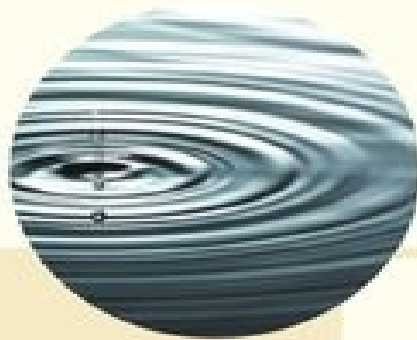


Peirene



Next World Novella

MATTHIAS POLITYCKI



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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
BY ANTHEA BELL

Peirene

Jenseits- novelle

This novella deals with the weighty subjects of marriage and death in an impressively light manner. Shifting realities evolve with a beautiful sense of irony and wit. It is a tone that allows us to reflect, without judgment, on misunderstandings, contradictory perceptions and the transience of life.

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If only it hadn't been for that smell! As if Doro had forgotten to change the water for the flowers, as their stems had begun to rot overnight, filling the air with the sweet-sour aroma of decay. Schepp noticed it at once, that subtle sense of something Other in the midst of ordinary life, slightly skewing the morning. From the far end of his room autumn sunlight came flooding in, bathing everything in golden or russet glow – the *chaise-longue* in the corner was a patch of melting colour. They'd have opened a window to let all that light out later. Schepp stood there, blinking at his world gently flowing around him, a world of stucco moulding and decorative wallpaper, book-lined walls, chairs with silk covers. Checking the way his hair lay over his bald patch, stroking the back of his head, he told himself that he was a happy man.

Not least because of Doro, whose own hair, pinned up, mingled black and silver, he could see above the back of the desk chair. At one side he glimpsed the kimono she liked to wear when she sat in the chair, editing what he had written the day before. Since the children had left home, she had wanted to resume her career. That had pleased him. Not only did he go to bed late, he also got up late, so if Doro had fallen asleep over her editing, wedged at an awkward angle between the desk and the chair as she was today, he would just shake his head, because he couldn't have put into words all that he felt.

Oddly enough, as regularly as he had found her here before, he had written almost nothing since his operation, so was there anything to be edited? I'm still dreaming, he told himself as he moved quietly across the fishbone-patterned parquet towards the sun and the desk and the big vase standing on the floor with the decaying gladioli in it, and Doro.

Before he planted a kiss on her neck, stealing up quietly like a man newly in love, a few of the little wooden segments of the parquet creaking slightly, a fly buzzing somewhere (but even that sounded familiar and homely), before he bent over Doro, to the little mole at the base of her throat that he knew so well – any minute now she would wake with a start and look askance at him, half indignant, half affectionate – he suddenly registered a stack of paper on the desk, her reading glasses, a packet of aspirins, a water glass that had been knocked over and a dark mark on the leather inlay of the desktop with her fountain pen beside it. Once again she had forgotten to put the cap back on it. He was about to pick it up when he remembered, and no, he wasn't dreaming any more, remembered yesterday evening and the new waitress who had given him such a long, intent smile as he was leaving the bar. Schepp was standing directly behind the chair where Doro sat so still, only the wing of the chair-back kept her from tipping over, and he smiled at this thought for a few seconds. Well, Hinrich, he said to himself, grinning at the place where he thought he detected a last reflection of the night before, you may be sixty-five but the ladies still have time for you. Then he bent over Doro. Once again the smell hit him, an entirely strange smell now, a sweetish aroma mingled with the odour of sweat and urine and – he shrank back, his mouth gaping.

Gulped, gasped.

How he made his way around the desk he didn't know. He clung to it with both hands, hardly daring to look up. Doro? She sat there before him, her features relaxed, entirely at peace, her skin grey. The left-hand corner of her mouth drooped, a thread of saliva hanging from it. It had dried where it ended on her chin. Her lips were slightly open, her tongue lolled awkwardly in her mouth, looking swollen. But worst of all were her eyes, almost but not entirely closed, so that you could see the whites and a bit of the irises, as if she had pulled her lower lids down at the last moment.

I don't understand, thought Schepp, understanding.

It's not true, Schepp decided.

Everything will be all right again, Schepp assured himself, and at the same time he was overcome by the certainty that he was choking.

