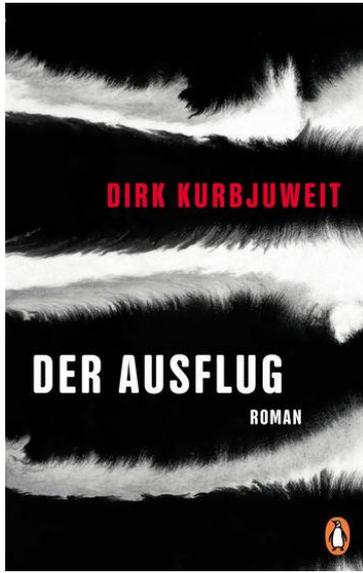


Dirk Kurbjuweit

The Trip

[Der Ausflug]

Outline + Sample Translation



Contemporary Fiction

Penguin Verlag, 192 pages, February 2021

A shocking journey into the heart of Germany's darkness

Childhood friends Amalia, Josef, Gero and Bodo are on a summer canoeing trip. However, the moment they arrive at their destination it's clear that they aren't welcome. Josef in particular, who is black, senses the locals' discomfort in his presence. They evidently deeply dislike anything that looks remotely foreign.

But should the friends let themselves be intimidated by a few backward provincials? Should they simply give in? – Amalia, Josef, Gero and Bodo are determined to stay, and from that moment on there's no turning back. Every step they take leads them closer to the abyss. They all know that this trip won't end well, but none of them wants to admit it. Soon their summer adventure becomes a desperate effort to get out of this place alive.

Press

"Dirk Kurbjuweit exposes the evil lurking just below the surface of civilised life." *Stern*

"*Fear* shifts our moral codes. It makes us sympathetic to violent revenge, accessories to murder. Do we want the victim to survive? No, we don't. Long after I had put this book down I still didn't. A great achievement." *Herman Koch on Fear*

Dirk Kurbjuweit, born in 1962, is a journalist at *Der Spiegel* and lives in Berlin. He has received numerous awards for his writing, including the Egon Erwin Kisch Prize for journalism, and is the author of nine critically acclaimed novels, many of which have been adapted for film, television, theatre and radio. His novel *Fear* was a bestseller and has been translated into numerous languages.

Sample Translation

By Imogen Taylor

I

As they were coming off the motorway, Josef said that the first to see a stork would get a free dinner.

‘But there aren’t storks anymore,’ Bodo said.

‘There are here,’ said Amalia, and immediately regretted her tone. A big sister lecturing her little brother. She was past all that.

‘Why here?’ Bodo asked, without a hint of protest. Apparently he was okay with being the little brother when he was sleepy, Amalia thought.

He smiled at her, as if he knew what she was thinking. ‘Sister superior,’ he said.

‘They’re left in peace here, that’s why,’ said Gero. ‘Nothing happens here. Never has, never will.’

‘So why are we here?’ Bodo asked.

‘Same reason.’

Wide open fields shone yellow, lacquered by the low sun. Far off, a range of bleak-looking hills shimmered bluely. A combine harvester crawled along in a cloud of dust. At the edge of the road a tractor waited with two empty trailers. The driver was asleep, folded up on himself. A bird of prey circled.

Josef jerked the wheel round to avoid a pothole and the car swerved to the right. He swung the wheel back the other way. Too sharply—the car skidded and crashed into the next pothole. There was a tinkle of broken glass.

‘Watch it.’

‘Sorry.’

The smell of alcohol filled the car, a new BMW, which until a moment ago had smelt of leather seats.

‘One of the bottles has broken,’ Amalia said, looking into the bag at her feet.

‘Can someone remind me why we had to bring wine with us?’ Gero asked.

'Because you can't get decent booze here,' Amalia said.

'Only cat's piss,' Bodo explained.

Amalia bent over the bag and began to pull out pieces of glass.

'Wait till we get there,' her brother said.

'What? And let the glass make holes in the bag and turn the apples to sauce?'

