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173 pp.

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THE NEIGHBOUR (pp.7-15)

A movement woke me up. I can still see the waves, uneasy waves, rolling towards and away from me. It wasn't in my dream, although I did have a dream: I was lying on a meadow in the evening sun. A figure approached and stood in front of me like a huge shadow. I could not his face, only his silhouette in a halo of light. Who knows what he wanted. As he leaned down, I pulled in my legs and kicked. I can't say if I hit him because my jerky movements woke me up. Now the surface of the water has smoothed over again; steam rises and drifts up through the room. This is the first time I've fallen asleep here. I'm not afraid: I don't think that I could drown in my sleep. I read in a magazine about gurus who pull off their deaths like a healing performance. With their legs crossed, they are capable of sinking to the bottom of the water, where they drown without the slightest twitch. Others are able to pause their heartbeats through sheer willpower. It probably takes an entire lifetime, though, to be able to stop your heart completely and decide the exact time of your death, to announce it so that you can pass away in front of a crowd of followers. A peaceful death to rest in peace. A peaceful life to die in peace. I'll stay in here one more hour. The water is still hot and today I have time. There's no one making me leave; I am alone. No one is knocking or rattling the handle. Everything is quiet – no doors slamming, no footsteps, no loud voices. It's so quiet that I could imagine I were deaf. No shift in the weather that might affect the light; no clouds, no sun, no sky above me, and no power failure. Now and again, the lightbulb flickers. If it blows, I'll have to get up. In the pitch-dark bathroom, up to my neck in water in the narrow bath, I would fear for my life. In the light I can see my arms and hands, my belly, my member, my legs sticking out of the water, my feet lying on the edge of the tub: my body, which shows me that I exist. Maybe I could hold out in the dark. I would have to imagine the light so that I could see with my eyes closed: the red sand, the street in front of the house, the women. But the silence doesn't bother me either because it makes my own voice sound clear. I listen to myself. I have to listen to myself. I'd prefer to listen to myself than to the radio, the salesman, the caretaker, the rubbish collectors or the newsreader. Rather my own voice than the phone call of a stranger waiting next to me at the bus stop. Rather my voice. I don't

know why I'm afraid of dying. I am used to death; just not my own. On the radio, people die quickly and easily. Their deaths are tucked in among the normality of the weather, sports events and elections. Only rarely does an actual individual die – a bishop, a peacemaker, a president or a famous murderer. The small people die like everyone else. No one's interested. They live in seclusion, keep quiet and stay in their peaceful homes. It's a relief if they hide their faces. I used to live as if in a dream. People were illusions, their faces masks, worn by ghosts. Or there were no people at all, except for those running away, so terrified they had no lives. Here, they now have lives. Sometimes their pathetic masks suddenly come to mind again. I see them in the face of a stranger, or in the familiar features of an acquaintance. Then I tell myself that I've left all the ghosts behind, but my horror is obvious. If they catch my face in the mirror, their heads twitch in my hands, their bodies sink deeper into the chair. But while I shave their skulls, stripping the black curls from their scalps as we talk about everyday things, we calm down. My brother, they call me when they leave, and I too speak of them as brothers. In the evening I sweep up their hair and burn it in the yard. The flames sear, white smoke plumes upwards in wisps and there's an acrid smell all around, which, if I'm not careful and stand downwind, clings to my clothes, skin and hair. Steam condenses on the tiles and runs down the walls. I miss the glow of the afternoon sun, which you could only bear under a shady veranda, the sweat on my bare skin that felt every breeze, every ray of sunshine, every shadow. Here my skin lies buried under layers of clothes. I freeze in this air: even during the short summer, I am still cold. My wife says, bathe, bathe as much as you want. And when I stagger out of the bathroom, she says, "Now you're warm for once," and we do the act that doesn't require much talking. Sometimes I can't finish; then she gets up and leaves me alone. I have tried to tell her who I was – when, where – but she doesn't want to know. She says: That's not why I am your wife. In the shop, I joke with the other men. They treat me well, sit all day long on the bench and watch me cut hair. We'd better stay together, they say, and stick together like chickens. When something happens, if there is trouble with officials or another German, they complain and ask me, "You could do something, you're strong." True, I'm not as poor as they are. I have my own business and good clothes. They respect me because the caretaker doesn't shout at me, but addresses me by name. But he pronounces it in such a way that it sounds like an insult – empty and meaningless, spat out. Not that I want my former nicknames back; I don't need titles any more. But my mother knew why she gave me my name. I'm new here, have no ancestors or cult. It's enough for people to know that I have my own business for them to hide their distrust. If I pay the rent on time and don't leave garbage next to the container, I'm a proper man. They even forgive my blackness if I'm tidy and dress the way they do. Often I wake up in the middle of the night and don't know where I am: I have to look around and focus. But even when I do remember, I can't believe I'm still here, leading a second life, saying hello, and chatting to the caretaker about the weather. I have to recite it like a prayer so that the world feels real again. In the bathroom, this little room, half-underwater, I am nowhere. I don't have to hold my head upright, but I can lean it against the edge of the tub instead, feel the

