

Judith Herrmann

Home

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Judith Herrmann tells the story of a departure: an old world is lost and a new one comes about.

Her daughter is a traveller, on the road far away. In little letters to her ex-husband, she tells him how she's doing in her new life by the sea, in the north. She sets up house, forges cautious friendships, tries love for size, wonders whether she might feel at home here or ought to move on.

Judith Herrmann tells the story of a woman who leaves a great deal behind her, builds resilience and becomes another person in the intense landscape of the coast. She tells a story of remembering. And a story of a moment in which life splits in two, an old world is lost and a new one comes about.

In this new novel, Judith Herrmann admirably recreates the

'dancing, feather-light and yet melancholy tone'

(Uwe Wittstock) that makes her work so unique.

Judith Herrmann was born in Berlin in 1970 and lives there with her family. Her extraordinary debut *Sommerhaus*, später was followed by the short story collection *Nichts als Gespenster*, the five stories in *Alice*, her first novel *Aller Liebe Anfang* and the short stories *Lettipark*. Judith Herrmann's work has become required reading in schools and has been adapted for the silver screen, internationally celebrated, and awarded numerous prizes, including the Kleist Prize and the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize.

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

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[...]

Back then, that summer almost thirty years ago, I lived in West Germany, far away from the water. I had a studio flat on a high-rise estate in a medium-sized town and a job at the cigarette factory. The work was easy; I had to make sure the rod of tobacco ran into the cutter perfectly straight, that was all. The machine did it, actually, it had a sensor that the tobacco chugged past, and if it wasn't straight the machine would stop. (It stopped like someone running into a wall, it stopped with a horrific jolt.) The sensor often didn't work so I stood next to the machine and watched the rod, adjusting it if shifted out of place. From seven to twelve, half an hour's lunch break and then another three hours. I looked away fairly often. I looked over at the cutter, in which the rod was sliced into single cigarettes, from which thousands of cigarettes fell out, all the cigarettes the people out in the city would smoke. Before work. During breaks. After meals. While arguing. While making love and after making love.

Smoke.

The job at the cigarette factory was alright. I kept out of things, or rather – I didn't get worked up about things. I wore ear plugs while the other women didn't; they actually insisted on talking to each other in the midst of the hellish noise on the factory floor. I couldn't understand them because of my ear plugs but I could watch them yelling at each other. Their faces were reddened and shiny, the tendons on their necks stood out, strong and beautiful. They gesticulated; they had precise, curt gestures for fucking and failing, for anger, for the end of something, for triumph. They laughed a lot and pointed at each other, slapped their thighs with laughter and wiped away tears with the backs of their hands. Most of them were quite pretty, despite the shapeless overalls, the fuzzy gauze hairnets, despite the heat on the factory floor that made exhausted creatures out of all of us.

At lunch break, you had to say the word *Mahlzeit*. You had to wish everyone a good lunch: *Mahlzeit*, in the lift, the corridors, the canteen, in the queue for food. I didn't feel

like saying *Mahlzeit* and at some point they noticed, and they ordered me into the shift manager's office.

The shift manager was sitting behind his desk. He rolled back and forth on his chair and looked me up and down, and what he saw didn't interest him very much. He nodded as if he'd known something anyway and all along, gave a bored yawn.

As he yawned, he said: So we all say *Mahlzeit* at lunchtime here.

I said: I don't know what you're talking about.

He said: You know very well what I'm talking about.

Of course I knew. I wasn't intending to stay at the factory, to spend my life there, and I simply couldn't stand the word *Mahlzeit*.

He said, Listen, love, it's very simple. If you're not capable of saying *Mahlzeit*, you're out on your ear.

It wasn't about the word, it was about the rules and about power. I thought for a moment about the sudden *love*, about the temperature in his office, the room in which he killed time; we stared at each other.

Then he let me go.

In the evenings I'd often sit on my balcony on the fifth floor. One of the previous tenants had left their flower boxes behind and there were plants growing in the boxes that I'd never seen before. Delicate green stems with white flowers the size of match tips; I never watered them but they were still there. There was artificial lawn on the floor, a folding table and a single chair, and the view was of the dual carriageway and the petrol station.

