meadow. With the anger that he felt, and

justifiably so, was mingled an inexplicable cheerfulness, the source of which he could not imagine. He smiled at his own irritation.

The delay. The colleagues who were waiting. Perhaps they were not waiting. Maybe they'd started with the drilling. With the first boring. He wanted to be there. Most definitely.

"They can go ahead, for all I care!" he shouted cheerfully into the fantastical movement of the sunbeams. *Let them go ahead and begin the drilling that I set up, without me, because I'm here walking towards my car, which is sitting in the muck. And then I'm going to take my time and have breakfast. And then perhaps …*

The wheels really had buried themselves in the topsoil up to the axles, in receptive Mother Earth, whose grip was not so easy to escape. That was evident here.

He didn't start the jeep. He took the army spade out of the tool compartment and began digging the wheels free.

Then his eyes discovered a horse's legs. They were moving in the rectangular space framed by the two front tires of the jeep. Mathias was seated on the horse.

"Good morning," said Sieghart, startled.

Where had this horse and rider come from? He would have seen them for sure. Standing as he was in the middle of a field, I mean, one does see another person approaching. Perhaps not a mouse, but a person? Good grief! Certainly he would have seen this man and this old horse.

"That won't work without me," Mathias said from his position on the horse, and his words rang with confidence and pride. For the first time Sieghart felt a slight distaste for this man's manner. But he knew little about him—in fact not much more than that he had some connection to Ena.

"I've got this," he countered quickly. He wanted to get by without any help. "It's part of our job to be able to handle things ourselves," he added. "There aren't horses standing by everywhere …"

He put the spade back in the compartment and got into the driver's seat. The motor started. Sieghart rolled down his window and leaned out so he could observe the wheels. They were turning—but they kept spinning. The black earth was sent flying in sodden flat chunks, torn free by the tread of the tires, in two even arcs.

He cursed. He had hoped to demonstrate how he could work the vehicle free by himself. A simple bit of car trouble! Got lost, got stuck, night in a wet field. That wasn't even a story worth repeating over a beer. Nobody would listen. There would need to be a lot more to the story than that …

Mathias had brought with him everything he needed to make the strength of his horse effective: ropes, a collar, simple and easy to wield, and in the bat of an eye everything was set up. Sieghart was in no position to reject

the help that was already offered. The ropes were hanging from the towing hitch of the vehicle. Mathias held the horse by its bridle.

"All right, so not too much gas," he said.

The animal had scarcely begun to strain when the jeep rose up out of the dirt, like out of the starting blocks where it had been awaiting a command—and which had now been delivered, at last, by Mathias.

"Thank you," Sieghart said.

Mathias wound up the tack, vaulted up onto the horse, and rode along in front of the jeep. For a while Sieghart drove behind the two of them, in the tempo that they set. Then he decided it was ridiculous to follow the swaying rear-end of the horse with its proud man on top, and he pressed on the gas pedal so that the engine revved and ate up the grassland, as if he wanted to prove what all-terrain vehicles are capable of. He passed the two of them. They presented an idyllic image in his rear-view mirror, an image which broke up into lines and bands running diagonally over its cracked surface. The farm buildings towards which he was driving also jumped around inside the picture-like frame of his windshield. They grew closer. And then Mathias, on his horse, overtook the jeep. That was a ride unlike any Sieghart had witnessed before!

The horse was standing in front of the gate. It was hitched to a hook on the column. Sieghart drove up as far as he could, creeping ever closer, until the horse had only

a very narrow space in which to stand, one restricted by Sieghart. It was a laughable act of revenge for a laughable humiliation, but it was one.

Then came breakfast. Ena had set a table in the garden, close to the pump where one could see the gable and the shunned stork's nest. Breakfast outdoors. A bit of freedom that one could afford here. No street ran past the table, no neighbors could look over their shoulders, and no smoke from any industrial chimneys could disturb the aromas of the food. The table was small but it offered up everything that the autonomous world of the grange was capable of putting forth for the nourishment of the people who inhabited it: eggs, stacked up in a little pyramid; butter as yellow as dandelion blooms; bread, still warm, possibly from the house's own oven; milk, fresh from the cow, foamed up over the edge of a pitcher; honey so clear you could see a spoon through it; cheese; and onions.

"Please! What are you all waiting for?" asked the woman who had come to the table. She was a short, rotund lady—Ena's mother. Their similarities lay in their skin tone and their hair, even though the mother's was starting to take on another color. That gray, the color of accumulated daily routines, classified her face as older but could not detract from her enduring beauty. Their faces were like two coins of the same stamp. One could see traces of old campaigns on the woman's face. Her vigor had not

suffered. She acted like Sieghart was part of the family. She made do without any formal greetings; that was a tonic to him, and it made new small talk superfluous.

While he was eating and observing the two women, he thought back over the images that had just impressed themselves on his memory. First, there were the horse's legs in detail, framed by the wheels of his jeep, and then Mathias' face, looking down from where he sat astride the horse, the flexing of the muscles in the animal's powerful hindquarters, behind which he'd been forced to drive, at a pace they had determined.

They ate, and the enjoyment of pure, gorgeous nature, which presented itself in rich living color in the things on the table, made Sieghart forget that he actually should have already taken his leave. He felt very comfortable there. *My God*, he thought, *why can't this dignified stilling of hunger, which is in and of itself nothing fancy, be possible everywhere, at every breakfast table, every morning?*

"How do you do this?" he asked, and he didn't even consider that his thoughts, which had preceded the question, weren't apparent to all.

"What do you mean?" the mother asked.

"This here," he answered, indicating the table, the circle of people, and probably even the garden in which they were sitting, as well as the barn, the stork's nest.

None of the four people who might have been in a position to answer understood what he meant. Ena wanted to say something. And she did, but it was no more than

an interjection, a random acclamation, which indicated the willingness to give information because there were no secrets.

None of them had noticed that the grandfather had gotten up from the table. No one knew that he was using the saw, the noise of which now reached the table. It was the monotone song of fine, sharp teeth, freshly set onto wood, when they are drawn across the grain, carving up the growth.

"I'm much obliged to you," Sieghart said, and then in that same moment a crash could be heard. It was loud enough to capture everyone's attention. It was a metallic blow; something rolled away, clanking.

"What was that?" Ena asked.

They rose from the table and went to the gate, from behind which the jarring sound had come. Sieghart was the first to notice the damage. The right headlight on his jeep had been knocked off. It lay several meters behind the vehicle. The horse had kicked it from the side, with no little precision, from which could be assumed that the animal had acted with intent or under human direction. Sieghart picked the headlight up and turned it around and around in his hands, seemingly in an attempt to determine whether it could still be used.

But the fussiness with which he did this was meant only to distract him from the animosity that he felt—at that accursed house, at Mathias, on whose face he thought he could see a smug smile of amusement. At all of them. They belonged together. Loathsome clan.

Sieghart let the light fall from his hand, climbed into the vehicle, and drove away. In his rear-view mirror he saw them all, standing there, looking after him.

"This can't be right," he muttered. He wanted to tear himself away from the quivering picture above his head, by using force, with gas and a higher gear, but the group of people didn't get any smaller. More than anything else, it was Ena who rode with him. She was like a photograph stuck onto the mirror. It was only when the lane turned and began its steep descent into the valley that the uncanny group image disappeared.

"It's about time," Sieghart said, and he exhaled deeply as if he had wiggled free from an onerous embrace, as if a dream had come to an end, a dream that was fascinating because it was a mixture of longing, desire, and affliction.

CHAPTER THREE

As Ena was clearing the table, the sound of the saw grew louder. After picking up the plate that Sieghart had used, she stopped and listened attentively. She left the plate where it had lain before and walked into the garden.

Her grandfather was sawing down the cherry tree. At a distance of about one hand's width below the crown of the tree, he had started cutting, and he forced the blade back and forth powerfully, as if he wanted to usher the torturous job to as quick a conclusion as possible. Ena froze when she became aware of what was happening. It was unimaginable to her that her grandfather, if he were still in his right mind, would kill this tree.

"What are you doing?" she cried out.

The old man paused. He was breathing heavily but he maintained his grip on the saw. The sharp teeth had already gnawed their way into the middle of the trunk. The steel blade gleamed. Sawdust trickled down, like snowflakes, onto the stationary trunk. The old man's pants were also white from the thousand filamented flakes that the merciless sheet of metal had pulled out of the deepening wound. The grandfather said nothing. He stood there as if his mental faculties were returning, as if he might shudder to think of what he had done.

"Have a look at this!" he said.

Ena went over to the tree. Her grandfather swept his hand over the bark. It passed over the tree's covering as if it were touching the chapped and cracked skin of a person. This was like a touch of nature, intended as evidence of harmony maintained since time immemorial, within all of nature's species and forms and even over and beyond their boundaries. Then his hand paused. Grandfather's finger pointed to a nail in the wood. The broad head of the foreign object gleamed with a reddish tint. The jaws of his pliers grabbed it. Now one saw how long it was, how deeply into the flesh it had been pressed, driven, pounded. The four-sided shaft shone in the sun. It was extracted from the wood the way an enemy's arrow is drawn out of the flesh of a friend.

"Copper," the grandfather said. "Copper will kill any tree."

He reached into the pocket of his trousers and produced a second nail. He had already pulled it out before Ena came over.

"Who could have done this?" she asked, looking around the garden, as if she might still be able to discover some trace of the killer.

The grandfather shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know who would do such a thing. I don't know."

He looked out over the fence. His eyes wandered over the lush, untamed meadow, to the edge of the forest, and then along its edge, over almost the entire landscape that was visible from their vantage point, until his eyes reached the dirt lane, which, falling in a half-curve, led down into the valley. It was this route that Sieghart had taken when he left in his jeep.

Ena's eyes followed her grandfather's. She understood clearly his implied concern. From the surrounding area, bordered by the dark edge of the forest, the attack might have been carried out. At night. An unknown evildoer. Someone deceitful, cunning, somebody soulless. How would it benefit anybody to go after the life of a tree?

"You should've waited," Ena offered. "Maybe it would've bloomed again."

"No," the old man replied. "The vitriol of copper is already in the branches; the poison is everywhere. I checked."

The two of them stood there facing each other, indecisive; it seemed that something else needed to be said before one of them could go on working and the other

could finally discern that all of this was right and true. Ena knew now that her grandfather had done, this time, as always, what his sound mind had called on him to do. In accordance with his tried and true method of handling trees. She had nothing to add whenever their conversation turned to trees; he knew their lives better than she. He knew how their sap rose and fell. And of course he also knew that vitriol accumulates as the metal begins to rust in the juicy flesh.

The old man put the saw in place again. A few more strokes were all it took for the crown to sag and spin around, so that it was touching the meadow and had just a few remaining fibers connecting it to the trunk. It appeared to be looking around the familiar neighborhood one last time, and then it fell away. It was a head rolling off a body. The branches cracked, and collapsed, whipping back and forth, to show that they retained their elasticity and that perhaps life was still in them. Ena went back to the table. The end of that tree couldn't delay the necessary chores that the daily routine required.

Her grandfather was breathing heavily. He was leaning on the saw. The stump, a tree beheaded, stood there like a natural column, like a post, a pole still of practical use. The old man had most likely been thinking of utility when he placed the saw beneath the crown in the first place. Now the remains of the tree frightened him with their repellent alienation. It was a torso. He placed the saw on the ground and went over to the crown. He took

hold of several of the branches and dragged it out of the garden. He could still muster the strength necessary for this action. He leaned into his work, and the man and the branches moved away, taking leave of the little spot of earth that nature had allotted them.

Ena had cleared the table. Now she started on the bedrooms. The door behind which the unknown guest had spent the night was ajar. She entered as if he might still be there. The room was like all abandoned rooms: bedcovers thrown back, windows not quite closed. A pair of binoculars hung on the chair, forgotten by Sieghart. Ena reached for them and raised them to her eyes. Now everything distant, on display in the opening of the window, was close: the woods, the meadow, the path. She saw her grandfather with the branches in his hands, making his way into the forest and vanishing among the trees.

Ena heard her name. Her mother was calling for her. She was shouting from the courtyard.

"Come give me a hand!"

"I'm coming," Ena answered. Observation time was over. The images tilted up and were gone, along with the people who were in them, the people one presumes were in them.

Her mother had opened both wings of the barn door. An old carriage had come into view. It was painted black, with tall wheels; it was a drivable frame exploiting in an intricately liberal way the laws of mechanics, and its elegance could only be assumed under the dust and hundreds

of cobwebs. The harsh light of the sun struck the carriage. The spiders fled from the unexpected brightness, setting their shawls and curtains in motion. Her mother was already bracing herself, both arms stuck into the spokes of one of the front wheels. She awaited Ena's help. Ena came to her and the vehicle rolled out of the barn. The two women had difficulty bringing the coach to a stop on the pavement. But Ena's mother still knew how to work the brake. A crank installed on the side of the chassis was connected directly to a system of levers that pressed the oaken brake shoe onto the rim of the tire.

"It's a shame we have to sell it," she said.

"Yes, it's too bad," Ena said also.

The women began cleaning. The spider webs tore.

Her grandfather had left the garden and was now tugging the crown of the cherry tree along the track through the forest. These exertions, which increased with every step, slowed the old man's pace. Sometimes he had to grab the crown with both of his hands in order to push his way through the trees. The strain he was putting himself through had a secret goal. When the calm surface of the pond appeared, he let out a sigh of relief. On the banks all around grew reed-like grass. Somewhere water was flowing into the pond, and somewhere it was flowing out. The burbling was a sign of that. There was flow in this apparently immobile mass from which the forest drew its moisture. The man had still not reached his goal. He stretched out

his arms for the branches again. He tugged the treetop along, and yet the purpose of his exertions was still not apparent. Then he was on the stony weir, an age-old stack of rock strata, a water barrier, an adjustable outlet from the pond. Three polygonal granite columns formed a gate, the opening of which was blocked with planks, a hand's width higher than the top of the water. Water pressed through the cracks. The number of planks determined the extent and depth of the pond.

At that point, the old man reached for the crown of the cherry tree for the last time. With his last reserves of strength, he lifted it up and hurled it over his head and down the weir, into the water. The awkward branches pierced the even surface, triggering hundreds of rings that spread out into waves and caused the entire pond to pulsate for a few moments. Even the reedy grass along the shoreline moved.

The crown of the cherry tree floated. It stopped at the deepest point, just in front of the dam.

"Drink your fill, one more time!" the grandfather said. "Dilute the poison in you. Rinse it out!"

Then he set out for home.

Towards evening Mathias arrived. He walked around the carriage several times. One could see once more its former refinement. Mathias touched the smooth, curving surfaces. The housings, in which the light sources were protected from wind and water, gleamed on their elevated posts. Mathias grinned at the sight of this antiquated

finery, which served no purpose any more, and which was good only for selling. "You'll get a good price," he told Ena. "With that money we could… "

Ena knew what he meant. She looked over at him, and then she moved closer and wrapped her arms around him.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Ena was on her way with the bicycle, on a day when Mathias had gone into the city to get started on a number of errands in the offices, she could not have known she was pedaling towards something momentous. She had undertaken to return Sieghart's binoculars to him; he'd left them hanging on the back of his chair. At first everyone assumed he would come back for them himself. But the days passed, and Ena remembered the strange parting. Maybe Sieghart was in a huff about something. He didn't feel like returning to the place where a horse had kicked out the headlight on his jeep. Maybe he assumed that everything had been set up to make him look bad. He didn't miss the

binoculars. But Ena wanted to be rid of them. They didn't belong to her. Thus it was determined that they must go back to their owner.

She knew he was working somewhere in the vicinity, somewhere beyond the woods. She rode along the farm track. She reached the first bend, and then came the descent into the valley, that comfortable downhill into the boundless landscape that grew wider and deeper with every meter Ena put between herself and her home. But first of all she stopped, in order to use the binoculars one more time. She held them up to her eyes backwards, and viewed her own farmstead, which the lenses rendered smaller. She was confused by the distance that now lay between her and the house—but there was nothing disturbing about it. It was illusory, a lying prospect, a distortion of reality, a dislocation of objects that a person could cheerily flout.

Before she noticed, at the end of the track, the bends and loops that she had known since childhood, the four travel trailers and equipment trailers belonging to the drilling crew in the middle of the field, she saw Sieghart's jeep. She couldn't imagine that anyone had seen her. There was no way that the man whom she was seeking was coming towards her. At this distance, he could not have recognized her without his binoculars. And yet it was true. The jeep raced in her direction. Behind it, the dust rose up and twisted into two spiraling waves, which in turn quickly disintegrated into a huge yellow veil across the landscape. Now Ena knew that this journey had her as its

goal. Shortly before he reached her, the driver braked hard. The jeep skidded and turned, as if it were about to fly off of the lane. It came to stop, still rocking.

Sieghart opened the door. He was happy to see her. But he was also happy that he could show off a bit of superiority: *This is how we live, missy! Adventure is our world. Here is where a man proves himself; it's not like in your world, in that idyll that you inhabit. Your Mathias—he's all well and good. I know what you two have going on. But have you been involved with other men? I doubt it.*

"The binoculars," she said. "You forgot them."

"Yes," he answered. "I noticed."

Now he got out of the jeep and slammed the door shut behind him, as if he owed the vehicle no consideration at all. "In the field … " He held her hand firmly. She balked at his clumsy, childish teasing.

"What are you doing?" she said. "I've got places to be."

"I could drive you. You and your bike. We'd be at your farm in a few minutes."

He let her go, finally. Ena climbed onto her bike and rode away.

"Thanks," he called after her. "Thank you very much. When will I see you again? Ena!"

She rode fast. But the bumpy route through the field hindered her escape. It would have been ridiculous to attempt to outrun a car. Ena heard the engine growling behind her. Sieghart was driving after her. The game, the

silly game, was still on, and she was subjected to his superior force, his motorized superiority. Maybe it was better to give in than to resist.

Sieghart overtook her. He fishtailed again, and remained sitting there once more with the door open, provocatively, conscious of his superiority. He was doubling down on it. "All right, then," said Ena. "Tell me what you're doing here! I'm interested. Really."

He got out and leaned her bike against the vehicle, as if for his explanations she would need to have both hands free, as if room were needed for the extensive topics upon which he intended to expound. This, too, was the action of a man who was sure of himself, who was bearing down on his goal.

"We are analyzing the ground," he said, holding out his arm in the direction of the valley. "The goal is to explore the consolidation potential of the earth, along with its shear strength. We have to know whether it will be necessary to seal the bottom or not. Whether or not we can spare ourselves an injection curtain of sodium silicate and some expensive chemicals. Our maps do indicate that the soils are cohesive, but the hydrological conditions are in dispute. It is our task to end the argument between the engineers, which has been going on for years. Structural hydrologic engineering, young lady. Economic development zone.

Ena understood all the words, but she still didn't know what this was all about. Sieghart wasn't joking. It was clear that he wasn't just horsing around anymore. But what exactly was the point? Why did one need to know what the earth was composed of, beneath its fertile topsoil? And why here?

"Interesting," she said. "What people won't do in order to perfect their maps."

