

ANGELIKA KLÜSSENDORF

The Thirty-Fourth of September

A penetrating masterpiece about the age of rage

ABOUT THE BOOK

A village in East Germany: Walter, a man with an anger problem, is killed on New Year's Eve by Hilde, his own wife. Yet shortly before meeting his end, he has a rush of gentleness and affection towards her. Cut to a cemetery: the dead are studying the living. Walter becomes the village chronicler, condemned to record the fates of its inhabitants. And he ponders the question why. What was the reason for Hilde's act? Was it hate or compassion?

The Thirty-Fourth of September is a moving novel that probes the abysses of our existence, painting a painfully recognisable picture of humanity. Angelika Klüssendorf writes with great power, precision and a hefty dose of black humour.

- A village as a microcosm for society – a great piece of writing with a strong contemporary relevance
- "Klüssendorf's art is the avoidance of any artificiality."
DER SPIEGEL

ANGELIKA
KLÜSSENDORF
VIERUND-
DREIßIGSTER
SEPTEMBER

Roman

PIPER



Piper Hardcover
September 2021
224 pages
Sample translation available
World Rights available

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angelika Klüssendorf has published several volumes of short stories along with the novel **Life is Like That** and the popular and critically acclaimed trilogy of novels **The Girl, April** and **Years Later**, all of which were nominated - and in two cases shortlisted - for the German Book Prize. Her latest award to date is the Marie Luise Kaschnitz Prize (2019).

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PIPER

Angelika Klüssendorf

The Thirty-Fourth of September

A Novel

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Sample translation by Charlotte Collins

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Hilde

Look at the flowers, she wanted to say, but didn't. Frost had patterned the window with icy blooms. She breathed on the glass until she could see through. The streetlamps threw splinters of light; it was six in the morning, and the village green lay still and silent. Silence like the end of the world. Only a pigeon hopping along the fence; it was missing a foot, and looked dishevelled and docile, as if waiting for a goshawk.

She heard Walter call out: Hilde, have you seen my gloves?

Still, after more than forty years of marriage, she had not got used to him asking her where things were, sometimes right before his eyes, but she stayed calm.

Here, she said, handing him the gloves, don't forget the doctor's appointment, but he had already gone out of the door. She followed him into the garden. Walter turned to her, his breath rising in little clouds.

Don't forget the doctor's appointment.

He nodded, took the moped out of the shed and rode off.

In the kitchen she loaded the dishwasher, opened the window and exhaled deeply. The pale moon up above, as if stuck onto the sky. She heard the first cars starting up. The woman who ran Mill Farm was waiting at the bus stop. The author was walking her dog towards the woods. She usually got up early, but there were also times when she didn't leave the house until midday, looking as dishevelled as the footless pigeon. Hilde wasn't sure whether she liked the author. Empty wine bottles lay scattered around her overgrown garden. Then there was the loud music, often into the early hours of the morning, and her boyfriend's drumming. She just called him The Drummer. He had turned up last summer, holding a yellow flower, and they had been a couple ever since. Hilde didn't know what work he did, but he drummed whenever he felt like it. A tall, good-looking man, early fifties, eyes like a husky.

They were the only ones in the waiting room. Dr Kies came down the corridor and nodded to her. He looked serious. He was really a specialist in orthopaedics, and was only her general practitioner because, until she retired, Hilde had been his assistant.

Walter had two very obvious lumps on his forehead, one on the left and one on the right, just under the skin; they were called lipomas, consisted of fatty tissue, and were usually harmless. When she was angry with him she would think: old devil. Today she felt sorry for him. Walter didn't like doctors. It had taken her a long time to persuade him, and she had used the lipomas as an excuse, but what was really worrying her were his raging headaches, dizziness, and the numbness in his hands. An MRI had been done the previous week, and yesterday Dr Kies had called about the results.

Outside the doctor's surgery, the silence was broken by a bang. In four weeks it would be New Year. During the last one, their letterbox had been ripped apart by firecrackers. Hilde looked at the paintings on the wall. When she had been the doctor's assistant, she had often stood in front of them and tried to interpret the black lines and crosses. She had seen anger and despair in them. Rosie, the old woman who lived in the woods, stepped out of the consulting room. Rosie nodded to her and sighed. Hilde thought she looked confused and lonely. Walter sat hunched over on his chair, head between his shoulders; he was asleep, or pretending to be. From one breath to the next, Hilde realized that she had to speak to Dr Kies alone. They knew each other well; in his view, there were certain jobs men were able to do better than women and vice versa, while she believed that warm-heartedness and caring for people were the preserve of women.

Hilde closed the door behind her. Dr Kies, standing at the window, looked at her in surprise. Where's your husband?

She tried to explain to him that Walter would never be able to cope with a bad result.

Dr Kies shook his head. You know I have to –

Nonsense, she interrupted, sit down. I want to hear everything.

As he spoke, she tried to recall when it was that his grey hair had gone completely white. Glioblastoma, a large tumour, he said, inoperable, fast-growing, cerebral oedema already far advanced – hairs sprouted from his nose like little paintbrushes – statistically speaking...

She waved away the statistics. Dr Kies couldn't claim all the wisdom for himself; he too was a man, one who was acquiring a paunch and wide hips and whose hands trembled slightly.

The world will keep on turning, she said, with or without statistics, and no chemo, of course.

She bought the painkillers the next day. Walter listened to her explanations without question; he didn't seem suspicious, and, remarkably, bore the doctor no ill will.

Three weeks after the diagnosis, Walter stumbled while walking, saw his dog Yuri, who had died twenty years earlier, beside him, confused the attic with the cellar. She looked at him suspiciously when he greeted her amiably in the mornings. He even invited her to the Golden Ox, and offered her the window seat of his own accord. Who was this person sitting in his head, looking out at her?

What on earth is wrong with him? she asked the doctor.

A personality change, Dr Kies explained. It happens.

Lifelong anger, gone, just like that?

Dr Kies nodded, and sneezed powerfully without holding his hand in front of his nose. Tiny droplets sped through the air. We should talk about death, he said. Your husband doesn't have long.

That's it? she asked.

He laughed. That's it.

The temperature in the room seemed to change. Dr Kies sat behind his desk, legs wide apart, slurping his coffee. Far too late for chemo, he said.