'Can't you get decent apples here either?'

Amalia snorted and went on pulling shards of glass out of the bag.

The car rolled through a village: small, low-slung houses desperate for a lick of paint, rusty wrought iron fences, sprucely kept gardens, greying net curtains. The road was deserted.

'A stork,' Bodo said.

'Where?'

They all peered out.

'Up there on the right.'

On the roof of a house, a stork was standing in a nest.

'Wow,' Josef said and overlooked another pothole. The car went crashing into it.

'Ow!' Amalia shouted.

'Sorry.'

'I've cut myself on the fucking glass.' She sucked the heel of her hand, but couldn't stop the blood from dripping onto her summer dress.

'Let me have a look,' Bodo said.

She held out her hand and showed him the long, deep gash. There was a lot of blood. Bodo took off his T-shirt and wrapped it around the wound.

'Have you got a first-aid kit?' he asked Josef.

'Mate, I'm a pharmacist,' Josef said.

He pulled over and stopped in a gateway. The three men got out; Amalia stayed in the car. Bodo opened her door and kneeled down next to her.

'You okay?' he asked.

'It hurts,' Amalia said. 'It fucking hurts. And how am I going to paddle with my hand in this state?'

Josef fetched the first-aid kit from the boot. Bodo reached for it, but Josef wouldn't give it to him. He kneeled down alongside Bodo and took Amalia's hand to inspect the wound.

'This wouldn't have happened to Fabian,' he said.

'What?' she said, startled.

'He wouldn't have crashed into two potholes in a row.'

'Stop it.'

He bandaged Amalia's hand in silence, without looking at her. She stared down at his smooth shorn head and thought of the thick woolly hair he used to have. She would have liked to put her hand on his head to feel the difference, but killed the impulse.

'I'd feel better if we got the wound stapled,' he said. 'Shall we drive to a doctor?'

'There aren't any doctors here,' Gero said.

'I'm so sorry,' Josef said.

'It wasn't your fault,' Bodo said. 'It was the stork.'

The village lay quiet in the summer sun. An old man came along the road on a rickety bike with a trailer. Inside was a dead piglet. The old man gawked at them. Gero waved, but there was no response. A net curtain twitched; the stork stood stock still on the roof, one leg bent.

Bodo walked out into the middle of the road. He leaned back from the waist, stuck out his left arm, curled his fingers around an imaginary bow and pinched together the thumb and two fingers of his right hand as if he were holding the end of an arrow. Then he brought his hands together and slowly pulled back his right arm as if to flex the bow. He aimed at the stork, taking his time, adjusting and readjusting the angle.

'Just fire the fucking thing,' said Gero who was leaning against the car smoking.

Bodo pretended to release the arrow and stare after it as it flew through the air. 'Got it.' He made a fist.

'Storks are a protected species,' Gero said.

'It was a rubber-tipped arrow.'

'Count yourself lucky.'

'Then again, storks are fucking Nazi birds.'

'Why Nazi?' Gero asked.

'Red legs, red beaks, black and white feathers—the colours of the Nazi flag.'

'And the Kaiser's flag,' Amalia said.

'Little Miss Smart Arse strikes again,' Bodo said.

'My hand's throbbing like a hammer,' Amalia said. 'No way am I going to be able to paddle.'

'The wound's not where you hold the paddle,' Josef said. 'You'll be all right.'

The old man on the bike came back the other way, his trailer empty now. Bodo positioned himself at the side of the road and took a sweeping bow. The old man saw him out of the corner of his eye, but didn't respond. Josef stowed the first-aid kit in the boot, and everyone got back in the car. They set off again, driving parallel to the blue hills.

All the villages they passed looked pretty much the same—a row of small houses on either side of the road; a further row or two behind; a pub, in some cases defunct, and a cowering little church with a stumpy tower.

It was growing dark. White patches of mist appeared on the fields, low over the ground. Bodo began to sing softly.

