

Localised Tremor

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Excerpts from chapters 9, 13 and 29

Translated by Charlotte Smith for *New Books in German*



At the hospital, they say it will be fine. Veronika speaks to a doctor who looks like Dr. Best from the television adverts. Only without his brand of toothpaste. Old, with deep-set dark eyes, sunken cheeks, a straight back and wavy white hair. She almost wants to call him Dr. Best. It wouldn't be right on the first meeting, Veronika thinks, as she stares at the piece of paper in front of her that the doctor is drawing on. He sketches the outlines of a uterus, to show her what benign growth has done to her womb. A useless, unusable hole, as big as a heavyweight boxer's fist, irregularly formed, gently misshapen, which doesn't make things any easier, with a hilly, uneven inner landscape, overgrown with blood-filled and waterlogged tissue. How was that supposed to help? Veronika feels twinges of an old sadness. How useless it all was, she murmurs, and the doctor looks up from his doodling.

You don't have any children, he says. It isn't a question – everything is in the documentation she has brought with her. So she doesn't answer. She lets the statement hang in the air, and Dr. Best doesn't press her either. Instead, he draws three small points and explains how they will prepare her stomach with surgical instruments while she is heavily sedated. First a probe, then comes the heavy equipment to hack into pieces what was once her womb, before it became useless tissue, and pull out the useless tissue piece by piece. Someone in some laboratory will later check that the cells are 'healthy'.

Despite all the decay.

Then we close and stitch it up, Veronika hears the doctor say, and tries to concentrate again. You can leave hospital after three days, if it all goes well. You know, says the man, leaning back in his chair. He pushes the piece of paper, with its sketches and doodles, back towards Veronika, in case she would like to take it with her and show it to someone. Or would like to think things over again, who knows. You know, every day I have despairing women sitting there. Their quality of life is so limited. They don't make any plans, because they don't have the heart to. Bleeding is the only certainty about their lives. They are tired and pale, anaemic, they have no sex life any more, they just want it all to stop. They only come here when everything else has failed. They have tried many things – herbs, pills, hormones, the coil. They have taken advice and put worry dolls under their pillows. Believe me, women only come to us when nothing, absolutely nothing else works. Even those who haven't wanted children for some time, or who never wanted them, find it hard to make

this decision. To part company. But I can assure you of one thing, Mrs Grabowski. Afterwards, when these women have made a decision and seen it through, they all feel better.

Veronika starts to cry. She cries quietly and calmly, and is surprised that the very busy Dr. Best has so much time. He doesn't get impatient, look at the time or push a final piece of nonsense across the desk, but just lets her cry. And then it's over. Veronika gets up, reaches out to take the drawings the doctor hands her and puts the piece of paper in her handbag.

I'll see you again in three weeks, the doctor says. Just keep taking the tablets until then. And look forward to life after the operation.

Veronika goes back to the waiting-room to get her jacket. A woman is sitting there with three children playing energetically around her. Like organ music, Veronika thinks. And looks at the whole lot of them. Then she starts to cry again. Quietly, softly. Nobody sees. She puts her jacket on and just lets the tears run down her cheeks. She can wipe her face outside.

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Veronika takes a bottle of white wine from the fridge and opens it. It's time to tell her father why she's come. That she wants him to tell her something that she's known for a long time. That he should be honest with her. She drinks half a glass of wine before she starts to talk. She begins with the operation that she'll have in just three weeks, explains her decision and touches on the pain that the stillbirth caused her and Hanns. Then she comes to her talk with the gynaecologist. Explains what the gynaecologist explained to her. Notices how embarrassed she is to describe to her father in such detail how a cervix, how her cervix, is made and why it indicated that something was already wrong before the stillbirth. By the time she's finished her story, she has drunk three glasses of white wine, and Eckard Stinauer hasn't once moved from his chair. Her father sits there, as if he can undo all the words by just sitting there. He is still sitting there when Veronika has long finished, has said all the words as she wanted. Why should her father help her now? She left home when she was eighteen and led her own life.

Eckard Stinauer gets up and goes into the sitting-room. Comes back a few minutes later with a photo album. Sits at the kitchen table and opens the album. Looks through and turns it round so his daughter can see the pictures. There she looks twelve, thirteen, fourteen. And a page later fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. Always dressed for gymnastics. Sometimes alone, sometimes with a coach, sometimes with other girls of the same age, wearing the same outfit.