It sounded to her as if he were talking about an unsuccessful invitation to dance, expressed years ago, claimed only now, far too late.

Hilde took the path through the woods that ended at the marshy pond, which reminded her of an old depiction of the Cretaceous Period. Bare branches projected into the icy landscape; the swamp lay buried beneath a thick layer of snow. A bridge led across to Rosie's house; a stream flowed past her property, and this too was frozen. Crows sped through the air; shots could be heard beyond the trees. She turned back. Dusk was falling as she reached the village. The light from the streetlamps fell onto the author's garden. She saw the woman standing in front of the heap of firewood and heard her talking to herself.

Hello, neighbour, she called out.

The author turned, as if she had been expecting her. What are you doing for New Year?

Same as usual, Hilde replied.

Why don't you come to us? My boyfriend and his band are giving a concert. We could do with some more guests.

Oh, thank you, she replied, surprised by the offer, and looked at the author more closely. She was wearing a dressing gown and appeared tired. Is everything all right?

Stabbing headache, said the author. One of the characters in my novel has got one, and the pain's transferred itself to me. It happens when you're writing.

As they bade each other goodbye, Hilde was oddly touched. She was astonished by the friendly invitation. And there was the woman's talking to herself, and her openness. How she would have liked to tell the author that she was living out her dream, or even to show her one of her own poems.

At home there was a bunch of flowers by the table – real roses. Walter smiled at her and asked about her day.

She told him about the encounter with the author.

Perhaps she's lost her marbles, he said.

Not her, thought Hilde.

They're looking for someone in the forestry department.

Yes, so? She shrugged.

What about the boy, Hans? He wanted to work there, didn't he?

Hilde thought she had misheard. That had been years ago, and Walter had hated the boy, had shaken with fury if she so much as said his name. His affability now made her want to scream. Had he forgotten everything? What had become of his dry, dusty heart, his spitefulness?

These days Hilde only wanted to walk and walk, in the woods, across the fields, anywhere but home. The snowflakes fell thickly, swallowing all sound. With each step her boots sank deeper into the snow; she spotted the tracks of animals, and yet she kept walking, couldn't stop. Should she allow herself to be buried by all this whiteness, here in the cotton-wool silence? She stood still for a while, breathing deeply. In the clearing she saw a fox. It shot out of the snow, stretched its reddish body, legs far out in front, twirled through the air, spun around once, twice, as if it could hear a dance tune. A rough gust of air stroked her face. The fox had vanished, and it had stopped snowing.

Walter talked about friends from his schooldays as if he had said goodbye to them only yesterday. He said he was going camping with them, on the Baltic coast, with the moped.

He stood before her and said: I'm hung over, I drank too much yesterday.

Who with?

Frieder, he said, we were celebrating, he's passed his driving test, it was quite an evening.

That was years ago, she said.

Possibly. He sounded thoughtful.

You're old.

But we're at home.

Who's Frieder?

Don't you know him? His astonishment sounded real to her.

Walter dug out old photos. What an exciting life we had, he said, and showed her an old snapshot, not of Frieder. The two of them were standing with the other villagers in front of Mill Farm, covered in soot, and it was true, there was something like happiness in their faces.

Firecrackers kept exploding. The animals in the village were going crazy; even above the stormy wind you could hear Jackson's screams and the frantic barking of dogs. The snowdrifts were banked up over cellar windows.

Walter had asked for potato pancakes with quark; he only wanted to eat sweet things these days, and it had got to the stage where Hilde would serve him chocolate cake and tinned peaches before he had a chance to think of it, just so she wouldn't have to hear his friendly, beseeching voice.

May I watch you cook? he asked.

Do what you want.

I remember our wedding, he said, we should celebrate it again, throw a big party.

No, I definitely don't want to do that.

We had bad weather back then, but we were over the moon.

I have no idea what you're talking about. She had not, she well knew, been over the moon.

We could move to the countryside.

Where are we living if not the countryside?

Get a cat?

You're allergic to cats. Have a sherry, she said, and poured him a large glass.

We could watch an animal documentary, she added, in a more conciliatory tone.

The Punch Bowl? he offered.

She nodded, relieved at his suggestion, though not at all pleased; she had never liked the film. She raised her glass to him.

Walter finished his sherry and rocked back and forth, yawning.

Why don't you go to bed? Have a New Year's Eve sleep.

I really am very tired. He heaved himself out of his chair. She heard his laboured breathing as he headed to the bedroom, dragging his feet. Have you got everything? she called after him.

Everything I need.

She sighed, silently at first, then a second time out loud; she inspected the kitchen wall, which was in need of a fresh coat of paint.

Walter hadn't pulled up the blankets; he was breathing heavily. His feet were large and bony; he turned them out when he walked. He looked exhausted. She thought: It must cost him a lot of energy, this cheerfulness. He had become a friendly old man. She covered him with the blankets, stroked his hair, tried to call to mind the memory of a feeling for him, but nothing came. He began to snore, short, tremulous sounds. She could have used the rifle, but opted for the axe. Hilde brought it hurtling down onto his head as if she were splitting a log.

She had imagined that she would look different afterwards. She stepped out of the shower cabinet, stood in front of the mirror and turned her head to the right, to the left; everything the same as always. The temptation to lie down beside Walter and not get up was brief.

She opened the window and snowflakes whirled in. I won't linger over memories, she said out loud to the room, before closing the door behind her.

Outside on the road she battled against the wind and snow, and it occurred to her that Walter might freeze. She resisted the impulse to go back and check on him.

The author's house had once been a barn. Now the windows were brightly lit, cars were parked in the garden, and when she entered, it was warm and cosy. People were standing in the hall, chatting and smoking. She went into the big living room where the walls were full of books and paintings; a blood-red roof arched overhead, two

pillars in the middle. A fire in the hearth, beside it the footless pigeon in a box, sitting quietly on the ground and not looking at all dishevelled any more. Hilde put down the box of chocolates and found Dr Kies in conversation with the author. His expression suggested he didn't know what he was doing here. The Drummer began a solo performance; people clapped and whistled. A chaos of bottles, bowls and plates on the long table. Hilde strolled through the room; for a moment she felt a trembling in her legs, got herself a glass of wine and sat down on the sofa.