There's something strutting on our field,
Wading through the bogs.
It wears a coat of black and white
And two fine red socks.
Snaps the frogs up, snap, snap, snap,
Rattles gaily, clappety-clap.
Who can guess my riddle?

He started over and the others joined in the old nursery rhyme, laughing, imitating the clapping beak with their hands. Josef even honked the horn.

II

It was nearly dark when they pulled up outside the pub where they'd booked rooms for the night—a solitary building flanked by trees, long and low with a pointed gable in the middle. The paint was peeling; the net curtains at the windows were yellowing. Drunken whoops could be heard all the way to the almost full car park.

'Let's join in the fun,' Josef said.

They fetched their bags from the boot and went in. The walls were lined with wood, the floors covered in gently bulging linoleum. Reception was unattended; Amalia rang the bell. They waited, but no one came. A door seemed to lead to the bar; the noise swelled and ebbed on the other side.

Bodo opened the door and disappeared. A moment later he was back.

'Weird,' he said.

They waited in silence until at last a small, thin man came and checked them in without a word. He pushed the forms across the desk to them, then turned to the little shelf where the keys were hanging. He seemed unable to make up his mind, and kept taking keys down and then replacing them—as if he were trying to solve some complicated puzzle, Amalia thought. She filled in her address, making a round five and a square three, which for some reason annoyed her. She and Bodo would share one room; Josef and Gero another. The bathrooms were down the corridor.

Amalia was the first in the bar. Here, too, the linoleum on the floor bulged with age. The brown panelled walls, stained by decades of cigarette smoke, were darker towards the top and almost black where they met the ceiling. A big green-tiled stove stood in the corner. On every table was a pot plant that looked as if it were made of plastic. The man who had checked them in stood behind the counter pulling beer. He never shut off the tap, but dexterously pushed glasses back and forth beneath it like a thimblerrigger, waiting until the froth was about to spill over the edge before sweeping one glass aside and manoeuvring the next into place.

It was full, it was loud. Almost only men. Quiet tables, rowdy tables, well-filled ashtrays, air thick with smoke. Next to the door a group of young people, some of them girls, were playing a drinking game, trying to lob ping-pong balls into the glass of the person opposite. Whenever a ball landed in someone's glass, that person had to down the contents. They were laughing and cheering each other on.

Amalia made for a table by the window, aware of the gazes on her legs and bum. It had gone quieter. Be my guest, she thought as she sat down. One by one the others joined her, Josef last. The room fell quiet, as if all the sound had been sucked away.

Amalia smiled at him, as if to guide him safely to the table.

Your homeland smile, he had once said.

What's that supposed to mean?

You want to show me that I belong.

Well, you do.

Obviously, he had said—rather rudely, she thought.

He sat down. There were low murmurs, as if a council were being held to discuss the situation. Then the old noise level resumed.

No one came to take their orders. They didn't notice at first because they were so busy joking about the seedy rooms, the creaky floorboards.

The landlord cut the flow of beer and put the brimming glasses on a tray which he carried from table to table. When the tray was empty, he returned to his post behind the bar and continued his virtuoso performance at the tap.

'Excuse me, could we order something?' Amalia called.

There was silence. Stares were turned on them, hard, disdainful. The landlord went on pulling beer, intent on his work. Froth rushed to the top of the glasses, as if pursued by the amber liquid that rose beneath it. Sometimes there was no escape but over the edge.

'We're thirsty,' Amalia said. 'And hungry.'

Another glass, and another and another. They clinked against each other—a torment to the thirsty, Amalia thought, as her anger grew. Eventually, very slowly, the landlord pushed back the tap. He stared meditatively at the thinning stream as it slowed to a drip—and then tore himself away, picked up a pen and a damp waiter's pad, and headed for their table. He said nothing, but held his pen poised above the pad, signalling readiness.

'Nice of you to take the trouble,' Amalia said.

He looked at her impassively.

'Do you have red wine?' she asked.