"And after the maps, the earth," he added. "Where there are no mountains, we will build them. Where there are no lakes, we will call them into existence. It's not a problem. Not today. Structural mining and hydrology."

"Yes. Really interesting," Ena repeated.

"Humankind remakes everything in its own image. We do it to our liking. Man takes the reins out of the hands of the gods," Sieghart added by way of explanation. "What are we supposed to do, when everything is arranged rather inadequately?"

At that point they both fell silent for a bit. She needed time to think through the portentous things Sieghart was saying. He sounded smart, but to Ena this sounded like lore from some kind of catechism, for which no proof existed. It was supposed to be believed.

"So what around here is inadequate? What is it that needs to be corrected?" she finally asked.

Sieghart thrust both hands into his pockets. He bowed his head and strode out into the meadow. It looked like he wanted to avoid giving an answer, like he was upset that this question had come up.

"Why don't you say something?" Ena continued, reminding him that he still owed her an answer.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he said. "We're making a couple of boreholes, that's all. What happens with the things we bring to light—that's not in our hands. That's how it works. This might be about purely scientific curiosity, or it could … "

"What? What else could this be?" She was quite resolved to find this out. He hadn't anticipated a woman asking him, with this degree of thoroughness, about plans that still lay in strongboxes, plans that were still being turned inside out during confidential deliberations, rejected, brought back out and put away yet again.

"I'm not allowed to share any information about that," he said.

"Ah, so that's how it is. We don't need to know anything about it," she commented. "It's no business of ours!"

Sieghart knew what he had done with his imprudent remark; it was conceivably the worst thing he could've said. He should have known that these people, in their little sovereign world, would not lack self-confidence. They couldn't hold their tongue even when one looked right past them, ignored them as if they were not even there. One couldn't treat them like they were wards of

the state, dependents, gullible or trusting true believers, fools. There were four of them, but still, four people, four human beings—and among them this maddeningly beautiful woman. He cautiously put his hand on her hip. The gesture was meant to be conciliatory: "I didn't mean it like that." But she was having none of his touches. This kind of contact was common, and for her it was out of the question. Ena shrank from his inept effort; she twisted out of his outstretched arm.

For the first time, Sieghart had the feeling that his efforts to hit on someone were not going to pan out, that none of his experience would do him any good here. Ena was from another world. People interacted differently with each other there. Who knows…

"Of course, I know what the maps say," he offered, to save himself from embarrassment. Speaking was the way to regain the upper hand. To be muzzled is tantamount to defeat, and he had no desire to be outgunned. Not by this woman and not in general, and that's why he said exactly what he'd been forbidden to say.

Ena indicated that she was ready to hear more. She'd keep listening to him. She'd stick around.

Sieghart sat down on the grass and leaned his back against a wheel of the jeep. He motioned to a spot beside him. She declined. He should not have expected anything different. So there she stood, at an appropriate distance only one step away from him but far enough to ensure that no misunderstandings arose. She was interested in

what he had to say, what he knew about the data present on the maps, but nothing else. She wasn't interested in him. The length of the pace between them made that obvious; drawing that boundary was what permitted this conversation to occur.

"What's on the maps?" She wanted to know.

"If the investigations find that the resource outlay does not exceed our capabilities," he elaborated, quietly, "then in a few years we could put this whole landscape under water. That's the long and short of it."

Ena took in these words as though they contained no message, as if they were of no consequence. She had comprehended everything, and now she knew what was going on.

"Putting the whole landscape under water," she repeated for her own benefit, as she snuck a glimpse down into the valley, where the forests stood and there were lanes and tracks, along which people were moving with beating hearts supplying oxygen, taken from the air, to the blood.

"Yes," Sieghart reiterated. "But please don't tell anyone. It might not happen for a long time."

Ena nodded. She seemed to be promising that she wouldn't tell this to anyone. But she was nodding for different reasons, which lay deeper, so deep that there was no way for Sieghart to have any idea about them. She looked at him as though she were grateful for the information that she'd received on the occasion of an insignificant bicycle ride, all on account of a pair of binoculars.

But she said something that unsettled him, something that left him once more in that bizarre plight he'd experienced during his stay at Ena's house.

"What gives you the right to say '*du*' to me?" she asked.

This was the wall, the insurmountable barrier on which he was going to keep banging his head if he failed to come to his senses.

"Fair enough. Pardon me."

Ena could not shake the images that Sieghart was talking about but were nowhere to be seen: this whole landscape under water. What did that mean? How far would the water extend?

"I can't give out any more information," he said, when he saw that she was still looking down into the valley.

"What about us? Our house?" she asked.

"It's on higher ground," he replied. But he had barely let her finish the question; she was, after all, hardly in a position to ask questions. His pat answer left her perplexed.

Sieghart was annoyed that he had spoken of a lake that did not exist, not yet, and perhaps never would. He wanted to prevent her from imagining that the water was already rising, backfilling, inundating, burying, that its sparkling surface was already expanding.

"No, no," he emphasized yet again. "The reservoir isn't going to reach as far as your place. At the most… "

"What?"

Ena moved closer. She reduced the distance, which she'd determined in the first place, reduced that unambiguousness that one step had represented.

"At the most, it means that you all will live closer to the water," he added. "In a way you'll be beach residents, right in the same neighborhood as the *Wassermann*, that Merman. That wouldn't be so bad."

Sieghart laughed to himself. He was glad that the *Wassermann* reference had occurred to him. At some point he had learned that the people here believed in it, a nix, who was sort of a beast that lived under the water, a man with frog eyes and fins, or a frog with human characteristics, or some such combination. He had his kingdom under the water, in the reeds or muck, living off of fish and snails, and now and then he would grab a person and drag them down with him, for amusement, for variety's sake. And young girls were not exempted.

She interrupted his chuckling and asked why so much water was needed.

"For projects of all types, young lady," he responded. "For power plants, and powerless plants. Without water, you have to realize…" And once more he laughed, as he had just done about the fairy tale of the *Wassermann*. Sieghart had succeeded in drawing attention to himself with the details about the still secret future of this site, which he had divulged. He could feel it. The woman standing in front of him, who didn't want to sit down at his side, was listening. He had something that would make

him attractive. She had fled from him but now she wasn't budging. That was the source of the happiness inside him; that was the old elation that gave him a sense of security. He pointed once more to the ground next to him. But Ena made no move to accept his prompting. No matter, he seemed to say. One day you will sit next to me. One day.

"In my family," Sieghart said, "everybody works with water in some way. My brother's a captain. My father was a well builder. So, the depths and the breadths. They took a liking to us. Searching and striking paydirt. Change. Tapping the earth. Creating seas. Playing God a little.

Ena broke in, "And your mother?"

"I never knew her," he replied and then ceased talking.

She should not have asked about her, because his report, which she needed to hear, was apparently now prematurely concluded; it was cut off in the middle. "I don't create anything," she said. "I take what exists. We pass along what we obtain ourselves. Sharing. Working in the fields. Mother, grandfather, Mathias. To exist, the way people are. Here."

"And your father?" Sieghart asked.

"He died," she answered. "I only knew him through photographs. He was trying to treat a fox with rabies."

Sieghart had stuck a blade of grass in his mouth. He let it work its way from one corner to the other. Then he spat it out and asked, "Isn't it boring—always on the same farm? Always the same trees? Faces?"

"Sometimes," Ena said. "When I was a child I used to climb up onto the roof of the barn to see the world. Everything was right there and it was nice: our villages, the city. I wanted to fly away with the stork … And you? Do you like always being somewhere new? Not being at home in any one place? New faces all the time?"

He considered this for a while. He didn't have a ready answer to that question; he could not just reach for it like for a trump card, something easy to deploy in conversations that always ended up similar. He couldn't remember ever having been asked this.

"Sometimes I do get fed up with them, the changing scenes … In the little town I'm from, they put in a new sewer network. It was a big deal. When it rained for the first time, we children made little ships out of paper and bark. They sailed down the gutters along the streets to the market square. It didn't bother us when they fell into the storm drains. We pictured them continuing to float along down below, on and on, into the river and then to the ocean … Those are still the clearest memories I have. I still build little ships. And this yearning for the gutters of that little city … But, oh, the heck with it!"

A shock tensed his limbs. In the space formed by the two front wheels, beneath the chassis of his jeep, he suddenly saw a horse's legs. As he had once before. He sat up and recognized Mathias, who was looking down from his position on the horse. His back was stiff and he had the look of a man who was not to be deceived or betrayed.

Ena was also unnerved by Mathias' unexpected appearance. She turned her eyes up to him as if she wanted to explain everything right then and there, to clear up a misunderstanding. Naturally, the scene as it presented itself to him on high was odd enough, suspicious, but looks deceived. Nothing had happened, and nothing was going to happen, ever.

Mathias turned his horse around and vanished.

"I have to go," she said, taking her bicycle. It seemed like her journey would never end. She pedaled faster; she wanted to get home. She had not yet realized that the binoculars, which she wanted to be done with, were traveling with her once more. They were securely attached to the luggage rack of her bike.

CHAPTER FIVE

It so happened that a man known as a *braška*, a wedding facilitator and table master, was noticed by three other people almost simultaneously. The first to see him was Sieghart, and this occurred when he stepped out of one of the travel trailers arranged in a block next to the drilling tower. It was almost eight in the morning, and his first shift was already behind him. He felt the warmth of the tea in his stomach, a sense of well-being that customarily grew with his second breakfast. And that was when Sieghart glimpsed the black-clad man on a moped. He was seated on it, wearing a top hat and tailcoat bedecked in random places with white and green bows and ribbons; as he drove, the adornments followed him and the airflow

caused them to flutter like the paper tail of a kite. Sieghart had never seen a person like this, and the outfit aroused a feeling of childlike curiosity in him. The closer the *braška* drove, the clearer his features became. He had an old face with a thousand wrinkles, tiny traces of a duty repeated a thousand times, some practical activity done out of doors, bringing bread and blessings and satisfaction. The customary practice that he carried out belonged to a unity of work and pleasure; perhaps it was a continuation of the ways of his father. Who knew what exactly was pulling up beside him on this moped? How could Sieghart know what the colorful ribbons were supposed to mean, and the coat, and the hat?

Sieghart thought, *And on a moped, at that. You can't be serious*. Still, he couldn't articulate why the unusual man and his vehicle weren't suited to each other. When the *braška* had drawn even with Sieghart, he raised his festooned hat and managed to bow deeply, as though part of the custom was to extend such a courtesy to everyone along his route. And then the man's face was visible once more, the old furrowed countenance with its thousand trails inscribed onto the map of an existence. The *braška* didn't neglect to greet him, either. He called out something to Sieghart, surely words of no consequence, about which all that matters is that they were heard, not necessarily understood. Perhaps it was even enough for them to be seen.

The *braška* had passed the drilling team's base and was motoring off into the green of the open country, growing ever smaller, sinking into the terrain, dropping down into the bottomland. Both of Sieghart's colleagues, who had just walked over, saw nothing but the fluttering ribbons—nothing of the face, the thousand-lined face.

"Did you guys see that?" Sieghart wanted to know.

"No," one of the two men said. "What were we supposed to see?"

"That man who just drove past. He has something to do with weddings. I'm sure he's connected with weddings."

Sieghart was overcome by anxiety that didn't mesh at all with the feeling of comfort he'd enjoyed just a few moments earlier. He took a step towards the trailer, stopped, and then turned in the direction that the *braška* had driven, as if he could grasp what was going on by seeing one last corner of his outfit. Then he turned over his tin mug so that the rest of the tea, which he'd been holding for the entire time, came out in a broad arc.

His two colleagues didn't know why Sieghart was suddenly so agitated. They looked at one another, shrugged their shoulders, and set to work. A diesel engine kicked into operation. Billows of black smoke twisted into the air.

Ena saw the *braška*, too. His journey could be tracked from their garden. A message flew along the edge of the forest. Everyone could see it. Slowly Ena relaxed her grip

on the bundle of hay in her arms. It fell down and broke apart. She didn't want to stand there, hugging straw, if the *braška* was out and about.

"Drive faster!" she murmured. "Faster, *braška*, my good man!"

The forest, the dark rim of the nearby horizon, swallowed him up. The *braška* was riding across the moor. Somewhere out there a village would appear. They'd welcome him back. He was the object of attention wherever he went. It was the best kind of attention anyone could wish for.

As Ena turned around to go into the barnyard, her gaze fell onto the solidly rooted trunk of the beheaded cherry tree. Sap was collecting where it had been cut. It looked like a large drop of clotted blood. She laid her finger on the bleeding wound, as if she wanted to ease its pain.

Her grandfather was sitting on the weir at the forest pond. He had found a cozy spot. He could look out over the surface of the entire pond. And he looked the forest right in its big damp eyes. The crown of the tree was still lying in the same spot; it was floating and drinking. Some of its branches had gotten tangled up in the reeds. The rest of them either stabbed into the depths, where they were recognizable down in the clear water, or they loomed in the air, offering themselves up to the dragonflies.

"Hey, you!" the grandfather called out, without shouting with full force. His cry, intended for someone only he knew, cruised over the surface of the water, gliding gently.

He called out once more, with somewhat more strength this time, and an echo came back at him from the other side. Otherwise, nothing happened. The old man looked eagerly at the smooth top of the pond, and then, unmistakably, the stalks of the reeds began to move, back and forth, like a group of people frolicking in a circle. From the thirsty crown of the tree emanated other movements as well. From the places where the branches stuck into the water, circles were forming. As they expanded in diameter, and flattened out, the rings were still strong enough, for there to be no doubt: something was happening.

"Hey, you!" the old man said once more, certain that an understanding had been established.

A clear, resounding masculine voice could be heard: "What do you want?"

It sounded as if his interlocutor was sitting somewhere in the swaying water plants and was using the pond as a bull horn, to increase the volume of his voice and gain access to a dimension to which he, as the inhabitant of another medium, was entitled.

"Nothing in particular," replied the grandfather. "Just some conversation."

"Just some conversation?"

It was an echoed response from the pond.

"And about what?"

"About your realm," answered the old man. "Things must be nice where you all are."

"How do you know that?"

"From fairy tales."

"You believe in fairy tales? At your age? In these times? Isn't it forbidden to believe in fairy tales?"

"No," the old man said. "Not forbidden, but … "

"But what?"

"A war has broken out."

"Who's fighting?"

"Fairy tales against machines."

"And who's going to win?"

"I don't know," the old man responded. "I hope it will be the fairy tales. Otherwise the world will be a wasteland."

The man in the water laughed. It sounded as if he were making use of the full width of his mouth in order to express the pleasure he felt at this. And that mouth of his was as broad as the pond in the woods; the reverberation built up in the chambers of the forest. Suddenly the grandfather felt as if he had been dreaming, as if he'd dozed off, just for a moment.

He turned around, and there behind him stood the "governor of the feast," beside his moped. The *brašk*a had apparently been there for a while. Maybe he'd been the one laughing; maybe he'd carried on that conversation. At this point, nothing was obvious anymore, nothing clear-cut. Now doubts were again appropriate, and the fairy tale that had commenced was reaching its premature end.

"Oh, it's you," the grandfather said. "Whose wedding are you inviting people to?"

"To the other one," answered the man in the tailcoat and top hat.

"And when will you make the rounds for Ena and Mathias?" the grandfather asked next.

The *braška* reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a small red notebook. He thumbed through it, and said at last, "Soon. They're up soon. I will take care of everything to your satisfaction."

Water was dripping from the hem of his tails. Aquatic vines clung to his boots. A green frog leapt off of the moped seat when the motor began to clatter. The man with the thousand furrows on his face, which resembled the map of an existence, rode away. The bows fluttered behind him like the paper trail of a kite.

The grandfather got laboriously to his feet. He stood up as if he were just waking from a delightful sleep.

He stretched his arms and legs, and even yawned; and he leaned down to the water. With great effort he managed to get his fingers around one branch of the cherry tree. He shoved the crown out towards deeper water. "It's better this way," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

One a week Ena biked into the village. For shopping. The local branch of the *Konsum* co-op chain was prepared for her Friday afternoon appearances. The short, fat clerk and her simpleton of a husband, who stood around in the store so that he could, at his wife's behest, go up the step-ladder and fetch down the desired items from the higher shelves—they had known for ages what the people from that farm out in the moors needed. The goods had been laid ready on the table, and Ena stowed them away securely in her three pot-bellied bags, all of which were then put back into their accustomed spots on her bicycle.

When on this Friday, which will stay etched in her mind, she walked out of the *Konsum*, two masculine hands reached for the loops of her shopping bags.

"May I?" It was Sieghart.

She didn't want him to help her. And why should she? For years she'd been toting her groceries home in this way, and she'd always gotten by without anyone else's help, without the swooping friendliness of a man. She wanted to fend him off, but now the bags were already sitting there in his vehicle. Sieghart even manhandled the bicycle into the jeep. He urged her to sit down, and his gestures seemed exaggerated, though not silly. No, the way he did it … was neither clumsy nor frivolous.

The afternoon was bathed in warm, wearisome light. It corresponded to the idea of quitting time, and one that was bringing the end of a work week at that. The work was tapering off, those tasks one had done for five days to earn a living and to put bread on the table. Now a well-earned break would follow. Days were approaching now when a person could afford a few tangents. People could spare the time to show that they were more than just hired hands. And also the things inside of men and women, in their souls even, in the infinite spaces of their thoughts and notions that is, to which no one has access, moved at a different pace on such days, a more moderate, tolerant, and balanced one. That could also be the reason that Ena wasn't able to bring forth enough strength for a proper defense, in order to resist this man's advances. Thus she let herself be driven home, be taken home. The drive was pleasant. The vehicle, which had rattling sheet metal surfaces that pointed to its extensive use, took the uneven

terrain in stride. Sieghart didn't say anything. Every now and then he looked over at Ena, who was clinging to the grip on the door so she wouldn't slide around or fall over. Sieghart could not conceal his happiness that this woman was seated next to him, that it was currently her lot to follow the course that he was setting.

"Here we are, after all," he said in her direction. He laughed self-assuredly, as if nothing further stood in his way.

Ena made no reply. The childlike joy of this man left her feeling uncertain. She couldn't imagine he was pretending, feigning some exaggerated fondness. On the other hand, the grounds for so much delight seemed too skimpy to her, and she couldn't shake all of her doubts about his sincerity. She was letting herself be taken home. What was wrong with that!

"What do you think of when you drive across land like this?"

Sieghart didn't know how to answer that question. What was he supposed to think about, for God's sake? He raised both hands off of the steering wheel. The gesture was supposed to indicate his helplessness and perplexity.

"Nothing," he finally replied.

"Nothing," Ena repeated. She did not conceal her disappointment. "That's not much."

Sieghart changed gears. The road they were driving down didn't call for an upshift. The opposite was true. The roughness of the road was increasing. The jeep lunged,

and the sturdy iron fastnesses inside it creaked and grated. There was no sign of the springs that the car, in Ena's mind, must have somewhere. Even the carriages of a hundred years ago had better springs than this. She held on tight and abandoned herself to the man's experience, the man who had invited her on this excursion.

"I have to tell you something," he began, although the circumstances were hardly suited to disclosures that led off with a preface like that.

"What is it?" she wanted to know.