'At least say something,' he whispered finally. 'Just one word.'

He wanted so much to take Doro in his arms, to hug her until she was gasping for breath and stopped playing this game. But there was nothing he could do, he saw that, he felt it, he knew it. He couldn't even pluck up the courage to whimper; he remained immobilized, breathing as shallowly as possible.

At least it hadn't been rotting flower stems that he had smelt when he had come into the room, he knew that now. Leaning on the desk, Schepp looked into what could still be seen of Doro's eyes. He dared not close them. How long, he wondered, had she been sitting here dead, waiting for him? He attempted to take her pulse; he had to try several times; he feared the chill of her wrist so much that he flinched as soon as he touched it; he was sure, in any case, that there was nothing to be felt. Should he call a doctor? Oughtn't he call a doctor?

He stared across the parquet and into the great void; he saw himself immobilized at his mother's deathbed because he could not bring himself to touch her in farewell, he saw himself finally, wordlessly, placing his hand on her forehead – and that immediately brought him back to the harsh, oaken presence of the desk on which one of his manuscripts appeared to be lying. Obviously Doro had been editing it and, in her usual way, annotating the pages, summarizing her impressions; the top sheet was three-quarters covered with her firm handwriting. Or rather, only the first lines were written in that familiar script, then the characters visibly slipped sideways. Schepp bent closer to the page; the letters appeared very untidy, Doro would never have set them down like that, not in full possession of her senses. Soon whole words were sliding away from her; here and there the paper had absorbed water from the glass she had knocked over, and the ink had run. Schepp almost reached towards the manuscript to put it somewhere dry. Only then to embrace Doro, warm her, perhaps put her to bed and sit beside her until she awoke. But the sight of her kept him at a distance, the sight of her face froze into a mask, alarmingly peaceful, already alarmingly unfamiliar, smooth, almost unwrinkled, surprisingly like the face of her sister, who was still under fifty, how strange. To think, reflected Schepp, trying to hide in the shelter of his hands, to think that you grow younger in death. Then his throat tightened as a great wave of misery washed over him. When he could move again, the clock of the Church of the Good Shepherd was striking eleven. He hesitantly touched Doro's right hand and once more shrank from the cold skin and its waxen feel, like a layer of varnish. Finally he took her left arm, which had slipped off the desk, holding it by the sleeve of her kimono and carefully replacing it where he thought it belonged, beside the manuscript. Her hand was swollen and purplish-red, her forearm a shade of violet. Schepp stared at the pale pressure marks that, despite his caution, he had left on Doro's arm. The longer he looked, the more blood seemed to flow back into it. The silence of the room closed gently around her again. Overwhelmed, Schepp breathed in the smell of death.

Finally he looked back at the stack of paper that Doro had left for him. Yes – it hit him like a sudden revelation – that was the first, the most important thing to do. He had to read those pages, find out what her last message was. How relieved he felt all at once! As if some kind of hope could be derived from that act. The idea that another action might be more appropriate, considering that he had spent half his life with the deceased, did not cross his mind.

At first it seemed as if his shaking hands were holding a long, unusually long set of editorial comments. Beneath the top sheet, where the handwritten lines soon became crooked and agitated un-

finally all the words were in the middle of the page, lay many other sheets, meticulously filled with Doro's familiar handwriting. Under those was a typewritten manuscript, the first page at the bottom of the stack and untitled; only after leafing forwards and back for a while did he realize that this was a fragment he had discarded long since and far from being a serious work of scholarship. How had Doro found it, even thought it worth editing – and she had obviously been editing it for days – this old forgotten text of his? He hadn't concealed or destroyed it, he had just forgotten when he last had had it in his hands. The longer he thought about it, the more certain he felt that Doro had been looking for something, something else. Schepp fell into all kinds of speculations; he hardly noticed the sheets of paper slipping from his hands and falling on the patterned wood of the parquet. The throbbing in his throat grew worse and worse, and a rushing in his ears began to make him dizzy.