'Hungarian.'

'Okay, then could we have a bottle of Hungarian red, a large bottle of sparkling water and the menu, please?'

'Don't have any.'

'What? Wine? Water? Menus?'

'Menus.'

'But you have food?'

'Brawn or frankfurters with fried potatoes.'

'That's all?'

'That's all.'

She looked at the others with resignation.

'I'll take the brawn,' Bodo said.

They ordered two lots of brawn, one lot of frankfurters and a plate of plain fried potatoes.

The Hungarian wine proved undrinkable, but they had come prepared; Amalia had two bottles of pinot noir in her bag. She opened one of them surreptitiously under the table, filled everyone's glasses and hid the bottle under her chair. The four of them made butter-wouldn't-melt faces, like kids pulling a prank. They clinked glasses.

'To the canoe trip!'

The glasses sang.

'Since when can n... canoe?'

Amalia put her wine on the table. 'Who said that?' she called.

Nobody looked at her. People went on talking and shouting as if nothing had happened.

'We're going,' Amalia said, getting up.

Josef pulled her back by the arm. They exchanged glances familiar to them both. She didn't want to sit around doing nothing while he was insulted; he didn't want to ruin the evening. Amalia sat down again.

'It's okay,' Josef said. 'We've heard it all before.'

'It is not okay,' Amalia said. 'Don't always be so accepting.'

Josef raised his glass. They clinked again and drank.

As always at the start of their trips, they got Josef to tell them the year's news from the town where they'd grown up. He was the only one who still lived there.

'Jens is dead,' he said.

Jens had had a motorcycling accident in the sixth form. He'd spent the evening drinking at the Podium, the bar where they all hung out, and hadn't left for home until long after midnight, driving his little motorbike with his friend Ralph riding pillion. According to the truck driver who hit him, he took a left at the big junction without giving way. The driver was on his way to the furniture factory; he hit his horn and braked hard, but couldn't avoid the collision. That was what it said in the papers. Ralph was killed instantly; Jens survived with severe injuries—now, years on, he had died of the long-term effects.

'He practically lived in the chemist; he was on so many meds to keep him alive. Without a spleen, you're always going to have trouble in the long run.'

Josef began to explain, but Amalia was lost in her own thoughts and wasn't listening anymore. She'd barely known Jens and had very little to do with him, but she suddenly felt acutely that she and he were part of a series in which everyone's turn came sooner or later—one by one they would all join the list of the dead. There were several series, of course—friends, siblings, contemporaries at university. She realised that. For now, though, it was the school series that was nagging at her. It had started back in Year Ten when Svenja became number one on the list after overdosing—more from ignorance than from any particular wish to die. Then came Ralph, and now Jens. Number three. What about her? Which number would she be? And Bodo? Josef? Gero? Amalia felt tears running down her face.

Bodo, who was sitting next to her, put an arm around her and pulled her close.

'Did you like him that much?'

She was spared from answering by the arrival of their food. They ate the greasy fried potatoes, the frankfurters, the brawn. Amalia topped up their glasses under the table; they grew louder and more cheerful. Once, the landlord came over and asked if they'd like another bottle of the Hungarian red, but Amalia said no, they didn't want to drink too much; they were going canoeing the next day. When he was gone they burst out laughing and giggling.

Bodo went to the toilet and stopped off to watch the beer ping pong on his way back. Eventually he asked if he could join in, and after a moment's reluctance he was accepted. He threw the ball and missed. He lost one round, downed a beer, then won a second round and returned to the others.

They grilled Josef about who bought what drugs in the chemist, particularly curious about their old schoolmates. Josef hung back, said it was confidential, but they went on at him, bribing him with favours—no washing-up for the entire trip, no need to help put up the tents. He stood firm. They persisted.

‘Okay, but no names. One guy from our class had to be treated for a dose of the clap.’

They laughed as raucously as the people at the other tables. Now they had to know the name.