"Since the first time I laid eyes on you," he continued, "something's been happening… I don't know what to call it. I feel like I've struck it rich. Something has shown up on my radar, and I have a constant feeling of intoxication. I am… trying to calm down. It's not working. Something has been broken open. Do you understand me?"

"No," Ena responded. "I do not understand."

Almost unnoticed, Sieghart had turned off of the road leading to Ena's house. The two ruts of a simple track through the meadow raced up and under the vehicle. The tall grass still standing in the strip between tire tracks struck the jeep's frame. The twin ribbons raced towards them, disappearing beneath the tires. The terrain seemed to be winding itself with increasing speed onto a reel beneath the vehicle.

"I was observing you," he went on, as if nothing had changed. "Back then. With your Mathias. From behind the door. The next morning at the pump. As the water ran

down your arms, when your blouse got wet and stuck to your body. Images I can't get rid of. And I know that they were not illusions."

"Why are you driving so fast? I'm afraid," she said, attempting to interrupt him.

Sieghart did not hear her objection. He was in the ecstatic state of which he'd just spoken.

"I've never told a woman before that I love her," he exclaimed. "Never loved one before. Definitely not. I've just had them. But you I love. And I don't have you."

"Stop it! Stop the car!" Ena cried out. "Right now!"

But he made no effort to comply with her request. He continued racing along. A forest trembled in front of his windshield and grew bigger, rose up, menacingly. The jeep shot between the trees. The narrow lane, which with its divided tracks for tires resembled a railway line, continued to disappear under the wheels.

"You have to say something back! Do you hear me?" he pleaded. His hands clenched the steering wheel, for the danger was great that a root, or a rut, might wrench control of the jeep away from him. The result would have been predictable, and any answer from Ena would have been superfluous.

"I don't know what you mean," she yelled back, upset.

"You know," he said, and he extended his right foot once more so that the engine roared. "Am I the kind of man you could be with?"

"I'll answer that if you'll stop the car," she said.

"No. Here, next to me, in this cage where there's no escape… " He doubled down on his demand.

"You're crazy!" she was screaming at him now. "I'm scared. How am I supposed to give you an answer when I'm afraid?"

They drove past the pond in the woods, past the weir where the cherry tree's crown lay out in the water. But they didn't see these things. They saw only the flashing water onto which the evening sun was falling. The pond was reddish in color and looked beautiful in its fairy-tale insouciance. The only thing visible in the water was the mirror image of their hurtling passage, but that reflection was not capable of destroying anything.

"You superseded all of my expectations," began Sieghart anew. "All of them. A new beginning. This could be one. I beg you… "

"No," Ena declared. She said the word softly. And then she repeated it. And then she screamed to his face, "No! How could I let myself get involved with a lunatic? What do you think I am? Stop this car. You are creeping me out!"

The jeep exited the forest. The flying trees on either side had vanished. It actually looked like they were soaring over the landscape, as if they had taken leave of the earth. But then loose dark brown soil sprayed against the windshield. Sieghart jerked the steering wheel back and forth in both directions; it seemed he'd lost control, something he'd been fearing for some time, and it seemed like they had just moments, seconds, until the impact, plunge,

and rollover, all just an instant away. Ena lost her balance because the vehicle had lifted up on the rider's side. She flew towards Sieghart. She clung tightly to him and could feel the working of the muscles in his upper arms.

Then all was still. From the engine, now at rest, came only the slight clacking sounds of cooling metal. She knew that she could leave now, that his mad game, so alien to her, as unnatural and bizarre to her as anything on this earth could be, was finished. But even as she became aware that disaster had remained at arm's length, a strange hesitancy was growing in her: it compelled her to stay, as she was and where she was, for one more moment, and then another.

Sieghart was hunched over the steering wheel. He was taking deep breaths. He knew he'd accomplished nothing. He felt Ena's body lying over him, but he knew that he'd lost. Ena extricated her arms. She reached for the door handle on her side and exited. But she didn't climb down—she let herself slide out of the jeep, feebly, almost indifferently, as if all her powers of resistance were used up. She leaned against the crackling metal of the chassis. Sieghart also got out. He walked slowly around the jeep and came up to her. Gingerly he pushed back the hair from her forehead. There was a little cut there. There was only enough blood to form one drop. His fingers were shaking. He seemed to want to apologize, as if he were trying to smooth out something that cannot be made smooth, as if he were saying farewell to her, as if he wanted to say, "Now you are rid of me, Ena. Go your own way. I will go mine."

His lips touched her brow, the sweat-soaked hair sticking to it, the wound, and then her mouth, those half-open lips that still appeared to be talking, still forming the word "no," even long after they had surrendered.

The jeep squatted there, up to its axles in freshly turned earth. Through one of the seams in the cargo bed dripped milk. Ena's grocery purchase. They were standing in the middle of the plowed field.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The melancholy of accordion music. The song was about a deep valley, where two ships began a trip and sailed out, far out, into the sea. They were never to return, never, and no one would find out who was aboard them, leaving home, and no one would know either, my sweetheart, that I was one of them, *judahej*! However, whoever knew the melody would also know that the lugubrious emigration was a mirage, a story from a song that would never be true, because no one yearned for departing never-to-return ships, not here. So the song was a warning, a reminder of impending danger. People who played this song did so not out of high spirits, or to dispel the boredom of an evening.

Mathias was leaning against the decapitated cherry tree. He was the one playing the accordion. It made a worn-out, crushed impression. His playing was far from perfect, and this imperfection provided the melancholy. When Ena walked into the garden, she saw the ships sailing away, the ones that were never to return, and she saw herself on one of them; she wished the musical instrument would implode in his hands.

"Play something else," she requested.

He stopped and then started over. He wanted to play a different melody, but his efforts came to naught. He played again what he had played earlier.

Ena walked over to him. Her proximity interrupted his music. She wrapped her arms around his neck and stared out over his shoulder, over the stump of the tree towards the forest, and along the forest over almost the entire landscape, until the dirt road came into view, leading to the valley, descending in a half loop.

"The wedding," she said quietly.

"What's wrong? We agreed," he said.

"Yes, we did." She pressed herself against him. "It needs to be sooner. Earlier. As quickly as possible."

"Why?" he asked. And yet it seemed like he had guessed why she was requesting haste.

"Just because," she answered.

"We should talk about all this."

"Yes."

"And so … "

"After the wedding. As quickly as possible. I implore you," she said.

The accordion was dangling from his right hand. It opened all the way up and emitted a high, tender tone. It was the highest note that the instrument could produce. Mathias removed Ena's arms from his shoulder.

"I'll bash his head in," he said, and he walked over to the fence, apparently to wait for Sieghart there. The accordion was still hanging from his wrist. So he tossed it over the fence. It flipped over, wailing, in the overgrown meadow.

The instrument came to rest at the feet of the grandfather. Maybe he'd been at his pond in the woods, or maybe somewhere else. In his arms he held a stork, which had acquiesced in his embrace. Only the bird's head betrayed its agitation. It bobbled back and forth, looking carefully at where the old man was going.

"What are you doing with that?" Ena asked.

"Can't fly," he answered. "Shot. There are people who shoot at storks." Her grandfather ran his fingers through the feathers and showed her the wound. The flesh was torn open above one of its leg joints. Dried black blood was stuck to the feathers.

"What will you do with him?" asked Ena.

The grandfather raised his eyes and looked up at the peak of the gable on the barn. The unused nest was there.

"He's going to die in a strange nest," Ena commented.

"No," he countered. "It's a female. The egg's about to come out. It's very far back already."

Mathias removed a long wooden ladder from the wall of the barn and leaned it against the gable. It reached the highest point of the roof. Then he took the stork, gingerly, and clambered up to the nest. The ladder creaked and teetered and sagged. Mathias moved up rung by rung. The project grew more and more perilous with each step. When he reached the peak, he lifted the wounded bird up into the nest and scrambled back down.

"Good," remarked the grandfather. "Very good."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The rig team in the field camp was currently caught up in a curious hustle and bustle. On normal days, this was not at all the case. When speed was in demand for reasons other than the ones in play now, it did not materialize. The men "took their time, not their lives," as the saying on the wall of one of the caravans had it.

Beneath this motto, a triangular piece of mirror stuck out of the seam between two boards. In the mirror was a face in the process of being shaven. The small motor of the electric razor buzzed, and from some dark corner of the uncomfortable trailer the radio played.

Outside, in front of the travel trailer, one of the men was pouring steaming water from a red plastic bowl over his head. The foaming shampoo ran down to the ground.

The man straightened up and hastily rubbed his hair dry.

"What's going on?" inquired the man in the mirror.

"Nothing," Sieghart answered. "I'm staying here."

He was sitting at the small table that still had the remnants of a supper on it. According to the men's understanding of order, it wasn't worth it to put everything away, because these were items that would be brought back to the table at every meal anyway: salt, sugar, bread, a couple of spices.

"You're coming with us!" his colleague proclaimed as he stowed away his razor by simply leaving it hanging, plugged in, from the wall.

"I'm staying," Sieghart repeated.

Then a shirt came flying into his face, along with a tie.

"Get dressed!" his colleague ordered. The other man was already standing there, all cleaned up and preened, ready for their evening out. "Off we go then!"

Sieghart pulled the shirt out of his face but remained seated. His fingers drummed the table. There was agitation in their play, pensive agitation, and also disappointment. But still he kept sitting there, not reacting yet to their pleas.

"Man alive, what an opportunity!" his colleague said. He was using a small spray bottle to put on cologne under his button-up jacket. The cologne spread quickly and saturated the air inside the caravan, as if it had longed for the displacement of the old smells there. "Such an

opportunity! A party the night before the wedding. Raising a little hell will do us good. A person needs that. Revitalization, the reproduction of one's forces. It's been proven scientifically. A man who gets it regularly achieves more. It's a no-brainer. You can bet on this: there will be tight sweaters to marvel at over there!"

Now their other colleague came into the trailer, too. He pulled a little vacuum cleaner out of the corner, hung it up on the wall without its hose, and let its warm air blow through his hair. He also indicated to Sieghart that he should hurry. He tried to make it clear, without using words, what they could expect there (there being the place for which they were about to depart): dancing, schnapps, embraces—and then he smacked his fist with the open palm of his other hand, in a suggestive gesture.

"Good grief!" lamented the first man, as Sieghart continued to sit there motionless. "You've got it bad."

The other man turned off his blow-dryer and said, "Hair of the dog that bit you. You know?"

Sieghart's fingers moved towards a knife that lay on the top of the table. He left it stuck upright in the wood, vibrating.

He stood up. It seemed that the solution to his woes had occurred to him, and he reached for the shirt that'd been slung his way.

The three men were all decked out when they strode out of their travel trailer. It was very rare for them to be seen outside of their lodgings in this kind of get-up. They were aware of the contrast.

The anticipation of things to come had raised spirits, but Sieghart did not yet feel a part of it. The goofy mood of the other men didn't extend to him, even though he liked a good joke, or silliness and pranks. He wasn't one to wallow in gloom. So if it had to be like this, then… But it couldn't be like this right now. He still had the feeling that he'd been defeated, as hard as that was to comprehend, and to overcome.

He helped the others load a couple of crates into the jeep, but otherwise he left the majority of the required effort to his two colleagues. This was cargo that called upon all the men's strength, but it was fun for them. Running themselves ragged like this—when does that ever happen?

Then they drove off. Sieghart was behind the wheel, and the other men sat next to him. One took a bottle out of his pocket. He drank and passed the bottle on. Sieghart declined. This attempt to lighten his mood failed, too. There was simply nothing to be done.

"I'm not optimistic about this," he said.

They took the curving road up and out of the valley. It was clear after that where they were going. They were already nearing the forest where the pond was situated. The water by the dam was sparkling this time, too. Gentle waves passed through the branches of the crown of the

cherry tree. But they didn't see all of this, and if their eyes had accidentally landed on this image, it wouldn't have meant anything to them. Nothing. They had no appreciation for Mermen. They were heading towards a party, and it never would have occurred to Sieghart that in the water, in the water of this forest pond, lay the crown of a tree that he had seen before. It had been in Ena's garden, which they were now approaching.

They turned into the absolutely straight lane, the green path with its two tracks for tires, which led like a natural railway to the farmstead. The buildings appeared when they were still far off, as if they had risen up from the ground, out of a depression into which they could vanish once more whenever they wished. There was the old farmhouse with its outbuildings, and its whitewashed walls, which were reflecting the meager light of evening far out across the land, as if they wanted to announce the existence of a special, leftover purity, which had already become equivocal in this world. The old grange, still attractive, grew larger before their eyes, wobbled around in their view, which was framed by the windshield and disappeared for a moment in the upper right-hand corner after seeming to dissolve. When the house dropped back into view, it was larger, closer, clearer. Now one could also see the trees growing between the buildings, their unspoiled green, standing guard like they wanted to watch over something, fend something off.

Sieghart braked hard and stopped. His colleagues had to shoot out their hands and press against the windshield, against the scene in front of them, so they didn't tip out of their seats.

"What's wrong?" one of them asked.

"You chickenshit!" the other said.

"You drive, then!" demanded Sieghart.

So they switched places and set the scene back into motion. The closer they got, the clearer the shapes became. It was like an initial approach, and even Sieghart felt like he was experiencing this for the first time. They heard the singing: women, girls. A melody flew out towards them, drowning out the sound of the engine. It was odd that the song could be heard.

On the front side of the gate, covering its full width and height, garlands had been hung. From the crossbeam hanging down towards the center of the gate was a disk, woven with greenery, where a few foreign words were written on red paper. They couldn't make heads or tails of them, but they already knew what the words said, so they stopped the vehicle and got out. Sieghart's two colleagues were rubbing their hands together as if their goal had been achieved.

A ladder was leaning against the decorated gate, from the courtyard side. A young boy climbed it. When he saw the three men who had arrived in the jeep, he let himself glide back down into the yard. Shortly thereafter he opened the little door. A few curious young women and

young men appeared, and the singing gradually ceased. The three men were at a loss. They didn't know how they were going to get across the short distance between themselves and the group of young people.

"Let's get out of here," Sieghart hissed. "We have no business here."

"We're staying!" said one of the other men. He walked in, adopting a swagger and bluster that fit the occasion and broke up the stalemate, as the situation called for. The young men and women smiled at his approach, aiding his efforts, and one of them called out, "Did you show up empty-handed?"

"No, we didn't!" Sieghart's colleague responded and hurried back to the jeep. They unloaded one of the heavy crates and all three of them carried it into the courtyard. People made room for them, stood around them in a circle, as if expecting some kind of show or attraction, a contribution of some special sort.

Sieghart opened the crate and removed the first pot. It was a large soup tureen, colorfully painted, with thick side walls; it was strange, an elegant vessel, and there was a lid and a ladle in the crate with it. He pulled his arm far back and swung the absurd kitchen container up into the air, so that it flew up and over the observers' heads and plunged back down onto the pavement of the courtyard with entertaining speed. A couple of the young women screeched. Some of the chips and slivers sailed all the way across the yard. The muffled sound of impact filled the

air and then hung there, as if the noise itself had stopped moving. The shards sparkled in the afternoon sun. The porcelain, finely fragmented, lay on the paving stones, and flakes of clay covered the ground; a beginning had been signaled. Sieghart and his two colleagues, animated by the change in mood, made the potshards fly. Plates swirled up and burst to pieces, and, following them, cups, teapots, plates, and more plates. The other people, who had been watching, joined in. Sieghart gave a sign, and young men brought over the other crates and cases, and the destruction became wanton, as if everyone had been overcome by some unseemly rage. Hands reached in and grabbed, vessels ascended, appeared to pause in the air of the courtyard, and broke open, until the pavement disappeared beneath the crunching bits of clay.

At some point the young women started singing again. They sang as if they had dispensed with every point of vocal technique. It was as though their voices came out of their throats with a naturalness both God-given and unadulterated. It sounded like they were pushing up from the depths of some unknown region.

Slowly the dishes that had arrived with the men ran low. Only one small chest was left to be emptied. The young people from the village, who had woven the garlands, began to dance. They formed a circle, held hands with their arms crossed behind them, and moved with syncopated steps. A small musical ensemble was there, a two-man band. No one had noticed when they arrived or

how. It was two old men with tanned faces, looking like they played outside from morning to night, as if it were their profession to hurry from wedding party to wedding party and make merry people even merrier with their two instruments: a small violin that had only three strings and colorful, flapping ribbons, and a trumpet that had long since lost its shine and had various nicks and dents from which one could see that many generations had played it. The ice-gray stubble on the men's faces stuck out prominently; it hadn't been tidied up or trimmed for weeks. Around their mouths lay a deliberate conviviality and anyone who looked in their eyes could see the delusion in them, the light that had been slain. But the men played cheerfully and crisply, resigned to their fate, and one could see that they still found meaning in their existence.

Sieghart listened carefully to the blind men's tune, the guttural singing of the adolescents.

He saw the intersecting movements, the arcing and leaping of the fragments. Then he spotted Ena. Finally. He'd been afraid of this meeting. He had been yearning for her. There she was, standing at the door. She observed him through the commotion. The circle of dancers was spinning in the space between them. The alternating faces could not distract him. The fact that there were so many options had no effect on him. He stared in the direction of the door where Ena stood, the woman he could not shake, the one on whom he had run aground, on whom his

attentions had no impact. He walked through the circle of dancers, interrupting the sequence of faces, and held out his hand.

"I wish you happiness," he said.

Ena thanked him, and one could tell from her demeanor that this wish meant a great deal to her. Her lips trembled as she uttered words that no one heard.

Her excitement was not lost on Sieghart. Ena had nothing to reproach herself for. Why then did things feel out of control to her?

Then Mathias walked out of the darkness of the interior. The two men exchanged greetings. Neither of them had lost, and neither had won. Everything had stayed the way it was, the way it had to be, in the well-rehearsed way of the world, stipulated since time immemorial, since people had been keeping track of such things.

Sieghart's colleague pulled a bottle out of the last crate, which they had thought was already empty. He lifted it up into the air. Then he opened it and took the first drink. He passed the bottle around, and others drank, too. They struck up a new song. The two blind men sang as they played their instruments. The song was a well-known one. And the musicians' teeth were yellow, weathered from the harsh life in the here and now, which they did not see.

Once again the table stood in the garden, and it had been extended all the way to the headless cherry tree. Food was set out, cakes and loaves of bread and fruit. They drank and raised their glasses, which held white wine that

seemed golden-green when the sun shone on it. The wine was transparent and one could see through it. They talked a great deal, as if they'd been deprived of conversation for years, everyone with everyone, across the tables, face to face. Here one could communicate, get down to cases, and when the voices could no longer reach through the tumult of words, people signaled to each other and moved away from the commotion to meet. There was plenty of room for that.

The clear, yellowish wine was good. Who would've predicted that? Sieghart's colleague had gotten drunk. He was asleep at the table, with his head resting on his hands, prematurely out of commission, cast down by this accursed exhaustion that he had not reckoned with before the party. The second man was not testing his mettle like the first; he had better things to do. He was leaning over a girl who actually appeared to be interested in his pontifications about drilling towers and soundings. From her glances, he assumed she would tolerate some physical contact. He reeled her in, inconspicuously, casually, as if he simply wanted to jazz up his account a bit, the way it was done, you know, and … But she pushed back hard. And when he didn't let go ("Not so fast!") she hit him in the face.