Dr Kies came over to her and started talking. She let him top up her glass and didn't understand what he was trying to say to her. She wondered why men his age thrust their paunch before them as if it had been earned by a life of heroism. She noticed perspiration on his forehead. Where's your wife, she interrupted, I can't see her.

With her head in the clouds. And Walter?

He's asleep, she said.

How is he?

I think his heart's broken.

Now, now, now, he said, patting her hand, don't despair.

She realized, to her surprise, that she felt at ease. The author's dachshund placed its paw on her shoe. She gave the dog a piece of bread and it whimpered happily.

Dr Kies went on talking; his voice spiralled upwards, sounding defiant, over-excited. She imagined herself singeing his nose hairs with a jet flame, and laughed.

What? he asked, and showed her his dirty hands. She realized he was talking about his paintings. It was important to him, he said, to amaze the art world with the only colour worthy of consideration: black, everything had to be black. He paused; his gaze shifted from her to Roller-Skate Girl. Helen glided through the room, and the fire in the hearth seemed to flare up. Even her bones must be beautiful, Hilde thought; the girl had the legs of a foal. She felt a sudden impulse to hug her. Until now she had been jealous of her youth and beauty. It briefly crossed her mind to wonder whether this change of heart had something to do with Walter's death.

When the organic farmer asked Hilde to dance, she followed him without hesitation.

Dr Kies is insufferable at the moment, said Wolfgang, he does nothing but blather on about his paintings.

How are things on the farm? she asked.

A sow's given birth, you should come round sometime and look at the piglets.

She moved slowly. I'm rusty, it's been a long time since I danced.

This is just my kind of music, said Wolfgang, pointing to the band. Hilde looked over at them. The guitarist had dyed his hair blue; the singer seemed to be dreaming with his eyes open, his voice rough and loud. She could feel her birthmark burning, observed everything with heightened attention. Wolfgang's style of dancing took some getting used to; he sprang to left and right, moving his arms and hands as if he were winding a ball of wool. He was wearing a bright yellow shirt and a necklace of animals' teeth.

What animal? she asked.

Wolf's teeth, they're magic.

The singer's voice grew louder, the guitarist strummed harder, the Drummer twirled his sticks, as if they had all been electrified.

During a break in the music she told Wolfgang about the dancing fox in the clearing.

When was that? he asked.

She told him the day, and he laughed. That was no dancing fox, he said, I shot it.

It's dead?

Wolfgang nodded.

I've never seen anything so beautiful, she said.

The new year had begun some time ago. Hilde had danced with everyone, even the Drummer. She'd made him laugh. Astonishing that she was capable of such a thing. Now, though, she was starting to feel tired. She said her goodbyes.

Be careful, there's a storm outside, said the author.

The icy wind was so strong she could barely move from the spot. Thunder and lightning were making windowpanes vibrate. Gusts of wind pushed Hilde up against a garden fence. Amid the persistent roaring, a shower of hail came down, followed by a snowstorm; within minutes the snow was ankle-deep. She struggled on, one step at a time. It was only when she reached the village boundary that she stopped, and saw her footprints behind her vanishing into whiteness.

Walter

The new year was greeted by a storm bearing my name. Cellars were flooded, ground floors under water, roofs blown away. The electricity was cut off, trees lay uprooted across roads and in the fields. Was that why my death went undiscovered for days? The windows of our house were open. Roller-Skate Girl was the first to realize something must be wrong. She was the one who found me. The police and forensics specialists arrived. Our house was even on the television news. Journalists came and intruded everywhere. The question of who had last seen Hilde, the why, for what reason.

Wolfgang is still going around in a tizzy, instigating searches and questioning everyone.

How strange to be a guest at one's own funeral.

There is a church service. On my death certificate, under 'Religion', it says 'Evangelical'. The funeral service is in the stone church on the village green, a lovely building, covered in ivy; inside it is ice-cold, minus two degrees. Every seat is occupied; people have even come from neighbouring villages, some are standing squashed together in the porch.

There they are, my freezing mourners, curious, not just to hear the pastor's speech. She fixes her gaze on the ceiling; no idea who she expects to see there. Leo, the Panzer boy, is giggling in the front row beside his mother, who owns Mill Farm. Wolfgang is looking around suspiciously, as if the murder had occurred right here. Dr Kies is sitting like an automaton in one of the middle rows, next to his wife. Branka is holding her hand in front of her mouth to hide her laughter.

The pastor positions herself directly in front of the dead people – who are also there, of course, but more of that later. She greets the congregation with a serious, almost toneless voice and begins: *In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.* The mourners talk among themselves or glance at the door, as if at any moment Hilde might come strolling in and explain to them what they want to know. The author has even brought a notepad.

Who killed me? Where is Hilde? The search for her has proved fruitless; she is still registered as missing. As the pastor starts to speak about me – he died too early, unexpectedly snatched away – Heinrich puffs his boozy breath down Bipolar Man's

neck. Hans has a ponytail and is wearing headphones; without the wheelchair, he and his prosthesis occupy an entire pew, semi-recumbent and swigging from his hipflask. He's here without his mother, Fat Hubert; they say she can't get through the door any more. Doris, the local council representative, is neatly dressed, as always, and blows her nose loudly. Roller-Skate Girl whispers furtively with Rosie. Iron Alex is late.

The pastor finishes her speech, thanks the congregation for donations; the collection will go towards repairing one of the church doors.

On leaving the church, the wheat is separated from the chaff: a small group accompanies the coffin, but the majority follow Branka straight to the Golden Ox. The funeral is a good excuse for a midday beer.

The coffin is lined with draped fabric, like a baby's bassinet. Over the shroud – a gift from the local council representative – I am wearing my old suit. There is no gravestone yet. Dr Kies's wife stands so close to the grave it looks as if she wants to throw herself in. Earth thuds onto the coffin lid. I bid farewell to my mortal remains. The other dead look on, bored – what a cheap spectacle, their faces say. How can you tell the dead from the living? The dead don't get out of the way of the bus. Gerda Engel, Hilde's mother, waves to me. I'll go and talk to her later.