Once he had opened the window he felt better. He tried not to shrink from the chilly presence of Doro waiting for him on the other side of the desk, with a smell about her that would certainly have embarrassed her very much when she was alive. When you're dead, she had once whispered in his ear before going to sleep, you can't smell anyone any more, isn't that sad? Schepp felt ashamed on her behalf, and whispered that there was no need for her to feel ashamed, he loved her all the same. Perhaps he loved her even more for her inviolability and the stillness she radiated, had radiated even in life, had he ever told her that?

He replaced the cap on her fountain pen, righted the empty glass, retrieved the scattered sheets of paper from the floor and hesitated again, staring at the last page of Doro's comments. They read:

... turned into its opposite, the gentle wind above, the rejoicing lake beneath. 'It is good to cross the great water.' But without you, Schepp, do you understand, without you. As far as I'm concerned, and now I will say it once and for all, you can go straight to Hell! Along with Hanni and Nanni and Lina and Tina and

whatever they might be called. Your
I'm sorry, my head
suddenly hurts again,
like when I

Had Doro really written that? The spaces between the words became larger and larger, the rest was illegible, or no, at the bottom of the page, on the right-hand side, there was a little more in a shaking, entirely unfamiliar hand. It took Schepp some time to decipher it.

and now this too
well we'll
talk about it

Doro's last words – how they blurred before his eyes! The pattern of the parquet – how it stretched away to the surrounding bookcases, which held his publications and special editions as well as the standard works and volumes of commentaries, and on which were arranged all the things he had brought back from lecture tours and guest professorships, together with photographs of the children. Pia radiant just before her wedding, Louisa looking sulky because he never had time in the evening for anyone but his 'silly old Chinese people' – it was all there, but now so far removed that he saw none of it. Schepp had been left desperately alone. All he had were the sheets of paper that Doro had written for him.

But written in what kind of confusion, and by which Doro? Obviously she hadn't been entirely

her right mind; he'd never known her to sound so out of control, so wild, so forceful. What on earth had come over her? Doro, that fragile little woman whose discretion he had always admired! He wanted to start reading at once, from the beginning – 'As far as I'm concerned' – no, something wrong there – 'As far as I'm concerned, you can go straight to Hell', and when had she ever addressed him by his surname? Was she making fun of him?

It was no good, he *had* to read it. Yes, maybe he ought to have let the children know first, but did a few more minutes make any difference? Yes, he ought to have called a doctor to fill out a death certificate. But which doctor should he have called, when Doro wasn't even registered with a GP? And then it really would have been over, they'd take what was left of her away, and emptiness would move in, first into her favourite places, soon even into the most remote nooks and crannies – no! There was time enough for that in what life he had left. Gesticulating at the room, right index and little fingers extended as if in full flow, talking himself into true lecturer's mode, Schepp strode back and forth punching accentuated reprimands into the air with his fist, until he came to a halt by the window. And he saw that life outside was still going on as usual.

He would just stand there, then, stand there until he finally fell over, or woke up, or until the world came to an end. Standing like that also meant that he didn't have to look at Doro. What had she died of, anyway, when she had never been really sick? As if her doubts about conventional medicine had kept her healthy. Apart from two or three migraines a year, she had managed very well indeed without all the check-ups and aftercare that kept her sister happy. 'No tumour, no heart problems,' she had been told after a CT scan following one of her migraines. 'Everything's in good working order.' These days people didn't just drop dead at the age of fifty-six!

Although she herself used to be preoccupied with that very thing. It was how he had met her in the first place, he was then a mere Teaching Fellow whilst she was already a Lecturer in the Faculty. One day of the blue, she had told him about her fear, her great fear of the cold, dark lake whose shores you could reach immediately after you died, only to die there a second time. Or whatever it could be called when you were already dead. He had almost let slip a stupid remark, saw the tears in her eyes just in time.

So now it's happened, thought Schepp, now she really has gone to the place she's dreaded all her life. And what about me? I promised to hold her hand there, and I've failed her. Had she already reached the lake? Was she standing on the shore scanning the water for an island, the island that during their life together, he had hoped she would find there? Perhaps she had already taken her first steps into the water, bravely, without any fuss, in her usual way. Perhaps she was swimming with calm and steady strokes towards a second death? No, no, Schepp was sure that whatever Doro was doing on the other side, at least she wasn't doing *that*; she had always promised not to.