"Damn, you crazy broad!" he shouted after her. He reached for the glass that was there in front of him and drained it.

A couple of the guests had been watching. It wasn't the kind of incident that could disturb their merriment. "It happens, friend. Don't think anything of it. Our women … "

Sieghart saw none of this. His senses were concentrated on one single point, a red point, which was the scarf worn by Ena. He saw the red point move about between the guests, and he searched for it whenever it vanished. Then he saw it pull away from the hubbub, out of the garden, out into the protection of the courtyard, across and beyond the crunching shards. He didn't know he was following Ena. He only knew that he had gotten to his feet and now the singing was coming from a distance. Now that it was quiet, every step was audible. He also picked out the sounds of the wooden door opening. Ena disappeared behind it. He stood there in the middle of the courtyard. She didn't want him to follow her. The broken dishes and pots, damn them! But then again, who knew whether she actually wanted him to follow her lead or not? This was the last opportunity to find out if she perhaps did want it. In a few hours, she would be another man's wife. Why shouldn't he risk it?

He took the dare and opened the door. The stable was small and dark. The two horses' bodies filled the space. Weak light pushed in through the small, high window, which was draped with spider webs. Both of the animals turned to face him. He didn't see Ena. But he sensed her presence. Then he caught sight of a corner of her scarf, the point that had drawn him here. She was standing in

between the bellies of the two horses. He moved towards her. She was breathing heavily; she wanted him to come. She had not intended anything with her exit from the garden other than what was happening right then and there. He took her in his arms; she clung to him, as if she never wanted to let him go, as if all were forgotten, as though everything that had occurred before this moment, all of it—was a lie. She enjoyed the embrace. Both of them sensed the exuberance, the opening of the floodgates, before which there was no retreat or resistance. They tumbled with the current, forgetting, transgressing, excluding everything else, violating all their wonderful and noble intentions and scattering them to the wind.

"No," Ena said. "Go away!"

She pushed him back, as if her good intentions were returning, as fast as they were inexorable.

"Ena!" he urged. "Don't play with me!"

"Be quiet," she interrupted. "What you're saying makes no sense. Tomorrow Mathias will be my husband. I have lost my mind. You need to disappear! Leave! I'm begging you."

She leaned against the horse's back and waited for Sieghart to go away. The warmth of the animal's body had a calming effect. She looked up at the window, where the weak light was coming in through all the spider webs, and up at the entrance to the hayloft, through which no escape was possible.

Sieghart froze as he went out the door. Mathias was standing in the middle of the courtyard. There he was, as if he'd seen everything, felt everything, experienced everything with them. Sieghart walked over to him as if nothing had happened. But the old feeling of certainty, which had always been easy to call up, was refusing to kick in: a secret embrace. With someone else's bride. In a horse stall. During the rehearsal dinner. So what? As he drew closer to Mathias, he was counting on retribution. "Hold it right there! What do you think you're doing?" He would strike Sieghart in the face. With one of those great paws of his. And Sieghart would take it. Endure it.

And yet nothing happened. Mathias stood aside. He stepped aside. This man was behaving in a way that was at odds with what experience, and norms, led Sieghart to expect. He ascribed this to superiority, not weakness, and not cowardice, on Mathias' part.

What's he going to do now? Sieghart wondered, and he watched Mathias bring the horses out of the stable, with Ena helping him, carrying the harness; the two of them pushed the carriage out of the barn and they maneuvered the team into shape. Here was a harmony, a unity and teamwork that nobody was capable of disturbing.

Sieghart felt like he was back on that initial evening, when he had first entered the house. In everything there was self-reliance, self-confidence, which could chasten, humiliate others. Even their secret embrace came across to

him now as something the two of them had contrived in order to humiliate him. Who knew what kind of game was being played here!

It was Sieghart's intention now to go back to the garden, collect his two co-workers, and leave, drive away, back to the little piece of home consisting of four travel trailers and a drilling rig, away from this woman at last.

But when he closed the little door to the garden behind him, he forgot the resentment he was harboring.

The guests were all staring in one direction, spellbound, fearful. They were looking up towards the gable of the barn. Propped against it was a long ladder and the grandfather was climbing it, rung by rung. He was holding a pole in his hand and gave no thought to the fact that with his increasing height the vibrations of the ladder were also increasing, to the point where they could shake him off. He would sail downward to a certain death. None of the observers would be able to prevent the impact.

Ena and Mathias walked into the garden. They were horrified by what they saw.

Mathias positioned himself beneath the ladder, as if he were going to catch the grandfather.

And Ena shouted, "What are you doing? Grandfather, come back down immediately!"

The old man didn't hear her cry. He didn't want to hear it. He had something in mind. Now, right now, at this very moment. On one of the final rungs he paused. Holding himself steady with one hand, he raised the pole with

the other. With it he could reach the nest now. The nest was empty, shunned by its former inhabitants, abandoned even by the injured female to which it had been offered as a refuge in its dire affliction. The nest, visible for a long way across the local terrain, was useless. Now it could be removed. The old man poked the pole into the hard mesh. The branches, dried out after years of storms, cracked and pulled apart. But they didn't release themselves from their trusted embrace. The grandfather increased the force of his blows. Then the nest broke apart, disintegrated. The material lost its rigidity, flaked away piece by piece, dropped down and slipped over the roof, raining down on the grandfather, snapping when it slammed on to the ground, breaking into a thousand pieces of wood and chalky droppings.

The guests heaved a collective sigh, and the two blind musicians with them, though they had seen nothing. They seemed to intuit what had happened. Perhaps they were the only ones who had really seen everything, everything that was real but invisible on outside. They struck up their next song and walked out of the garden as they played; they climbed into their horse-drawn buggy, and off they drove. Mathias took them home; it had to be that way. That was the custom, because the sun was red and it was not long until evening. In the evenings, blind people are not out and about.

The music was missing, but the people knew how to make things work. They did not yet want to go back to their homes, not on a day like this, when the evening was the best part. They recalled their dances and songs, and once again everything they needed was on hand.

Sieghart's colleagues also tried to integrate themselves into the throng, the innocent play. *Hoppeidi* and *hoppeida*! They took part, to the extent they could do so. But they couldn't do all too much, since they didn't know how to link up with others with their arms crossed behind their backs, or what to do with their feet, in those rhythmic and alternating steps that made the circle rotate while they stamped on the ground. Always a group dance. Round and round, everyone together. This wasn't exactly ideal, but it was what it was. If we must … and thus they were pulled along, absorbed into the round, which was strong enough to withstand them.

Sieghart stayed on the sidelines. He was waiting for a suitable moment to tell his friends that it was past time to be off, to go back.

Things would have transpired that way if he had not suddenly found himself seated opposite Ena at the table—the banquet table where people sat and drank and ate, from which people stood up and to which they returned, the table that was a focal point, and where there could be no secrets. It was an accidental encounter, because Ena was waiting for Mathias to come back. Sieghart in turn was waiting for his colleagues, who were still dancing. The

meeting happened as if it, too, were complying with something. Here nothing was intended or contrived; here they sat silently across from each other, at the table on which everything that occurred was patent, manifest to all. They didn't speak to each other, since everything had been said.

He forgot that he had pledged they would steer clear of each other from this point on—something that would have been reasonable, humane, bearable for both of them. That lack of contact would have been like distance, the healing powers of which are well known. At a distance all unhappy loves perish. This one, too, would have perished if a touch of the requisite force had been applied. But, because neither of them possessed that strength, their feet touched beneath the table. Neither one shrank from this, and Sieghart lost track of all sense of judgment, of rational discernment, the kind that makes you sad, and makes life hard. He popped off his shoe and inched his foot up Ena's leg. He could tell that she was willing to tolerate this. She enjoyed it. Right there in public. At this table. With everyone close by, all those other people who had come there on her account, and who saw nothing, and suspected nothing, nothing of what was taking place under the timbered table, with the wine that had the evening sun shining through it. What did they know about this deceit, to which no one is immune. They knew nothing, because they did not yet know temptation, not as long as they were among their own kind. They would not have understood any of this. They were still in a place Ena had left.

Sieghart felt a haughty sense of gratification, as if he possessed the woman he liked, the woman for whom he had fought, as if he were sleeping with her, here, under the eyes of the people who did not like him, before the gaze of that loser who had always struck him as extremely strange but was now going to end up as the fool. She should marry him, Sieghart!

Him she could not elude. Not him…

And then the table begin to rise. The top fell over sideways along its entire length. The young women screeched. The young men looked in alarm at Mathias, whose outburst they did not understand. Ena and Sieghart had not noticed his return; he was the only person to see through the table. His self-control broke down under this imposition originating with the foreign guest. That man was moving in on his bride in such an indecent manner that all of Mathias' inherent propriety, all of his reserve, every bit of his vaunted hospitality, as praiseworthy as all of that might be in the eyes of the outside world—it could now be construed as moronic submission. No! Not with me!

Mathias had taken hold of both Sieghart and Ena. He pulled them out of the garden, past the ruins of the stork's nest, over the shards in the courtyard, over to the carriage. He shoved them into it, with a determination that afforded them no opportunity to resist.

"We're going for a ride," he shouted.

The young people from the village didn't comprehend what was happening. They seemed to be frozen in place, standing, sitting, holding each other. They could not make sense of what they saw. Never before had any of them witnessed this man beating horses, his horses, the ones he handled every day, the ones that were a part of him. Now he let loose on them, and they lurched forward with the carriage, so that the hundred year-old glued bonds of its composite wood creaked, and the springs, which had not counted on forces of that kind, yielded, buckling dubiously to a dead stop. The three of them sped off in the carriage. Driven. Hunted. Possessed.

Mathias stood in the carriage as he held the reins. He drove the horses onward, and there could be no doubt about the purpose of this journey. It was his revenge. He was employing the means at his disposal. He wanted to show what it looks like when privilege is defended, when one's prerogative is in play, and what kind of resistance one can expect then.

Right then and there, for everyone to see, he was giving a lesson in the exorcism of insolence. And Ena was included. She needed to see what a miserable coward he was, this water-boy, this loser called Sieghart who considered himself a Casanova.

The curves in the road caused the wagon to slide. The tires, iron rings, raised clouds of the fine-grained sand. Both tracks rushed under the wheels. The tall grass in the untended strip down the middle of the lane slapped

against the horses' legs. The two parallel ribbons hurtled at them and disappeared beneath the wheels. It was as if the landscape were spooling itself up, with increasing speed, onto a reel.

These images were familiar to her, and Ena yelled, "Stop! Mathias! Please stop!"

Sieghart clutched the side panel and held onto it as tightly as he could, but he didn't add his voice to Ena's entreaties. He didn't grab the reins or tackle Mathias.

The forest was upon them. It loomed up, menacingly large. The team shot between the trees. The branches flew over their heads; the lower ones threatened to hit them. Sieghart jerked Ena down as soon as he recognized the danger that low-hanging oak branches presented. The wheels followed the sandy track that resembled a rail line and led down into hell.

They had come up beside the pond in the woods. They did not see the sparkling water or its reddish coloration. It no longer occurred to them that it was beautiful in its fantastical nonchalance, for they sensed the impending crash. The wheels got stuck in the stones on the dam. A tremor, a brief shudder, passed through the vehicle. Then they saw the outcome: a man, an animal, and a vehicle taking off, flesh convulsing and contorting, a disintegration, witnessed in phases, hands that no longer found holds and shock on faces, dismay that could no longer have any

effect, a sinking into the water, multifarious, wrecking the peace, disturbing the crown of the cherry tree in its quiet repose.

Then the stillness, the receding circles, the reeds into which the motion traveled, the horses, with enough strength still at their disposal to escape muddy death. They were attempting to reach the shore, but the harnesses pinned their limbs. The horses gave up; they ceased disturbing the deadly quiet.

Sieghart's breath came fast. He wanted to hoard the air greedily in his lungs, as if this was the only thing that proved he was still among the living. He was ravenous for this proof. He swam to the weir, wiped the plants from his face and saw the horses, their necks extended, looking up out of the water. At first he leapt to help them, but then he asked himself what he was doing and why he was concerning himself with them? They could drown for all he cared, those confounded animals.

"Ena!" he shouted. The word skated over the surface of the water. It resounded far out into the distance. The only answer was a clear, unperturbed echo, his own voice.

"Mathias!" he cried out. He called both names, shouting them into the pond, as if his wrathful horror could penetrate the water. Then he saw a hand. It was clutching the cherry tree. He jumped in and swam over to it. He pulled Ena to the shore. She opened her eyes.

"Mathias," she mumbled. "Mathias, where are you?"

She got to her feet, as if she intended to go looking for him with all the strength she had left. In confusion she turned round and round and threatened to fall back into the water. Sieghart caught her. She vomited.

"Mathias," they both yelled.

They shouted his name again and again. Sieghart jumped into the pond once again. He swam over to the reeds; he moved the cherry tree away from the deep spot it occupied right by the dam, submerged, re-emerged in order to get more air—but he did not find the other man.

"Maybe he's hiding somewhere," he said. "Who knows? A game… "

Ena shook her head. "No, that can't be." There was no way this was a game. She saw the horses, which were still standing, hobbled, in the marshy pond. To her it seemed like they were sinking, slowly, steadily. She cried out, as if she could banish this horrible scene from her sight.

Sieghart was scared. A shiver ran down his back. Someone was standing behind him. He turned around and saw the *braška*.

"What happened?" inquired the man in the tailcoat.

Before Sieghart could answer, he looked down at the man's shoes. They were wet. Vines clung to them, as if his feet had just come up out of the water, out of this water, damn it all, this very water.

"Why are you just standing there?" he screamed. "Go get the others! Fast! As fast as you can. We're looking for Mathias." The *braška* leapt onto his moped; it seemed that he had finally recognized what had happened. He drove away, with the ribbons on his suit waving in the wind.

By evening they were still searching. Men and women pushed poles into the water from their positions on the banks. Some of them got into a boat, and the spotlight on the jeep guided them. Shouts could be heard, and somewhere in the distance a woman was weeping. She was crying to herself, gently.

The grandfather stood on the dam. His eyes followed the beam of the light, but he seemed to see more than the light could render visible. Next to him stood Ena's mother. Her arms hung at her side. She could not interpret what she was seeing. She could not get her mind around the furious activity it took to churn up a pond in the woods in order to pluck out a victim. She didn't believe that Mathias had drowned—her son-in-law, one day before the wedding. No, no …

"Come," she said to the grandfather. "There's still a lot to do for tomorrow."

The two of them left. They disappeared into the dark.

The horses were saved. Mathias wasn't. They did not locate Mathias. Or any of this things.

The *braška* removed his top hat.

"In the realm of the *Wassermann*," he noted. "From there, nobody returns."

CHAPTER NINE

The storks were gathering for their departure, their great departure to Africa. They rose up from their nests, their numbers strengthened by their offspring. Away they flew, in order to return, in order not to return. Life took its course.

The signs of the accident were still to be seen on the banks of the forest pond. But already a casual observer might miss them. The stone of the dam was banged up, and wind was blowing through the reeds. The dry leaves rubbed against each other. Tiny waves crossed paths on the water, and from their points of intersection, new rings pushed outward. Everything was as it had been for ages, and things were not the same as they had been for ages.

Sometimes a woman sat on the weir and looked into the water. At times she walked along the shore, slowly, as if she were waiting for someone. Each time she tossed a bouquet of flowers into the pond.

Once she was late. She ran through the wild meadow, hurrying so much that the flowers in her hand lost their blossoms. When she arrived, she was out of breath, but she smiled contentedly, the way you smile when you finally make it to a rendezvous. Then she sat down once more on the rock; later she walked along the bank again. The sun was red and it hung in the upper branches of the pine trees, where it would linger, pausing and catching its breath before finishing its trip home.

Ena was still seated on the rock when the first wisps of fog began wafting over the water. Their reflections were dull, gray, woolly. The bouquet of flowers was caught on the cherry tree.

"After this, Mathias, I won't be coming here anymore," she said. "But you don't need to worry. Do you hear me? Everything will stay as it was. It will stay. It will stay… as it was."

She turned her head around abruptly. It felt like someone was standing next to her, behind her, in the bushes, in the reeds, there where the horses had stood, there in the middle of the mirror that was the pond, where the fog lay.

Then she tore herself away from the rock, from the place where everything was familiar. She rushed towards her home, across the meadow, closer, closer to the farmstead, the starting point, where everything begins, where everything ends, where everything is easier to bear.

On one of the following days, the small, low door in the wooden gate opened. Ena stepped out, deliberately, as if a great deal depended on the steps that she intended to take from now on. The opening of the door and her exit seemed curiously novel, as if the young woman, this young woman with the red scarf, were coming out the door for the first time: it was like she was viewing the world with new eyes, and nothing lay behind her, nothing before her, or everything. However you want to put it.

Ena climbed onto her bike and set off on the path that ran in a completely straight line into the country, and would eventually peter out somewhere in the distance, drop away into the valley, where there was a path, a little river, and a pipe nozzle, too, projecting from the ground in the middle of the field. She rode past the token that the men had left behind. For a moment it seemed to her that the pipe was keeping step with her, staying even as she flew past, as if she wouldn't be able to shake it off, like a sign that demands recognition.

When she reached the edge of the field, the other women had already begun working. They were colorful dots on an infinite green expanse, the beginning of which was nowhere in sight. Nor the end. Ena slipped on her work

outfit, tied the red scarf around her head, picked up one of the long-handled billhooks, of which a large number lay ready, awaiting other field hands, and made herself into a new point on the plain. The leaves fell away under her sharp blade, and the white turnip flesh gleamed in the sun. Somewhere in a far-off part of the field the women were laughing. One of them waved at Ena.

The day passed; the points moved about and altered the picture.

Ena straightened up to look at her watch. As she was preparing to lean down and resume work, she saw the jeep. It was driving on the horizon, along the lip of this scene to which she herself belonged. She knew who was in that vehicle. Sieghart was not driving by chance past this field. She observed his route, the progress of his vehicle, the hesitations, the brief halt, the journey resumed. She took no joy in this performance. These were advances, she knew, maneuvers like the ones with which everything had started. She wanted no new beginning of which this man was a part. She pushed back against the idea that he alone was culpable for everything that had happened. But she could not avoid the conclusion that without him she wouldn't have this burden to bear, one that no one could relieve her of, not for as long as she lived. Not as long as there was breath in her body…

None of the women with whom she was working, or whom she knew, had taken such a burden upon themselves. Not a single one of them. But now, after the worst

days of self-recrimination, of self-devouring reproach, were over, you could stand up and stretch your back and watch as a car edged along the horizon. This was a bit of hope that life would be bearable as long as it was yours to live, that some truth resided in the simplistic consolation: life must go on. Of course it would go on. Ena turned around. She wasn't looking at the jeep anymore, or its progress. She knew that life with Sieghart was not an option. Not with him. Perhaps not with anyone else.