Hilde again

The first time she saw Walter, there was a solar eclipse. She was standing amid the crowd of onlookers, who were wearing home-made sunglasses, while she was just shading her eyes with her hand. You can go blind like that, the man beside her said. He lent her his sunglasses and they got talking. It turned out that they had met once before. He had brought an injured colleague to see Dr Kies – and she had been there. Hilde didn't recall, but acted as if it were possible. There's no mistaking you, he said, tapping himself on the cheek, right where her birthmark was. He lived just three villages away and had spent his summer holidays in her village, with Lehmann, the farmer. Hilde remembered: her mother had talked about the farmer.

When she met Walter, her mother was in hospital because one of her heart sacs was calcified, a *constrictio pericardii*, also known as armoured heart. Just a few hours after the operation she appeared to be on top form, arguing with the woman in the next bed. Gerda Engel described herself as a tough cookie. Until ten years earlier, she had been a shepherdess, then she was hit by a bus while recovering a dead sheep and her leg had been stiff ever since. She found it hard, not being able to work any more, and the accidents became more frequent. She fell, broke her wrist, her shoulder, suffered from chronic pain and osteoarthritis. This went on for years, until the armoured heart left her barely enough air to breathe. Hilde was then thirty-six.

At the hospital, Walter and her mother played cards, talked about newborn lambs and the best grazing spots: love of their work was something they had in common. Gerda Engel seemed born to be a shepherdess; Walter was a huntsman through and through. He was sixteen years older than Hilde; sitting in the kitchen with the two of them, her mother's gaze placid, Walter's turned towards her, she felt safe. When Gerda Engel spoke of marriage he immediately agreed, and Hilde just nodded, as if returning a casual greeting.

Walter purchased the only house for sale in her village, a stone's throw from Dr Kies.

The wedding was unspectacular. They took the bus into town. Rain; two passers-by as witnesses. The registrar punctuated her speech with emphatic jerks of her head, and none of her words were of love.

Later, Hilde often wondered why she had been so passive. She had allowed herself to be picked up like a stone at the side of the road. She simply hadn't managed to say no. Walter's lipomas either side of his forehead had been just the merest hint of a lump. Was it his dependability, his bleating laugh, that she had fallen in love with? Had she in fact been in love with him at all? She didn't know, and the *why* was not yet ticking like a time bomb in her breast.

Hilde had never liked houses like this one. Grey plaster decorated with sgraffito, wood-panelled interior. When they moved in, she tried to redecorate the rooms. Bright curtains, art prints on the walls: Monet, Klee. She herself had painted a copy of Kirchner's *Female Artist*. It seemed ages ago that she had been part of the art group. Back then, she had felt as if she were the young girl in the picture, as if she were painting herself. Poems, though, were what was really close to her heart. Ever since she was a child she had written poetry and short stories. She had been part of the circle of working-class writers; one of her sonnets had even been published in a literary journal. She had considered writing seriously, but had reckoned without her mother, who firmly talked her out of the idea. Writing was something for dreamers, her mother had said; she should keep a clear head and do something useful. Hilde became a doctor's assistant. And started reading intensively. Twice a week she went into town and borrowed books from the library.

The first year in the new house passed her by as if she were not there. In spring she planted fruit trees, ornamental bushes and shrubs, and waited for the leaves of the golden currant to turn red in September and the lilac to burst into bloom the following spring. In May she heard the frogs croaking on the village green. She planted larches and fir trees, only holding back when it came to flowers. Walter didn't like flowers. He insistently drew her attention to plants that had been attacked by pests, and got angry when she told him caterpillars were food for young birds.

Although her mother lived at the end of the village, they hardly saw each other. Walter did not keep up the card-playing; in so many ways those long-ago weeks felt like part of another life.

When the Wall fell, the pear tree bore fruit for the first time. There was a curious atmosphere in the village; for weeks, everyone stood around in the street debating the

pros and cons of the fallen Wall, exchanging information about trips and cheap offers in the *West*. Half the village still celebrated New Year together. A hot summer followed, but it felt as if it wasn't on account of the heat that the streets were so quiet. No pig was slaughtered for the harvest festival that year. Two years later a children's playground was built, although there were no children.

Walter had become an angry man, and his anger seemed to have gathered in his lipomas, now two prodigious lumps projecting to a point. He was a forestry management foreman; there were redundancies, jobs were axed. Walter's colleagues started acting differently, and he often wondered if he had been insulted. His customary meticulousness was suddenly viewed as pedantry; the opening of the border bothered him more than he admitted. He held on to his party membership book, but showed no interest in remaining a member. I was deceived, he said, as if he took every change personally.

Hilde didn't want to see it. She didn't want to see *him*. He had described her miscarriage as 'discharge'. You weren't even four months pregnant; anyway, you're much too old, don't make such a fuss: those were his words. She felt hollowed out, as if a cold wind were blowing through her insides. She was in her early forties, and it was only when the bleeding started that she realized she had wanted the child. After she lost it she had pain in her abdomen, but didn't take sick leave; she was eager to get out of the house again.

When the chaffinch's noisy courtship songs fell silent, she watched the female bringing home roots, grasses and feathers for her nest. It built its nest in the fork of a maple tree, and soon Hilde could see the fledglings. At first they just sat there, beaks agape, as if they wanted to swallow the world. After their first attempts at flight they fluttered back and forth and, just a short while later, the wind barely in their feathers, they flew away for good. One summer passed, and another, and the next.

Hilde and Walter were eating dinner when Doris, the local council representative, ran past their window shouting: Come and help, there's a fire! Lightning had struck the old walnut tree at Mill Farm, which had fallen onto the mill and set it alight.

Walter threw down his bread onto his plate and ran out; she could barely keep up with him. Mill Farm was lit up by the blaze, which had turned it into a lurid backdrop;

the burning flames drowned out all other sounds. Walter plunged into the thick of things and astonished her with his attentiveness. He instructed the other villagers to form a chain and to stay calm as the sparks flew around them. The volunteer fire brigade arrived without their commander. Heinrich was lying drunk in bed; they hadn't been able to wake him. And then, miracle of miracles, the clouds parted and heavy drops of water slammed through the burnt haze into the ground. The rain raged as the fire had done moments earlier. When the last of the flames had been extinguished, everyone stood there soaked to the skin, their faces covered in soot. Smoke hung like a bell jar over the yard. Branka passed around a bottle of brandy. The owner of Mill Farm, Nelli Panzer, was clinging to her Leo as if she might fall apart at any moment. He was her younger boy; the elder had gone to the graveyard years ago.

