



Svealena Kutschke

CITY OF SMOKE

Novel

“...and for years and a day, in front of St. Mary’s Church, the wind waits for the Devil, who never appears. He is taking the sinners down to Hell.”

Sample translation by Lucy Renner Jones

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Part I

Summer Solstice



Magdalena stood on the banks of the River Trave and looked across the black waves that were lapping at her feet. She was twenty-two years old, older than the 20th century – but still not old enough to face the Devil.

The Devil stood across from her on the other side of the river, snow fell through his body. Magdalena looked at him and the unborn child in her body opened the eyes. The night before, the river had risen above its banks, crept up the steps of the houses on the Upper Trave, seeped through sandbags, trickled into the floorboards and filled the only two cellars that were built on the river. When it slowly retreated, it left behind drowned rats, outdated, sodden account books, rusty tools – and Magdalena.

She was sitting on the floor between three beer kegs, two bloated loaves of bread and a slick side of ham that the men had to leave behind; her legs stretched out in front of her, hands blue with cold and balled into fists. When the flood came, she'd hidden herself away in the cellar of the public house, quite determined to die. The men had salvaged the wine stock, most of the smoked goods, barrels of salted herring and the flour. As they were heaving the beer kegs up the narrow steps, the water started trickling into the bar room. So they locked the cellar door, stacked sandbags in front of it and hoped.

And so did Magdalena. Upstairs, men were praying to be let off lightly while downstairs, Magdalena longed for a wave that would purge her. But the water trickled in thin, murky rivulets into the cellar; and once the grimy tide had reached her thighs, it stopped. The sight of the stoic leisureliness of the rising water might have given back a less determined woman her will to live. But Magdalena feared life, especially unborn life, more than death. She may not have been determined enough to drown herself in a puddle; but it was enough not to be put off by one miscarried attempt.

The following night, she went down to the water's edge: if the Trave wouldn't come to her, she would have to go to the Trave.



When she stood on the bank, a few pale stars were reflected in the water. If Magdalena had been afraid of Hell, the sight might have helped her in some way: to outwit the Devil by forcing her way into Heaven straight from the river, in this way, but she wasn't afraid of Hell. She didn't believe in Hell, which was one reason to end up there, so the pastor had given her to believe. Just in her case, there was more than one reason.

The Devil stood across from her on the other side of the river, tapped a cigarette out of the pack, placed it between his lips, took a box of matches out of his tailcoat pocket and struck one. In the glimmer of the flame, his face sliced through the darkness: black, slicked-back hair, thick beard, dazzlingly bright blue eyes – his hand with long fingernails painted red. He held the match to the cigarette and the spark lit up the whole neighbourhood. It began with a flickering light, like summer lightning, that shimmered across the river as he drew on his cigarette. But soon the light was as bright as the sun in the middle of the night. A couple who were arguing under the halo of a gaslight fell silent; two men who were taking swings at each other dropped their fists and even found they could barely stand. Everyone looked up at the sky, which lay dark and icy above the light. All over town people came out of their houses, shook their watches and plodded down the streets in nightshirts and coats.

The streets were lit up as if they had been set on fire. A merciless floodlight penetrated even the gloomiest alleyways and backyards, even the dark, damp tunnel leading to the rear houses through which only a coffin could pass. At the harbour, sailors stumbled out of bars, suddenly convinced that their next voyage would be their last; whores gathered their shawls about their breasts and looked up at the towers of St. Jacob's Church; captains had a funny sort of feeling and resolved to christen their cog boats a second time.

The beam of light ate its way up along the narrow streets to Mill Street, where girls were dreaming hand-embroidered dreams; to Castle Street, where a boy was



writing feverish love letters and a pastor sank to his knees, unsure for the first time in his life whether these goings-on were the doing of the Lord or his foe. A young woman, in the act of cheating on her husband a few houses further down, asked herself exactly the same thing.