She went on working; she was glad that Sieghart was smart enough to leave her in peace. He would return to his world. She could count on his returning, at some point, but their passions had been reined in, and perhaps they were extinguished. They had come at a high price, involving a man's death. Mathias stood more resolutely between them than ever.

Sometimes she dreamt of her wedding, of the conclusion of that day that had already commenced. She saw herself in the wedding dress, the one that was hundreds of years old and had been passed down from bride to bride. She saw herself in the unique set of clothes and jewelry for which every woman yearned. That's how things were around here, and every exception was dysfunction.

Ena saw herself crying next to Mathias, who hadn't even put on his suit for the exchange of vows. When she was told to put the ring on his finger, she looked, horror-stricken, at his fingerless hand. She fled from the small

wooden church. A bride ran across the meadow to the hill. The graveyard was there. There was a wooden cross on a fresh grave.

She awoke.

The small window stood open. Its sash creaked and strained on its simple mounting. She felt as though she had detected something that wasn't part of her dream.

She got up and went to the window. The moon was shining, producing shadows that lay over the garden. Somebody was standing in one of them. She saw the outline of the man, but she couldn't make out his face.

"Who are you?" She sent her question, tremulous and restrained, down into the garden, as if the answer might cause her to shudder.

The unknown man said nothing. He stood there as if he wanted nothing else, as if the sight of Ena sufficed, and he felt safe in the shadow of the shrubs.

"Sieghart… is that you?" she asked.

The man did not react.

Ena rubbed her face. Her hand shook. Her limbs quivered.

"Mathias… is it you?" she asked, and her voice failed, the way it does in dreams, in that other, transcendental reality.

Then the shadow moved. The man stepped out into the wan, bluish light and walked away. He left the garden, with which he seemed to be familiar. Ena noticed his hesitant steps. She wanted to make him stay, but she didn't know how to speak to him.

She fell back onto her bed and wrapped herself around the pillow, as if she were searching for a stay, an anchor to let her regain her equilibrium. She flipped the light on and moved closer to it, so that she could see the fine wires in the bulb, the technology behind all of its illusion-banishing brilliance. She wanted to be awake and understand what was going on, what was happening to her.

After that she lay down again and waited for the daylight.

In the morning, she moved to the window again and looked down into the garden. The sun made everything different. The sun could do that.

Ena knew that Sieghart's path and hers would intersect again one day. It had to happen at some point. It was only that she had not reckoned with this recurrence, with the similarity of the events; she didn't like what it symbolized and she tried to overlook it.

Back then, on that horrifying evening, she had asked him to leave. She remembered how it happened. He wanted to tell her something, to say a word of comfort, perhaps, like everyone else was doing. But she turned her back on him. And she did this in front of everyone.

Now that she had some distance from these events, she would not have been able to treat him the same way. It would transpire like this: they would exchange a few words, the way people do when they meet someone who is not quite a stranger, not quite a total stranger.

But this repetition of details upset her, as if it harbored something mysteriously philosophical.

Once again Ena was making a weekly trip into the village. Once more the short, heavyset clerk and her simple-minded husband, who stood around the shop until his wife ordered him to climb the stepladder and fetch the desired items from the upper shelves, had her goods ready for her. Nothing was different about these conventions.

When she came out of the store, two masculine hands reached for the straps of her bags, as had occurred once before. "May I?" asked Sieghart.

This time, too, she did not wish him to help her. This time, too, she wanted to defend herself, but again she let it happen, because there was nothing more to ward off. The bags were already stowed in his vehicle, and Sieghart lifted her bike up and put it in as well, and he made a gesture inviting her. It seemed exaggerated, but not silly.

She let herself be driven home a second time. They drove the familiar route without exchanging a word. The afternoon had its yellow-red sun back, and the end of the workday was upon them, along with their conceptions of what that meant.

Ena leaned back in her seat. She knew that Sieghart would not drive fast this time. That would have been a dumb thing to do.

"Where are you now?" she asked.

"A few kilometers farther to the north," he replied. "In the middle of the moor. Cut off from the world."

"And what have you all found out?" she wanted to know.

"The ground here is suitable for anything," he said. "With our amendments, we can turn it soft or hard. Whatever's needed."

"Then you'll build?"

"I don't decide that," he replied.

"Who does?"

Sieghart pointed his finger up in the air. "The people up there."

"But you're one of them," she said.

He smiled: "Not yet."

They turned onto the lane, straight as a railroad track, that led to the farm. Sieghart reduced his speed, as if he wanted to gain time, as if everything had not yet been said on this short journey. Then he brought the vehicle to a stop. There was nothing else to do except unload Ena's bags and bike.

"Goodbye," she said.

"One more thing," he said, in opposition to her haste.

Ena walked away. She had anticipated his using a tactic like this to detain her.

"I'm going away," he added. "Soon. Far away."

For a moment, Ena paused. Her hesitation was brief, hardly worth mentioning. But she could not completely disregard what he had said. At the very least, he had used the words “far away.”

“Goodbye,” she repeated. She disappeared through the little door in the wooden gate.

The image of this entry, which was an exit, stuck in his memory.

The cemetery, a garden inside a circular fence, stood between the village and the farmstead where Ena lived. This place of rest was small, because the dead came from a single village. It had been that way for centuries, and the enclosed garden was the quietest and most peaceful of all resting places to which a human being could be consigned. There was no chapel there, and no mortuary. The crosses were made of wood, two slats of unequal size fitted together. Where they intersected, names were pyrographed, along with numbers representing the years of life. There were no eulogies for the departed existence. The crosses were all similar, in both size and type of wood. The equality before death was visible in every feature of the garden. It lay on a knoll, as close to heaven as the landscape permitted, and the last passages were combined with struggles for bearers and attendants. These final efforts were experienced by everyone who was carried up here, provided that they had

believed in them while alive. All people believed in them, and they all wished for the honor of this exertion to be bestowed upon them.

Ena had climbed up the hill. She walked around between the crosses. The wind swept across the graves. The evening had made the names and dates illegible.

She touched the crosses with her hand, as if she was there on a visit, yet another visit, as was the custom. But then she stopped. After a year the grave still looked fresh, as did the wood of the cross, and at this grave too she touched the marker stuck into the soft earth. She stood there as if praying, but she wasn't praying. She was just looking down at the sparse grass that could not cover up anything in this place.

Unexpectedly a man's hand laid a bouquet of flowers on the mound. Ena wasn't startled. It seemed like she had predicted this, as if she had known for a long time that Sieghart was standing behind her.

"A grave for him," he said, in hushed tones.

"Yes," she responded.

"But he was never found."

"No, he was never found."

"A grave with no one in it."

"For me, he's here," she said. "The way they're all here. Everyone who dies here."

They stood there in silence. The wind swept over the grass. When Sieghart laid his hand on Ena's shoulder, she did not resist. She leaned her head on his hand, as if she

had forgotten where she was; it seemed that she had no other choice, that she was mixing up the men, the worlds, the locations, time, as if she'd forgotten herself.

Ena and Sieghart left the little cemetery and walked down the hill as if back into life, effortlessly, without bearers or attendants, repelling the honor that they were renouncing.

This honor had no point for the two of them, not in that moment, as they embraced, and sank into the grass with the wind blowing through it, the wind that came from up there, from the garden in which there stood a cross with Mathias' name burned into it.

There was no time, not a single second, for Ena to get a clear picture of what was going on. She was letting something happen to her that actually demanded insurrection. But this renunciation was fortuitous. In the company of death, she sensed a new life awakening in her; she sensed that Sieghart was a part of this new life. She felt that it was really beginning now and that it permeated her, and she sensed how it might look later, when she was ready to live this life, this other life, the beautiful things of which she had a presentiment, these other beautiful things, these greater things. Her voice rent the air, now without the inhibitions that had always belonged to that decorum one was expected to preserve.

"Sieghart," she said, her breaths coming rapidly. "I love you. I've always loved you. You don't believe it. And why should you! I myself didn't want to believe it. I didn't want

to love you. I love you. Everything is over. All is forsaken. There's nothing else I can do. Come, hold me tight! Swear to me that it will stay like this, now and forever. Dammit! Swear it will stay this way, or I will kill you."

"Yes," he countered, without considering what he was saying. He didn't need time to reflect, because he wanted things to stay the way they were now. This was the moment he'd been yearning for, from that very first morning onward, when she had walked over to the pump and the water had flowed over her skin, that clear, cold water on her hot skin, that he was now allowed to touch, over which he could now move his hands, gathering, conquering, but lightly, over the skin that was like silk, the skin that was everything. Victory and happiness and meaning and simply everything.

They remained lying there next to each other for a long while. They held each other, but they didn't say anything more. Everything had been said. They knew that they'd been imprudent enough to leave the future no choice, to leave themselves no choice. In fact, everything had happened.

They were very cold, but they continued to lie there.

They endured the chill that arrived with the light of the moon, and the darkness, which they also used to cover themselves.

CHAPTER TEN

In the winter, which had arrived overnight, the wedding took place. The hotel in the county seat had a good reputation. And it lived up to that reputation in the elegance and refinement of its rooms and spaces. A person who thought to arrange a celebration here was a person who had the wherewithal to make it happen. And one could not do it without connections to the people who administer everyday things and facilities.

Sieghart was friends with the chief waiter of the hotel. This man had been able to persuade the boss that wedding celebrations are more profitable for conference rooms than conferences are. The turnover was a lot higher than with people sitting down to hold meetings.

Thus they gained access to the magnificent dining room, paneled in hardwood, where surfaces of crystal sparkled. Chandeliers hung above a long table. In its pendants of a thousand prisms coruscated a spectral light, as if a thousand tiny rainbows were present.

The waiters stood good-naturedly in one corner. They knew their way around wine and good manners. They were aware of having something to prove, something that this celebratory circle of people had never seen. The service was pure perfection, and the waiters felt happy and superior.

Ena had forsaken accessories and trappings. She wore no veil, nor did she have on any gloves. She was lovely, and she regarded herself over and over in the reflective panes of glass. There was music, unobtrusive music at a low volume, coming from albums that one of the waiters cued up. He'd had all the guests in mind and brought polkas and marches, too.

Her grandfather danced. He was showing how people used to dance in his day. Ena's mother helped out, because she also knew how things used to be. How quickly the time passes!

He garnered applause for breaking the ice, but Sieghart's colleagues demanded an encore, for they had come to have fun. A wedding has to be merry; no one wants a sad wedding. But her grandfather had shown his dance. And he didn't want to continue. He felt hemmed in on the dance floor, between the paneled wall and the table, and

anyway he hadn't come to be on display. At home everyone would have danced. Then things would've been the way they ought to be at a wedding. Here, now, he remained in his chair, and the goblet of wine in his hand trembled. He didn't know how one was supposed to drink out of this kind of glass.

The waiter who was in charge of the small, discreet stereo set knew how to mix things up. He put on a new album. A hit. The bridal couple danced. The young women who'd come from the village had brought flowers, wildflowers, and no one knew where they had gotten them at this time of year.

When Ena approached the glass door, with its reflected images, she saw herself for a moment in that other bridal outfit, the colorful gown with jewelry that did not go in and out of fashion. She blanched at her likeness, but she was holding Sieghart's hand, and she could turn to him, avert her gaze from images that she didn't want to see, not anymore.

Spirits rose, and the guests proposed lots of toasts. They raised the lovely goblets and demanded music that was faster and louder, music that the waiter kept set aside in a special box.

Her grandfather sat at the long table, his bony hands in his lap, as if he were praying; it was as if he were asking for a blessing on everyone who was present, all the people dancing behind him and in front of him. He sat there and he was the only one who was plagued by some unnamable

worry. He was the only person there who kept seeing the nail in the cherry tree. Then he stood up to distract himself from his own thoughts.

He left the hall, going down the stairs to the cloakroom where he had stored a jug in a holder of braided wicker. He took the jug and carried it back up the stairs. Then he pulled out the cork and filled the wine glasses on the table, one after another. The yellow wine gleamed in them. Even here the sun in the wine was recognizable, and he poured and poured, as though he wanted to fill the glasses with memories, with being and remaining and all things real.

The waiters shot him deprecatory glances. That wasn't part of the agreement, old man. Our wines are to be drunk here!

But then they took their places in the general cheerfulness unleashed by the jug and its sweet yellowish juice. Everyone reached for the glasses and toasted each other; it seemed like they were enjoying a special dispensation, and so indeed they were.

Then the music came, the other music, the completely different sort that silences the modern dance party with its banal abandon. An ensemble had come in, a two-person combo. No one knew where they were from. The two blind musicians stood in the corner of the room and played, as if they always stood for hours, until late, playing their music in corners, as if that were their profession; they hurried from wedding to wedding to make mirthful

people even happier with their instruments, a little fiddle that had only three strings but also multi-colored, waving ribbons, and a trumpet, which had lost its shine and on which one could detect bumps and scrapes revealing how many generations had made music with it. The stubble on the men's faces stuck out in all directions, gray and untrimmed. The gaiety enveloping their mouths was forced; there was no light in their eyes. They seemed to divine the environment in which they found themselves; their eyes were dead but seemed to see. Both of the men were lively and their music was brisk. In their playing, the two of them glimpsed the overall meaning of their existence, the sole meaning, the incomparably beautiful one.

The young women from the village began dancing, one after the other, the way it had once been down in the courtyards of the farmhouses. They arranged themselves in a circle, held hands with their arms crossed behind their backs, and rotated with syncopated steps.

The young women pulled Ena along with them; they tore her away from Sieghart, who stood by helplessly. There was nothing he could do, because he knew this dance, and yet he did not know it.

Now the waiters were looking on again disapprovingly: that was not part of the arrangement, people! We have our own music. But who could stop the dance? There was no way to halt it, given its sealed simplicity.

Now people could tell who had brought the musicians to the hotel. The *braška* was standing next to them. He was wearing neither his top hat nor his ribbons. Sieghart looked over at him, across the heads of the dancers, between their elaborate strides, and he saw the *braška's* shoes and the climbing plants and vines on them, which looked like they had just come up and out of the pond in the woods. The shock launched him into motion. He got his hands on Ena and wrested her out of the circle. He held her tight, as if he needed to protect her from a danger that was very close by.

Sieghart signaled something to the waiter. The musicians and the *braška* received glasses. The others raised their goblets to them, and then the three men started walking, still playing, taking their leave. The *braška* shook hands with Ena and Sieghart. And he left, as if he would never be seen again, either with his festooned top hat or without it. Simply gone forever. It was quiet as they left. Everybody watched them go. A whole experience was making for the door: the days of childhood and youth.

Ena took a few steps in their direction. Just a couple. Then she stopped in the center of the dance floor, in the middle of the room; she was standing between things, between the spaces. A hand retrieved her, a strong, helping hand, one that knew in what direction things now needed to move.

The music kicked in again, that ideal and complete music, and people could dance once more the way they do inside a building.

The evening passed.

Gradually the conference room emptied out. Sieghart's colleagues stayed the longest. One of them drank straight from the grandfather's jug, and another was changing the records. The waiters dispensed with the demonstrations of their craft. They let themselves be served by Sieghart's co-workers, who always knew how to kill time, always, "You're very welcome, sir. Oh, and one does not eat fish with a knife. Good grief."

Upstairs in the suite, before they got into bed, Sieghart told Ena, "I still have a surprise for you."

"A surprise," she repeated. "That's lovely."

The bed was soft. They sank down into it. There was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, a smaller version of the one in the conference room. Its prisms flashed and passed on the reflection of the hotel sign outside, at regular intervals, with electronic precision, and Ena asked for her surprise.

"All right," he said. "It's about my promotion."

"Your promotion," she repeated.

"We might be moving far, far away," he continued.

"Where?"

"To Paris. For a while. They want to appoint me to the staff of ICOLD, the International Commission on Large Dams. Headquarters: Paris. Well?"

Ena looked at the little rainbows behind the prisms of the chandelier. She didn't feel as if she understood yet what he was sharing. It sounded like a half-truth, and she didn't know whether to be happy about it or not.

"To Paris?"

"Yes. Just imagine," he said. "I didn't want to say anything till it was all settled. We're at that point now. They only take you if you're married."

"What am I supposed to do there?" Ena asked. She still didn't feel like celebrating the news. How was it that this failed to make her happy? A little bit, yes, but not properly so. *What am I supposed to do there?*

"Something will turn up," Sieghart replied. "For women, something always turns up. Don't worry about it!"

He turned to her, kissed her. He knew that he had succeeded in surprising her. At the right moment. He'd been able to contain himself all day, in the previous days, weeks, that evening, throughout half the night. He informed her on their wedding night that they would be going to Paris. The world lay at their feet. "What's wrong with you?" he asked in alarm. There were tears in her eyes. She wasn't crying, but the tears did not match the good fortune that he felt, and that he wanted to share with her.

"Nothing, nothing at all, Sieghart," she said in an attempt to placate him. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Aren't you happy?"

"Oh but I am! Why wouldn't I be?"

But it sounded to him like he had disappointed her. She looked at the prisms in the chandeliers. The colors of the little rainbows bothered her. She couldn't look at them any longer. She pulled the blanket up over her head.

The next morning, when they walked down the stairs, they didn't look any different from the other visitors, who were there in the hotel on their business or government trips. They passed the main conference room. The waiters were at work. The art of service. On the long table stood little flags, colorful symbols of European states. One of the waiters turned towards the exit. He smiled. Why was he snickering?

"Stupid fellow!" commented Sieghart.

They remained in that hotel, in the city, for two days. Sieghart liked it; he knew his way around in this environment. He could show Ena how well he knew the place. She let him guide her and show her everything: the cafés; the park on the edge of town where a count once lived, in the midst of trees from all over the world; the Löwen Apothecary on the Old Market, the oldest in Germany; the ruins of a church from the time of the Hussite Wars; and the hotel bar—everything that was to be seen in two days. They also spent half an hour in Sieghart's firm, with his boss—the length of time it took to smoke a cigarette.

"Understood?"

"Understood."

"And what do you think of the Paris thing?" the boss asked Ena. He acted as though she had him to thank for things working out this way, as if he were due a small word of appreciation.

"Well, what can I say?" she answered.

"It's really something, isn't it?"

"Oh, indeed," she replied.

He was satisfied. He smiled and removed his glasses and cleaned them with his tie, for a long time, until they stood up.

"Ah yes, work," said the director. "With you folks in the country, the wedding goes on for a whole week, right?"

"Yes," Ena said. "And it would not have taken place in the winter."

Their days of celebration were over.

The jeep was snowed in. It was in the parking lot. One could see that it hadn't been driven for days. Sieghart cleared the snow from the windows. It was cold inside. Around them, the metal of the interior glittered with frost. The displays showed no readings.

They drove out of the city, back to the plains, where it was white, flat, really flat and really white, pure, immaculate. Slowly the vehicle warmed up, and the dials on the dashboard began to function.

Ena and Sieghart drove across the wild meadow, which did not let itself be seen. The tires pulverized the snow. They blazed a trail. It was the first one leading to the farmstead. That indicated that no one had come out and no one had gone in since the snow had fallen.