Wolfgang, the organic farmer and unofficial village policeman, immediately started talking about arson, but no one really took him seriously.

That rain was a miracle, said Branka.

No one's going to believe us, said Leo; and this *us*, Hilde thought later, was like a glimmer of hope amid the spinning flakes of ash. The mill had stood unused for years; the fire had spared house, barns and livestock. Only thin columns of smoke were still coiling up. The fire brigade drove off again, honking loudly outside Heinrich's window. The local council representative invited Nelli and her boy to spend the night in the parish hall.

We have to see to the animals, said Nelli Panzer, and now they all heard it: Jackson, the old wild boar, grunting piteously.

Hilde got up before daybreak and started cleaning. Soot had forced its way in through the cracks in the house. She cleaned cupboards, polished windows, waxed the stairs, then stood back, satisfied, to admire her work. When Walter entered the kitchen, he switched on the radio. Let's see whether they mention it.

That could have been us, said Hilde.

For the next few days she felt as if she were borne on a fresh breeze. They had escaped; the thought touched her with a sense of quiet happiness. They drank wine at dinner, walked together to the scene of the incident; the villagers talked among themselves, exchanged wise old sayings, and a guilty party was soon identified: Heinrich had slept through the deployment.

The weather report had forecast the storm, and the heatwave beforehand, it was obvious what would happen, said Branka.

But not to our commander, cried Wolfgang, he was in bed, tight as a tick.

Bipolar Man, who lived next door to Heinrich, tapped his forehead contemptuously. Do you know what he told me? That he had an upset stomach.

Patches of tar on the road had split open in the heat of the past few weeks, grass and weeds withered. Such silence. Hilde would have liked to write a letter describing it all, but to whom? Her former friends had no place in her current life. Her husband was not a letter writer, and he didn't have any friends in any case, as far as she knew. The outrage over Heinrich died down; daily life settled back into its customary routine. Only Walter was unable to let it go; it was as if he wanted to preserve the accident at Mill Farm.

There must be consequences, he said.

What do you mean by that? she asked.

One misfortune seldom comes alone. We need to bring fire prevention in the village up to scratch again. We should hold a meeting. No one takes care of anything any more, said Walter. He met up with Wolfgang, who spent days creeping about the village gathering information that might confirm his suspicion that a crime had taken place. The organic farmer even wanted to inspect the police report, but was not permitted to do so. It had not been arson, the police said tersely. Eventually Walter had had enough.

Now, though, when Hilde wanted to pass him his beloved crossword puzzle, he waved it away: too wound up. Instead, he leafed through to the death notices and calculated how many years of life separated him from those who had died. I've got thirteen years on him, he said of a former colleague, and he was a vegetarian. From then on, he wanted to eat meat more often.

Hilde decided to have swimming lessons. The bus to town left three times a day, and the journey took forty-five minutes. She liked to leave the villages and countryside behind, dream of what might be possible. She was the oldest in the class; they were almost all children apart from her and two teenage girls. She had thought she would be embarrassed by her body, which often seemed useless to her. Instead, it gave her pleasure to move about in the water; she joked with the children and scrounged

cigarettes off one of the girls, which she smoked when she deliberately missed the bus and wandered around the streets. This was how she found out about a language course at the adult education centre: Chukchi, indigenous to the north-eastern tip of the Russian Far East. An endangered language: the course was free. She got hold of all the books by the Chukchi Yuri Rytkeu and followed him on his journeys. This course also gave her pleasure; she learned fast, and on the way home she lost herself in dreams that no longer had anything to do with her life. When that course finished, Hilde learned to chop wood.

One Sunday, when they drove to the lake and she wanted to show Walter her new swimming skills, he followed her into the water wearing flipflops.

I thought we were going to swim together, she said.

Don't think so much, he said.

Hilde heard the collision and ran out, saw the motorbike, shrouded in blue smoke, in front of the old chestnut tree on the village green, and, as she drew closer, the young man lying twisted alongside. The engine was buzzing like a distant swarm of hornets; it was a few seconds before she saw the man's leg, crushed and drenched in blood. She ran into the house, called the emergency services, hunted for the first-aid kit. When she returned, several villagers were standing around the scene of the accident. She bent over the casualty, could not discern any breathing, palpated his ribcage, turned him on his side. It was Hans, Fat Hubert's son. She bound a tourniquet around his thigh – as if on automatic pilot, she thought later. She felt the young man's warmth through his clothes, and still no breath. He was presumably extremely drunk, even at this early hour.

One week and several blood transfusions later he was moved out of intensive care. Two ribs had pierced his right lung, and they had had to amputate his left leg below the knee. His head was the only bit of him that seemed to be undamaged, although he had been riding without a helmet. Hilde took the bus into town, then the tram to the hospital. She had a driving licence, but she hadn't driven since she got married. Walter didn't want her to.

No sooner had she entered his hospital room than Hans began to speak. You saved my life, he cried. I'd be dead now without your help.

To her surprise, Hilde started to cry. Oh God, she said, I didn't mean to do that. She found a handkerchief in her jacket and blew her nose. He was twenty; he had

wide-set eyes, azure blue irises, tiny pupils, and she thought they had a look in them of tremendous loneliness. She had never exchanged a word with him before; a brief nod when she passed him in the village, that was all.

On her next visit, she said: You had a lucky escape; you were riding without a helmet, and all you've got is concussion.

If that's what you think, he said. But someone could at least have saved my leg.

Hilde wasn't sure whether he meant her or the doctors. He was no longer quite as euphoric about getting out of it alive.

She had brought him fruit, and a book: *Huckleberry Finn*.

Please will you read it to me, he asked.

The midday sun shone through the window. Hilde heard the blood rushing in her ears.

I'd like to be Tom Sawyer, said Hans, before falling asleep.

The next day he started using the informal form of address. You've got to do something, he told her. I don't want a prosthesis.