The successful writer on Castle Street looked out on the glare, folded her hands across her chest and had an inspiration; the unsuccessful writer Willnauer on Roses Lane, just finishing his second novel, saw the night's miracle as a good omen. Again, he was mistaken: this book would remain unpublished too. Just around the corner Miss Lispeth spontaneously regained her eyesight at the age of 68 and caught Miss Hedwig hovering over the cherry cake, which she had claimed had been eaten up the day before. In the rear house, Michel the painter staggered drunkenly into the yard and shook his fists at the light, which seemed to have a palpable substance like fine, silky cloth. Then he leaned his head back and surrendered to a strange, redemptive sadness, a feeling that up till now, he had only felt in Magdalena's arms. The city was ablaze with light and Magdalena looked into the deep inkiness of the Trave's depths.

It would have been the perfect moment to pluck one weary of life back from the edge of the riverbank. But the Devil isn't a saviour. No one saw Magdalena. The light from the stars is visible for centuries after they die while Magdalena had already disappeared long before the river swallowed her up.

"Well, damn me," said Johann Petersenn, lapsing into his native dialect in sheer awe, *"tis the Devil's work."*

Next to him at the window stood his youngest son Christoph in his nightshirt, watching the cold hellfire consume the school. The school walls turned white; even the dark gullet of the entrance gate was starkly lit. The trees in front of the school were like stalks in the glare. The moving shadows at different times of day, which Christoph for the life of him couldn't reproduce in his drawings of the school, were wiped out at last. It was the kind of glare that extinguished every shadow.



Christoph Maria Petersenn smiled, Johann fretted and Magdalena put her head back and looked up at the dead sun, the moon smothered by light, the blinded stars; then she looked the Devil in the eye, then her waters broke. A wind had picked up and her dress clung to her round belly; the heavy shawl that was draped across her shoulders billowed like a sail. But the Devil's hair lay flat on his skull, and not a single gust of wind disturbed the neat folds of his tailcoat.

Signet rings glittered on his fingers. Magdalena could see them as clearly as if she were looking through opera glasses: the crest of Henry the Lion on his right ring-finger, the merchant and seafarer's crest on his left, and the double-headed eagle on his middle. His small finger bore a ring with the ship's seal of Lübeck. The Devil's hair shone, and the smoke from his cigarette wafted over the Trave.

It was quite plain that Magdalena had been wrong. The Devil did exist. But the pastor had been wrong too: Hell was not elsewhere: it was right here, right now. Hell was Lübeck. Magdalena took a deep breath, the Devil threw her a smile and she jumped. The Devil stubbed out his cigarette. The city plunged into darkness, and Magdalena into the Trave.

When her dead body was recovered the next day on a strut of the quay wall, she was neither bloated nor had the fish nibbled at her. No, her skin, and her otherwise straw-like hair glistened so radiantly that it brought tears to the harbour workers' eyes. Even her teeth, which were anything but perfect during her lifetime, shimmered like pearls. The pastor crossed himself; even the top incisor that had been knocked out at the beginning of her pregnancy, had grown back. On her belly, coiled beneath her breasts, lay a baby. The umbilical cord, which had taken on a poisonous grey hue, lay in its fist like a rope.

Some said that the Devil had come to fetch Magdalena; others believed in a miracle. Most said it was a tragic misfortune. The only clear fact was that the young girl was dead. She was floating belly-up in the harbour, her hair entangled with seaweed, and one of her ankles caught in the rigging of a cutter. Next to her drifted half a loaf of bread, which was distracting the fish for the moment.



The baby lay on her belly as if – and here, people crossed themselves again hurriedly – the legendary sea monster *Roggenbuk* had delivered it himself with his bony, wet fingers and laid it on her stomach; or (and this notion was even uncannier) as if the babe had climbed up onto its lifeless float of its own accord. A duck snapped at the umbilical cord, but didn't manage to sever it all the way.

Christoph Maria Petersenn, who was hanging around at the harbour with his sketchpad as he often did, gazed at Magdalena in fascination. It wasn't only because she was dead. It was also because he'd never seen a naked woman before. The sight was both disappointing and enthralling: reality was sobering compared to his fantasy, yet still quite exciting. He was nine years old, when he swore to no longer unravel any mysteries.

