

Gerhard Jäger

# SNOW, FIRE, GUILT AND DEATH

[Der Schnee, das Feuer, die Schuld und der Tod]



Literary Fiction

Blessing  
400 pages  
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The autumn in 1950 sees the arrival of the young Viennese historian Max Schreiber at a village up in the mountains of Tyrol, where he is to research the murder of a witch there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finding himself facing an archaic alpine world and a closed and distrustful village community functioning according to its own rules, he feels alienated and isolated. In his loneliness, Schreiber increasingly loses himself in his love for a young mute woman, who, however, is also being wooed by another man. When a peasant dies under mysterious circumstances, a barn goes up in flames, winter erupts with brute force and numerous avalanches descend on the village, the situation in a village in the grips of claustrophobia and fear of death increasingly comes to a head, and in the end Schreiber disappears without trace. More than half a century later an old man is determined finally to get to the bottom of what happened all those years previously. Pursued by his own shadow, he, too, goes to the village to use one last chance.

Ingenious, permeated with rhythm and poetry, Gerhard Jäger tells both of the magic and the brutality of a place that seems to have fallen out of time and space.



**Gerhard Jäger**, born in 1966, received the Voralberger Literaure Prize in 1996 for a novel that remains to be published. After that he worked as a journalist for the Tiroler Tageszeitung and other publication. He lives with his family in Imst, Tyrol.

# Sample Translation

by Lucy Renner Jones

[...]

**Five days ago**

**Monday**

It's five minutes from my hotel to the federal archive. But it's taken me two hours to get here. Not because the directions were wrong or I couldn't find the way. I just needed some time on my own. I strolled a little first in one direction then the other; I watched passers-by, cars, gazed at window displays and scoured the cloud-covered horizon for a glimpse of the mountains that hadn't yet wanted to expose themselves. I toyed with the idea of not going to the archive, of dropping the whole idea and spending a couple of pleasant days here eating good food and drinking good wine, perhaps catching a concert, then returning to the airport and saying goodbye to this country and the mountains for the very last time. At my age, you don't take this kind of trip again.

But in the end, I arrived at the door of the archive. I dithered about, hesitating, not knowing quite what to do. Weeks beforehand, I'd enquired by email whether they had any documents connected to my case: an employee told me that they did. When I announced I was coming, she assured me that she would prepare everything for my visit. And she was looking forward to it: after all, it wasn't every day that someone from America came to do research.

So now this someone has arrived, this someone from America, an old man dithering about at the door. And then this someone – I – take the plunge, the decisive step, and push open the heavy wooden door to go in.

It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. In front of me is a reception desk and behind it, a lady whose hair is tied back in a severe bun. I clear my throat, which has the desired effect.

‘Yes?’ The lady looks up at me.

‘Good morning,’ I say. ‘I have an appointment.’

The lady frowns. Someone approaches from the side.

‘Mr Miller?’ A young woman, or rather a girl, barely twenty years old, with short blonde hair and a round face, stands in front of me. ‘We exchanged emails.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ I confirm, feeling ridiculous.

‘Please come this way. I have everything ready. The story of your cousin is quite remarkable.’

As I follow her down the corridor I recall my email in which I told her that I wanted to make enquiries about my cousin who vanished without a trace. Every few steps, she turns around as if to reassure herself that an old man like me can keep up with her. She gives the impression that there is something on her mind. And sure enough, as she holds open the door in the next corridor, she suddenly says that she’s read my cousin’s manuscript.

‘Was that wrong of me?’

‘No, no,’ I say, shaking my head.

‘It was just so interesting, I couldn’t help it...’ She shrugs and seems worried, as if she’s done something naughty.

‘On the telephone... well, you said...’ I try to find the right words to placate her, but my German only seems to be coming back slowly.

‘Yes?’ She looks at me expectantly, clearly glad that I’ve said anything at all.

‘Well, you mentioned some police reports...?’

‘Yes, of course,’ she says, a shy smile fleeting across her face, ‘the police reports on the murder. Unfortunately there’s not much left of them. I made enquiries and in 1973, there was a fire at the police station where they were kept in the cellar.’

‘What a shame,’ I say, just to say something. We are standing in the middle of the corridor and I wish she would walk on, just walk on and lead this old fool the last few steps of the way to a mystery he’s trying to solve.

She seems to be waiting for something else but when I’m not forthcoming, she just quietly repeats, ‘Yes, a shame,’ turns, goes in front of me again and guides me into a reading room. Our footsteps are unpleasantly loud. Two men, both grey-haired but still a good ten years younger than me, or so I guess, occupy two tables.

‘Over there, right next to the window – does that suit you?’ she whispers.

I nod.

‘Please take a seat. I’ll fetch your documents.’

She walks back through the reading room. I wait until her footsteps have died away. It’s very quiet all of a sudden. The rustling sound as one of the elderly gentlemen turns the pages seems unnaturally loud. A car horn honks, far away and muffled, like a sound from another planet. I don’t take a seat. Instead, setting one foot in front of the other as quietly as possible, I walk over to the bookshelf that stretches along the wall and from the ceiling to the floor. There are books as far as the eye can see. This must be some kind of history section. The volumes are old, which I surmise not only from their leather spines, but also from their smell. I inhale it deeply, enjoying the moment, enjoying the familiarity that lies in that smell. For over twenty-five years, day in, day out, for weeks and years, I breathed in that smell. In 1962, I opened a little antiquarian bookshop with Rosalind: it was seven years after we met and five years after we married. We didn’t make a lot of money out of it, but that had never been our aim. Hunting for old, rare books, the joy of finding another gem, the

awe of holding a first edition in our hands, perhaps with a dedication on the inside cover – all that became the essence of our lives. We never regretted it.

But the absolute high point for Rosalind – how could it be otherwise? – was Red Indian literature. Until that crucial day in May 1968, neither of us had even known there was such a thing, or that it had a historical tradition. Rosalind was rummaging through a box of books she'd purchased at an auction. Suddenly, she stood in front of me, wide-eyed, a small, yellowed book in her hands. It was the first autobiography ever written by a Red Indian –Black Hawk's memoir, penned in 1833. In his native tongue, his name was remarkable: Ma-ka-tai-she-kia-kiak. On Rosalind's insistence I had to learn it off by heart. After she discovered this book, there was no stopping her. She began to look for everything ever written by or connected to Red Indians. And she discovered a great deal.