I liked that view a lot.

The illuminated blue of the petrol station, the cars pulling in, pulling out, the displays of sad plastic-wrapped bouquets, the sacks of barbecue charcoal outside the door. The way people got out of the cars and filled them up, daydreaming as they watched the digital numbers on the petrol pumps rattle round, the way they went inside and flicked through the newspapers, bought beer, chocolate and mints. I imagined all these people were going on a long journey, filling their petrol tanks, on a really long drive, people passing through; ask them for directions and they shrug and say: Oh, I'm not from round here, I don't know my way around. Sorry.

I'd sit on the balcony on the only chair, my feet on the table, smoking cigarettes from the factory, and I'd tap the ash over the edge and drop the butt in a Coke can; I smoked a lot back then. It was very hot that summer and I'd sit outside in my underwear until it got late and dark at last. The lights went on in the flats one by one, the headlamps of the cars on the dual carriageway flared up, the sun was gone, the heat remained. The heat wouldn't abate; it hung between the buildings, static. I got into the habit of going down to the petrol station for an ice cream. I'd put on a sundress and flip-flops, take my keys and some change and walk down, never taking the lift, I'd walk down the stuffy, dirty stairs, and I'd never turn the light on in the stairwell. It was even hotter outside, the asphalt soft from the heat, and all the windows were open, you could hear the TVs, the arguments, the slamming of doors. The cars inched up to the petrol pumps in slow motion, the drivers filling them up like sleepwalkers. The entrance opened automatically and it was bright and cool inside. The radio was always on. I'd slide the ice cream freezer open and stand in front of the open chest as long as possible, and then I'd take a Moscow ice cream. Only ever a Moscow ice cream, never any other kind, but still I'd pretend every time that I couldn't make my mind up. The woman behind the counter was the same age as I am now. Amazingly enough, she'd be reading a book, and she'd put it aside when she had to serve people, in an extremely reluctant way; that impressed me. It was the same woman night after night and we didn't exchange one word of conversation all summer.

On the evening I wanted to write about, there were two people at the till buying petrol and a whole load of crisps, liquorice and tobacco. I'd thought about waiting by the open ice cream freezer, my arms dunked in its dry cold up to the elbows, but in the end, I slid it closed and joined the queue. The door swished open and an old man came in. He was wearing a plain but good black suit, his hair was snow white, his face as weathered as wood; he looked like he'd come from a state funeral. I saw him coming in out of the corner of my eye and he stood right behind me and proceeded to stare at a spot between my bare shoulder blades. I could feel his eyes on me and shifted forward a step. He waited a moment, then he touched my elbow and I turned around.

You're short, he said. Just right for me.

I clearly recall his voice, very quiet, quite high for an old man and slightly gruff. Perhaps he spoke with a slight southern accent. Let me emphasize that what he said

didn't sound suggestive. It wasn't obscene. It was just strange, it made no sense. I wasn't short. I'm not short now and I wasn't then, either, I'm five foot seven. Is that short? No, and I told him so.

He raised both hands, his palms turned to me, their skin calloused and clean.

No, not really, of course not. You're not short. You're perfectly normal. But you're short enough for my trick. You've got the right feet, your shoulders are narrow. I need a new assistant. You look like the right woman for the job.

That was what he said.

I said: The right woman for what job?

I didn't mean to ask but I did ask; I didn't mean to have a conversation with him, but before I knew what was happening we were having one.

He said: For my box. The girl sawn in half. An assistant to saw in half. I'm a magician.

The people with the crisps, beer and tobacco had disappeared all of a sudden, simply vanished into thin air, and the woman behind the counter stared at us and said: Next, please. Jeez. Next. It's your turn. One Moscow ice cream, anything else?

I said: No thanks. Sorry. Nothing else, that's all.

I paid for my ice cream. The old man stayed behind me, sticking close to me, extremely persistent.