That was a bad time, she says, and wants to close the album. I hated the sports college. The training and all that. I was so slim and wasn't allowed to put on weight. Or grow up or have any friends or do anything at all that I liked.

Her father nods and puts his hand on hers. It was a big mistake to send you there. That coach promised you the earth – a bright future, with money pouring in. You were really promising, he said. Perhaps the most talented in your year. We knew what torture it was for you. But when we asked you whether you wanted to stop, you always said no.

Veronika nods and suddenly memory after memory floods into her head. She closes the album and looks at her father, who now downs a whole glass of wine too.

I hoped I'd never have to talk about it. Your amnesia helped us. To start with we thought it was temporary, but then it really seemed that absolutely everything had been permanently locked away. From you. As if you'd decided never to recall it. And that suited us. So we were only ashamed on our own, never in front of you. The fact that the sports college was in a different town also worked in our favour. No one had noticed anything here. And everyone there kept quiet.

Veronika realizes she is really angry. She wants to shake her father, to hit him. He just won't get to the point. He should say what happened. So that she can finally say it, too. She gets up and stands behind him. Looks at his head and sees that his dark hair hides a small bald patch at the back. So he's going bald after all, she thinks to herself, and the thought distracts her slightly from her anger. You had a baby then, Veronika. You were only just sixteen. You got pregnant when you were fifteen and only realized far too late. You girls always have irregular periods. It was surprising that you got your periods so early. Most of the girls were children and stayed that way, physically at least. Who knows what they did to you. Anyhow, you were six months pregnant. It had been the holidays in between and I remember that you weren't sure about going back to school. You were ill after the holidays. And even Carola didn't realize why. You were pregnant. We simply thought that everything was normal for all you highly trained, well-bred girls.

Pregnant at fifteen.

Veronika tries to sound as horrified as possible.

Just a few more minutes and it's over. Then she has her story. She sits down again at the kitchen table and looks frantically through the album. It's true, there is no sign of what her father is saying. In all the pictures, she is thin as a rake, with protruding shoulders and an angular face, skinny legs and hands that seem too big. She is clearly made of muscle and must have been tough. A tough cookie, Veronika thinks. If I slept around at the sports college, I must have been a real minx.

So who was the father, she now asks. She has to ask this question. It's completely logical that she asks. Who was the father, that's what you ask, if you can't remember anything.

We only had suspicions. We thought that it was one of the coaches. But you wouldn't say. When the situation became clear, you closed up. And left all the decisions to us. You didn't want to talk, just to do what others decided for you. So we decided. That you would have the baby somewhere else and we would sign.

What?

So that it would immediately be put up for adoption. The baby. Without you knowing. You would give birth and give it away. And then you would start training again. But the coaches said they had to wait and see what happened physically. Whether you would still be fit for gymnastics after pregnancy and childbirth.

Was I fit?

Yes. But you didn't stay at the college for long. In spite of the amnesia. You had made up your mind. Your results got worse. It only took a few months until you were no good to the people at the sports college. We took you home.

Was it a boy or a girl?

Probably a boy. But I'm not sure. We had agreed that they wouldn't tell us anything. About anything. We shouldn't get attached to the baby in any way.

Your grandchild, you mean?

Eckard Stinauer nods and his eyes cloud over with sadness. What we did was wrong, Veronika. And I make no apology. Of course you were still a child yourself, too young and naïve to look after one of your own. But we could have cared for it. I don't know.

He gets up and stands by the window. Looks outside and not at Veronika, who is sitting at the table and thinks that at least she can now resign herself to things. That she feels better, now everything has been said, and it's not left to her imagination any more.

Do you think it's a punishment? That I have no children, only a dead one and one I don't know?

What do you mean? This isn't some kind of church. Veronika's father is furious, and now turns round to his daughter, who is sitting at the kitchen table and talking nonsense.

So you think I should believe that's why Carola died? You think?

Veronika shook her head. I only mean punishment for me. Sometimes you make a mistake and can't put it behind you.

No, you can. For Christ's sake, you can.