After the pastor had chased him away, he went home, ripped the drawings that he'd made of the school out of his sketchpad and started a rather inept drawing of the dead girl and her child. For this, he earned a boxing of the ears, but it marked the beginning of a new series – a secret one.

Michel Hinrichs, who had come to unload cargo, threw a single look at the pair of bodies in the water, then turned and rapidly walked away down the Lower Trave. In a corner inn, he first smashed his fist into the wooden panel of the counter, then into the teeth of the innkeeper.

The harbour workers pulled Magdalena's body against the bow of the cutter using a long pole. None of them could swim, and so a large net was fetched to fish out mother and child.

When the baby flopped out of the net and into the pastor's arms like a sprat, the clergyman closed his eyes and murmured another prayer. Because Lucie, Jesse Merten's grandmother, was alive: hungry, dangerously cold and covered in parasites – but certainly alive. And this was how the whole calamitous business began.



Late one cold evening in April 1974, a short, brisk walk from the harbour, in the rear house on a small backstreet, Jesse Mertens, sixty-six years after her grandmother's birth, clenched her fists in the womb of her mother Freya and steeled herself for the birth. Jürgen Mertens was watching a Jesse James Western, half-sitting, half-lying with a plate of fried potatoes on his stomach and his brown suit jacket stuffed behind his neck for support.

Freya was hunched over the table she had so often sat underneath as a child, staring grimly at her plate. She watched the grease going cold on her potatoes, congealing into unsightly white blobs. She imagined that this was what was going on inside her legs and hips: since conceiving she'd put on twenty-two kilos. Then she looked at her husband. Jürgen's chubbiness had never bothered her before, and she'd even found his slightly feminine snub-nose and droopy cheeks quite touching. The rampant moustache and the big sideburns granted him melancholy features and the dignity of a tragic hero.

In contrast Freya was proud to the point of aloofness. Her deep, husky voice lent her a hint of loucheness – and even now, so heavily pregnant that her mother Lucie's old quilted bathrobe only just fastened around her belly, she had an aura of majesty. Jürgen's easy-going warmth evened things out. At affectionate moments, she would call him *Bear*, with a polar bear in mind because of his fair, prematurely grey hair.

But now, seen in a less compassionate light, Jürgen didn't appear dignified and tragic, but shabby. With the acumen of an angry wife, she realised that his teeth had a definite rodent-like quality. He was sprawled out across the sofa, his nose almost completely sunken into the flesh of his cheeks. With sudden malicious clarity, she realised that Jürgen looked like an enormous hamster.

She thought of how her father, Christoph Petersenn, would sit perfectly upright on that green velvet sofa, his feet in plaid galoshes, his black hair neatly parted, his hands right next to him on the cushion, as if sitting itself was a stimulating and intensive activity.



Her husband now stretched out in the shadow of her father, an escaped fried potato on his belly that he had yet to notice. Freya watched it form a greasy ring, which slowly spread out onto his shirt.

To the sound of shots ringing out, Freya heaved herself out of the chair, swiped her husband's feet off the table, stamped over to the television and turned it off. Jürgen had been looking forward to this classic Jesse James Western from 1939 for a week now. Still, he didn't manage to get a word in edgewise.

She had backache, headache, and heartburn, etcetera, etcetera, but Jürgen was just lying around as if he hadn't a worry in the world. Even though *he* was the one who'd got her into this mess. Had he taken a look at himself recently? His posture? His haircut? Jürgen touched his hair in fright, stroke his moustache and sideburns, just as Freya's waters burst.

Freya and Jürgen stared at the puddle on the ground, and at Freya's white socks, which were slowly darkening, as suddenly, a heavy oil painting of Lucie fell off the wall and clattered to the floor. Freya distracted by the noise, looked at her mother's face, just as Lucie closed her eyes. Freya stared at the closed eyelids, the oil painting cracked, as if Michel had painted it like this. At that very moment, Freya doubled over in pain and let out a strained curse. To the Devil with Lucie, the baby was coming!