Soon a third of our bookshop was set aside for Red Indian literature. We were one of the first ports of call for people looking for sources. Rosalind received invitations from universities, enquiries first from all over the United States, and later from Europe and Asia. This was long after her first naïve forays into Red Indian literature, during which she'd led me to the alleged daughter of Spotted Elk. She became a respected expert in the field of Native American literature. Researchers and students wandered into our little bookshop on more than one occasion. And that smell never went away, that unmistakable smell that old books exude, and that now, here in the Innsbruck federal archive, conjures up long-forgotten memories and scenes in my mind: Rosalind bending over a box of books, Rosalind sitting by the window with a weighty old tome in her hand, Rosalind in an animated discussion with a customer, Rosalind handing me a rare edition with a triumphant look on her face – Rosalind, Rosalind.

Books were our shared passion. My fascination for avalanches and avalanche disasters, on the other hand, was something that Rosalind had always found ridiculous, at least until our winter holiday in 1963. Some of the most vivid memories I have date back to that holiday. And the pictures

that appear in my mind's eye are in black and white. But I never told Rosalind. I didn't want to be subject to her ridicule yet again.

Back then, we'd wanted to take some skiing lessons in a little place up in the Rockies. It had been Rosalind's idea. 'You're Austrian so you must be able to ski,' she said. My weak protest that I'd grown up in Vienna and had never set foot on a pair of skis didn't interest her. She'd never been one for logic.

As we stepped off the bus that snowy winter in the Rockies, the wind slapped its icy hand across our faces and with a throaty screech, a large, black bird rose up right behind our heads, making us duck instinctively.

'What a welcome!' laughed Rosalind.

I didn't reply. There are moments and places that fill you with dread. You know that something is lying there in wait for you, faceless, nameless, beyond all description, beyond all shape. You only sense it and you're sure of only one thing: no good will come of it. This feeling came over me as we stepped off the bus. My eyes sought the hotel in the falling darkness – the place that would shelter us, the staff that would welcome us, anything that would chase off this uneasy feeling. But there was nothing to see. The car park was behind the hotel: the building had its back turned to us. We picked up our bags like the others, and walked around the hotel, our shoulders pulled up against the wind. Opposite the front entrance, a steep hillside rose. In the dusky light, it was impossible to make out how high up it went. Man-sized walls of snow lined the path, and if anything was capable of casting shadows in the twilight, these could. We said nothing. It wasn't until we'd walked through the front door and into another world – one that the wind could not pierce and where banks of snow could not cast shadows – that our strange unease diminished. Tentative words broke the silence and there was laughter here and there. We settled in.

On the first night I slept badly. A strong wind had whipped up. I listened to the howling of the storm, listened to its distorted tunes on the power lines, its gusts tearing at the unbolted shutters,

and in the murky light thrown by a lonesome streetlamp in front of our window, I saw that it had begun to snow. I saw the eddying snowflakes, the mounting snowdrifts and watched as they turned into black-and-white pictures: pictures of the Winter of Terror. I saw people searching through avalanche cones with long poles, clearing paths with snow shovels, bearing their grief through the village with flowers. One picture after another surfaced from my inner album, a world in black and white.

The next morning, the wind had let up. But not the snowfall. Our ski instructor was undeterred. Once we'd found shoes, skis and poles that fitted – 'all included in the price,' as Rosalind whispered proudly – we set off. It was not nearly as cold as it had been the day before, but it was cloudy, and the thick flurry of snowflakes obstructed my view again as I tried to find the highest point of the steep slope in front of the hotel. We followed our ski instructor along a narrow, snow-cleared path that led straight to a ski tow. The banks of snow to our left and right were about 80 inches high; if we didn't walk dead centre, our shoulders brushed against them, causing me to convulse with a shudder each time. I tried to concentrate on Rosalind who was in front, her right hand resting on the skis across her shoulder, while she grasped both ski poles in her left like me. I tried to concentrate on the colours of her hat (red and blue), the colour of her jacket (red with dark grey stripes), the colour of her skis (red, black and green). I formed a colourful barrier in my mind to block out the black-and-white images in my head, and almost ran into Rosalind when she stopped and turned her head to talk to me.

'This is so wonderfully romantic! Don't you think?'

Luckily she didn't expect me to answer and shortly afterwards, I was glad to escape the narrow, white crevasse and sit down at the foot of the piste where I could concentrate on strapping on my skis and trying to stand up, then start my first faltering ski attempts, propelled by my poles. I focussed on Rosalind's laughter, our teacher's instructions, the clattering of the ski tow, distant shouts from other skiers, the refreshing wind, the wind that grew gradually stronger, the wind that

passed its icy hand across our faces again and tore Rosalind's laughter to shreds, chopping up our teacher's instructions, and finally driving us along with the others, skis on shoulders and heads ducked, back through the white crevasse to the hotel, back to a world that the wind could not pierce and where banks of snow could not graze our shoulders.

This was the only day during the holiday that we would put our skis on. But we didn't know that at the time.

At night, the storm grew stronger. Its howling, whistling and screeching was the low music that soon drowned out the sounds of Rosalind's quiet, peaceful breathing as she lay in my arms. Long after midnight I was awake, fighting pictures whipped up inside me by the storm's wailing; I fought black-and-white figures from old photographs summoned by the wind to dance on a white stage, rhythmically thrusting their long poles into the ground, into the loosened hair of the avalanche that grasped at me with white fingers.

That was the moment when I yelled out loud, and suddenly, there was a hand on my forehead, a comforting voice piercing the symphony of the storm; I saw Rosalind bending over me, her lips moving slightly, and I heard soothing words coming from her mouth: *dream, you, don't be afraid*. I nodded over and over again, over and over again I nodded, until Rosalind's head sank back down onto my shoulder, her hand briefly caressing my cheek before she fell asleep again. The storm took up its song, battering the power lines, the shutters, the roof tiles, and it wasn't until morning when the faintest glimpse of light daubed the walls of our bedroom that I fell asleep again.

The next day was grey more than anything. None of us could see more than a few yards out of the window before the elements barred our view. The storm grew stronger, and its howling, hissing and whistling soon grew to be an endless background noise that you barely noticed. At breakfast, our ski instructor explained that it was unthinkable to go out that day, and then vanished. I didn't see him again for the rest of the day. Rosalind didn't seem put out at all. She was in good form, and found the storm alternately romantic and thrilling. She didn't understand why I was so

untalkative, why my gaze kept wandering uneasily to the window, or why my thoughts were elsewhere. I was thinking about the slope in front of our hotel, the sheer slope whose height I couldn't judge because the weather prevented a clear view. All I knew was that masses of snow lay out there, and my unease increased by the hour, making me barely capable of holding a decent conversation with Rosalind or anyone else who was trapped along with us in the hotel.