It had been in the winter term of 1979–80. He had been adoring her from afar for two years, ever since she had suddenly moved into the room opposite his. Whenever he had brought over a pot of green tea for her, she had been intently studying the I Ching. He was in his mid-thirties, just completing the thesis on ancient Chinese script that would qualify him as a lecturer, and well on the way to becoming number one in Germany in his field, because there was no number two working on the same subject. Nine years younger, she didn't have her PhD yet, but already had a full-time appointment. She was the constant subject of gossip at the Institute, perhaps even throughout the entire Berlin's Free University. Dorothee Wilhelmine Renate, Countess von Hagelstein, who apparently had been two years ahead of her age group at school, and who had spent a year in Taiwan before beginning her university studies; Dorothee Wilhelmine Renate, Countess von Hagelstein, whose forebears had made their fortune importing Chinese art, also acquiring a rather dubious reputation under the Third Reich; Dorothee Wilhelmine Renate, Countess von Hagelstein, courted by

everyone in Faculty II, Sinology, including the professor, who had created the post of assistant for her, with no trouble at all, and who then also saw to her seminars on ‘The History and Theory of Feng Shui’, and on ‘Women’s Poetry during the Tang Dynasty’, and of course, also, every term, on the subject of her dissertation: ‘Three Thousand Years of the Wisdom and Prophecies of the I Ching’; ‘The Flowing Together of All Things in the I Ching’; ‘The Dark Lines of the I Ching’.

When Schepp crossed the corridor in silence to place the pot of tea beside her on the desk, she was usually hunched over the commentaries of the emperors and philosophers of ancient China, surrounded by the sixty-four signs of the old oracular book. She had hung them on the walls of her room in an order that placed the water signs at the centre – yes, even a scholar strictly interested in philology, like Schepp, knew his way around the I Ching, not so much because it was regarded as sacred by soothsayers, and probably by Countess von Hagelstein too, as because the entire intellectual life of ancient China had been concerned with its interpretation. It was a subject to which grave and serious statesmen and scholars had turned their minds, even Confucius – Kung Tze – whom Schepp revered. He suspected that the little countess, who in spite of her youth seemed entirely absorbed in research and scholarship, interpreted it in mystical terms. Sometimes she emerged briefly from her reveries with a start when he came in. But usually she didn’t even notice when he stood beside her for a few too many seconds, gazing at her wide-eyed. What could she have seen behind the thick lenses of his glasses anyway, except his pupils, a couple of sparkling pinheads? With his extremely poor eyesight, Schepp was lucky to get out of the room again without bumping into everything. No, he was certain that nothing could bind this perfect young woman to a man like him. Even his school-leaving exams had been a test that he had passed successfully only because his teachers recognized his talent and his studies had been financed by a foundation for gifted students. It was his place to be grateful and not ask for more than his due.

But one day in the late autumn of 1979, when he was still addressing Doro as Fräulein Dorothea, although she had specially asked him to drop the ‘Fräulein’, she had looked up as soon as he had placed the teapot on to her desk, and, even more surprisingly, had asked if he had any idea what the next world would be like. After all, in the Faculty he was considered a specialist on Kung Tze; she, on the other hand, felt a greater sympathy with Taoism. So ... In fact here Schepp agreed with Confucius, who held that it was not worthwhile dwelling on what we could not know. But of course, he said forcefully he could, he had an idea about the next world, in fact an extremely precise idea. There wasn’t one. He didn’t want to live for ever in any case, he added defiantly; there was an end to everything, even a sausage had *two* ends. The next moment, he would have been prepared to convert to Tibetan Red Hat Buddhism, but Fräulein Dorothee merely regarded him with her dark eyes, and the conversation was over.