Je deside, thought the Devil resignedly, who had just stepped onto the scene. *Deside*. Was that the correct form? He was sure of the verb *desider* – but was it *je deside*? Or *desides*? Whatever the right form: he had a wish.

Jürgen was still staring at the cracked picture frame, and the yellowing back panel of the canvas (Michel had never signed portraits of his daughter but he'd added the year on the back, which in this case was 1915) while Freya was already lying on the floor, her feet against the wall, pressing.

The Devil turned away. He abhorred births. All that screaming, squeezing and pressing, ripping and squirting – it was all so very *unoriginal*. He didn't understand: you could concoct all sorts of tomatoes, turnips, young dogs and the rarest varieties



of flowers, but births still had to be so *archaic*. The only reason he had decided to witness this birth was that Lucie's granddaughter was fighting her way into the world.

Lucie Hinrichs, this peculiar rear house wretch, who's presence only the toughest could stand. Lucie who could see through a millstone and hear the grass grow. Lucie who was delivered by the River Trave and one day will be reclaimed.

And Christoph, the charmer with the wasted talent, who always seemed so honest, especially when he was lying.

Freya, Lucie's and Christoph's daughter, had been a disappointment to him, but some curses and talents skipped a generation: the Devil closed his eyes and hoped.

Jürgen ran back and forth, fetched towels and water, couldn't find the midwife's phone number, and twiddled the telephone dial (he knew the number of the hospital off by heart), without noticing that the plug had been pulled from the socket. Freya bellowed like an animal.

The Devil gazed at this racked body: no elegance, no decency, no dignity. In his thousand years, he still didn't understand the fascination that humans had for their own bodies. A bunch of tendons, muscles, skin and hair, a digestive system, a womb, a heart, bladder and lungs. Headache and toothache, goose pimples and chills, sharp pains and tugging pains, ruptures, flatulence and orgasms – that's about all there was to it.

Freya's face was all veins and sinews; she pressed one last time and a blood-smeared creature with bent limbs slid straight into Jürgen's open hands.

His trousers splattered with blood as he squatted between his wife's legs and held the tiny girl whose heat effused his skin. He looked at her, the crumpled face, the nose no bigger than his thumbnail. He cradled her in the hollow of his hand; her skin looked like fine, light-sensitive paper.

Jürgen Mertens carefully unfolded her, smoothed her over and carried her through the hallway to the bathroom, which also served as his darkroom. There he dipped



her into the basin of the shower and watched as the contours of her eyes, her tiny mouth and her shell-shaped ears gradually took form in the red light.

Her eyes weren't strong enough to make out the face of her father, but she could clearly see the face of the Devil standing next to him. She saw his bright blue eyes, his black beard and his blood-red lipstick. So one Wednesday Jessie Mertens was exposed under the light of a cool moon, and developed in the bath of her father's improvised darkroom. Christened in the name of the Devil and Jesse James.

And as the Devil looked into her water blue eyes, those eyes that saw him, just as Lucie was able to, he knew Lucie's story wasn't over yet.



With his head pressed down to his chest, Jürgen walked through the low, narrow tunnel that led from the front to the rear house, a large wicker basket in his right hand and a plastic shopping bag in his left. The size of the tunnel was designed so that a coffin could just about squeeze through. A reasonable architecture as Jürgen thought, but it always made him miserable how less it fit to real life. Not even big enough so that a stately, well-fed man could walk through.

In the backyard, Jürgen set down his shopping, lit a cigarette and looked at the house. It was a remnant from the old town, overgrown with ivy and ensnared in roses. Like misery set in stone. Jessie's great-grandfather, Michel Hinrichs was born in this house, Lucie grew up here, Freya, and now Jessie. This house had witnessed the Black Death, cesspits had risen to its doorsteps and children had starved in its belly. The house was familiar with poverty, ghosts and death. Jürgen saw something else, however. This was the house in which his daughter slept, in which his wife woke. He enjoyed these moments: smoking a cigarette, the ingredients for the evening's supper at his feet, looking up at the house – the house that held his family tightly in its arms.