With an artificial leg you'll be able to walk, maybe even ride a motorbike again, she replied.

I'll be the scum of the earth with a bloody prosthesis, that's what.

If he were fifty or sixty, she thought, the boy would be right, but his life was only just beginning. She couldn't possibly say that to him, though. Her comfort was brief; she had only been able to take a short time off work, Dr Kies was already waiting.

When she got home in the evening, Walter would look pointedly at the clock. For months he had only been working half days in the forestry department. Since the fall of the Wall, people worked sloppily, he said, and he couldn't sort it out *all on his own*. Walter was in battle mode, but didn't know who to fight. And now there was this boy from the accident, *allhisownfault*; he chewed the phrase before spitting it out: *Allhisownfault*.

His name is Hans, she said.

Walter looked at her differently now, as if she were a threat, a thorn he might tread on, and she registered the scorn in his face. He had taken to disappearing into the woods whenever he had a free moment, in the company of his dachshund Yuri, named after the famous cosmonaut.

Since the accident, people in the village would ask Hilde for advice about injuries small and large; they spoke to her as openly as if she had acquired the competence of a doctor.

Hilde visited Hans every two or three days, and after reading him Tucholsky and Rilke she read some of her own poems, too.

I need work, you've got to help me find work – this was his mantra. She helped him fill out the form for the insurance.

Angels, he said, there are angels in your poems, that's nice. How do you want to die, one day?

Preferably in my sleep, she answered.

That's boring, he said. I'm allergic to tonic water, if I drink gin and tonic my throat swells up, I can't breathe, and then all hell breaks loose! Are you allergic to anything? Yes? What? Have you ever sleepwalked? What do you find disgusting?

Once his mother was there visiting him, a woman who weighed a hundred and forty kilos and who seemed to have buried her sorrow beneath a mountain of fat, so forlorn did every movement seem. I'm very grateful to you that there's a place for Hans in the forestry department, she murmured.

Hilde didn't know what she was talking about.

Stop it, said her son. He looked annoyed, not embarrassed, and his mother let out a worried sigh.

I thought, she said –

Shut up, Hans interrupted.

This was how Hilde found out that he wanted a position in the forestry department.

There's bound to be a job going there, his mother said.

Not that I'm aware of, Hilde replied, realizing only now how serious the boy was. She wouldn't be able to bring herself to speak to Walter about it. She wondered how Hans had even got the idea that the forestry department might have work for him, then she thought that there were hardly any jobs in the area, and Walter was her husband; who else was he supposed to ask? Against her better judgment, she said: We'll sort something out, making a gesture that was uncharacteristic for her.

Hans laughed happily, and his mother blew her fringe off her forehead with a sigh. There are lots of options, he said, I could become a district ranger, or even a huntsman. He showed her a magazine about rangers and huntsmen and read her the jokes on the back page. His mother patted the middle of her heaving bosom with her hand, as if there were someone in there who needed soothing.

Hilde was sitting in the garden, a book open in front of her, but she wasn't reading. She let herself drift sleepily through the early evening, heard the *chick-chick* of a warbler interrupted by the screech of a power saw, then silence again until she caught the whirring and humming of rubber tyres on sand. She listened out past the garden fence. In hospital, Hans had practised using a wheelchair for the first time; now he was wheeling himself right up to her door. I'm coming, she called, quickly getting to her feet. She walked beside him and lent a hand when the path got too stony.

I want to get out of here, he said.

She pointed to the stump of his leg and asked: When will the prosthesis be ready?

I want to get out of the village, leave this graveyard behind. He sounded irritable.

She moved her hand in a way that was meant to placate him.

She visited Hans at home. The kitchen was in the basement, where the television also was, illuminating the darkened room. He was lying on the sofa. Beer bottles were strewn across the floor. A cookery show was on the TV.

I could scoff the lot right now, he said, by way of a greeting.

Are you hungry? she asked.

Always, he answered, beer in hand, watching the cook as he shoved a goose into the oven.

She took a beer for herself without asking, then a second, then a third. Later, she laughed so hard at his jokes that her stomach muscles hurt the next day.

She prepared Walter's breakfast for him, at the weekend, too. His hostility had long ago transferred itself to the table, the salt cellar, the clock on the wall, the ticking sounded ominous, tick, tock, he gazed over her head as if she were thin air.

She had not asked Walter if there was a job in the forestry department; she had lied to Hans. Why, she wondered later, had she overlooked the obvious? The boy had lived off social security benefits when he had two healthy legs; how was he going to

work as a huntsman or ranger in a wheelchair, or with a prosthesis? Days later, Hans was beside himself with rage; he railed at her and cursed her for her betrayal.

Hilde went into the little brick church to listen to a sermon for the first time. The organist had a coughing fit and had to stop playing for a moment. *Trust in God's mercy*, said the pastor. Hilde would have liked to believe her. But she couldn't manage it, not least because God was a man and she didn't seem to be on good terms with men right now. You stupid, filthy cow, Hans had screamed as he smashed her windows.

Walter no longer hid his anger behind covert attacks, such as not flushing the toilet or hiding Hilde's things around the house. He belittled her whenever he could, debased her, humiliated her. Have you brushed your hair, he would say at the breakfast table, have you washed? When she was in his way he pushed her aside with his elbow, as if by accident.

Someone broke into their shed; shattered glass on the floor; her old diaries were stolen.

When her mother died three years later, she found a savings book with 5,800 marks in it in among the home-made socks. Hilde had arranged for the dead woman to be collected in the morning, and by evening she could no longer remember her face. She felt sorrow at the finality, and wished she could mourn, weep, be comforted – but there was nothing to be comforted for. Gerda Engel hadn't cared what her daughter's life was like. The only thing that had bothered her was having to give up the sheep.

She used the money to pay for the oak coffin. Expensive box, cheap funeral, that's how your mother would have wanted it, was Walter's opinion. The local council representative was the only person standing with them at the grave. There was no eulogy, no funeral reception. On the gravestone: dates of birth and death, her name.

Hilde enjoyed her work. Dr Kies praised her for her dedication; she could have extended her holiday by weeks with all the overtime she did. She completed her tasks immediately and with precision, liked talking to the patients. She organized new files for the patients' records, threw out the old newspapers, arranged for workmen to come in, cleaned the basin and toilet at the end of her shift; the cleaner only came on Fridays.