I seemed to be the only one who was worried. All the others were talking, chatting, laughing and drinking; two younger couples began to dance when the music was turned up at their request. It was so loud that the fury of the storm was drowned out. This could have distracted me, but it didn't. Quite the contrary, in fact: it only caused my uneasiness to grow. Now I could no longer keep an ear out. Had the storm stopped? Or grown stronger? The only thing I could hear was the dance music. Like on the Titanic, I thought.

I kept on slipping away from the main hall; I walked past the reception to the toilet, then locked myself in one of the cubicles and wrenched open the window. I tried to interpret the screaming of the wind – to note some kind of direction, anything at all. It seemed better than this uncertainty. Rosalind became increasingly frustrated and angry, not at the situation itself – she was regaling two other women at the bar – but with me.

‘What’s the matter? What’s wrong with you for Christ’s sake?’ she said, taking me to one side. ‘You’re behaving outrageously! Is it so terrible if we don’t go skiing today?’

I shook my head. Rosalind and the others suspected nothing.

‘Don’t you get it?’ I asked Rosalind.

‘Get what? What don’t I get?’

‘The storm, the snow, all that snow, the slope out there. I have no idea how far up it goes.’

Rosalind still didn’t understand.

‘Darling, is everything all right? What do you mean, the slope? Why do you have to know how far it goes up?’

‘It’s dangerous, Rosalind. Dangerous. There’s so much damn snow out there. Avalanches, don’t you see?’

She laughed out loud.

‘Oh, come one! You and your avalanches! That old story with your cousin.’ She looked at me pityingly. ‘Just think about it: the locals here know what they’re doing, right? If we were in any kind of danger, they’d have moved us out of here long ago!’

I nodded, must have said something along the lines of: ‘You’re right, of course, you’re right!’ But I wasn’t reassured, not even when the storm suddenly stopped and a ghostly hush settled on the snow-covered landscape.

We went to bed early, lying next to each other without talking, Rosalind in my arms, her head on my shoulder, her breath on my chin. The unnatural silence weighed heavily in the room, and I almost wished that the howling, raging storm would return. At some point we fell asleep. I woke up hours later. Rosalind had turned onto her side. Something seemed to be pushing down on my chest, cordoning up my throat. I pushed back the cover, went to get up, and then I heard it: a muffled rumbling that first sounded like rolls of thunder, but which a moment later hit me like a fist.

‘Rosalind!’ I yelled. ‘Wake up!’

Then a crash: screaming and splintering sounds, something cold actually hitting the back of my neck and thrusting me forwards. I yelled and yelled and yelled, brushing aside the snow that lay all around me before suddenly, everything went quiet: quiet and frozen. I stood up, stomped towards the bed through the 20-inch-high snow, whispered ‘Rosalind,’ said ‘Rosalind,’ pleaded ‘Rosalind,’ shouted ‘Rosalind!’ I reached the bed, buried on my side by the avalanche that had burst through the broken window, and saw Rosalind sitting bolt upright on her side, both hands clinging to the cover pressed to her mouth. I tore away the cover and took her in my arms, rocked her back and forth – Rosalind, Rosalind, Rosalind – and then, I don’t know how long it took, she made a sound; first a sob, then a scream, and then finally, she wept uncontrollably.

We were lucky, as were the other guests. We all left the hotel unharmed. It was our last winter holiday. Neither of us ever talked about learning to ski again.

‘...Your documents.’

I turn around, baffled. I had been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn’t heard the girl’s footsteps. I go back to the table, where a large cardboard box is waiting.

‘It’s all in there,’ she says quietly, her voice lowered to the noise level in the room. She takes the lid off the box, reaches inside and pulls out a large leather-bound book.

‘Look,’ she whispers, ‘your cousin’s manuscript!’

I take a deep breath, and notice that my heart is beating faster. So close, so near to my goal, if this story has anything resembling a goal.

‘Here are the police reports, or what’s left of them,’ she says sounding genuinely concerned and holding up a yellow file. ‘I could try to copy them if you like?’

‘Copy them, yes...’ I hear myself saying, my eyes glued to the manuscript within arm’s reach on the table.

‘Then ...have fun!’ She shrugs her shoulders anxiously, clearly feeling like I do that the word “fun” is not quite appropriate. She turns and leaves and I hear her footsteps hurrying through the reading room. Then the door closes and all is quiet.

At some point I sit down without remembering sitting down. My fingers touch the book and I don’t remember reaching out my hand for it. I can’t bring myself to open it. I try to halt the whirligig of images in my mind. Now, after so many years, so many decades, to really being here, to be so close to finding clarity, makes my pulse race – even though I realise that after half a century, the traces I am looking for will be faint, perhaps no longer even visible. But there’s no turning back. I open the book and delve into Max Schreiber’s world.

## Schreiber's manuscript

The rattling of the bus was the crackling of an enormous blaze; the engine misfiring was the screaming crowd. Whenever a sharp jolt threw Schreiber's head forward, he awoke with a start from his dream, glimpsed the empty seats of the bus, the bus driver's blurred silhouette behind the frosted glass pane, the mountains that grew gradually darker and seemed to loom past the windows like strange giants, the rutted road that wrapped itself around the mountain like a belt. And then he sank back into his dream, into the crackling of the fire that drowned out all the other sounds.

Schreiber shouted out loud. But the crackling had died down, the screaming crowd had fallen silent and the flames licking his shoulders were the bus driver's hands.

'You were dreaming!'

Schreiber nodded mutely, his speech still trapped in his dream, and stared in confusion at the dark eyes above him. The driver's hand slid off his shoulder, making it possible for him to stand up. He silently grabbed his suitcases and stepped off the bus; the bus driver's brief nod followed him out.

He stood lifelessly at the side of the street as the old bus wheezed and turned around before taking the road that led back down into the valley. The vehicle got smaller, first becoming a silhouette, then just a noise, then silence. Schreiber was alone although his insides still felt the juddering of the old engine, and the memory of the dream made a hot tremor run down his back. In the falling darkness, his eyes carefully surveyed the village that lay before him. Crouching below a sheltering slope, over generations it had eaten its way into the rocky belly of the mountains. Houses grew along the verges of the cobbled street; their dwellers withdrew into them from the distant gaze of the stars. Schreiber's eyes followed their rows along the street until they were swallowed by the darkness. He hesitated, standing and watching. A sudden gust of wind hit his face; a shutter that had come loose creaked somewhere in the night that was torn apart by a new gust of wind. Schreiber

shuddered. Hesitating, he flattened himself against the stone wall of a house. Then he turned right and edged along the wall, just as the news that someone was due to arrive here had edged along this same wall a few weeks ago. A researcher, it was said, a writer of books. A scholar, a professor, said some in awe, others in mockery.