Freya lay exhausted on the green Biedermeier sofa, her child on her belly, and watched Jürgen putting away the shopping and frowningly inspecting the wicker basket – in which two generations had swung everything that could easily break (wine bottles, crockery, and children) through the hatch to the top floor – before plucking a wilted leaf from its wickerwork. Jürgen placed a cushion and a blanket in the basket and knotted it back to the cord hanging from the hatch. The staircase leading to the bedroom was so steep that it was more like a ladder. Michel built it with half steps and a handrail, which had to be climbed, legs straddled and swaying like sailors. But it was best not to be carrying a baby at the same time. Jürgen had knotted the cord around the handle of the basket hardly, as Freya stood up, put the child in the *cradle* and dropped back on the sofa wordlessly. Jürgen bent over his girl and smiled, before he begun to peel the carrots. *That was Billy, lonesome Billy, who was quick to think, a gun could make him strong.* Freya's silent manner did not



bother him, he understood she was tired. But his girl should hear more than the scrabbling of mice. So he sang: *No one tougher or more daring. Only he and his gun sharing the great fight to live, and his great love to fight.*

Freya's black hair grew uncombed and unwashed over the back of the green sofa, which she hardly ever got up from. Jürgen's voice made her cry. A plate of soup made her cry. The smell of her child made her cry.

She had nothing to give to Jessie. The sadness that had taken up inside Freya since her childhood, had been born into the world along with Jessie. Freya, the war rubble wretch, who could hit hard, but not embrace anyone. She was unsettled when Jürgen smiled at her for no apparent reason, she was never carefree, let alone silly: she was passionate, proud and argumentative. She couldn't accept weakness in herself or in Jürgen. *A rough man who played with danger, to whom trouble was no stranger, until one day he lay dying.*

She never intended to become a mother.

"Nothing good will ever come of me," she had said over the years to Jürgen at increasingly shorter intervals. "I feel the war in my bones, I feel Lucie in my bones. I don't have much to offer – it's only just enough for you." And at increasingly shorter intervals, Jürgen kissed his wife and said: "You'll be surprised what's in you. You'll be surprised how much you can offer."

And at some point, she believed him. Because he knew her. He didn't pretend she was a good wife, or that he was completely satisfied. He wasn't blinded by love but he gave her the feeling that no one was a dead loss, not even her. And no one is completely immune to hope, not even Freya. *Never friendly, never trusting, always kept one ready hand near his gun.*

But for all that, she knew that evil was a dormant in her too; it had to be, because evil was dormant in everyone.

How could she have been so naïve to believe she could look after a child? How could she have believed that she, of all people, would get away with it? Jürgen's voice made its way through the ceiling as he sang Jessie to sleep.



Keep your hand on the gun, don't you trust anyone, there's just one man you can trust, that's a dead man, and gringo like me.

Jürgen sang, Jessie slept, and the Devil sat in the backyard looking straight into the sinking sun without blinking. Freya had never felt so alone.

Jesse Mertens grew up with the sound of beams cracking in an old building, Clint Eastwood's shooting prowess, the scrabbling of mice in the walls, the watery fragrance of ghosts and the smell of meat loaf. The only thing she was afraid of was her mother's hair. When she combed it, the heavy black strands wound around the comb's teeth as if it were a living creature: a creature nesting on her mother's head. Jessie cried when Freya loosened the knot in the evening and her hair fell down to her waist. Sometimes, when Freya put on lipstick, darkened the birthmark above her lips with kajal or piled her hair on top of her head, Jessie would place her hand on the elaborately wound knot in the same way that you might touch a snake-charmer's snake.