‘I’ll paddle you through the delta for half a day,’ Bodo shouted. ‘You won’t have to lift a finger.’

Josef shook his head.

‘A whole day.’

There was no persuading him.

The third bottle was almost empty. Josef got up to go to the toilet, but when he reached for the door handle, a man grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

‘Not you.’

‘What do you mean?’ Josef asked, taken aback.

‘You’re not taking a piss here,’ the man said calmly.

Josef freed his arm from the man’s grip, hesitated for a moment and then reached for the door handle again. The man shot up from his chair and wedged himself between Josef and the door.

‘What don’t you get?’

Gero, Bodo and Amalia jumped up and went to join Josef.

Half a dozen men were sitting at the table next to the toilet door. Five of them got up too.

‘What’s going on?’ Amalia shouted.

‘N... piss outside. That’s all.’

‘You watch your language,’ Gero said.

‘My language,’ the man said. ‘What’s my language got to do with it?’

‘You know very well that the N-word is racist.’

‘I don’t know any N-word.’

The man who said this was wearing a flannel shirt, baggy cords held up by braces and a green cap saying John Deere beneath a prancing yellow stag. One of his eyes was big and oval, the other was a narrow slit, and his high wrinkled forehead was clearly visible below the cap, which was pushed back on his head, the peak sticking straight up in the air. He had a big, large-pored nose, fleshy lips, and a chin that wasn't really a chin at all—more like a broad flap of skin covering part of his neck.

'Do you know this N-word?' he asked his mates.

They shook their heads. 'Never heard of it.'

The group of men was growing; two had baseball bats in their hands. The young people had abandoned their drinking game and gathered round to watch.

'Why can't my friend use the toilet?' Gero asked.

The men smirked; nobody said anything. Bodo grabbed one of them and tried to push him to one side, but found himself caught in a straitjacket of arms and hands.

'Racist bastards,' Amalia hissed, already helpless, already in retreat.

The landlord came out from behind the bar. He walked over to the door, locked it and put the key in his trouser pocket.

'Toilet's blocked,' he said, and went back behind the bar to pull beer.

The men smirked again and returned to their seats; the beer ping pong resumed.

Amalia went up to the landlord and yelled at him. 'How dare you stop my friend from going to the toilet?'

No reaction.

Josef put an arm around Amalia's waist and gently pulled her away.

'Forget it,' he said. 'It's not worth it. We're not going to let them ruin our trip.'

'Fucking Nazis,' she said. 'We can't let them get away with this.'

Someone gave a loud laugh.

Amalia froze, but Josef steered her back to the table.

'Let's go to our rooms,' she said. 'We can't sit here drinking with these fuckwits.'

When they went to pay, the landlord charged them for three bottles of wine.

'But we only drank one,' Amalia said.

'You drank three,' the landlord said.

'Okay,' she said, 'we drank three. But we brought two of the bottles with us.'

'You drank three bottles of wine in my pub, so you pay for three bottles. It's the same everywhere. It's called corkage.'

Amalia paid for three bottles.

Upstairs in Amalia and Bodo's room, they talked about calling off the trip.

Gero thought they should—he said he didn't want to spend his holidays in a nest of Nazis.

Josef said they mustn't be intimidated; once they were on the water they probably wouldn't meet anyone anyway.

Bodo said nothing, because on matters of importance he still tended to wait and see what his big sister thought and then, depending on his mood, either emphatically agree with her or violently disagree.

Amalia had a feeling that he would probably go with whatever she said on this occasion—which meant that she had the deciding vote.

She said she was for persevering. Josef was right—first, you shouldn't give way to Nazis and secondly, it seemed unlikely that they'd run into trouble on the water.

'Bodo?'

'Let's go ahead with it.'

Gero didn't object.

When Amalia looked out of the window later that evening, she saw Josef standing on the back of a white pickup truck, pissing into the tray as he turned slowly in a circle.