One of the first to know was Mrs Neubauer in her little shop, which even on sunny days was shaded by the enormous church spire. One morning, as she scooped butter out of the churn, or measured up orders of laces with outstretched arms, she told anyone who cared to listen. No one asked how she knew. No one asked because everyone took it for granted that not only the goods brought up from the valley every Monday were stacked in her shop, but also the gossip. Her store thrived on it and the things people heard there and carried home often weighed heavier than the goods they'd purchased. And so she had told them about a stranger who wanted to come and spend the winter in the village; a researcher, someone who wanted to know all about the past, someone who wanted to write a book about this past, about this village and, of course – here, the voice of Mrs Neubauer sank to a mysterious murmur – about the people living in the village too. About you, she said, firm in the belief that she was something different, that she didn't belong to this village, that she was actually a woman of the world whom fate had brought to this far-flung place, just because, as a young and dumb thing, as she put it, the whole world had seemed to shine from the eyes of a young farmer who was now her husband, and whose wife's bitterness drove him up to the steep stony fields, even when there was nothing there to be tilled.

Old Mrs Brunnhofer, bent over as always, her crucifix knocking against her concave chest as always, heard the news on her way to the shop on the very spot where twenty-six years ago, the horns of a raging bull had torn her husband's guts to shreds. By her side as always, her son Bruni, as everyone called him, with his imbecilic, grinning face, the right corner of his mouth drooping, a thread of spittle dangling from it as always, and about whom it was common knowledge that old Mr Brunnhofer wasn't the father, as the old woman had always claimed. Rather, he was the son of a

malicious twist of fate that had driven her up into the mountains, in grief over her husband's recent death, to search for a runaway bull that hadn't returned from the mountain pasture, straight into the grasping arms of a coarse woodcutter who rammed his lust into her almost fifty-year-old frame, out of which crawled – just as painfully, just as inevitably – her son. Bruni, the idiot, Bruni, who couldn't say sentences only names, Bruni, who had a permanent strand of drool hanging from his grimacing, crooked mouth and who now, as always, went down the three steps to the shop hanging onto his mother's arm. From her expression, it was obvious it was something important, something extraordinary, that she'd heard, something that he didn't understand, which sounded like *historian* and *Vienna* and *winter*.

And so the rumour was carried through the lanes, through pursed lips, visiting upon the wizened priest in his confession box, ambushing old Mr Kühbauer and his sons in the merciless August sun on a parched red field, and cropping up at the greasy tables of the only inn as dog-eared cards were passed from hand to hand. Through the crevices in the houses, through the narrow alleyways, across the dirt tracks, yes, all the way up to the snow-covered pass where the herders rounded up their cattle to lead them back to the village when the summer was coming to an end; even up there, there was talk that a stranger was coming, a scholar who didn't have to work his fingers and back to the bone with a shovel, plough, scythe or pickaroon, someone who could make a living from writing clever things, someone who wore suits of fine cloth, had a radio at home and a watch on his wrist.

At the school, which only had one class, the children talked about it in whispers in the yard and even the elderly teacher, who had to take the bus into the valley once a week because she had quarrelled years ago with Mrs Neubauer and had not set foot in her shop since then – even she could no longer contain her curiosity one day, and descended the three steps of the little shop in the shade of the church spire, where she awkwardly mumbled something about too little flour and had to leave

again empty-handed, because for the first and only time, Mrs Neubauer had served someone without saying a word and nothing more than a gloating smile playing on her lips.

But finally, even the wildest gossip on the story died down and could no longer arouse more interest than Birnbaumer's newborn calf that was found dead in the stable without the slightest sign of injury or disease. News of the coming stranger wore off, lost value, subsided: it became fact. Max Schreiber had arrived long before he awoke with a start from his dream, long before he stepped out of the bus in a daze, long before he edged along the stone wall, following the path across the small square, past the murmuring fountain, while his eyes scanned the façades of the houses in the fading light for a sign that might have shown him that this was the door to go through, that this was where he would find the innkeeper's wife to whom he had announced his arrival in a brief exchange of letters.

When Schreiber eventually found the inn, the wind no longer beat his face. A loose sheet of paper that had been blown by the gusts of wind across the cobblestones stuck steadfastly to his right foot, one of its corners fluttering. Schreiber looked up at the house, at its old weathered sign with its barely legible lettering, and looked at the yellow shaft of light that fell through the windows into the night. Muffled voices could be heard inside, voices that accentuated words strangely, making it difficult for Schreiber to understand anything; there was an occasional laugh. He felt strangely self-conscious, yes, more than that, he was almost fearful; it weighed upon his chest and he caught himself turning towards the end of the street in the blind hope of seeing the old bus that could take him back down into the valley, back to the world, back to what he knew and what was familiar.

He vigorously shook off this thought, climbed the steps to the door and pressed the latch. A smoky, yellow light pierced his eyes and as if by opening the door, he had let in not just himself but also the stillness of the night, everything went quiet. A sentence dangled in mid-air, and Schreiber felt as if he were standing in front of a painting: the yellow light, the chairs, the tables, the cards that had just been laid and were still spinning like tops on the table, then came to rest. The heads that

turned towards him and the eyes that glinted at him – he, the man who had stopped in the doorway, much younger than their idea of a historian, in much too elegant shoes, a much too new coat, and both suitcases in his hands.

Finally, Schreiber managed to shake off his trepidation and took the first step, nodding slightly as he walked across the room past the tables to the counter, behind which a fat woman was staring at him from small, bloodshot eyes. To his relief, he heard the gentle scraping of chairs behind him, a first word venturing to break the silence, the sound of cards being thrown onto the table again and finally, a liberating laugh, joined by others, releasing frozen time and making it flow again.

The woman pushed a small book across the counter, which bore the words “GUESTS” in clumsy capital letters on the cover. When Schreiber opened it, he saw it was empty. He took the blunt pencil that was lying on the counter and wrote his name in it. Even before he could finish, the woman pulled the little book out of his hands, turned it and held it up to the light to read the entry, together with her husband who had just stepped up next to her, wiping his hands on a greasy apron before throwing a brief, suspicious glance at Schreiber, and eventually giving a nod of approval. With a curt jerk of her head, the woman indicated that Schreiber should follow her, and she led him through a low door at the rear of the inn to a corridor and up some stairs which were so narrow that Schreiber had to hold one of his suitcases in front of him, so that it bashed his shin every step of the way. When he turned around, he saw the innkeeper standing below in the doorway, looking up at him with narrowed eyes.