So do you know that it was a boy?

No, I'd just heard that. A nurse who didn't know I was standing behind her in the corridor at the hospital. She said to a colleague that your parents were going to visit. She didn't say parents but: the grandparents of the boy that's being adopted are coming. So I put two and two together. And it also seemed right.

Veronika thinks about the letters. About the last letter: even if I'm younger, sixteen to be precise.

You want to get rid of me. For a second time. So I don't need to meet Martin Wagemut any more, now that everything is clear and can be made official. If it's *my* story again.

Veronika starts to cry. So this is the answer. She looks at her father, who does nothing, or who can't do anything, to comfort her. Who just sits there and watches her crying and doesn't know that he hasn't told her anything new. Perhaps it's the same for him. Perhaps he cries a lot too. But he's an

old-school type of father. An old-school father must always be strong and have a solution for everything. You can't just cry when you feel like it.

He gets up and says, I'll make up a bed for you, Veronika.

This is the one gesture of love that he is still capable of tonight. To make up a bed for his daughter. To get the best bedlinen out of the cupboard, with the big lavender-coloured flowers, that Carola had bought and guarded like a treasure. Those lilac sheets were only used for the best, most unusual occasions, and that's how they feel. As good as new. They smelt of times long gone. Perhaps he had not got them out of the cupboard since Carola passed away. Now he gets them and makes up a bed for Veronika in the sitting-room. Puts a candle and a glass of water on the bedside table, and two freshly laundered towels and a flannel on the bed. Turns on the radio, but with the volume so low that it's just a comforting swishing sound in the background. He goes into the kitchen and says that everything is ready, set for the night. Good night, he says and disappears into the bedroom. Comes back again to say that he's happy they can now talk. Stays standing there. Until Veronika looks at him.

I always thought that you remembered, Veronika. That you remembered and just didn't want to say. Because it must have been so much easier for you for all these years. Not recalling it.

Why do you think that?

I spoke with a doctor, then another. I read about it and once I wrote a letter to a psychotherapist. I got the name and address from the phone book. He had his practice in Berlin. Far enough away. And they all told me that it wouldn't be possible to forget everything for so long. That the memory must have come back to you at some point.

But it hasn't. What do the doctors know. Veronika thought of a friend. One of those whom she had gradually cut out of her life, by staying silent. Two daughters, so you always knew what the main topic of conversation would be when you met up. But one particular story that had stayed in her mind for a long time. How the fourteen-year-old daughter of her friend had got caught up in a lie that she couldn't escape from. Only a small lie, something of little importance, nothing really. The friend had blown this up into a great drama. Why doesn't she tell the truth, it would be so simple, I wouldn't be angry with her. She should just make an effort. I don't want my children to lie.

Veronika had talked, as you do when you can't really sympathise. Or perhaps you can, but with the wrong person. Let your daughter lie, she said. There's no way around it. You lose face. Give her the chance to stick to her lies.

She stays sitting in the kitchen until she feels that the lilac bedlinen can't hurt her. Then she gets up and goes to bed.

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The sparrows are moulting. On the window sill sits a ruffled, grey-brown tuft and moves its head manically. I'm moulting too, Veronika thinks, and tugs at her hair. A surprisingly large amount comes out in her hands. Veronika makes a small nest of it and wonders whether she should give it to the sparrow. Perhaps it was a tree sparrow, not just a house sparrow. She can't tell the difference. If there was one. The house or tree sparrow could make itself a warm little place with her hair. For the bird and its brood. Veronika pulls again at her hair, again and again.

She pulls from her head a nice warm home for little sparrows and makes the nest in her hand bigger.

Death is a harsh sentence, but I know I must die,

And my sweetheart will plant a little red rose when I'm gone.

Death is a sharp pain, and when its sickle splits two lovers,

Ah, that is the hardest thing to bear.

Ah, what good is a little flower when it means the grave

Ah, what good is a little red rose, if it blooms when love has died.