In the night, Freya's hair flowed down the stairs, the wind pressed against the panes and the mice gnawed at the beams. In the Seaman's Bar, the last shots were passed around, and another metre of the cliffs in nearby Travemünde broke away. Freya's hair covered the walls and floors, Jürgen turned over in his sleep and buried his nose in the nape of his wife's neck and Jessie slept in a nest of hair that might have strangled her at any moment.

Jürgen Mertens worked in a funeral parlour, and his wife in a maternity ward. Freya slapped the newborns on the back and elicited their first cries. Jürgen Mertens washed the dead. Freya dressed the newborn in their first vests; Jürgen dressed the dead in their last.

When Jürgen came home late in the afternoon, Jessie padded up to him; he knelt down on the floor and Jessie grabbed two fistfuls of his face. Each time, he had the feeling that he had never touched skin in his life that was so warm, soft and alive. Freya went to her late shift and Jürgen picked up his daughter in his arms, locked



himself in the bathroom with her and developed the photos that he secretly took of the dead.

It was the 1970s and everywhere, people strongly believed in the soul again – the idea that everything is connected to everything else and energy doesn't die but is simply transformed. At least that's what Jürgen Mertens believed. It was no small comfort to him – it even accounted for much of the love he felt for his wife – that 'his' dead souls were reborn in Freya's hands. Over breakfast, when she told him about the births that had taken place the night before, he nodded sagely as though she were talking about old friends.

For Jürgen, Freya and him weren't simply two people who loved each other. They split the world between them, making sure that nothing decayed or was held up. He was so touched by this thought that he kissed his wife with an ardour over their boiled eggs that sent the coffee cups flying and he would have to change his shirt.

When he went for walks along the beach at Travemünde, Jessie on his shoulders and hand in hand with Freya, he would point out the hermit crabs: some of them were carrying a snail's shell on their backs, some a shampoo bottle cap. "It's the same with souls," he would say. "They need a house: some take the first thing that comes along, which may not suit them very well, but they do until a new one is found. A house is a house."

He even captured this idea by taking pictures of the dead. He knew that the souls didn't leave the body as soon as someone died: it took a few days. This was obvious to anyone who washed the dead. Their skin was cold and dry, their limbs stiff, but something else still resided there that only left in search of a new home after a while, which is why he took two pictures of them – once with soul, once without. The difference was striking.

He used to photograph his wife. But in the developed pictures he saw more than he intended to. To photograph a person means to explore its personality. And in love you better not explore. He stopped taking pictures of Freya and attended to *more scientific objects*, the dead. Several times a week, he took Jessie into the bathroom, locked the door, fixed black paper to the windows, taped over the cracks in the



door and stuffed the keyhole with cotton wool. He balanced a plank across the bathtub on which he placed the developer and fixer, and after an hour or so, the faces of the dead would be swirling in the water below. The enlarger stood on the toilet lid, and the paper and the other equipment was piled up in the sink. Jürgen Mertens had exactly one square meter, enough for him to turn around on the spot. The shower curtain lay under the washbasin, and photos hung dripping from a string. From a little cassette recorder jangled Western film music by Morricone.

As a baby Jessie had lain in her wicker basket in the red light of the darkroom under the washbasin along with the shower curtain; later she crouched under the basin and played with her father's shoelaces; even later, she squeezed herself between the shower and toilet and blinked into the red light, which made her father look very young.

Jürgen explained every step of what he was doing to his daughter, even before she could talk. At four, she was allowed to pick the washed photos out of the bathtub, at seven, she was allowed to fish the developed photographs out of the fixer with a pair of tongs and throw them in the water. At nine, she developed pictures with a care and sensitivity that was no great surprise to Jürgen but it made him very happy. Jessie found nothing uncanny about the sight of a dead person – until she saw a few photographs that her father had taken of her when she was asleep.

“Why didn't I notice that you were taking pictures of me?”

“Because you were asleep.”

“What happens when I sleep?”

“You dream.”

“Do I dream all night?”

“No.”

“What do I do when I'm not dreaming?”

“You're unconscious, or something like that.”

Jürgen smiled and Jessie was horrified.