III

At eight the next morning they were back in the car. Josef had agreed to let Bodo drive, because he wanted to know how it felt to bomb around in a Beema. Amalia was in the passenger seat.

The fields lay pale green and yellow in the early sun. Amalia, who had barely slept, nodded off, but soon woke again, unsettled by something. The BMW was hurtling along—too fast, she thought, for a narrow country road, especially one like this with trees on either side, closely planted, dense as walls. She glanced at the speedo. 120.

‘Slow down a bit,’ she said.

‘Sorry.’

Bodo jerked his foot off the gas in a show of protest. The road seemed to widen; Amalia relaxed. She turned the radio on. It crackled loudly. She tried to find a station, but there was no signal.

The road entered a wood, plunging them into darkness, and the two lanes narrowed to one. It was a wild wood—dense undergrowth, dense scrub, bracken that seemed to reach out and grasp at the road. Around a bend, a wreath was propped against a stout tree trunk with candles scattered about it, withered flowers, a photograph.

‘Stop,’ Amalia said.

Bodo slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a halt.

‘Was that necessary? Drive back a bit.’

He put the car noisily into reverse, backed it up and stopped by the wreath. Amalia looked at the photo—a young man with short hair and a sweet smile.

‘Well?’ Josef said.

‘The usual,’ she said. ‘Let’s go on.’

Then she glanced at her phone. ‘No reception,’ she said. ‘The GPS is dead.’

The others checked their phones. Same story.

‘Fuck!’

‘And now?’

‘Hansel and Gretel were lost in the deep, dark woods...’

‘Anyone happen to remember the way to the boat rental place?’

‘No.’

'Nope.'

'Fraid not.'

'Great,' Amalia said.

'That was your job,' Josef said to Amalia.

'Er, why exactly?'

'Because you...'

'Leave her,' Bodo said. 'We'll find it.'

Why was Josef being so aggressive towards her, Amalia wondered. It was strange sitting here in the car with him—not seeing him, but knowing he was there behind her.

She hadn't seen him for a year, not since their last trip, which they had spent in the hills of South Tirol—three days of not particularly strenuous hiking. Since then, he had sometimes emailed her in the middle of the night, strange messages describing what they were missing out on—sex for the most part, but not just. The emails were vague, coy, slightly confused, as if he were high on something from one of his chemist's drawers. They were brief, with no greeting or sign-off, like a light flickering on and off. She never replied, but not a day passed when she didn't scroll through her inbox in the morning, hoping he had written. She was usually disappointed.

Then, on a whim, she had sent him a photo. She'd been to a Georgian restaurant with a girlfriend; they had shared a bottle of red wine, ordered another couple of glasses each and finished off with the free schnapps that came with the bill. Back home at around midnight, Amalia had stood tipsy in front of the bathroom mirror cleaning her teeth, naked except for a pair of black knickers. Liking what she saw, she took a selfie—she and her friend had been exchanging texts, and her phone was right there by the basin. Quickly, deliberately giving herself no time to think about it, she sent the photo to Josef.

It was only then that she looked at the picture—her breasts, the toothbrush sticking rakishly from her mouth, white foam on her lips. It was puerile. She tossed the phone onto a pile of towels and went to bed.

The next morning she rushed to check her messages. No response from Josef—and none in the days that followed. But a few weeks later an email arrived. It was vague, coy, confused—but whatever was going on between her and Josef in this email, it was clearly happening in a bathroom.

After a while they saw a small car ahead with a round white sign in the rear window saying 25 in black figures—about the speed the car was moving at. Bodo sounded the horn, once, twice, three times. He paused briefly, then sounded it again.

‘Can’t you see the sign?’ Amalia said.

‘Can’t he keep to the right so I can pass him? Look at him, clinging to the middle.’

He sounded the horn again.

‘Stop it,’ Josef and Amalia said almost simultaneously.

Bodo switched to flashing his headlamps. The flicker of light was reflected in the back window, but the car kept on at a snail’s pace, undeterred.