They rolled up close to the gate. The little door in it was recognizable. Sieghart stopped the jeep. The gate remained shut. He put the vehicle in gear and drove up closer, and closer. His bumper touched the gate. The forward motion pushed it open, slowly, deliberately, delicately. Both doors opened almost effortlessly. The wood creaked. The snow piled up on the other side of the gate, sliding into the courtyard, and Sieghart smiled. He wanted Ena to revel in what his jeep could do when he demonstrated it. Look at how those doors spread apart!

Ena walked in before he did.

Her mother immediately gave her a hug. The grandfather remained sitting at the table. He had a honeypot in front of him. He was dunking pieces of bread into it and then using the tip of a knife blade to place them into his mouth.

"Leave that thing outside the gate!" he said.

The jeep remained outside the courtyard. It didn't mind being consigned to the driveway. It stayed out there for one day. Then a second. A third. Then it was inside the gate, in the yard. The old man had to go around it while he did his chores.

At one point he looked into the cab. The dials and meters merged into a face with large eyes, with a wide mouth. It was a strange face.

The grandfather left the courtyard. He walked through the garden. He wanted to go over to the forest again, which was also black in winter, but he was struck by the changes, the little unassuming corrections to the usual surroundings. The stump of the cherry tree was being used to support a clothesline. A cord led from the stump to the barn. Clothes were hung on it to dry, and frozen undergarments. It was odd how the stiff legs moved in the wind.

The old man strode across the white landscape. A point upon it. The hand on a dial. One could tell by looking at him, reading him, what was going on with the forces of his world, his world that was so small, so big.

He walked over to the woods, tramping through the snow. He stopped when the frozen pond lay before him. The stones of the weir were occupied. The snow was lying there. The crown of the cherry tree protruded from the ice.

The grandfather saw how the branches spread under the winter décor, how they connected, how they remained intact and compact, how they remained a crown. He stepped onto the pond, walked out across the ice. In the middle he paused. The forest, the pond, and him. No one else. He was alone with his thoughts. They could penetrate the layer of ice.

Then he noticed, however, a second set of tracks in the snow; they looked like a continuation of his own, as if he himself had crossed the pond and reached the other shore. The old man looked around warily. The man who was with him on the ice might be standing behind him.

"Mathias," he said softly. "Where are you?"

The days passed rapidly. Sieghart knew how to bring a particular kind of order to the sequence of days and nights. He used his organizational abilities. He coordinated activities. He was an engineer. The work flow on the farm could be influenced; it could be rearranged.

He drove to work and returned. Ena prepared the meals to conform to the requirements of his goings and comings. They no longer all ate together, as had been customary. He demanded no changes. They came by themselves. There was no other way. He was respectful, but his consideration effected new work processes. He knew how to justify his suggestions. He proposed, but he demanded nothing.

When the two horses were picked up, he asked the grandfather whether perhaps one of them should stay. He knew how it is when one is used to a certain way. The grandfather didn't answer. It was too late for an answer. They had already driven the horses onto the truck, whipping them, pulling them, with expert thrusts and a practiced grip. The horses were driven away. Both of them

looked around. They seemed to intuit that they would never return. The snow thawed as the vehicle rolled along; it left two brown tracks in its wake.

"So," Sieghart said. "That's that."

It is not true that they no longer sat together at the table. They did come together, not terribly frequently, but as often as their work cycles allowed. Sieghart had bought a television, a portable one that could be placed anywhere. It would play anywhere and chatter everywhere. Now it sat on the small narrow cabinet containing that item that was still a mystery to Sieghart. Ena hid the key. One day…

So there was the television with its topical pictures, with the news story about the French pilot who flew through the middle of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, a trick that was both dangerous and forbidden. Sieghart laughed loudly: "People might well file complaints about that."

After the supper, when he was alone with Ena, he finally asked her to divulge the secret of the little cabinet.

"It's high time," he said. "I know almost everything about any of you."

He said this casually; he was certain it would be successful. He was expecting a revelation that would differ little in its meaning from the picture in the television.

Ena acted at first as if she hadn't heard his request. Then came her question, "Why is it so important for you to find out about this?"

"It doesn't matter that much to me," he responded. "It's just that you're supposed to know everything you can about the other person. I read that somewhere. The more one knows about the other person, the lower the risk that there will be conflicts. Later on. There's no great wisdom in it. It's just because it's logical."

She had understood, and she went over to the little black cabinet and turned off the television. Then she retrieved a little key from behind the pendulum clock, which suddenly seemed to be running louder, as if it were the only thing that had no expectations, that was just going to keep going its usual, unstoppable way.

Ena unlocked the little door. Sieghart came closer. It was not merely logic that drew him there. He also heard the clock running louder. "Damn it," he swore. "Why does the clock have to make extra noise now?" And it announced the top of the hour, striking just when he saw the face that was in the little cabinet, the face he had already seen once, the dark wooden countenance, formidable and alien, round, with bony features and dead eyes, the unfinished face, flat and woeful; it wasn't a real face, but yet it was, and it was one that belonged to a person; it was a reproduction of one, in which fissures could be seen, the brittle hints of disintegration. Despite everything the head was beautiful in its defective workmanship. In its visibly dubious artistry that had accompanied it into existence—in days of yore. My God, when must that have been?

"What is it?" he asked as his voice nearly cracked. The clock ticked loudly.

"Živa," Ena answered. "The goddess of life."

Sieghart didn't follow her. He regarded the face, as if he could glean more information from the cracked lips, full of wormholes, or from the eyes, perhaps, that appeared to be drawing closer to him.

"Živa," he said after her. "A goddess. And … what is she doing here?"

"We've had her," Ena answered. "No one knows how long. Been passed down time and again. Brings good luck. A pagan woman. We protect her. She's not allowed to fall into strange hands. Not to be seen by unknown eyes."

A fair amount of time had passed, and now the clock was quieter. Sieghart understood what he had seen and heard. He reoriented himself; logic returned. It gained the upper hand now, and he could no longer suppress a smile. "So, then … Živa is your name. A goddess. But you look like a … ."

After that he laughed out loud. As one should when faced with this kind of thing. "Like a god," he concluded, as though he'd actually seen one before.

He laughed in the direction of the cabinet. It wasn't sarcasm, not derision; no, it was a liberating laugh. The secret had proven harmless. It was on the odd side. But it was more or less meaningless, like so many things. Ena,

his young, beautiful wife, her mother, and the grandfather venerated an idol. This was such an unimaginable anachronism that he couldn't do anything but chuckle about it.

He put a hand on Ena's shoulder and floated a question. "You don't really believe in it, do you?"

Then he turned on the television. He was no longer looking for any answers from her.

Images from all over the world flickered in rapid succession on the screen, pin sharp, colorful pictures about the start-up of a new laboratory in space, about heat accumulators, something else about the unknown stunt pilot who had flown through the middle of the Arc de Triomphe. The pictures passed over Živa, irresistibly. Živa could not keep up with them, for she had no feet or legs. She was dumb and thus condemned to silence, just watching, and yet both of them, the chain of images and Živa, were present in an almost unbearable intimacy, in which they strove to exclude the other but had no power to make that happen. And so it was.

Ena closed the cabinet door and stashed the key. She turned to Sieghart, who was again at ease and was now seated in an armchair. She was trying to think, to come up with a response that had not yet materialized, but she found no suitable words.

"I'm afraid," she said.

Sieghart tore himself away from the images. "Afraid? Of what?"

"I don't know," she answered before leaving the room.

He reflected briefly on what she might have meant, and then the pictures started up again.

"I'll be right there," he called after her, although he wasn't sure that that was actually going to happen.

When they were lying next to each other in bed, she said, "That time when there was a man in front of the window… "

Sieghart, half asleep, heard her voice; it was coming from far away.

"What man? In front of which window?"

"This window. Was that you?"

"Yes, that was me," Sieghart answered. "I was longing to see you. I was at your window many times. But it's really time to sleep now. Good night."

"Why didn't you answer when I called your name?"

"I don't remember," he replied. You were… Oh, I don't know. The way you were. That's just the way it was."

The moon had an aureole, an illuminated round courtyard. The moon-grange was traveling. From the clouds you could see how it was subject to tireless migration.

Sieghart was asleep. His quiet, regular breathing was audible. He did not see the moon in motion.

Ena shut her eyes as well, and then she reopened them. She had heard something, a noise below the window, in the yard. She sat up and got out of bed. She pulled the curtain to one side. In one of the shadows cast by the grasses

and shrubs, someone was standing. She saw the outline of a man, but she couldn't make out his face; she turned back to the bed and listened to Sieghart's breathing.

"Who are you?" she asked, quietly, through the pane of the window. She was posing this question to herself, not to the stranger, and not to Sieghart.

The man stood there as if he intended to do nothing else, as if the sight of Ena sufficed, as if he felt safe in the shadow of the shrubs. Then, finally, he left.

He walked out of the garden, into the pale, bluish light, as if he knew his way around.

Ena noticed his hesitant steps. She wanted to hold him back, but she didn't know how she should address him.

She dropped back onto the bed and embraced Sieghart, who had no idea what was going on.

"What's up?" he asked.

She turned on the lamp and walked right up to it, to where she could see the bulb and its little wires, technology in all of its disillusioning glory. She wanted to feel awake, to take in what was taking place, what was happening to her. Sieghart could not help her with that.

"You won't understand me," she said.

"What's not to understand?" he countered. "There's nothing that can elude the mind in the long run. You'll see that I'm right about that."

"No," she repeated. "You won't understand me. You have too much intellect."

He came over and hugged her. “Too much intellect? What drivel!” As he led her back to bed, to the warm, soft place of safekeeping where everything began, and everything ended, it dawned on him that she might be ill. He squeezed her tightly in his arms, and he knew that the closeness did her good, that he would have to protect her from a still unknown danger. He resolved to get to the bottom of things.

In the morning the sun was shining. “Spring!” he observed and then woke Ena up. “It’s spring! Get up! Today’s the day. If you want, we can take Živa with us. What do you think of that?”

“No,” she answered. “I have to get by without her.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was little time left for saying goodbye. That was Sieghart's doing. He arranged it that way. On account of the tears that could be expected. Why shouldn't he do all he could to leave only a brief time for such things?

The jeep showed up at the last minute. One of Sieghart's colleagues was at the wheel. They took the suitcases outside, loaded them into the vehicle, and stood in front of the gate as if it hadn't yet been decided whether they were actually leaving or not.

Sieghart's colleague looked as his watch. "Holy smokes. It's definitely time now," he said. And he started the engine.

"Well, then … "Sieghart began.

He shook the grandfather's hand. He embraced him, something he'd never done before. It looked awkward, the way men's hugs do.

"Don't let her out of your sight!" bade the grandfather. "Do not let her out of your sight!"

Ena's mother was silent. She held on tightly to Ena, as if she wanted to prevent her daughter, at the last minute, from departing.

"I'm not leaving the planet, Mother," Ena said into her ear, but it did truly seem that she was heading off into another world from which there was no prospect of a return.

The colleague honked the horn. He pointed at his watch: *We have to go!*

They shook hands again, all around, and the jeep drove off. In the rear-view mirror the farm buildings vibrated. The two people standing in front of it shrank and shrank. They were the first things to disappear. Then the house was also reduced to a dot. Before the jeep dropped into the valley, Sieghart placed his hand over the mirror. He wanted to help Ena. She no longer could see the last point of an entire world disappearing. She laid her hand on Sieghart's, and the parting she'd been fearing was concluded.

They landed in Paris in the late afternoon. The first lights of evening were already turned on at the airport. They took the escalator down into the main hall. There they put down their suitcases and hugged each other. "And here we are," he said.

At that point a man addressed them. His name was Robert, Robert Lagrange, and it was his job to pick them up, he said. They got into his car and drove into the city, the lights of which proliferated. It seemed like they were switching on just ahead of them. Whatever place they were approaching was illuminated. In their honor. The city rolled past them on the right and on the left, it approached them, and it flew along behind them.

"The Avenue des Champs-Élysées," Robert noted. "The Arc de Triomphe is up ahead."

"Will we drive through it?" Ena asked.

"No, you can't do that," laughed Robert.

"Inconceivable, doing that in an airplane. Am I right?" Sieghart said. "Someone did it?"

"Yes, of course," Robert replied. "An experienced pilot."

"He'll lose his license," Sieghart observed.

"Now where'd you get that idea?" Robert countered with a laugh. "It's all a setup. A bet or some such. The trick will make the guy really popular and that will bring him a lot of money. And the money will keep him from losing his license. So it goes."

Ena and Sieghart laughed then, too. This was the lightheartedness that characterized a certain way of looking at things. They had heard about this. It gave people room to live, and it meant that almost anything could be tolerated. Almost anything. Anyway, don't always focus on the worst possible outcome! *Savoir-vivre*.

They stopped on a little side street. There were no streetlights, but the ones in the avenue did the trick and made the hotel entrance visible. This was where a suite had been reserved for them.

"Just for a short time," Robert explained. "Your actual apartment must first be renovated." Sieghart's predecessor had taken his time moving out.

"Tomorrow morning I will pick you up," he said. "We will go to the Institute. Good night!"

The short, portly woman at the front desk had their key ready. She asked if they still wished to eat. Wine they could get all night long, but food… She went with them and unlocked their door, one of the four in the angled corridor, where there was only one light fixture. The light was strange. It was not that of the city. They were glad to see the points of light outside the windows of their room. The markers of life being lived to the fullest, in a million ways.

The suite had two rooms, a bathroom with a toilet, and a storage room, which was already, or still, filled.

Sieghart nodded in the affirmative when the woman asked him whether they liked it. Then she left. Sieghart and Ena remained standing at the window. Everything had gone so fast that they still hadn't been able to get their minds around the change, the leap, the transition. Their suitcases held the things they did not dare to unpack.

The next morning they rode with Robert to the Institute on the Avenue de Wagram.

"Here we go," Robert said. He pointed to the sign where the Institute announced its full name, in English: Central Office, International Commission on Large Dams.

"Here we go, indeed," Sieghart repeated. He was taking deep breaths, so that he could get through the introductions awaiting him with confidence and poise. He believed in the power of the first impression. And the one he made was not at all bad.

Ena intended to wait for him. They arranged to meet again in an hour at the entrance. In one hour. The introductions would not take longer than that. Afterwards they planned to go together to the embassy.

Ena walked down the street, straight ahead, in one direction. Every step she took magnified her feeling of being exposed. She belonged to the throngs of people moving along the sidewalks, the colorful corpuscles of the thousandfold tide that kept the city alive. Ena nourished the cosmopolitan city. No one could tell she was doing it, but that's how it was. No one noticed her, but she was seen. Without her the streets of Paris would be different. Yet the streets took her in and took her up in order to stay the way they'd been for ages, since the famous *quatorze juillet* and earlier. On this morning she recognized that she was in the middle of a stairway leading up to civilization, to progress, culture, to the plateau from which one can catch sight of everything that the human animal was capable of achieving. She was afraid to go any further, because the end of the ascent was not in view, and she was scared that,

up there, where she expected to find the presentation of human progress, there might be no people anymore, only progress.

She walked along slowly, more slowly than the other pedestrians, and she turned around. She wanted to see how much distance she had already covered; she wanted to orient herself, to commit the prominent points to memory, because she wanted to return to where she'd started. But the starting point that had come to mind, the one that she was reflecting upon here in the Avenue de Wagram, was called Sieghart. It wasn't the cherry tree or her grandfather, nor her mother, the wild meadow, or Živa. Not them either. A new point had been reached, and from there a new beginning was in view. She looked around. Her caution was unjustified. Things around her were lovely in their consummation, in their masterful elaboration, their elegance, abundance, even their ostentation. She beheld the displays in the storefronts, the jewelry on the fingers and hands of the shoppers and sales clerks alike. Then she clutched at her neck, where no necklace lay, and she seemed ashamed of her nakedness.

In front of a café stood tables and chairs, probably for the first time this season. She ordered a coffee, and a kindly waiter brought it out to her.

From the neighboring table a young man turned to face her. He had a worm on his hand. It was knitted of green wool and it could move. The worm walked across the back of the young man's hand, wriggled between his

fingers, and finally disappeared up his sleeve. He wanted to let the worm have a turn on Ena's hands, but she refused. He shifted his attention to another woman, and the woolen worm vanished up her sleeve. The other guests in the café laughed and squealed over the secret peregrinations of the worm. No one knew where the invisible string was that controlled it.

Ena had plenty of time. She turned up a side street; she knew that she had gone left, and she knew that on her return she would need to go right. There was uncertainty in her first steps. She was walking the way the other people were walking: freely, or almost, and with disarming certainty. You could indeed get oriented even to this world. But then, as she was entertaining that very thought and making a note of her route, she got a scare. She kept on walking, but guardedly, reluctantly. It seemed as though she'd just seen a man she knew. He was coming toward her, in the stream of other pedestrians, a powerfully built man, who stood out above the rest. His face hadn't been visible. But the way he carried himself, with his body tilted forward, the arms hanging straight down, the way Mathias held his … the way Mathias had once held his. She scanned the area for him and ran as far as the corner, in order to get an overview of the big avenue. No. No one. She leaned against the wall of a building and knew that she was attracting attention now. Someone would be addressing her any minute.

"*Puis-je vous aider, madame?*" a young passer-by asked.

"No. No, thank you," she answered. "I'm all right. *Merci*."

Sieghart was waiting for her in front of the ICOLD building. "Where were you?" he wanted to know.

"I was right over there," she responded. "Just a few steps from here … "

He was in a good mood. After he took her arm, he said, "So, everything went well." And then: "Why aren't you asking me what it was like in there?"

"All right. How was it then?" she said, resolving to listen hard to him so that she could forget the incident in the side street.

"They're looking forward to collaborating with us," he explained. "The experiences of a Central European country in handling water are in demand. Small rivers, big projects. The way we do things. Structural hydraulic engineering. Next week the preparations will get underway for an international congress on that topic. They said I'll be directing… But you aren't listening to me."

Ena turned and looked at him. She wanted to listen, but she felt too weak to engage with his exposition. Out there somewhere… "But I am," she protested. "I heard everything."

"You heard it all?"

Sieghart stopped. He touched her shoulders and then pulled her towards him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she asserted. "Small rivers. Big projects. Europe needs our experience."

She did not discount his words. No, no, he was right. Everything was going fine. She needed only to cleave to him in order to move forward. The care, which his embraces represented, could make her forget. She was glad to be consigned to it in this way. "Hold me tight," she whispered. "Hold me tight!"

"We'll go to the embassy now," he decided. "Some interaction with the children there will help you. You'll have human contact. For sure. Children are—"

"I know," she interrupted. "I know. Drive fast!"

Days passed. And weeks. Ena kept track of them, and the more of them she counted, the more fleeting they seemed to her. They raced by with all the speed of the great cosmopolitan city, and everyone who lived in it flew on with them. She had little free time to ponder whether or not it had been the right thing to do, moving here with Sieghart, or if what she'd been doing in general was right or not. All of it. The city was full of the distractions of yellowing photographs. Here everything was about painting, panoramas. And sometimes when she sat at the window in her little hotel and looked out over the roofs of the city, she had to laugh at the pictures she had brought with her, the one of the farmstead, with the trees behind it, and the big gate with two people standing in front of it. Her mother and her grandfather. Her copy of this photo stood on the little chest of drawers opposite their bed, and she could look at it without making her eyes fill up with tears. She ran her

fingers over the picture, over the faraway, secluded home, touching her childhood, her youth. She could look over at it and still wrest herself free. That was a lot. The city had healing powers.