The sparrow flies off from the window sill. Hops it, thinks Veronika. They all leave me in the lurch, she thinks. But I always tried so hard. Hanns sits behind her by the table. She wishes he'd gone – it would be better without Hanns. Right now. But he wants to talk to her. I need to talk to you, Veronika, he'd said. He doesn't call her 'Vroni' any more. At last – it has taken enough time to get him to agree to stop calling her that. But he doesn't feel comfortable in his own skin – trapped, angry. About Daniel too now. Daniel, who had disappeared before Hanns could give him a piece of his mind. He wouldn't forgive the boy for that, even if he was clearly guilty himself in some ways. He shouldn't have taken him to that pub, should have taken better care of him. But that was too much to ask, that a stranger, her estranged husband, look after her son.

Veronika stands by the window and waits for the sparrow to come back. When Hanns had called the day before yesterday to say that everything had gone wrong, had ended so badly, a sparrow was sitting on the kitchen window sill and watched her fall apart. It just sat there calmly, as if gently happy about her distress. Perhaps it wasn't looking at her, but at something completely different. What did she know.

Veronika turns round and looks at her husband. She can see the anger flickering beneath his skin. The surface is confused, but the anger grows beneath, fed and nurtured for too long. They won't be able to sort that out. I could turn him inside out, Veronika thinks. Confusion on the inside, anger on the outside. Then he could talk better. She remembers days and times when she could talk to Hanns. When she met him, he talked so freely with her. She always described this when friends asked how she and Hanns had got together. He talked me into submission, she always said, and they laughed. Talked her into bed, Hanns would say. And that was completely right. He had besieged her with words for two weeks, he just hadn't stopped talking. That was after they had built themselves a den in their student halls one long night. Two weeks later they actually did sleep together, and Hanns had at

last stopped talking. Finally the man switched off, Veronika had thought. Everything seemed easy. Hanns was wonderful, a great man, with broad shoulders and warm skin. A tall man who had a faint, unusual smell of lavender about him, which seemed funny to her. He used lavender soap because it reminded him of his grandmother. Everything about Hanns was good then. He really was the right man for her. Gentle and good and yet man enough.

Please, sit down, he says, and looks at her. I want to tell you something. Ask you something.

I don't need explanations.

You won't get any either, Veronika. I want to tell you something and ask you something.

She sits down at the table. I have to work, she says. So hurry up. I've got a lot to do today.

She sees how a thick vein starts throbbing behind Hanns' temple. That's anger, she thinks. If I stick a small sharp knife in there, all that dark blue stuff will come out. Then Hanns won't be angry any more, he'll die. Perhaps that's a solution, she thinks.

Veronika. It was an accident, a tragic accident. But you won't believe me. And you won't believe what I'm telling you now. I know you. But I'll tell you anyway. I really don't think that Daniel was your son. It was just a coincidence, that I got to know him, that we'd sort of become friends, that he was the same age. And had the same date of birth. As we now know.

Veronika looks triumphantly at Hanns and starts to cry at the same time.

You could have asked him earlier when his birthday was. Then none of this would have happened.

Do you understand?

That's not true, Veronika, none of it's true. But I can't change your mind. You'll hate me forever because I murdered your son. That's what you think.

So I killed your son too. Veronika says. That makes us even. She says.

Hanns gets up. A few seconds more and he would start to hit her, until she shut up. He knows.

I have something from Daniel. He says. You can test it to find out whether he's your son. He says.

Was your son. He says.

You can get proof, if you want. It's your decision. As if he really were your son.

Hanns gets up. He puts on his suede jacket, rummages around the pockets, to see whether he has everything he needs. Cigarettes, lighter, money. He gets out the phone and puts it on the table.

Veronika thinks, if he wasn't my son, then I can start looking again. But if he was, I just have another dead child.

Hanns leaves. Closes the door quietly, goes downstairs quietly, and quietly leaves the house and goes to the nearest train station. He gets on the first train that comes. So here I am, he says, and finds himself a window seat.

Veronika stays sitting at the table. What she'd said about work was rubbish. She didn't have anything to do. And even if she did – who cared?

There is a tupperware box on the table. Far too big for Daniel's remnants, remains, if you can call them that. But there they are. No idea where you can get a maternity test. But you must be able to find one. Veronika hums to herself. She notices that she has run out of songs. Used up the whole comforting racket. Then she'll have to think of something else.

What should I do now? Veronika asks the table, where Daniel's remains lie. Hanns has gone. She can't ask him.

What shall I do now?

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