Curiously enough, however, she picked up on it the next day exactly where she had broken it off. As soon as Schepp appeared in her doorway she asked him, sounding quite anxious, almost imploring, how, as a thinking human, he could say such a thing. All the cool, objective distance that constituted not a little of her magic was gone; she pleaded with him as if he were a friend who must be saved from some terrible error. There had to be something after death, she said; surely life with all its beauty couldn’t end just like that? There were tears in her eyes. Then, as soon as Schepp had agreed with her, nodding vigorously, they grew even darker, and she said softly, as if he wasn’t there, as if she was completely alone, that of course it wouldn’t go on in as beautiful a way as before, far from it. In the Southern Commentaries on the I Ching, she came across passages in which the sign for ‘lake’ was curiously ambivalent, as if – unlike, for instance, the signs for ‘wind’, ‘mountain’ or ‘sky’ – it wasn’t just referring to something joyful, which was what the Commentaries usually stressed, but also to its

opposite, something dark that had to be overcome. However, none of the commentaries told you how to do that, as if the lake – ah, well, she didn't suppose the mystical side of it would interest a linguist.

Far from it. Schepp dispelled that illusion immediately. And so it was that while for two years he had known nothing about his new colleague in the Faculty apart from the rumours circulating about her, he now discovered her most secret fears in the course of a single afternoon.

After death, she said, if she understood the Southern Commentaries correctly, the process of dying only really begins when the soul is judged and purified. Sooner or later you come to a lake, its water motionless, in the midst of a bleak landscape. From a distance it may seem like a mountain lake, one larger, much larger, and the far shore can only be vaguely discerned in the diffuse light. Indeed, all the light in that place is muted, she said; there are no colours, no smells, not a breath of wind, not a sound, and that is sufficiently terrible, but worst of all you are entirely alone, yet you must enter the cold water and swim across. Swim to the far shore where perhaps life goes on somehow or other, but that makes no real difference, for you have no chance at all of reaching the shore; your powers are bound to fail by the time you get to the middle of the lake at the latest, everyone's powers fail. Then you let yourself drift for a while, becoming colder and colder, and at last you are drawn down into the depths as if by a giant hand, and ...

And?

No 'and'. Then you are really dead, and it's all over.

For ever?

For ever. And the lake, she said, was so dark and cold, and it frightened her.

But who says, asked Schepp, that you have to go into the water? You could just stay on the shore. Or walk around the lake if you really wanted to reach the other side.

Oh, said Fräulein Dorothee, and there were tears in her eyes again, the lake exerts a magical attraction, and although you know you're sure to meet your end in it, it shimmers promisingly like a new beginning, and you can't escape it.

Schepp briefly thought of responding with a knowing grin in anticipation of a smile in return – but there was no way she could mean all this seriously – but instead ironic objections spilled out of him. Surely, he said, the lake must be full by now, full to the brim, and in fact if all the people who had died over thousands and millions of years had drowned in it, Doro probably wouldn't have to swim when her turn came, she could walk across the water dry-shod. The next moment he could have bitten his tongue off, but Fräulein Dorothee just regarded him briefly, and once again the conversation was over.

After that not a day went by when Schepp didn't think of the lake and its inhospitable shores, and the way Dorothee Wilhelmine Renate, Countess von Hagelstein shuddered at the thought of having to undress there. Sometimes he pondered whether she might enter the water fully dressed, or whether he might swim from the far side of the lake to meet her. He didn't make much progress with her that way at all. But he made headway with the cold, dark lake. By winter's end he had a very clear picture of what he could even imagine the surrounding landscape, the vague shape of a mountain pine, a wan sky flashing with distant lightning. So he was greatly surprised when Fräulein Dorothee, still in her coat, came into his room. Since that last conversation she hadn't deigned to glance at him when he had brought her pots of tea in silent plea for forgiveness. Her hair was a bit tousled; a film of perspiration gleamed on her forehead and upper lip.

Could she show him something, she asked. She knew he didn't believe in it, but now, now she could prove it. Prove that it existed. The lake. Scarcely an hour later they entered the great glass cube of Berlin's New National Gallery, which was flooded with light. The little that Schepp had found out

from Fräulein Dorothee on the way amounted to the fact that on a recent visit she had discovered a picture that, she could have sworn, hadn't been hanging there before, a picture that, as far as she knew, had been missing since the war. It had suddenly turned up again without any fanfare although its reappearance should have caused a sensation. She had been deeply moved when she had suddenly been confronted with it; the original had a power at which copies merely hinted, a shattering finality in fact. It was proof.