Ena went to the Île de la Cité to see Notre-Dame, to the market in Saint-Denis, to the *bouquinistes* on the banks of the Seine, to the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, and to the cemetery of Père-Lachaise. The places where everyone who came to this city went to encounter the spirit of the place, or to be stirred by it if you were already here. In this most beautiful spot on earth. Many people, most people, will never see it. She was fortunate. And she felt as much, whenever she thought about what other people would give to be in her place, to be able to take their leisure among the famous stones and plaques. Oh heavens, yes. She harbored an unaccustomed pride. It grew, took up more space inside her.

One day Sieghart picked her up in a car.

"I bought it," he said. "Spur of the moment. Didn't have much time to think about it. The Scottish guy left it here."

Yes, it was a good thing Sieghart had taken this plunge. Now they could make more extensive excursions. Paris and vicinity. Maybe farther still.

The iron current took them in. Integrated, they were taken along, pulled forward. Their old car rounded out the feeling of arrival. Now they were participants. They had adjusted. The car had not been expensive. The Scot hadn't

really been in the mood to haggle, but the dented right wheel well was something that Sieghart intended to repair himself. Later, when their time in Paris was over… That is to say, he wanted to drive back home in a rather more respectable vehicle.

Beginning at the gateways to the city, springtime was already visible. The forsythia was blooming, along with a couple of other woody plants that the two of them didn't recognize. They entered a small inn, where they sat and observed the other guests: their daily carryings-on, the little acts of bravado, the low-key cockfighting and their market-driven assessments of value at the round table of regulars after mass.

A farmer with stubble on his face took a seat at their table. The low growth on his cheeks extended as far up as his eyes, clear to the bridge of his nose and out of his nostrils. He looked at them for a bit and coughed noisily into his fist, as if he needed his trachea to be free of mucus before he began his disclosures. He explained that he'd spent time in Germany, as a foreign worker, at a stud farm, crossbreeds, and then he did worked on road crews, paving, *très bien*. The Germans do everything right, better. He said he'd had a wife in Germany, Agnes Schüler, who was from Doberschau, in the vicinity of Dresden. After the catastrophe, she went with him back to France. Agnes did everything differently from the French women. Everything, absolutely everything. They built a house for themselves, with an upper floor, square, with green shutters. Only then

did she want to have children. She never learned the language. And the children did not learn hers. People didn't like her. Then she left, back to Germany, with the little ones, Marie and Luise, never to be seen again. *Très bien*. He tilted a glass of red wine into his mouth and said nothing more.

"Well?" Sieghart asked. "Why don't you visit them?"

"And the children," Ena added. "Maybe they want to come here."

Still he said nothing. Everything had been said. The story had no ending, or this was its ending. A heavyset young fellow came over to them from the adjoining table. He clasped the old man under the arms and pulled him away. "*Pardon! Il est…*" Ena and Sieghart didn't understand the gesture he made next with his hands.

In the afternoon, as they were driving home, on a delightfully smooth road, they were both thinking about the farmer, but they did not speak of him.

The next day Ena sat outside the café in the Avenue de Wagram. She drank the coffee that the friendly waiter had brought her. Once again the young man from the adjoining table turned to her to give a demonstration of the green woolen worm and how it could migrate. Once more he wanted to let it run across her hands, and yet again she turned him down, and the people laughed anew when the worm disappeared into another woman's sleeve. No one knew what invisible threads were pulling it.

Ena had plenty of time, as she usually did when she waited for Siegfried here. Sometimes she kept sitting there and observed the people thronging past on the sidewalk; other times she took a stroll through the area around the café. She knew her way around these side streets, and her fear of getting lost was vanquished once and for all. She knew the correct way to ask for directions to the streets or buildings she was seeking, and she'd experienced the friendliness of people in Paris, their willingness to help. You could get used to this. She could depend on this and so she could expand her meanderings.

She felt drawn more and more to the displays in the shop windows; more and more often she caught herself in the spell of the sophistication on exhibit, in the sway of the beautiful contrivances, the possession of which she now considered desirable. Already she had stopped raising a hand nervously to her throat and sensing alarm at her own nakedness, for her neck was taken, occupied, draped in an elegant bauble.

One day, on an afternoon in May, she spotted a cherry tree on her walk. Its branches were covered in white blossoms and it stood there, glorious, stretching out its arms. The tree was in a small garden in the middle of the city, standing its ground, alone, amidst all the walls, almost out of spite. A tree like this was not something Ena had expected to find here, and she stopped in front of it as if she

wanted to say hello, as if it were an old acquaintance. She stared into the white splendor, underneath which shadows bounced about.

"My God, you are gorgeous," she exclaimed.

People walked past. They had to squeeze by her because she was standing in the middle of the sidewalk. She was getting bumped, and an elderly woman said, "*Pardon, madame. Pardon*."

Ena was fascinated by the tree. She found it hard to think of walking on. She had no explanation for her attraction. She realized that the tree was calling memories to life in her, that its image overlay other images. She saw her grandfather and the branches in the water, the copper nail, but the tree remained just an ordinary tree in a Parisian garden. For everyone who looked at it and walked past, it was an unremarkable tree, just in full bloom. That was as it should be, in the beginning of May. It would have stood out to them if it had not been blooming.

Ena moved on. She still wanted to get to the end of the row of buildings, all the way to the corner, where there was a small antiques shop. On her walks up to now, she had not pushed as far as that corner. But she hoped to see where the street led when it turned, along there, back behind there, after this long block. She walked along, suspecting nothing, with only this simple goal in mind, in the expectation of getting the lay of the land beyond the corner. That was all.

In front of the shop she paused, but she wasn't looking in. She felt as though she'd already seen something she knew behind the plate glass of the store, something that was going to take her breath away if a second look should happen to confirm that she'd not been mistaken. She attempted to walk on, not to look in there again, but just keep moving. To overcome the temptation to know for certain. And yet she did turn around and face the shop again.

"Oh, God," she said, as she laid both of her hands on the glass. Behind it she could see the face, the head, on a metal base, a repulsive metal pedestal—the face of Živa, the polygonal forehead, the dead eyes, the mouth, the grooves in that mouth, the furrows in the old wood, the eternal wood, the eyes that had been able to see, that were capable of seeing now, the mouth that was just about to speak, that was already speaking…

"Živa!" Ena uttered softly, and her breath condensed on the pane. For a moment, the face vanished. Then it came back.

"How did you get here?" she asked. Then she reached for the door handle. The entrance was locked.

"Hello!" she cried out as she knocked. No one opened up. The shop's hours were printed on a placard in the display case. She knocked again. The way she rattled the handle on the door began to attract attention. She must have long since recognized that the store was closed.

Ena walked back in front of the window display. Then, as if it had dawned on her what she should do, she ran back the way she'd come.

Two days later, she decided to confront Sieghart. She wanted to tell him what she had discovered. Throw caution to the wind. And without transitioning from some other, completely different topic. And she wanted to interpret his reaction. She hoped that he had some part in Živa's story. And she also feared just that.

Sieghart was seated on the trunk of his car. Whenever Ena was late, that's where he would sit while he waited.

She took his hand and pulled him away from the car. He showed her the repaired section of the right front wheel well. One of the Institute's drivers had done it, with Sieghart's help. Fast, and cheap. He asked where they were going.

Ena didn't answer. She got into the car, and he drove, also without saying a word. Something had happened. Fair enough. Recently… Maybe it was normal. People had predicted she'd be homesick. So perhaps this was homesickness.

It didn't matter where they drove. Just not to the hotel. In the light of day it was unbearable. The renovation of their apartment was still ongoing. Even in Paris such things could take longer than expected. At one point a blue-and-white sign cropped up overhead: *Bois de Boulogne*. Maybe let's go there.

When the rows of houses on either side of the street suddenly gave out, Ena said that she would like to visit her cherry tree. Just to check on how far along it was.

Sieghart didn't know what she was talking about. He stopped the car. The whole time that she had gone without speaking, he'd also held his tongue. He'd been prepared to accept her silence as a part of her soul, where he still did not know the lay of the land, not precisely anyway. But now, with her mention of a cherry tree, in Paris—to which something was drawing her, with which something linked her, since there was no way this question of hers was a joke, now the suppressed apprehension that Ena was suffering from more than just homesickness got the better of him.

Behind them a line of cars was forming. The first honks of protest…

"Cherry tree?" he said. "And where?"

Ena pointed right. They had to do a U-turn in the street. Now and again Sieghart glanced over at her. There remained no doubt: they were driving to see a cherry tree.

"Stop!" she cried out.

Ena walked ahead of him. She found the garden, the one besieged by gables, the big-city garden that knew how to stand its ground.

"This is it," she said.

The tree had lost its blossoms. The green leaves were thin, almost transparent. They still lacked chlorophyll.

"So what?" Sieghart asked. "What's up with the tree?"

"Nothing," Ena replied. "There it grows, and it will bear fruit. Do you see the little drupes?"

"Its weakness is plain to see," observed Sieghart. "Those leaves. The tree lacks light."

He took Ena by the arm and led her back towards the car. "Well, then. What do you know," he said. "The things that pass through your mind. My friend the tree—"

He smiled to himself. The traffic had picked up. Some cars already had their headlights on. Ena said nothing, although he asked her repeatedly about the cherry tree. Finally he waved her off in his mind: crazy.

In the hotel, the elderly lady held the key out for them as she always did. On the stairs Ena stopped, half-turned back, as if she wanted to go down and out again, as if she'd forgotten something.

"What is it?" he inquired.

"Živa."

She didn't see the way Sieghart winced at that. The shock and fear froze his limbs for a fraction of a second. "Živa?"

"Yes."

"What about her?"

"She's sitting in the window of a shop."

He took a couple of steps back down the stairs so he could take her by the hand. "Come up," he urged. But she sidestepped him. She flew down the stairs. The woman came back out of the kitchen.

On the street Ena was nowhere to be seen. A flow of passers-by. The first shadows.

When she came back, after about an hour, she was crying; Sieghart was seated in front of the small TV set, with its images that moved but held no interest for him.

They lay down on the bed. While he talked, she gazed at the photo that stood on the dresser: two people in front of farm buildings.

"Right, so I don't know," he began, "how to explain this away. Nothing in the world has ever been more difficult for me. What you saw—it is Živa. I brought her along because I wanted her to be here. I thought maybe she could help you, in those hours when a thing like that, something from home, can help. I thought I'd make use of it in some emergency. But there were not any of those. Until now. You wanted to make do without her. So I thought it was in your best interest for her to go away. To me she was always what she is: a piece of wood. I thought that maybe the French go in for wooden heads. I gave it to the consignment shop. That's it."

Ena did not stir. He couldn't see her face. His explanation worsened the bitterness in her mouth that she was sure she could taste.

"I can get her back," he said. "If you want. If she means a lot to you. It's likely that no one's interested in her. The antique dealer has it till the end of the month. If no one has gotten in touch with him by then … "

"Get her!" Ena said. "As quickly as possible."

She stood up and walked over to him. It seemed like she was once again in search of intimacy, as if she wanted to overcome the distance that had thrust itself up between the two of them.

"Fine," he resolved. "Tomorrow."

She did not move from her spot in front of him. The distance was still there, although she didn't want it to be. Drawing physically closer, taking steps towards one another, would not achieve anything. Not now. Sieghart wanted to stretch out his hand towards her and pull her down to him, sealing their reconciliation, the way people did that sort of thing all across the world. But his hand only made it halfway to its goal. Then it dropped back down into his lap. Ena noticed his tortured efforts and felt no excitement.

She didn't pick up on the fact that evening had arrived. They sat across from each other in the dark room. He was thinking of her inability to detach herself from habits, to graduate from her tired old clothing, so ludicrous in its appearance, to put aside this child-like piety of hers, which was of no use to anybody anymore, not nowadays, when one even had to consider the possibility of war out in the stars.

"Darling, we are sitting here grieving over a worm-eaten wooden head. And in a few days my conference about retaining dams on small rivers gets underway … "

"Let's dispense with the side trips to the south, too," he went on, abruptly, and with no apparent connection to the thoughts and matters that had brought them to this silence and to the recognition of the distance between them. "They don't have to happen. People can live without ever seeing Provence. Forgive me for what happened with Živa!"

They both stood at the window and looked out over the city below. Close to Ena's hand, very close, stood the little photo. Sieghart touched her shoulder again, and she tilted her head towards him. Things were decided: they were going to restore their equilibrium. They made an attempt to do so the next day. They drove to the antique store even before it opened. Živa was gone from the window display.

The proprietor of the shop, a baldheaded man in middle age, gave them a friendly greeting. "It worked!" he said to Sieghart. "Who would have thought it!"

The two of them watched as the man filled out a form with his bony fingers. Then the numbers of a sum took shape below a black line, the cash drawer under the till opened automatically, and the banknotes came to rest on the counter.

At that point Ena turned and walked out. The door closed with the tinkling of a bell, and its little tune sounded scornful.

"Who purchased it?" Sieghart inquired, upset.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Who?"

"Trade secret."

"Oh, come on!! Listen—to me there's a lot more at stake here than a transaction."

The merchant kept his splayed fingers on the bills, as if they might blow away. "Really, I cannot break confidence on that," he stated, as he stacked the notes into a little pile. "Please, count them."

Sieghart walked to the door.

"Your money!"

He put the stack in his pocket. The jingling mocked him, too.

Since that day, Ena had barely spoken to him. She shrank from his attempts to placate her, and she didn't ride with him in the car. She took the metro to her work. And often she returned to the hotel on foot. Then she would just sit in the corner of the room or lie on the bed. Sieghart brought her meals to her from the little restaurant and tried over and over to strike up conversation with her. There was a lot to discuss. But she sat there, and lay there, and said nothing. His patience reached its limit. One time he said to her, "How can anybody behave like this? It's beyond comprehension!"

He went into the city.

Evening came in its usual fashion. First she saw the glint of neon signs and billboards, of their runners on the ceiling. Then they were joined by the other lights: a victorious grappling with the urban darkness, something over which one could rejoice. Ena moved to the window and

looked at everything, the way she had always looked at it, and yet she found the lights deceptive, dishonest, and prepossessing. The automobiles underneath her headed off to their destinations. One of those cars belonged to Sieghart.

There was a knock at the door. Ena turned around. She hesitated, and then she flipped the light switch and opened up. There was no one there. The small angular corridor was empty. She looked over towards the stairs. That's where she saw him. A shadow on the wall. She didn't see the man himself. The shadow was enough.

"Mathias!" she said softly. The shadow waited until she comprehended what was happening. Then it moved. It descended the steps. What did it want? She'd known it for a long, long time. And she followed it. No, she did not follow it. She realized that she couldn't go out on the street dressed like this. She went back to the room, threw her coat over her shoulders, and picked up her purse, which contained the few items that were absolutely necessary. Then she followed him. She saw Mathias go past the front desk but lost sight of him. Then she saw the door, the way it opened, with the short chubby landlady asking for the key that was always supposed to be turned in, anytime you left the hotel. There was no time to waste; she strode out into the street.

He boarded the bus. She barely made it. Up front, just behind the driver, was his seat. The man was close and distant, familiar and alien, to Ena. She did not intend to lose sight of him. He had no intention of allowing her to lose track of him. And off they rode.

When Sieghart entered the hotel, he said: "*Bonsoir*!"

The landlady held the key out to him.

"What? Why? Is she not at home?" he asked.

A man's voice replied, "No." In the armchair behind Siegfried sat Robert. "You?" Sieghart was flabbergasted. "Where did you come from? What's up with my wife?"

"I don't know," Robert said. "I saw her at the airport. By chance. It looked as though she intended … "

"What?" pressed Sieghart. "What did it look like?"

"Like she wanted to fly away," the other man concluded. "I wanted to let you know, since … "

"Fly away," Sieghart repeated. He was at a loss. "What for?"

Robert shrugged his shoulders and said goodbye. He had done what he thought was right. There was nothing more he could do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The taxi driver who took Ena to her house stopped in the middle of the overgrown meadow. The farmstead lay before him, and he was looking in its direction as if he had never before witnessed such a scene: the attractive, old dwelling, white and black and green, with the narrow path leading up to it, with the trees amidst the various buildings, with the sky atop it all, the seclusion, the quiet, the soulfulness that had withdrawn into the place, the soul of past generations who sometimes cropped up in conversation—but, *ach*, what did he know… There's nothing more to it all, he thought. He smiled at his ruminations and followed Ena's progress towards the buildings. Then he remembered his job, glanced at the money in his hand, and started the engine.

Carefully Ena pushed on the little door. It opened readily. The courtyard was empty. Only the rooster was there, moving across the pavement. She walked into the arbor at the entrance to the house. The darkness, the intimate darkness of the interior, enveloped her. Her mother was sitting in the kitchen. When she caught sight of Ena, she stood up and approached her. Ena saw that her mother was dressed in black. The two women embraced.

"Grandfather," her mother said.

"Grandfather," Ena repeated. "My God. Grandfather. Why didn't you let us know?"

"I did," her mother said.

"We didn't get the news."

"It all happened so suddenly."

Her mother was crying.

The grandfather's grave was in the hilltop cemetery. It was located very close to the cross that Ena had put up for Mathias. The flowers from the burial trembled in the wind. Ena stood in front of the freshly turned-over mound, under which lay her grandfather.

"I want to tell you something, Grandfather," she said under her breath. "Today I saw storks, very close by. They've come back. You'd be glad about that, right? But there's something else I have to say to you, too. I'm going to fly away again. To that other world, where everything is different. I'm doing fine there. It's just the memories … these heavy memories … I'll have to leave them here. All of them,

and that's why I came. Forgive me, Grandfather, but your death—it's made the parting much simpler. And now I must leave."

That evening she told her mother that she needed to go to the pond in the woods. It wouldn't take long, and afterwards she wanted to propose something to her.

Ena left the farmstead by way of the garden. She took the path that Grandfather had always used. The evening was clear and she walked into the forest to take leave of all her memories. She was carrying the family firearm, the drilling that combined a small-caliber rifle with two shotgun barrels and was used for hunting. She carried the firearm as if she didn't realize she'd brought it along. The strap dragged on the grass; the metal gleamed in the light of the moon. Ena hurried towards the forest, towards the black wall. That's where the first trees became visible. She found the path that led through the woods. The way was familiar to her. She knew the direction she needed to go and glimpsed the stones of the dam. The water in the pond increased the night's brightness. It was almost like daytime. Ena saw the crown of the cherry tree, which was still lying in the same place. The branches now had blossoms on them, tender blossoms white as snow. The tree, murdered with copper sulfate and tossed into this pond, so that it might cleanse itself of the outside poison, was about to bear fruit, one last time, without trunk and without roots, alive yet, and still blooming.

Ena forgot everything around her. She knew she wasn't alone. On the rocks of the weir someone was sitting. The man. It was the man she knew, the man who was supposed to become a stranger to her, Mathias, a part of her memories, those heavy memories from which she had not escaped.