cool metal on my neck and the sweat dripping down my face. I have let my worst fantasies become reality, have brought my nightmares down on others. I have felt a demon inside and have become a demon, licking bloody hearts, breeding devils from children, bringing death, not life, into the world – I can recite it all without having to remember, as if by heart. The normality of the others has kept me going, has allocated me a place in everyday life, and has given me amnesia, which I have forced with my silence. My past seems to be that of a stranger's I met in a dream. A delusion that speaks to me when I lie in the hot water. Of red sand, an empty clothesline, a zinc bathtub. In the evening my wife would fill it with seven heavy buckets from the well. Seven buckets, she would say, but I would just laugh and take off my boots. I used to lie in the water, get drunk on liquor and stare at the sky. I always tried to see something in the stars, a sign that I intuitively understood, but in the end, it was just a game I played to kill time. When my eyelids would grow heavy, I would pull out the plug, and as the water emptied and a puddle formed around the tub, I would fall asleep. I didn't awake until I felt the scorching, blinding sun. I had to shout for a long time until my wife, or anyone nearby, put up the umbrella and brought me some water to drink. If I didn't feel like getting up, which was often the case, someone had to refill the tub. Kids would always be playing, but they stayed in front of the house where I couldn't see them; I just heard their noise in the distance. My wife would stay in the house; what she did there was none of my business. Not far from me there would always be a few men hanging about. They lurked in the shade of the porch where the TV was. American programmes that no one was interested in ran nonstop. But when the news started, they would leap to their feet and turn up the volume. The best thing was when we were on the news, or rather, all the dead, rounded up to a handy number. We remembered that number. We ourselves no longer kept count, hadn't done for ages. For us, there were only anecdotes and we'd try to outdo each other with our anecdotes, told and retold one after the other in a frenzy. On the news, they didn't seem to know that everyone dies alone, in terror of death. My soldiers could have shown them that. Sometimes, when I walk through the town centre, I can feel them by my side like I used to. Hatred and fear burn beneath their skin, madness glows in their eyes, but they walk slowly, and no one says a word. Until a boy stands in front of his sister and doesn't run away. Then the men scream louder than their victims, yelling with every blow and shot. When the sister throws herself over her brother, their curses are the last thing she hears. Then there are those men who remain silent and wrinkle their foreheads in concentration. They shoot up shop windows, raid them to slaughter salesmen, managers or whoever else is hidden in the back rooms. There was one guy like that who I never watched, not even once; and we wondered how he did it, considering how his victims looked. We called him 'the German', which he liked; he even had his hair bleached. Who knows what he's doing today. Did he manage to give it all up? Is he even still alive? I should have stayed. Now I'm here, with another woman, and my old job, in a new country. My habit of bathing hasn't stopped. Only the water isn't cold like it used to be, but flows out of a stainless-steel tap instead. I don't see where it runs off to. And the tub is in a windowless room on the third floor of a