With great determination she led him to the basement of the building – grey, carpeted floor, a functional atmosphere – where suddenly her mood became reverential. She stopped in front of a gilt-framed painting perhaps one and a half metres wide by just under one metre high. In the picture ... the surprised Schepp turned to his companion, but she was gazing in silent fascination, so he had himself to come to terms with the fact that the painting showed not a cold, dark lake but a huge island, a monumental, towering wall of rock, a rocky curve around a group of cypress trees with a flickering violet-tinged sky in the background. Before the island, as Schepp's eyes became accustomed to the gloomy hues, he saw a boat making for its shore, with a white, muffled figure standing in front of a coffin draped with white cloth. He could also make out various steps and openings in the rock resembling archaic portals. Just to make sure, he glanced at the picture's title. He had already realized that a few strokes of the oars would bring a new corpse to the island, to be placed on a plinth or in one of the burial chambers. Yes, the island impressed him; there was something so fundamentally desolate about it that he imagined the peace of the dead reigning in that place as a dignified form of despair. What fate as dark as those cypresses awaited the newly dead?

Only then did Schepp focus on what little the painting showed of the cold lake itself – water so calm that it reflected the vertical walls of rock without any tremor on its surface, motionless all the way to the horizon, which was nothing but a straight line. An endless, dead sea.

How, he finally whispered to Fräulein Dorothee, did she know it was a lake? She seemed unwilling to abandon her mood of rapt attention.

Anyone could see that, she said.

He gave up on the muted whispers appropriate for a museum. Lake or not, it certainly wasn't empty; there was even an island in it, a place where life went on, as it were, for the dead. Wasn't that prospect worth something?

'Please forgive me,' Fräulein Dorothee interrupted him without taking her eyes off the picture, 'but it's not an island.'

They stood in front of the painting for a long time, so long that one of the attendants wandered over and confided in a friendly tone that this was his own favourite picture. After he had turned away to keep an eye on the other visitors lingering only briefly in front of various pictures, Fräulein Dorothee explained.

Anyone could see, she said, that the painting was intended to be surreal; it skilfully kept its real subject hidden; the island was nothing but a reflection, an illusion that the painter had added as a kind of consolation. The boat, the ferryman, the muffled figure were all concessions to the taste of the time. The whole thing might just be reflected light from the depths of the lake, designed to lure us into the next world. 'Oh, Hinrich,' she said, the words wrenched out of her, 'I don't want to go there.'

At that moment it happened: *it* because Schepp himself was not quite sure what he was doing when he began to speak, telling her that he wasn't afraid of death; he would simply die before she did and scout out the terrain for her.

'Would you really do that for me?' asked Fräulein Dorothee after a while.

Schepp nodded mutely; he could not even begin to feel certain of the full import of her question.

Then he added: if he died first he'd wait for her – again, it was not like Schepp, growing bolder, reach for Fräulein Dorothee's little clenched fist, pressing it clumsily. And then, he said, he'd take her hand and go with her, they would reach the far shore together. Or at least the island. If the island turned out to be real.

The next moment he was wishing the ground could have swallowed him up. Fräulein Dorothee took a deep, audible breath, but she was looking at him, and not even in surprise, or with amusement or indignation –

‘Or we'll drown together,’ she said, exhaling, also audibly. ‘At least that's better than drowning alone.’

Still she did not withdraw her hand. As he turned to her slowly, looking cautiously at her through the thick lenses of his glasses, she seemed to be a hallucination which might dissolve into thin air if he regarded her too closely, translucent, untouchable, a creature from another star. And yet, and yet, she left her hand in his for an extraordinary length of time. She stood beside him, smiled at him, as if her burden had been lifted from her mind.

That decided things. In the same year, Dorothee Wilhelmine Renate, Countess von Hagelstein, became Doro Schepp, rejecting a double surname, and instead of fulfilling the hopes of the East Asian department of the Faculty she soon became a mother, abandoning her dissertation and, to the horror of the entire teaching body, the promise of her glittering career. Nothing much became of the now fully qualified Dr Hinrich Schepp either, number one in the field of ancient Chinese language. His professor was able to prevent at least that.