The room he was shown by the innkeeper’s wife was directly above the parlour and even through the thick floorboards he could hear voices and laughter rising up, long after the woman had retreated and he tried in vain to flee into sleep.

On the first few days, Schreiber could often be seen taking walks through the village. He followed the paths into the surrounding woods, crossed grazing meadows, was greeted by farmers and children, and by curious, friendly and suspicious looks. He tried to get into conversation with people now and again but everyone seemed strangely self-conscious in his presence, and Schreiber didn't dare steer talk towards the farmers' work. His knowledge was too scant, too delicate, and his hands too well manicured so that after a while, he took to burying them in his coat pockets.

He soon became a common sight in the village, strolling through the streets and talking to the children, studying the old weather-beaten houses with an interest that the locals found inexplicable; or timidly and cautiously approaching the cows, which caused some laughter behind his back. People grew used to the fact that he was someone who clearly had nothing to do except gaze and saunter, exchange a few words, and then gaze and saunter some more. Even Mrs Neubauer, who tried to sound out Schreiber on his rare visits to her shop, found out nothing new, nothing about the book, and nothing more about this strange visitor than what everyone already knew: he was Dr Max Schreiber, twenty-five years old, had just graduated from Vienna University with a PhD in History, and wanted to spend the winter in the mountains to work on his project without being disturbed. Schreiber didn't say anything concrete about his project: it was too early, he always said, fending off Mrs Neubauer, who felt compelled to dish up lies to her customers' quizzical faces rather than admit she had nothing new to tell. This was how a rumour did the rounds that Schreiber was working on a book about the life of mountain farmers; another time, Mrs Neubauer claimed that he had a particular interest in the personal lives of young women up in the mountains, a piece of gossip that was always accompanied by a salacious undertone. When all this no longer satisfied the village's curiosity, she one day claimed that Schreiber was a secret government envoy, sent to investigate a crime committed years ago in which people from the village might be implicated. With a triumphant look, Mrs Neubauer rounded off this claim by saying that she was not at liberty to say more.

Schreiber luxuriated in the peace of those days – the rays of the autumn sun, which around midday at least still offered some warmth – and he was strangely moved by the extraordinary blue hue in which the far-off horizon was bathed. Only gradually did the impressions of his last days in Vienna dissolve, when he'd told friends about his plan, which was met with precisely the reaction he had expected: mockery and incomprehension, and those strange, piercing looks that people reserve for friends who are about to embark on something evidently insane. That he, Max Schreiber, of all people – the historian who during his studies had fought against every literary element in historical accounts, who had described imagination as a scholar's worst enemy, who had always sung the praises of reason, rationality and reason – this Max Schreiber wanted to write a novel? And not only that: he was leaving behind in Vienna pretty much everything that could be left behind – his apartment, work, friends – and was giving it all up for a little village in the mountains whose name was so obscure that everyone immediately forgot it, just to immerse himself, as he put it, in the “atmosphere of his story”. He had tried to explain what had been on his mind for some time, thoughts that he himself had barely been able to put in order. Namely, that perhaps it was a mistake to perceive academic objectivity as truth, and that it was more a matter of revealing the deeper layers of life – life itself – in the way a photograph, a good film, or simply a good novel could.

A bitter smile played on Schreiber's features when these thoughts and memories went through his mind as he stood up from the bench where he'd been enjoying the sun and made his way back into the village. But what could have kept him in Vienna since the “zero hour,” as he referred to it with a touch of sarcasm that was new even to him? This had been the hour when he'd noticed for the very first time how loudly the bells of St Charles' Church chimed, nine times in all, how loudly they chimed into the silence that had arisen after she had finally given his suspicions and fears a name, had put that name on the table next to the piece of bread-and-dripping she'd bitten into that was lying in front of her, and which drew Schreiber's gaze because he was fascinated by the evenness of her bite, sunk like a half-moon into the slice of bread. All else around him had seemed

like a dream that he was watching from afar without understanding what was happening to a man named Max Schreiber and the oddly unfamiliar face opposite him.

Later, he had felt uneasiness, not because he missed her, as he very soon had to admit, but because he was now doomed to take up twice as much space as before, twice as much space in this apartment, and twice as much space in this life. So what had he left behind except for too much space that had to be filled?

Schreiber shook his head as if to rid himself of these unpleasant memories and hurried towards the village.

That evening, he turned up at The Old Ropemaker's small farm. No one knew The Ropemaker's exact age, nor did anyone know exactly where he was from. The eldest in the village could only remember that mild day in spring many, many years ago – one of those spring days from the past century that melted the snow on the path to the valley after a long winter. Up this path came a strange pair: a decrepit old pot-mender whom no one had ever set eyes on in these parts before and who, on unsteady legs and wheezing breath, was leading a heavily laden donkey. But it wasn't the vast array of tools, pans and odd-looking appliances that aroused people's curiosity, making them gather round on the street to watch the newcomers: their excitement was triggered by a small lad tied to the donkey by his right wrist. He was thin and barefoot, and his oddly transfixed eyes did not follow the movements of the old man ahead of him. Nor did they follow a single bird that fluttered up from the copse, nor a single curve in the road: He was blind. This, together with the old pot-mender, caused a stir in the village that lasted for several days. Whenever women brought their old pots and pans to the old man, they paid no attention to the dexterity of his fingers, which was the only part of him that seemed unscathed by age, but instead threw stolen glances at the small, cowering bundle in whose snuffed eyes they were not reflected.

After a few days, there was nothing left for the pot-mender to do, and so the strange retinue set off once more. In front was the old man, plodding one step at a time. He led the donkey and,

stumbling along behind, tied to the beast by his hand, was the boy who had been on everyone's lips for the last few days without ever having opened his. But they didn't get far. After nearly an hour, a chilly hand clutched the old man's heart, rent open his mouth and caused him to emit a strange, almost astonished noise. The pot-mender plunged face forward into the shingle whose chill and stiffness slowly covered him.

The next morning, before the first rays of sunlight appeared, a young farmer found the blind lad crouching and trembling on the path down to the valley next to the pot-mender's body that no longer contained the slightest warmth. The farmer heaved the corpse onto the donkey and brought it back to the village together with the whimpering lad. There, the boy was untied from the donkey, but when someone tried to undo the rope from around the boy's wrist, he cried out in torment, grasped it with both hands and only let up when they left him alone. After several days of this, they left him in peace and merely cut his rope to about half a yard. People grew used to the fact that the boy would sit mutely in a corner, gliding the rope through his fingers over and over again.