Bodo swerved suddenly and put his foot to the floor. The left wheels bounced over forest ground, flattening bracken, but the gap wasn’t wide enough; the other driver wasn’t giving an inch. Bodo interrupted the manoeuvre just in time to avoid collision.

‘Go easy, mate,’ Josef said.

‘Don’t do that again,’ Amalia said, pushing her hands under her thighs to stop them from trembling.

‘I’m sorry,’ Bodo said.

They continued their crawl through the wood. Time seemed to slow to the speed of the small car; the minutes dripped by. Amalia looked at her phone—still no reception.

‘Why can’t they go faster?’ Gero asked.

‘Because they’re idiots,’ Bodo said. ‘Alcoholics. Retards. That’s actually a wheelchair disguised as a car.’

At last they emerged from the woods and the road widened again. Bodo accelerated and overtook the small car. Amalia looked out of the window; she saw a fat man glaring at the road. He turned his head as they passed; little eyes peered out at her from an expansive face, a look of triumph in them, as if she and Bodo had lost a race. The same look stared out from the face of a woman sitting hunched over on the passenger seat.

They flew along, cornfields on either side, not a cloud in the sky. Amalia squinted at the speedo—90, 100, 120. Her hands were tight under her thighs. At last Bodo took his foot off the gas—110, 100, 90. He stopped at 90.

‘Thank you.’

‘I had to get rid of them,’ Bodo said, glancing in the rear-view mirror.

They came to an unsigned crossroads and Bodo stopped.

'What now?' Josef asked.

'No idea.'

'We should have looked at the map, Bod,' Amalia said.

'What, one of those old-fashioned folding things? The kind we could never fold up again once we'd opened them out? Do you remember how angry Dad used to get?'

'Yes. We always ended up making such a mess of it even Dad couldn't find the original creases.'

'And then he was so cross, he got creases on his face.'

They laughed.

'Look the other way a sec,' Amalia said.

She got out, walked a few yards into a field and squatted on the ground. When she stood up, she saw the little car in the distance, trundling towards them.

'Let's ask the wheelchair driver,' she called out to Bodo who was frowning into the rear-view mirror.

She stood at the side of the road, listening to the approaching chug of the engine—clearly a two stroke. A car with a moped engine, she thought, with sudden pity. She waved, but there was no response. Off to her right she saw a narrow ribbon of water shimmering in the sun.

Amalia took a couple of steps onto the road, raising and lowering her arms to get the driver to slow down. Instead he kept up the pace, clinging so doggedly to the right that Amalia had to dive off the road to avoid being hit. Bodo jumped out of the car and ran towards the crossroads, no doubt hoping that the driver would ease off the gas there to give way. He did no such thing: the little car took a wobbly left turn and chugged away. Bodo sprinted after it, but soon realised that twenty-five kph wasn't a speed he could keep up for long. He came back out of breath.

'He tried to kill you,' he said.

'Either that or he was scared,' said Josef.

IV

An hour later, after a number of detours, they arrived at the canoe rental place. The car park—a field surrounded by a wooden fence—was empty. They got out and stretched till their bones cracked, then fetched the bags and tents from the boot.

The rental place was in a secluded spot between woodland and river, on a small dock: a plain, quite recently built red-brick house, a ticket hut and an open boathouse knocked together out of dark planks. A life-size wooden stork was stuck in the ground; beside it, quietly rotting, was a leaky-looking canoe.

Behind the ticket hut, a man and woman sat at a folding table with a garish plastic cloth. They were both skinny, but the woman, as far as Amalia could tell, was taller than the man. They were drinking beer and had covered the glasses with beer mats. Bottles stood in the shade under the table; a fly swat lay on the cloth surrounded by flattened wasps. Amalia tried to work out whether the woman was the same woman she'd seen in the little car.

'Morning,' she said. 'We've booked two canoes.'

'Name?'

'Winterscheidt.'