One day, Fat Hubert came hobbling into the practice. She gave Hilde a friendly greeting, as if Hans had never smashed her windows. She had sprained her ankle dancing.

Dancing? asked Dr Kies, eyeing her body.

Hilde thought she could read his mind, and knew that he was wrong. She herself had seen the woman dancing. She had been sitting in the garden with Hans, smoking a joint, when she had spotted Fat Hubert behind the window and had seen her, simultaneously heavy and graceful, moving her massive form.

Hilde had never exchanged another word with Hans. As soon as she heard the whirring of his wheelchair on the road through the village, she would vanish indoors.

On Sundays there was a special kind of silence in the house. She wanted to spend the early morning hours without Walter, poring over her Chukchi vocabulary list or daydreaming. He made it a habit to get up early as well, and at breakfast she felt as if he occupied all the space in the kitchen; so little air left to breathe.

Walter remembered nothing she told him, confused the names of her acquaintances and ignored her corrections. If she talked about inviting someone over, he objected; he didn't want to throw money out of the window, and he couldn't stand strangers. When Hilde responded that they didn't have to remain strangers, he mocked her, asking if she were incapable of logical thinking: if that were the case, they weren't strangers any more, and people he knew he liked even less. He complained about the food, saying it was too dull or too salty, but he never forgot their wedding anniversary. On their twentieth, as every year, Walter gave her a rubber plant. By this time they had an ugly little forest growing in their living room.

Twenty years, she said. A cockatiel in a cage can live that long.

There are sea sponges that make it to ten thousand, he replied.

Neither of them has any choice, said Hilde, and was surprised when he didn't contradict her.

On the anniversaries that followed she was also given rubber trees, all of which she had stopped tending long ago and was surreptitiously trying to get rid of. A pedantic line had settled in the corners of Walter's mouth like lichen. He insisted on ironed handkerchiefs, commented on everything she said, left her newspaper articles about legionella in water – which she then boiled – and of course there were medicines that

could cure cancer but a doctors' lobby was withholding them. As for women, it wasn't easy for them, because they were getting a raw deal, and they even got their dogs to satisfy them. He knew what went on. Walter's face became utterly unforgiving whenever a report came on about the GDR. All lies, he would say, and switch the television off.

The drumming from the author's garden sounded like Hilde's irregular heartbeat and amplified her despondency. It never seemed to get boring over there. She would circle the house, looking for something unpleasant. She was happy when she heard the woman arguing with her drummer, but then there was the yowling that made Walter prick up his ears and Hilda feel embarrassed, as with love scenes on television, when she would leave the room. Yet if the author was sitting in the garden, topping and tailing beans, she felt she would like to sit down with her; the sun shone on precisely this spot with particular intensity. Meanwhile the strawberries were going mouldy, powdery mildew had killed her roses, her flowerbeds and shrubs were neglected. And sometimes the wind swept clean-picked chicken bones, fishbones and empty wine bottles from the table.

Hilde was demoralized by her inability to find the courage to leave Walter. His foul temper had done something to her. As if his obstinacy and discontent had spread inside her like a dismal jigsaw puzzle, the picture of a barren landscape consumed by worms. Was she becoming spiteful, too?

A new neighbour had moved in next door, and Walter looked out of the window more often these days. Gabriela, a young, strong woman, at least six foot two, with a wistful expression and a deep voice. As they were talking, Hilde noticed her moustache, her coarse, angular face; then there was the conversation about gynaecological disorders, and later, on top of that, what people were saying in the village: a hermaphrodite, who wanted to be fully female. Walter knew none of this. She's coy, he said, and something salacious would enter his gaze. Hilde let him go on believing this, and when he called Gabriela a hottie, she agreed with him. Now, when they argued, she had a secret. How furious he would be; he would want to drive the hottie out of the village, and how he would hate himself! Old devil, she thought, if you only knew.

Walter

Last summer I visited my mother-in-law's grave for the last time. It's still the same place, and yet it's different. I seem to see things with greater precision now I'm dead: the cemetery looks neglected, some of the graves are in a terrible state. The iron gate is hanging off its hinges, glittery artificial flowers scattered by the wind, an angel knocked off its pedestal. No one could wish to end up here, but it looks as though I don't have a choice.

Age is irrelevant to us now; the young are those who haven't been dead for long, says Gerda Engel.

What nonsense: does that mean I should be wearing nappies, drinking from a baby's bottle?

She looks at me, and her dry skin crackles with humourlessness.

Who's in charge here? Is there something like a cemetery chairman? Why is everyone looking at me so strangely?

They haven't known you *like this* for very long.

What's *like this*?

Everyone dies as they lived at the end, she says. What's most important are the hours before the transition.

Now I don't understand a thing. I've never heard her talk like this before.

You'll work it out soon enough. All these years the dead have seen an angry man, then in the last few months you were meek as a lamb. And besides, look at yourself, your skull is pretty much done in.

That's unfair, I reply, those few weeks versus all the rest?

Who says things are any fairer in death than in life?

And what did you die of, *like this*?

Weariness, probably. She waves the question away.

I thought it was your armoured heart, I say, and it's only now that I notice, at Gerda Engel's side, a tiny mummified creature. What's that?

My stone baby. There is pride in her voice.

Your what?

A stone offspring that was stuck in my pelvic floor for sixty-seven years.

For a moment I am speechless, then I remember answering a question about a foetus like this in a crossword puzzle. A lithopaedion, I say.

My lithopaedion, she confirms.

When was it conceived?

She shakes her head, then says: The father isn't here.

So there is a father. Bulging head and body, ossified, short trunk, little twisted legs, sludge-coloured eyes.

It can't walk properly, unfortunately, she says, keeps treading on my feet.

I've never seen Gerda Engel look so content. The way she looks at the misshapen thing, with something like love in her eyes.

I'm glad you're here, she says. The last one has to report. She points to the cemetery.

Who says?

That's just how it is.

So there are rules in the hereafter?

You're the reporter now.

What do I have to do?

Recount what's important to you.

So I'm a sort of chronicler?

Call it what you like. And don't forget, you have all the time in the world.