For a long time people were unsure what to do with him. No one wanted another mouth to feed, let alone one that was good for nothing. It wasn't until they rummaged through the old man's meagre belongings for the umpteenth time and a precious ring was found sewn into his waistcoat pocket that a farmer's wife declared she would take the boy in if she received the ring as recompense.

And so the blind boy grew into a youth, and the only thing that seemed to arouse his interest were the stories told in the evenings when the farmers sat down at the sparse tables after work. It was only over the course of the years that people noticed the other thing that interested the growing lad: ropes. Whenever he got hold of one, he would slide it through his fingers with reverence and great tenderness as if it were a precious jewel. Eventually, people also noticed that if they gave him frayed ropes to play with, he mended them with the kind of skill reserved for those who understand the soul of things. And so, he gradually became a ropemaker, and his status in the village grew. And, as if this admiration had lent him a tongue, he began to talk and tell stories. Everything that his ears

had picked up over the years had etched itself indelibly into his brain without being subject to the flood of distractions inflicted on those who take in things with their eyes. His tales resembled his ropes: graceful, never breaking off, they enthralled his listeners. He created worlds in shimmering colours, which only a blind man who had never seen the world could possibly invent. During the first few years, it was mostly children who gathered around to listen to him. But later, on windy autumn evenings or frosty winter days, the men also stopped by and reached with coarse hands for the glasses he set out for them on the table.

Schreiber knew nothing of all this when he was returning one day from a walk, escorted by evening downwinds, and was beckoned in by the old man sitting on a bench in front of his house. Surprised that the old man had heard him and strangely repelled by his vacant, white eyes, he obeyed The Old Ropemaker's summons reluctantly at first, and then with curiosity; he sat down at the roughly hewn table and, fascinated, followed the movements of the blind man, who, completely absorbed by what he was doing, paid no attention to his guest and carried out his actions with amazing self-assurance. After a brief interval, the door swung open, revealing a glimpse of the stormy autumn world outside before the men who came in shut it out again. The room filled up and Schreiber leaned back comfortably, enjoying the crackling warmth of the fire in the cast-iron stove; he enjoyed the contact with other bodies, the accidental brushes of elbows and knees against his as if they wanted to show him that he belonged. And then, as if on cue, the Ropemaker began. The laughter and murmurs of the men in the room broke off, sentences remained unfinished, and faces turned to the old man who had taken up a seat next to the stove, and from whose mouth came the tale of Andras and Alma, the young lovers whose stolen, intimate looks crossed the pews and church square on Sundays, looks that had to be kept secret from the village under the stern gazes and folded hands of their fathers, and that had to keep them warm for a whole week, feeding the daydreams that assailed each one; Andras, as he swung his scythe through the lush grass and the rain sliced through his beads of sweat, and Alma, as she spun the washing over and over again in the tub. These looks

were a weekly ration for the couple, whose fathers, due to a quarrel over a cattle pasture, never come within eyeshot of one another apart from that brief hour on Sunday mornings when the village followed the chiming church bells and silently squeezed into the small chapel. And the Ropemaker told the story of family conflicts, disputes and fights, of Andras and Alma, whose lips never had the opportunity to exchange the merest word, let alone the merest breath, and whose looks were the only shaky foundation on which they built another world.

And then came the day when the village found out that Alma was promised to her father's best friend, old Bernbaumer, who was more than twice her age and whose wife had only escaped his punches and tempers by dying. The day when the leaves on the trees were already tinged by the first reds of autumn, when Andras stood on a hill behind the old holly oak overlooking his foe's farm, his eyes circling like two birds, ready to swoop down the moment Alma's small, fragile frame came into sight as she fetched wood for the kitchen, or took the laundry into the house, at which moment her gaze would wander up and along the hill range as if by accident, gauging the edges of her world, sometimes resting for a moment, sometimes for an eternity, on the old holly oak. Up there where Andras received news of her forthcoming wedding; the wind, the flowers, the birds, the whole world knew what there was to know. Andras was not alone under the oak; next to him stood the listeners from the blind Ropemaker's parlour, whose whispered words filtered almost inaudibly through the leaves. The men balled their fists and were ready to march down there with Andras, to put an end to this injustice, recognising that no one in the world could be more in the right than Andras, than he who was in love, feeling how good this certainty did them, how keenly the words of the old man cut, words that made Andras suddenly set off through the night towards the home of his small room, of his straw sack, not noticing the cold or the night that slipped away, yielding to the early-morning crimson on the mountain tops. Andras did not hear the questioning voices, the warning ones, the worried ones, or the angry ones, not the whole of the next day, nor the following days or weeks, and

he only left his bed on the eve of the wedding, sunken-cheeked and gaunt, to make his way up into the mountains and offer his soul for the eternity of a whole night with Alma.

The Ropemaker's voice fell to a mere whisper as he described *him*, the one who stepped out of the darkness of the woods in a red jerkin, red eyes and red breath, he, the trader of souls, who promised Andras what he wanted: a night with Alma, a night of certainties comprising not only of looks, but of her lips, of her hands wandering over his face, her mouth constantly forming the quest of his name: Andras, Andras, Andras. This, then the meeting of their bodies, the soft pressure of thighs, the frisson making Andras' hands tremble as he loosened the black river of her hair from the dam of her plait, as he confessed to her how he had purchased this night and heard her trembling consent to go with him, to become with him what a body without a soul must become: stone, stone, stone. And how they dipped into each other over and over, savouring their limits, over and over defying the laws of time, of transgression, looking for eternity in each embrace, each shudder, each intertwining, yet not being able to prevent what was already written in the fading stars and in the waking birds' song, which slowed the two lovers' movements, made them slower, always slower, until they stopped still and froze: stone, stone, stone.

And early in the morning following that dearly purchased night, the Ropemaker's voice circled the odd-shaped black rock in the middle of the woods, the rock that conjured up the image of two people coiled around each other, and which the locals called the Devil's Stone. The listeners were familiar with it, situated just below the treeline in the shade of a craggy, looming cliff, just as they were familiar with the saga of Andras and Alma, just as each time they hoped it would end differently, just as each time it took them a while to find themselves back in the Ropemaker's cramped parlour, stricken, dazed, only slowly taking in the world again: their callused, used hands, their work shirts damp with sweat, the calf that hadn't eaten for days, the cow whose belly distended more with each passing day, and who bellowed in pain for a mercy slaughtering. And in their midst was Schreiber, who could not, would not avert his eyes from the old man's lips, now closed, or his

vacant gaze. Schreiber, who nevertheless stood up along with the others, accepting life and reality once more, sought the path back to his lodgings, through the night, through the smoky inn, through the noisy card players who no longer looked up at him, up the narrow staircase to his room, where he threw himself onto his bed and the murmurs of the room downstairs merged with the Ropemaker's voice, where he returned to Andras and Alma and the chiming bells of St Charles' Church, and the door clunked shut behind her as she left, down the steps as the tram screeched shrilly. And finally, he imagined the Devil's Stone in his mind's eye: large, black, shining like Alma's hair and then, at last, sleep.