The woman got up and walked over to the ticket hut. She went in at a door, closed it behind her and appeared at the hatch, running her finger down a handwritten list.

'There,' Amalia said, pointing at her name. 'But it's with a d-t.'

'You what?'

'D-t, Winterscheidt, you spell it with a d-t.'

The woman put on a pair of glasses and put a d in front of the first t.

'No, not there, in front of the second t.'

The woman looked at her.

'In front of the t at the end, not the t in the middle.'

The woman put the pen down. 'Three hundred,' she said.

'Now?'

'Now.'

'On the phone you said we paid afterwards.'

'Up front.'

'You said afterwards.'

Silence.

Amalia took out her wallet and gave the woman three hundred euros.

'And five hundred deposit.'

'You didn't mention that,' Amalia said.

'Boats get damaged, boats go missing.'

Amalia glanced at the man at the table, as if hoping he might come to her rescue. He had picked up the fly swat and was stalking a wasp that was circling his beer glass. The table was strewn with squashed corpses. The wasp settled on the table for a moment and he struck deftly. Another corpse.

'That's against the law,' Amalia said.

The man looked a question.

'You're not allowed to kill wasps, you can be fined five thousand euros for that.'

'Are wasps worth that much?' the man asked.

Amalia wasn't sure how he meant this. She collected the money for the deposit from the others and slapped it down on the hatch. The woman counted it, then put four fingers in her mouth and whistled. At first nothing happened, but after a moment a man got up from the unmown grass by the boathouse. He was blond and dressed in a threadbare shirt, shorts and sandals. He looked about him sleepily, then put on a pair of half-moon glasses and pushed them up his nose with one finger.

'Two and three, Peter,' the woman shouted.

Peter sauntered to the boat shed muttering, 'Two and three, two and three...'

'Do you have a map of the rivers?' Amalia asked the woman.

'The waterways?'

'If that's what you call them.'

The woman gave Amalia a section of plasticised map. Green for the land, red for the few scattered hamlets, and blue for the waterways that criss-crossed the green like veins— one main river and hundreds of tributaries.

'Three euros,' the woman said.

'And three packets of peanuts, please.'

'7.47 altogether.'

She handed over a ten-euro note, but the woman had no change, so Amalia had to ask the others to chip in. They only just had enough.

The man called Peter pulled a canoe from a rack and threw it into the dock. Then he threw another in after it. They were both old and clunky-looking. Amalia looked over towards the boathouse which was filled with new canoes.

‘Why are you giving us these wrecks?’

Peter lowered his head and peered at Amalia over the top of his glasses. She couldn’t interpret his look.

‘Can’t you give us new canoes?’ she asked the woman, who was back at the folding table, swigging beer.

‘They’re all reserved.’

‘Really? All of them?’ Bodo asked.

‘All of them.’

‘But there’s no one here.’

‘They’re coming later.’

They stood at the water’s edge, staring helplessly at the boats. There was no water in them, so they seemed watertight at least, but they were dirty and grimy and cobwebby.

‘Could we have a cloth?’ Amalia asked.

‘Peter,’ the woman said, jerking her chin towards the boathouse.

Peter went to the boathouse and came back with three cloths. He gave one to Josef and one to Amalia; the third he kept for himself. They kneeled down at the edge of the dock and scrubbed the insides of the canoes—Josef did one, Peter and Amalia the other. Spiders scuttled away in fright; some were caught and squashed in the cloths. Peter kept sneaking glances at Josef. From across the grass came the thwack of the fly swat on the folding table.

‘Who’s coming with me?’ Bodo asked.

‘Me,’ Amalia said quickly, before Gero could say anything. She didn’t want to be on her own in a canoe with Josef—not at this stage. Bodo sat in the stern; she settled herself in the bows. Peter handed her a paddle and she pushed away from the edge. They drifted around the little dock until the others were ready. Before paddling off, Amalia turned to Peter and waved. He raised his hand slightly, as if to wave back, but then lowered it again.