"There you are," said the man, who was just a shadow. He was seated on the rocks on which the wheels of the carriage had shattered. He was a silhouette, a living, talking paper cutout.

"Why won't you leave me in peace?" she asked. "Why are you everywhere I go? How am I supposed to live if I can't forget you?"

"You never will forget me," Mathias responded. "I am the ground, the beginning, the first, the meaning, the alpha and omega, the pattern, childhood and home. I am whatever you're going to ask about next. Do you still remember, Ena, the first time we saw one another?"

"Be quiet!"

"No, I can't be quiet," he went on. "The silent leave themselves guilty. Do you hear the language?"

She raised the gun. Three barrels were aimed at Mathias.

"I love you, Mathias," she stated; her hands were quaking. She was afraid she'd miss him. "I love you. I have to kill you."

Mathias added, "Kill the soul, kill the sense."

Then he stood up, as if everything had been said. He walked away, out into the fog that was rising from the surface of the pond.

The projectiles with their hundred pellets rent the air. Ena dropped the gun. She walked over to where she imagined the corpse would be.

The man was lying on his stomach. Ena knelt down next to the body and turned it over. The face was blood-soaked. That other face, not the one she expected.

"Sieghart!" she moaned. "Sieghart … "

And she dragged herself back to the pond. The crown of the cherry tree began to tremble. The blossoms detached themselves and floated on the water. A few ripples traveled outward.

That was all.

AFTERWORD: THE BALLAD OF ENA AND SIEGHART

Introduction

There is one corner of Germany, beautiful like all the rest of them, that holds a lot of big surprises. In the eastern reaches of the two *Bundesländer* of Brandenburg and Saxony lies the region known traditionally as Lusatia (*Lausitz* in German). There are two main cities in the area. One is Cottbus, which is green, neat and appealing, and close to the Polish border; this is where Jurij Koch lives today. The other is Bautzen, farther to the south and right by the Czech border. It is hillier and architecturally more dramatic and distinct, and Koch was born and raised in a nearby village. Most of Lusatia, however, consists of forests and fields (and an ever-increasing number of open-pit coal

mines), and in the novel you are holding, those fields, or "moors," are where the Slavic family consisting of Ena, her mother, and her grandfather, have their "grange," or farmstead. The "Slavic" is important here, because the original (and abiding, among the local Sorbian population) name for Cottbus is *Chóśebuz* and that of Bautzen is *Budyšin*.

This is traditional Sorbian territory. Today about 70,000 speakers of Sorbian (sometimes subdivided into Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian) still live in this far southeastern corner of Germany. The history of the Sorbs (or Wends, as they are also known) is fascinating, and they are often designated "the least numerous Slavic people." Their language sounds fairly familiar to speakers of Polish or Czech, but it has a distinct literary history and the Sorbs form a cohesive ethnographic entity.[1] Their relationship with their German neighbors, or authorities, has varied a great deal over the centuries, but to say that the Nazis persecuted them and the East German communists supported them would be a decent point of entry to their fascinating recent history.[2]

[1] Sorbian is one of the Slavic languages. Other West Slavic languages include Polish, Czech, and Kashubian; East Slavic languages include Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian; and South Slavic languages include Serbian, Croatian, and Bulgarian. The Slavic languages are a branch, analogous to the Germanic or Romance branches, of the very extensive Indo-European language family.

[2] For more information on the history of the Sorbs (or Wends), see the two books by Gerald Stone, *The Smallest Slavonic Nation: The Sorbs of Lusatia* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015; first published 1972) and *Slav Outposts in Central European History: The Wends, Sorbs and Kashubs* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic,

The book you are holding is about Sorbs. And Jurij Koch, its author, is the most famous living Sorbian author. This book is rewarding in many ways, and that's why its translator and publisher have endeavored to bring it to your attention. This book was originally written in German, although Koch writes in both languages. He refers to Sorbian and German as his two "mother/father" tongues.

The book you are holding is also unique. It contains a surprise character: a goddess. That is to say, a representation of a goddess. To put that exciting feature into a little context, let us consider what a contemporary Montenegrin novelist, Dragana Kršenković Brković, wrote in a recent essay. She asserts that, in legends, fables, and fairytales, highly imaginative elements of the forbidden and secret "introduce into the gray uniformity of daily life a 'kernel'—so indispensable—of enchantment, miracle, and amazement."[3] The great power, then, of the elements of Slavic folklore in this novel lies in the sense of liberation and possibility that they impart.

2015); Peter Barker, *Slavs in Germany: The Sorbian Minority and the German State since 1945* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2000); George R. Nielsen, *In Search of a Home: Nineteenth-Century Wendish Immigration* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1989); and Koch's translated interview in the Bibliography below.

[3] Dragana Kršenković Brković, "Igra, mašta, i tajanstvena moć bajki," in *FRAGMENTI: Zapisi o književnosti* (Cetinje: OKF, 2019), pp. 155.

Who Is Jurij Koch?

Koch is a Serbian writer born in Horka, Saxony, in 1936. He studied journalism at the University of Leipzig, worked in that field and in broadcasting and cinema, and has for several decades been a full-time writer of novels, essays, dramas, and children's books. He has won several literary prizes, but before the publication of this novella, none of his major works has appeared in English.

Little critical work specifically on Koch's oeuvre is available in English[4], but it is discussed, at least briefly, in a growing number of monographs on the relationship between writers and the East German government (and the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED, as the communist party there was known). This is especially true for environmental issues. All three of his autobiographical works have been reviewed in English in the journal *World Literature Today.*[5]

[4] For German-language sources, see Claudia Schicker, *Das deutschsprachige Prosaschaffen von Jurij Koch*, unpubl. doctoral dissertation, University of Halle (German Democratic Republic), 1987; and Dietrich Scholze, *Zur Entfaltung des sorbischen Dramas—Jakub Bart- Ćišinski, Jurij Brězan, Jurij Koch* (Köln: Böhlau, 1993).

[5] See the print version of *WLT* for January 2013 and Spring 2021, as well as its online edition for January 27, 2020, available at: https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/book-reviews/jurij-kochs-sorbian-memoir-life-during-and-after-gdr-john-k-cox.

Characters and Plot

In *The Cherry Tree*, Sieghart is a field engineer who works for the East German government on large development projects. He and his team are in Lusatia to assess the feasibility of building dams there to create reservoirs for various economic purposes. By accident he becomes acquainted with Ena, a Sorbian woman who lives on an isolated farmstead with her mother and grandfather. The two are drawn to each other, but for the first half of the book they are kept apart by the provocative presence of Mathias, a local Sorb who is engaged to Ena. Mathias is laconic, virile, and indeed half-feral, at least in smug Sieghart's eyes. The two men become rivals, after which Mathias disappears, apparently as the result of a carriage crash that leads to his drowning. Sieghart and Ena marry and move to Paris, temporarily, for his career. In the west, Ena is haunted by having left her family, by having been separated from the family's statue of a pre-Christian deity known as Živa, and by strange sightings of Mathias in the City of Light. Unsettled but loyal to Sieghart, she resolves to return to Germany to sever ties definitively with her family or culture. Confusion prevails in a climactic final scene, where Ena shoots and kills, with the family's venerable, powerful hunting rifle, the man who is the source of her misery and confusion.

If this novella had a magic number, it would certainly be two. The book is built on a dichotomy, a duality that we can characterize in a bewildering variety of ways:

Sorbian-German, rural-urban, traditional-modern, female-male, emotional-rational, family-individual, and so forth. Every one of these splits would make for a fine student paper on the book! But the number "two" has more surprises for the reader, because even the binaries come in two types. There are antagonistic ones, foils, opposites perhaps, which are the types we are perhaps most used to looking for in literary texts. They are the ones listed above, for the most part. But there are also doublets that signify sameness, equivalence, or duplication. These are repetitions that ask us to draw conclusions rather than draw distinctions. What do we make of the fact that there are two cherry trees in the book? Why do the wedding musicians appear, at *both* weddings, in an ensemble of two? Twice Sieghart shows up at the *Konsum* to carry Ena's bags, and there are two mad dashes through the countryside, one in a jeep and one in a horse-drawn carriage. On a pair of occasions Ena has to fend off the "worm man" at the Parisian café. She has two lovers. The pipe that the engineers leave sticking up out of the earth in the forest is an analog to the crosses stuck into the ground at the local cemetery, two shadowy men lurk at different times in the garden, and two dear creatures abandon the grandfather: the storks and Ena. There are even two points of light that ensorcel and guide Sieghart at various times: the light from the window on the rainy night, and the light from Ena's bright neckerchief when they hole up in the stable at her engagement party. Both the mother's face and that

of the *braška* are a kind of map of their lives, where life itself is more of a virtue than beauty. At a very fundamental level, too, the book is built on two kinds of water: the invisible kind, with which Sieghart, his team, and his government work, and the water in the pond in the woods on the farm, on which so much of the plot turns. We might have two world views here, two kinds of consciousness, but they inhabit one world. The tension between the shared and divided space is heightened and finally rises to the level of a paradox, which we, paradoxically and in that most modern of ways, must accept.

Stylistic Considerations

Every book is written in a kind of key. This is like a register, or perhaps a code, in which medium and message mix together in dynamic ways and produce all kinds of primary and secondary effects. Koch's style in this novella is a very clear participant in the construction of meaning in the text. It's not just "how he wrote" *The Cherry Tree*; it's more like the way he interacts with us to make us receptive to the story, and, even more abstractly perhaps, to get us involved in constructing a space where we can make meaning of the tale together.

Alas, this is not as straightforward a book as its short length, crisp sentences, and wee number of main characters might suggest. If Koch's style is complex, if this book seems dense (though never dull, and always careful—carefully engineered and honestly caring), that might in part

be because of the author's uncustomary sentence structure. He loves to double up on infinitive phrases, or direct objects, for instance. These are not run-on sentences or comma splices; rather they are part and parcel of a unique rhythm occasioned by his unique syntax, and I have tried to reproduce this in the English. This is apposition, or an extended formation thereof, with multiple nouns or phrases that refer back to the original verb. This has the effect of giving the prose a poetic quality. It's "lyrical," physically, to use an overused term of our day. It tumbles, complicates, slows us down, but also clarifies and rewards. The repetitions, sometimes with slight variations in diction or syntax, give the text a focused, concentrated feel—and we readers are on the inside of it.

There are other aspects of Koch's style that we could label economical, compressed, or even elliptical. He sometimes combines spoken lines and narration within indenting and beginning a new line, producing the unusual effect of quotation marks in the middle of a paragraph. He is also chary with transition words such as "then" or "but." These techniques simplify the narrative, and the salient result for the reader is arguably not jumpiness but a sense of definite motion; this, in turn, contrasts with the ambiguity of some of the elements of magical realism and the subjunctive mood, discussed below.

As a translator one has the privilege of reading a text many times. From this focused or even intimate interaction comes, sometimes, an awareness certain words (or

images, places, or ideas) that seem especially important to the author. For Koch, a small set of words appear very frequently indeed, adding to the lyrical effect of his prose and underscoring the clash of deeply-held world views that form the background to the novel. These words include *Vorstellung* (notion, concept, idea, imagination), *trügen* (to deceive), *fremd* (foreign, alien, unfamiliar, strange), *rechnen* (to reckon, expect, calculate), *Bild* (image, view, picture, representation), and various versions of "reality," "illusion," and "to know the ropes" or "have something figured out." There are also a large number of constructions in the subjunctive mood that indicate a sense of the provisional or purported and that I translated with "as though," "as if," or "it seemed." It might not even be too far-fetched to maintain that the author's frequent use of verbs meaning "to start, begin, commence" and "to look at, see, witness, regard, behold" reflect consciousness of the many competing dimensions or strata of human activity and sociability.

Conclusion

This is a book that, for all its apparent straightforwardness, bears re-reading. It was only on my third run-through of the novella that it dawned on me how powerful, how poignant and comprehensive, for lack of a better word, a number of its scenes are. When Ena is standing in the field harvesting beets, for instance, registering in her actions so much of the tradition and environment around her and observing the forces of confrontation and constriction

closing in on her, I am reminded very strongly of an analogous scene in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). It turns out this scene works its magic on me in at least two ways: as an exposition of social and economic historicity which I, as a historian, find delightful, and also as a parable of change, aching and ultimately ineluctable change.

Another very endearing aspect of this book is its humor. It does not produce guffaws, and often the humor is at the expense of Sieghart, or is at least born of his clumsiness and tin ear around people who care about him. His reaction when he first sees Živa and hears Ena's explanation of what the idol represents is not at all what one expects: "A goddess. And...what is she doing here?" Then, too, there's his geeky (or pathetic) "wedding night surprise" for his bride, and his awkward conversational attempts to fit in when he's in France. The narrator also sets us up for an untranslatable pun in Chapter 9. In the scene where Ena and Sieghart make love for the first time, he touches her skin with motions that are translated as "gathering." The German word in the original is "*gewinnen*," which of course pairs nicely (but repetitively) with the adjacent word "conquering"; but "*gewinnen*" also means to exploit or extract, as engineers, dam-builders, and coal-miners in Lusatia are often described as doing in Koch's other works. Other comic elements include the nearly madcap (but definitely not mad) figure of the *braška*, and, to a

North American, anyway, the idea that European waiters could ever be uniformly described as professional, kind, and helpful!

The quiet figure of the grandfather also leaves a very deep impression. He enters and departs from the novel unobserved, proclaiming his kinship with the winds and waters and demonstrating his love of wine, honey, dance, and family. His musings by the pond and his labored but purposeful walks through the forest make him a link between worlds. Ena might be such a link as well. Koch has integrated the grandfather deftly into the thematic fabric of the novella, too. At one point he is described as resembling the hand on a dial as he walks solo across the landscape, calling to mind Sieghart's fixation with the dials on the dashboard of his jeep. Elsewhere, the grandfather looks through the vehicles of the jeep at those very dials and imagines he sees a face—in the same way Sieghart envisages the face of the goddess.

These brief thoughts about the grandfather and his cherry tree bring me to some concluding comments on the possible place of this book in our literary world. There are certainly many ways to assess and interpret Koch's fiction. His environmental concerns and cinematic eye[6], for

[6] Koch's ability to think for the screen is readily apparent, in this observer's view, in the scenes where Sieghart's jeep or Mathias' carriage is "eating up" or "spooling up" the road in helter-skelter driving; many scenes of chase or flight have this same feel. One that comes to mind is the long opening shot from a horse-drawn coach in *Unforgettable Summer* (1994), by the great Romanian director Lucian Pintilie. We see this visual tendency again when

instance, beckon for evaluation; while direct references to politics are scarce in the book, there is plenty of material on gender norms and relations. In addition to *The Cherry Tree*'s significance as a very successful Sorbian novel—a distinguished and subtle work by one of the most prominent Sorbian writers ever—one may also choose to examine it in an international context, at the intersection of magical realism and, for lack of a better term, socialist realism.

Magical realism originated in various Latin American literatures in the 20th century. It greatly enriched fiction on every continent, taking different forms as it moved from place to place. It is far from an orthodoxy, because the way writers employ it varies greatly, and it also need not be equated with surrealism. Just as historians have gradually pushed the boundaries of "modernity" or "the modern" to include not only the destructive effects, for instance, of industrialization or nationalism, but also to acquiesce in the continued existence of paradoxes, of unresolved "inconsistencies." Holdouts or exceptions to generalized notions of progress might not be obscurantism or regression or even vestiges—they might simply be

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the narrator in Chapter 9, describing Ena's dream of marrying Sieghart, notes that her fantasy switches to the third person as the bride scarpers away from the ceremony and returns to Mathias' grave. The fissures and fragility of Živa's face evoke those of the ancient storks' nest, just as the decapitated cherry tree underscores the fact that the goddess is represented solely by her head. Sieghart's erotic fixation on Ena's wet, clinging shirt from Chapter 1, revisited several times over the course of the text, is also starkly visual.

part of the varied, bumpy, craggy landscape that is modernity. What if the modern is modern precisely because it includes a great deal of the pre-modern? To put this more simply, if the fantastic becomes commonplace, then we have magical realism—and airplanes and jeeps and soil penetrometers are fantastic, as are nuclear wars in space and an earth goddess. And they both can belong to the everyday of human beings.

If we make an attempt to create space for a "socialist" variant of magical realism, then it needs to be mentioned first of all that the place where this novel was written and set (and staged and filmed, etc.) was a socialist country, East Germany. The designation is not meant to refer to the author or even the content of the novel, beyond the fact that it raises important concerns about environmental degradation and economic and consumer priorities. Socialist realism as a doctrine went through many mutations in the USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe, like Koch's German Democratic Republic. Underneath its variability and inconsistency, a preference for the objective over the subjective or purely individualistic can be detected in the officially endorsed cultural products of the period from 1945 to 1990. I am not at all implying that the author adhered to some formula when writing this book, or that he undertook to pen propaganda about anything; I am thinking about the atmosphere in which this book was created. My point is that, extremely skillfully, Koch shields this novella from possible complaints

of mysticism or obscurantism by introducing ambiguities into causal relationships in this book. When the grandfather, for instance, calls out over the pond, and seems to hear a reply, we are later left in some doubt about whether it might have been the *braška*, freshly arrived but unheard behind him, who spoke back. The "behavior" of the crown of the cherry tree, and indeed the unsolved case of that tree's poisoning, also admit of two explanations. There are apparently natural(istic) or mechanical explanations for many "supernatural" or "otherworldly" things that occur here. Or is it that these explanations point not to causes, but simply correspondences, parallel developments? As Koch said to this observer about another one of his works, "*Es ist auf der Welt nicht alles auszurechnen*."[7] And, in that delightfully dialectical way of this novel, even the ambiguities have a foil; when Sieghart speaks of his work drilling and designing, or the narrator describes the restored carriage at the farm or the construction of the stone weir, the language is precise and professional in the extreme. If "socialist magical realism" is a useful analytical concept, then this novel might be an example of it.

Finally, at this point it would seem that reflecting on the situation of the Sorbs—not just their survival but their achievements, not just their legacy but their future—can go some ways towards answering the old question of how multicultural modern-day Germany is. To put this more

[7] "Not everything can be worked out." Email correspondence from Jurij Koch to John K. Cox, Jan. 20, 2021.

specifically, the galvanizing literary-historical debate about the extent to which "German literature" can include texts written in Germany, by German citizens or residents, but in languages other than German, takes on surprising nuances when we note the successful bilingual existence of the Sorbs. In no society can *de facto* cultural pluralism by itself ever make integralist hierarchies or the siren calls of supposedly virtuous traditionalism disappear; titular nationalities tend to be just that—entitled. But Germany's diversity is more than gastronomical, dialectal, religious, and political. It is also ethnic and linguistic, like the rest of the world, and fortuitously so. This book is a reminder of and a witness to that diversity and shared life.

—John K. Cox (History, North Dakota State University)

Partial Bibliography of Works by Jurij Koch

Multiple editions of many of these works exist. This list is not exhaustive. Some of Koch's books exist in both languages, and but other works, not represented here, were written only in Sorbian.

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[1] Koch wrote both the literary works on which these films are based and the screenplays for the films. He has also contributed, in various ways, to many other movies.

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