block of flats whose inhabitants I rarely meet. I don't get to know them, I know nothing about them, but I still imagine they are listening whenever I talk quietly to myself. For a moment I hesitate, because there is a scratching noise or a short cough, then I carry on a little louder. When my wife hears me mumbling again, as she calls it, she turns up the TV. Write a book or find someone from the newspaper to talk to, she says, when I say that the past sometimes goes through my mind. She has her own problems, but she doesn't say a word about them either. I ask her to bathe with me, but she just shakes her head. I suggested going to a sauna, but she wasn't interested in that either. When she was standing at the sink brushing her teeth, I tried to pull her into the tub with me. She snatched her arm away, fell against the wall and starting screaming at the top of her voice. I haven't seen her since then. A few weeks ago, in the middle of the night, she hit me on the mouth with back of her hand. I awoke with a start, my fists already clenched, but she was asleep. Her eyes were screwed up, her forehead pinched. I went to the bathroom to rinse my mouth. At the shop, they asked what had happened, but I just laughed and didn't reply. My ex-wife was quiet too. But she lived inside the house and I lived outside. She even brought out my food. There was a wide board that she put across the zinc tub so I had a table for when I was bathing. She ate with my mother and the kids. I can barely remember my kids: they were so small that I couldn't tell them apart. I was proud to have them, but I did not want to look after them. They were just kids that I was told were mine. I was rarely home anyway. My mother's probably dead by now. Perhaps my wife is still alive, maybe she's better off than ever. Why not? It wouldn't change anything about my memory, which has repeated itself for nearly four years. The past does not go away. I can't burn it like a bunch of twigs or a handful of black hair. I was able to open my shop because I took money when I fled. Maybe I'll hire someone. Then I could sit down with my customers on the benches, watch TV with them, and talk about the last big match while waiting for the next one to start. I'd rather open a small café, run a bar, do barbecues on the street in the summer. Or open a kiosk, sell newspapers, drinks, sweets. Or rent a garden. If I was a smarter, if I knew more, I could try other things. I have to get to the end of my life somehow. If my wife comes home today, I'll apologise. Perhaps she'll get pregnant, then I'll be a father again. I don't even know if she takes the Pill. Or wants a child with me. She doesn't trust me. She thinks I should be someone different. The way the films show it, the bad guy dies a horrible death or shows infinite remorse. But in real life, he lives peacefully alongside his neighbours and misses the good old days, just like everyone else. I'm no hypocrite, but I'm not waiting for the big punishment that everyone predicts either: no one gets away with it. That's a fairy tale for the losers so that they shut up with their whining and moaning. They should just shut up for once and hope that the justice they summon so eagerly comes down on us all. Until then, I'll lead an insignificant life. I don't need to regret anything, nor will anyone come to judge me, and I don't have to take my own life. I will carry on in peace, whether I want to or not. No matter how much hair I cut, I'm not a hairdresser. Always the same heads to shave. The same people on the bench who only leave in the evening when the game is over. When the last one leaves, I close up.

Meanwhile, I'm the one wearing the mask. But my mask is new, friendly and polite. When I sweat in the tub, it melts and drips into the murky water. And then I don't need a face any more, I just listen to my voice, which has been waiting for me to use it. I remember the kids by the river. We watched them from the bridge as they ran down the bank and into the water. I ordered one of my boys to shoot at a child who had stopped in the knee-deep water and was looking blankly up at us; he took aim for a long time, breathing hard. I jumped off the bridge into the river and sank to the bottom, bent my knees and pushed myself off. When I came up for air, there was no one in the water. I swam to the bank where the kids had just been playing, lay down in the sand and dried myself in the sun. My boys waited. When I waved to them, they laid down their guns and jumped in, one after the other. They came up again with muddy hands. They smeared it across their faces and came crawling up to me on the beach. When the mud hardened and began to crumble away and they looked like a group of small, wrinkled old men, giggling quietly while trying to hold it in. I stood up and pulled the dead kid out of the water. I shoved my thumb into his wound as far as I could and painted crosses, lines and circles on my boys' foreheads, dotting their cheeks. The younger ones looked at me while I painted them, the older ones closed their eyes. They sat in a circle around me, and there was something connecting us all.

THE BOTTLE COLLECTOR (pp.97-101)

All kinds of criminals place charcoal lighters on the four tyres of a silver family car, and run away. Their trampling pulls me roughly out of my dreams. I open my eyes just a slit and see that smoke is rising in thin, pitch-black columns. If I were like any other person, I would alert the fire brigade, but I don't have a telephone, and just a few coins that I can't do without. In any case, the last working phone booth has long since been taken away. I'm not sorry for the damage that can never be repaired. Nor for the children who have fallen into bad ways, or the hurt feelings of the car owner. Just the destruction of the environment that I have so often stopped myself from adding to, hurts my heart. Fire makes the ugliest things beautiful for a brief moment: a car tyre burns like a bright ring of fire, a worn-out wicker chair becomes a flaming throne, a burning piano is true poetry; flames licking from a burning terraced house wave to neighbours who are frozen in fear and a burning man can kindle a fire in others. As a child, I loved to burn small items: a crumpled paper handkerchief, a scrap of cardboard, or a small plastic man – but only once. Because then I was told: No, when you burn things, you not only destroy the thing itself, but also the sky and the air below. The beauty of that melting doll's head, whose silvery shimmering, black eyes stared at me from the colourful tongues of the flames, were extinguished with a bucket of grey mopping water. But today it is too late for that. Black, stinking smoke fills the road and so I get up and sneak along the pavement until I have a better view. The car won't explode, I know that, but I still hope that the flames might find their way into the tank. As I lean against a wall,