[...]

Everything has changed since the fire, writes Schreiber in his book, the feeble light of the light bulb not properly lighting up the room. It is night time.

Everything has changed since that evening with Maria, is the next sentence he writes. He stands up, restless, driven, takes a few steps to the door, turns around, back to the feeble gleam of the light bulb. He has to force himself to sit down again, and slowly write everything that wants to burst out of him at great speed; he has to take control, be calm, write down one word at a time, one sentence at a time, one thought at a time.

So he starts again from the beginning: everything has changed since the fire. The others don't look him in the eye any more – they look away. He barely perceives their nods, just senses them. If he shakes hands with anyone, it is quick and curt; if he talks to anyone, words dry up after a few sentences. If he enters the inn, where the two Kühbauer boys no longer show their faces, people rarely greet him nowadays. No invitation to sit down. The innkeeper's wife gives him a serious, stern, dismissive look and even praising her jam to the hilt doesn't change a thing.

It slowly dawns on Schreiber: clearly Georg Kühbauer had been drunk that night, clearly he'd been smoking in the barn, clearly it had been his fault that the barn had burned down. But

clearly he had had a reason to drink and smoke. And the reason, they think, is him, Schreiber, the historian who has arrived in the village to delve into the past. Schreiber, the intruder, the stranger. What has Georg told them? Do they all know that Schreiber became a mere shadow that night? Many saw him hastily leaving the cemetery after midnight Mass. Do they know why? Do they know that he followed Georg and Maria? Do they sense it? Brückner and his wife, perhaps, who surely noticed how absent he was in conversation, how tensely and uneasily he rushed out of the cemetery, out onto the street, the dark street, where the looks of the others couldn't follow him, although their inklings and assumptions did.

What did Georg say? Do they know where he went? First, upright, then, from the inn onward, when he no longer had a reason to walk on that silent and holy night, a shadow in the shadow of the houses, a shadow in the shadow of the night, and finally – a thought that torments Schreiber – a shadow in the snow, discovered and exposed by Georg.

Do they know? Is that why their looks are fleeting, their words hesitant, their greetings scarce? Or is it just that they sense something is not right between him and Georg and Maria?

Schreiber jumps up, takes a few steps towards the door, hotly, turns around, back to the desk, turns around, to the door, the same path, then he wrenches open the door, goes out into the corridor, to the toilet, although he has no urge to go, stands at the small washbasin, looks in the small mirror, sees a face, sees his face, feels how this sight is alien, turns away, goes back along the corridor, into his room, closes the door, to the desk, turns around, to the door, turns around, back to the desk. He sits down at the old table in front of his book, bound in leather, bought in another life, his leather-bound book that now lies before him like a symbol of failure. So many white pages, empty, so many pages that he still has to fill, he, Schreiber, the writer, so much that he still has to experience, he, Schreiber, the shadow.

Another few sentences flow from his fountain pen, sentences about the shadow that he follows with mesh of letters, with a suitcase full of words, with a manuscript of sentences. Again he

reads the first sentence that he wrote that night, the sentence: *everything has changed since the fire*, and then he takes his fountain pen, places the nib at the end of that sentence and writes:

Everything is different since that evening with Maria. The sunrise is a little brighter, the days are a little friendlier, walking is a little easier, even in the deep snow, the long hours of the night are still sleepless but full of lovely thoughts, memories of looks and hands and a fire in the stove that seems as if were still blazing. Does she know how he feels? Does she know of all the things he has taken from her? All the warmth? But does she also know that he followed the pair of them, followed them in the silent and holy night, that he was the shadow that Georg bumped into on the path? Does she know that? Does she know that he is at the beginning of the chain of events that led to the barn going up in flames? Does she know how ashamed he is? Could she wipe away this shame with a single movement, by slowly and gently stroking her hand across his head before letting it linger on his shoulder? Could she do that?

Schreiber does not know but the questions are there, spinning in his head, just as the shame is there, eating away at his insides. Although he can hardly bear it, over the next few days he spends many hours in his room. When he is outside, he takes new paths, paths that lead in the direction of the valley, even if his thoughts and feelings set off along a different route. He doesn't let himself go there, trudging minute after minute, sometimes hour after hour through the snow, always mindful not to meet too many others or give any foundation to speculations that would lead him in the direction of Snowslide Farm. He wants to scatter the questions, to stamp them into the snow with every step – the questions that the whole village is asking even though he can't hear them.

Even at New Year, his behaviour does not change. After breakfast, he disappears back up to his room, the innkeeper's wife is tight-lipped even now; after lunch, a walk across the Gertraudi hill and surrounding snowy fields, far away from the village, and far away from Snowslide Farm, and with every footfall in the deep snow, the questions will quieten and will, he hopes, diminish.

He returns from his walk before dusk falls, early enough to walk through the empty inn parlour to his room. The many hours that follow, the last hours of the year 1950, go on forever. He lies on his bed or stands by the window or paces up and down, but no matter what he does, laughter and shouts from the packed, heaving room downstairs reach his ears. He picks up on music – an accordion playing – as the year ends; but the laughter, shouting and music doesn't stop. It continues to fill the first few hours of the new year, as if the villagers are trying to shackle the old and the new year together so as not to interrupt the flow of time.

Not until the early hours of the morning does the noise abate and ebb away. For the last time, the heavy door of the inn clunks shut, the last few snatches of conversation rise up from the street, and the last few steps crunch through the snow. As if from afar, from another world, the soft clinking of glasses, noise of tables and chairs being moved around: then the door closes one last time and then there is silence, peace and quiet.