He said: May I walk a little way with you?

Don't you have to pay first?

Oh no, I didn't get any petrol. I saw you through the window, I was walking past and I spotted you. That's why I came in.

The woman behind the counter looked exactly above our heads. Her gaze revealed nothing; she couldn't help me, in any case. She opened up her book and turned away from us, showed us her right shoulder, her closed-off reader's profile, and so we went outside together. He walked fast for an old man, nimble, like a dancer; he was shorter than me, his back slightly hunched, and he didn't look like a magician.

I said: Okay. You can't walk with me, absolutely not.

He said: Fine. But would you think about it? It's very easy. All you have to do is lie down in a box, I saw you in half – just for show – and then I put you back together again. We can try it out. Come and visit me, we'll try it out.

He acted out everything he said with his hands, the box, the sawing, putting me back together. I knew the woman sawn in half trick, I'd seen it on TV. It was an ancient trick and everyone knew how it worked.

I said: Oh, I'm not sure.

He said: Yes, I understand. Don't worry. My wife will be there. She'll keep an eye out, nothing will happen. All you have to do is lie down. You might have to wear a red dress. It's really anything but difficult.

I didn't reply, and he looked past me at the illuminated windows of the tall buildings and gave a smile, patient and gentle. His suit was so conspicuously clean, neatly ironed, probably made-to-measure; he wore pointed snakeskin shoes and the shoes were the only suspicious thing about him; they were extravagant and also they were dusty.

He put his hands in his pockets; he'd showed me everything now.

He clearly wasn't the slightest bit warm.

He made a composed impression.

He said: Think about it. Take your time. And then come and visit us. Number seven, Steinstrasse. We're always at home, really.

I said: I'll think about it.

I turned around and walked off, leaving him standing. I didn't go over to my house, I walked in the other direction, thinking he really didn't need to know where I lived. I unwrapped my Moscow ice cream but it had almost melted by that point, dripping off the paper, and I threw it away.

I thought about it for a week. I stood at my machine for eight hours a day for a week and thought about it. I sat on my balcony until long after midnight and smoked even more cigarettes than usual and thought about it; thinking about it was incredibly hard work. After seven days I gave up and looked up Steinstrasse on the map. He lived at the very far end of town; it wasn't clear what he'd been doing in my neighbourhood, why he'd been walking around in his pressed suit and his snakeskin shoes. It took me a while to work out what to wear; I had a red dress and a blue dress at the time and I put on the red one first and then I took it off again and went for the blue one. I combed my hair, stood in front of the mirror for a while, I sat down at the kitchen table, I got up again and

went out. I went out because I didn't want to think any more about whether to go out or not.

I had to take a bus, then another one, walk a good way along a road lined with bungalows, bungalows behind white-painted fences with porch swings on their patios, azaleas in clay pots under woven straw awnings, sprinklers on neatly mown lawns, their water hazed like rainbows. In the open garages, cars were parked beside expertly piled wood, the paths sprinkled with gravel. The people who lived here were neither poor nor rich, they simply owned something, and I thought: I don't own anything. I had my bag with me, sure, and in my bag were my purse, my keys, my cigarettes, my lighter, but that was all. Back then that was all I needed, or I assumed I needed nothing more than that. I assumed I could have left that medium-sized city for another at any time.

The magician's bungalow was the last one in the road; it looked no different to the others. Behind the bungalow, the hills set in, the road ended and became a beaten track that vanished between gorse shrubs. No car in the garage. No wood. In the garden were trees with dark leaves, almost black. The shutters were down outside the windows, probably to keep out the heat. I stood around outside the house, perhaps thinking about changing my mind; maybe I hoped there'd be nobody at home, in the end. But then the door opened and he came out. The magician came out, in his snakeskin shoes, his suit trousers and a vest. He had seen me. He came towards me with his arms wide, clearly pleased.

Do come in. Do come in! You've thought it over, that's wonderful. It's really great. You've decided. You've made me happy.

And so I went in.

How could I have resisted?