watching for someone to stick their head out of the window, or for the fire engines to turn up silently at the deserted intersection, warning lights flashing, I remember the day in my childhood when a film crew in town blew up a car right in front of our school. The road was blocked and guardsmen guarded as we all eagerly waited for the moment that has been etched on my memory ever since. At some point I imagine I'll see it again in a run-down cinema: a real explosion, projected onto the canvas back into reality. This fire, in any case, is taking its time. The tyres have caught; burning plastic drips like lava on the asphalt. I would like to hold my hand underneath to catch one of those glowing drops. I would hold it close to my face, like a shiny beetle. Perhaps I would put it on my tongue and swallow it – but I know what's burning, and don't do it. In our town, there used to be a very active pyrotechnician club that arranged firework displays every three months. In the past, those sparkling artworks used to charm me, but that's over now. Their fire doesn't burn. They are made for fizzling in the air, then nothing but empty shells rain down, and white clouds of smoke hide the night sky, which hangs with its stars over everything. Phony, toy fires, but still, it's hard not to look up at them when they burst. You have to cover your ears and push your head against a wall. People think that I'm afraid, imagine I'm a bedraggled war veteran, reminded by the noise of some bloody combat. But I stink, and my jacket is stiff with dirt, and so no one lays a hand on my shoulder for comfort. Considering that I have kept on the straight and narrow, year in year out, always good at school and going up the ladder for years – the outline of a whole biography, all the way to its respectable end – it's impossible to understand how I became what I am today. Someday I'll sit down and think about it, but for now, there are always new stories coming, and those who look back stay back. For the time being, I say that every town needs a vagabond, someone who is always out on the street and who livens up the nights when people leave town to sleep in their feather beds. And this task was destined for me from the outset, whether I wanted it or not. In the meantime, it satisfies me in the same way that I satisfy it. There's nothing great about it, but it's not nothing either. None of these people, the tiny part of humanity that populates this town, knows anything about me, and yet they sense that I'm there. Every day they pass one of my countless sleeping places, which I visit depending on the weather, day or at night, whenever tiredness overcomes me. They don't look at me and don't want me to come near them, and yet they would miss me if I disappeared. I think I've managed to inscribe myself deeply onto their lives, as a symbol – yes, as a symbol. There are symbols that stand for something, and most symbols are those kinds of symbols. But there must some that stand for nothing, or only a notion, something inexpressible – I'm one of those. I watch people through the large windows of their dining rooms as they stand or sit together and give each other support. Or I mingle with them in the market, when the town festival is on, or at all kinds of celebrations that take place in the name of charity, even once in that exotic mansion, when I was invited too. I tried the appetizers, which stilled my hunger faster than I'd imagined, and I looked around. Slender hands danced to words, or work-worn fingers were hidden in fists, soft lips versus dark rows of teeth interspersed with gold or gaps; I made out a bare, dusty foot

and a pair of glittering patent-leather shoes, a rug from another era, handwoven and bought for a vast sum. Sometimes I engage in a sorting activity, ordering what I see to the left and right. Later, on dark nights, when there is only a faint noise from the town, I keep an inventory and work on my philosophy, sentence by sentence. For I can never manage more than a brief series of thoughts, and my memory seems too poor to ever capture everything at a single glance; so I sort the world into categories. My pretence at being simple-minded – peering over backyard walls, or my indifferent, rigid stare which I fix on the marketplace, the main shopping street or summer fields – might look like it's all for nothing. And in truth, it is no more than a way to pass time. I don't have to know what I'm looking at. I am a symbol and I have this task, which I carry out, sometimes highly focused, sometimes utterly distracted. It is enough for me to keep my eyes open and avoid closed rooms. When I walk through the night, through the windless streets, I do it with the knowledge that I could wake hundreds from their sleep at any moment; I'd just have to scream, break a window, lob a bottle through the air. I'd just have to press their doorbells. They'd wake up and look out into this forlornness, where I embody the last frontier. They'd see me strolling along, notice my odd gait that goes neither up nor down, but resembles an upright crawl. They'd sigh, roll back under their still-warm bedclothes and carry on sleeping like pampered infants. But I don't wake them. Let them remain sunken in their nightmares. And if I come across a bottle that someone has left by the side of the road, then I dash it to pieces against the strut of a bridge or a lamp post. Because I'm not a bottle collector. On the contrary. This name is wrong, a disgrace: whoever gave it to me didn't wish me well. I'm not one of those types who ventures out on summer evening, filled with pride and shame, to gather empty bottles for their deposit. Those industrious rodents who scrape together an extra penny for their honest labour, as they see it. As they skulk in wait for empties, their bottle-addicted eyes, fixed on mouths disgust me. They are symbols too. For every bottle that's drained, they offer a smile. They don't want to beg; they ask for nothing, demand nothing. They don't want to annoy anyone and never, ever be indebted again. They'd prefer not to exist at all. If I could, I'd burn or smash every bottle I found. But it's not possible, I can't waste my eyesight on such things, and I can't destroy the sky or the air below.