Schreiber lies there on his bed, suddenly not tired any more, suddenly seeing himself in full clarity, the absurd situation he is in, trapped in this village, in this tiny village in the mountains, and he asks himself: why, the street is not closed, it would not be a problem to go down into the valley. He could go down there tomorrow, pay his bill at breakfast, find someone who would give him a lift, Brückner perhaps, and then catch the next bus, the next train, back to Vienna, and to his apartment that has been empty now for months, and where the air is cold and musty. But these are trifles that can be immediately set to rights: open the window, let in the fresh air, turn on the heating and the next day, normality would be restored. Buying groceries, letting friends know that he's back in town, that he's had enough of the mountains, of the snow, of the suspicious looks and curt greetings, just because he helped a woman, carried her rucksack home, just because he was interested in a story that took place a hundred years ago. Katharina Schwarzmann flits through his mind and he feels the sudden urge to laugh out loud at himself, at this absurd story that lured him up into the mountains. She should burn in hell, the old witch, burn in all eternity – and he's amused that

he even uses the word witch. He laughs aloud again, shakes his head and thinks to himself, just burn, burn, you old witch, but without me, without me.

His thoughts turn to Vienna, to normality, to the screeching of the tram outside his window, to the noise of the traffic, the voices of drunkards trying to find their way home. And he thinks of her and the gardener; who knows what these few months of normality and daily life has done to them. Perhaps they are already sitting in silence over breakfast as she puts her slice of bread, bitten into once, in front of her next to her coffee cup and sees the half-moon of her teeth in the bread and perhaps she remembers the breakfast with him when she told him about the gardener. Perhaps she's already sorry; perhaps she already knows it was a mistake. What use is a man who understands flowers, but not women? But perhaps things are quite different and they say nothing at breakfast because the other's gaze says enough. Perhaps, thinks Schreiber, the downfall of every relationship is when you have to talk over breakfast because you need words, because the mere presence of the other is not enough, because the time of words has begun, the time of phrases, repetitions and lies; the time when lips learn to form words to pass on to the other while thoughts travel elsewhere. But perhaps she and the gardener are still in the country that doesn't need words, where looks and the gentle, accidental brushes of bodies and silence at the breakfast table suffice, and a slice of bitten-off bread is just bread, nothing more; not a memory from another time, another place, another table or another man who ran out of words when she put the gardener's name on the table, along with a few sentences strung together that she must have arranged many times in her head, pruning them a little here and smoothing them over a little there. He ought to be happy about this, deserving, as he did, a woman who was his intellectual match, who would brave the dusty libraries with him, and discover life the way he could, among the dead, among history. She would be a very different woman from one who was pruning flowers when he came home. And it had nothing to do with him; he was a wonderful person, and a wonderful man too, she added, glancing up at him – the only time she did during her speech, looking at him with a mixture of uncertainty and defiance, trying to read

something into his expression, trying to find out whether the word “man” had any effect on him, whether it conjured up something like pride in his features. Whatever she saw on his face, Schreiber doesn’t know; he only knows that she lowered her eyes again and carried on talking about this and that, about people who are compatible and people who are not, and that it is the death knell for any relationship: even when you liked – yes, even loved – the other, you both had to be compatible. And then she shrugged her shoulders helplessly, having got to the end, having finished the speech she had clearly made so often in her mind, and after a few seconds, she said, ‘Why aren’t you saying anything?’

Schreiber jumps up from his table in Vienna, up from his bed in the little mountain village, and goes over to the window, yanks it open at breakfast in Vienna, and yanks it open in his little room in the little mountain village, and a gust of fresh air hits him, back then in Vienna, now in the mountains, and he shakes his head, slams the window shut, in Vienna and in the mountains, turns around, snatches his coat from the hook, here just as there, leaves the apartment there, the room here, and escapes, back then in Vienna, today here in the mountains. The air is cold then and now, but otherwise the memory first peels away from reality when the door to the little inn falls shut behind Schreiber: because in Vienna it was already light and the streets he meandered down aimlessly were already bustling with people when he escaped from the gardener. Today, escaping from the flood of memories, he immerses himself into a world that is still dark, no glimpse of the morning light on the peaks and ridges, no New Year’s light, just an angry man, his coat collar turned up, who, chased by the pictures crowding his mind’s eye, stomps through a snow-covered mountain village, taking no notice of the gutted barn as he walks past, no notice of the dirt track that would lead him into the woods, and only when he trudges up the path to the small hill, to the place where small Snowslide Farm hunkers down in the all-powerful night; only then does he come round from this thoughts, halt his pace and look out into the darkness. The farm lies still in front of him, barely visible in the night. Abruptly the pictures in his mind’s eye transform: no more gardener, no more

Vienna, instead snow and a path through the night and a shadow on the path, and a man discovering the shadow. Schreiber goes hot with shame; it fills him and he hastily takes a few steps to one side, away from the open field, into the woods, which takes him in silently and closes ranks behind him.

Schreiber stands behind a fir tree, his fingers on the raw bark, and looks out onto the open field, at the hint of the shadow that must be the farm, the small farm, little Snowslide Farm, where she is, and suddenly, the thought hits him that he could come out of the woods, cross the field, knock at the door, and she would open it, and a smile would dart across her face when she recognised him; she would ask him in, and greet him with a hand on his shoulder. But at the same moment, he knows that he's incapable of doing it: the few metres to the farm are infinitely long, the arm he would have to raise to knock on the door infinitely heavy. And then another thought jolts him, as sharp as a knife: who knows if she's alone? It is New Year's Eve after all and perhaps she didn't feel like spending it alone. Perhaps she asked him to keep her company and perhaps, perhaps, Georg Kühbauer's life has just begun to fill up with real life, with hands of flesh and blood, with a warm body that nestles next to his and learns to trust, to trust at last in this man, in this farmer, whose looks and thoughts have protected and followed her for years, day and night, spring, summer, autumn and winter, always. What more can a woman, a single woman, a woman who does not even have words, wish for?

Schreiber chases away the thought: no, he can't imagine that he is with her. He doesn't want to imagine that he is with her. He would prefer any other scenario, even the one where Kühbauer is shadowing him on this first New Year's night. Perhaps he is skulking in the darkness too, perhaps even close by; perhaps he is also in the shelter of the woods, the same woods, the same silent woods in which Schreiber is standing, and whom it suddenly dawns on that morning is not long off. He has to avoid someone seeing him here at all costs, here near Snowslide Farm, or someone seeing him coming from Snowslide Farm, and he turns abruptly on his heel, trudges along the wood path, taking no notice of the dirt track that would lead him as usual back to the village, the glimpse of the

morning light is too strong, the shadow of the night already too pale, not strong enough to hide a human shadow on an open field; and so Schreiber slinks on in the shelter of the woods, skirts the edge of the open field and buildings until he eventually approaches the village from below, and walks along the main road to the inn without encountering a single person. His legs carry him through the empty inn, carry him up the staircase to his room, to his bed, which he lies down in and finally finds quiet and peace and sleep.