And where is Hilde?

Gerda Engel taps her forehead with a finger and disappears.

2

Wolfgang

When he danced with Hilde, Walter had already been dead. He couldn't get this thought out of his head. It had been Helen who discovered the body, and she hadn't reacted with panic, more like a sleepwalker. Roller-Skate Girl had called the fire brigade and said: There's an emergency. As if it were the most normal thing in the world. Patiently she assisted the police, who hung around the village for days; she even gave interviews, and brought coffee to one of the policemen who was sitting in his car until nightfall. She hadn't joined in the search. Wolfgang wasn't sure if she was hiding something.

For days he and a handful of villagers had combed the woods, despite the freezing cold. Heinrich, of course, had been the first to flag. A picture of the wanted woman was shown on the news. Anyone who had any information about her whereabouts was to report it immediately. In the photo, Hilde was barely recognizable, her face covered in soot; it had been taken after the fire at Mill Farm. How was it possible that there were no other photos of her? Had she planned her husband's murder far in advance, and so destroyed all pictures of herself?

Wolfgang was filled with euphoria. At last, a task worthy of his talents. How he had longed for a disaster that would get his life moving again. He even went into town, searched in vain for the adult education centre where Hilde had taken a foreign language course years earlier. There was no town centre, the slush on the roads was frozen solid, the remains of firecrackers and other rubbish lined the pavements. The only building of note was the post office. No hospital, no doctor's surgery, a primary school housed in a sort of container. Wind and low winter clouds kept people in their houses. By early afternoon the half-light was already turning to darkness; almost all the streets were empty, the clientele in the two brightly-lit pubs exclusively male. No one had heard of Hilde. How was he supposed to make any headway among more than nine thousand people? It was much easier to get an overview in the village, but where to begin? Also, he should see to his animals. He had neglected them long enough.

Nonetheless, the question continued to nag at him: who could have hidden Hilde?

Bipolar Man? Years ago, in one of his nutty phases, he had bunked off to the capital one summer and come back with a tattoo on his forehead, a green dragon with a tail snaking right down his neck. In winter, though, Bipolar Man was quiet; he barely gave a sign of life. If you asked him anything, his answer was so incoherent that no one could understand him. He would be incapable of hiding Hilde.

Heinrich, the unemployed drunkard? He was the commander of the volunteer fire brigade and always short of money. Bipolar Man's neighbour. They were friends, and argued like tinkers, always eyeing each other with suspicion. Once, so people said, Heinrich had even pissed on Bipolar Man's door. But he started drinking by four in the afternoon at the latest, and lived in just one room. Hilde would have been spotted there by now.

What about Dr Kies? Interesting thought. You never saw him with his wife. The doctor seemed to consider himself an artist, was planning a big exhibition. His wife painted, too, and people said he didn't like that at all. Hadn't he cornered Hilde on New Year's Eve and spoken to her very insistently? Where might he be keeping her hidden? She wasn't a hamster, after all. His wife would have discovered her straight away. Perhaps the Kiseses were keeping Hilde as a sex slave in the basement. He liked this idea.

Branka? She hadn't joined the search for Hilde, either. But that could have been a diversionary tactic. The two of them had become friends in the weeks before her disappearance. Wolfgang had long suspected Branka of cooking her books. The Golden Ox hardly had any customers. Maybe she was dealing drugs. Or laundering money, how should he know. For a long time he had believed that she had killed her husband, the handsome Karl. He couldn't come up with any proof. There were probably lots of hiding places in her pub, but why would she let Hilde stay there?

Rosie, maybe? The old woman lived isolated and alone in the woods. Everyone knew the only thing she lived for now was her son's return. She had been waiting for him since the end of the war. Scrimped and saved every pfennig. She wouldn't invite anyone into her house except the longed-for returnee.

Why not Leo, young Panzer? But he was permanently stoned.

Nelli, his mother, was more likely. But since Pede, her elder son, had died, she tried to shield the younger from every kind of trouble. She was too scared.

The new people, Florian and Amelie? He reckoned they were harmless. Not just because they had moved here from the West. Their apparent lack of interest in village

life could be a ruse. He didn't want to take their friendliness seriously; there was no reason for it. Sometimes they would show guests around, pointing proudly to Mill Farm or the church as if they had grown up here.

Or Doris? The old girl. No, the local council representative expended all her energy mourning for the GDR.

Iron Alex? They said he shat in the woods, couldn't read or write. Lived in his dead mother's half-derelict house. Hunted for gold with a metal detector. Photographed weird stuff. Was in love with Roller-Skate Girl. Who wasn't? But Iron Alex would have given himself away by now; he was a chatterbox. Whenever he talked about anything, it seemed he had the IQ of a prawn.

So maybe it was Helen after all? Roller-Skate Girl remained Wolfgang's prime candidate. She lived with her parents in the old rectory, shielded by a wall from prying eyes. A village rumour said she slept in the dog kennel. You hardly saw any sign of her parents. The maid did the shopping, the cleaner cleaned, the gardener looked after the grounds. But Helen was at boarding school during the week.

Hilde was last seen at the author's place. He couldn't really figure her out, either. Before the Drummer showed up, she would often listen to loud classical music until the early hours of the morning, which had turned half the village against her. Occasionally the police would come by, but no sooner would they leave than her music would thump out into the night again like a resounding slap in the face. Rock'n'roll had arrived with the Drummer. That was better.

The Drummer? Not a clue.

Gabriela? Wanted to get herself a bosom. She had recently left the village to get it done. Who knew whether she would be coming back.

And Fat Hubert couldn't get through any doors any more.

Her son, Hans? Not a bad idea, either. But he was in a wheelchair. And they said that Hilde didn't like him.

Who could have hidden her? Or had Hilde been murdered, too?

Mr Ghost from Weimar? Not for nothing did he have that name.

Lush? The only one still living in the prefab at the end of the village, ground floor left. No one had any contact with him. A Christmas angel was stuck on his window all year. But, as his name indicated, Lush was busy drinking what remained of his life from his body.

Roller-Skate Girl and Dr Kies: it seemed to Wolfgang that these two were particularly suspicious. And the Westerners, who acted so innocent: he wanted to give them another grilling, too.