Schepp found that he was now sitting on the floor, propped against one of the legs of the desk. Not only he could go on sitting there, lost in his memories, maybe even dropping off to sleep, dissolving into the past, quietly disappearing. If it hadn't been for that smell. Schepp turned away from the sun since his operation he hadn't been able to tolerate bright light. He moved around the desk without rising from the floor. He was now looking at Doro's legs, the kimono hanging down below her knees. Almost at once he was wide awake and slid closer. Looked at Doro's swollen calf. Oh no, how fast it was changing, marbled in shades of pale violet; she would have hated that. Schepp groped in her direction, finally grasped one of her legs, then pressed cautiously with his other hand, trying to banish the ugly marks of *livor mortis* from her calf; that was its name, wasn't it, *livor mortis*, discolouration after death. But where to make the marks go? First he tried upwards, then he pressed down equally towards her slipper. There was a dull sound. Alarmed, Schepp hit his head and saw Doro's hair dangling in front of him. This was too much. He took the hand and held it firmly until it stopped moving, until he had calmed down. Held it as he had held it twenty-nine years ago, as he had promised he would if the worst happened. Now at last he was doing just that.

‘I'm here with you,’ he promised Doro's hand tenderly. ‘I'm holding you tight. Even if you can't feel it any more, we'll get through this.’

A while later he was standing beside her, moved to tears by his own solemnity, and placing her left arm back on the desk. However, it immediately slipped off again. First Schepp had to straighten Doro's torso. That was difficult; it was almost impossible to correct the angle of her throat and neck. But though he had to push and pull quite hard, he tried to comfort himself with the thought that he was helping Doro, even with these pitiful efforts – just as she would help him one day. From now on she would wait for him on the shore of the lake, ready to offer him her energetic little hand as soon as he found himself there with her. On their wedding day she had told him she would do for him exactly what he had said he would do for her.

If *she* were the first to die, she said, she would wait there for him; it would be better to go together

whatever happened, much better.

She had renewed that promise on all of their wedding anniversaries, and although Schepp was sceptical as ever about the existence of the lake and all the rest of it, he did not express his doubts, and indeed saw the promise as reassurance that their marriage would last for ever.

Curiously enough, today Doro's idea of the next world did not seem to him at all ridiculous but perfectly credible, indeed consoling. He was glad he could cherish one last hope of seeing her again. The lake was better than nothing. How frail she looked! Only now did it strike Schepp that she could no longer disguise her frailty with the radiant smile he had always loved. She sat in his desk chair like a porcelain doll, her nose a little sharper than usual, her cheeks visibly paler, as pale as – Schepp couldn't help thinking of the new waitress, the look she had given him when he had settled his bill the previous night, and her captivatingly pale face.

He forced himself to turn his full attention to his wife. She had become a little less familiar with the colour in her cheeks. Having said that, even during her lifetime she had somehow always been distant and strange in spite of her daily presence. Perhaps because of his middle-class origins, which made him ill at ease in an eight-room apartment with such elegant furnishings. Or perhaps because of her ikebana flower-arranging sessions and her meditative silences. She talked to plants and engaged with objects in her mind; her intuitive nature was not only quick to understand human relationships but also went straight to the heart of the inanimate world. Everything whispered its meaning to her, a meaning that eluded Schepp, meticulous philologist though he was.

For him, her attraction probably lay in that very attitude. She did not need cheerful company, she was in constant touch with things both higher and more profound. Bringing up the children, looking after a rather remote freelance Sinologist, seemed to be all that linked her to the pitiful world this side of the grave. In the evenings she usually sought the company of the I Ching, equipping herself for the challenges of the future, no doubt also of the next world. Before every important decision she sought the advice of the ancient signs. Usually the outcome was good. However, as the years passed she had become ever quieter, more fragile, almost transparent. She did not often smile at Schepp, or take him in her arms to tell him about the cold, dark lake. Or was that just her way of avoiding the conversations that a husband and wife should really have? Schepp could never again touch the heart of her life's secret, as he had on that day when, faced with an isle of the dead, their lives had been decided. Admittedly he had at best a very vague idea of the nature of Doro's fear of the next world. Probably because as a man who did not know much about mysticism he was bound to ask the wrong questions, inevitably conveying some of his own slight distaste, or the derision that would be hard for him to suppress, or his categorical doubts. And of course Doro sensed that. At least, she never tried to discuss the matter with him.

How different she was when it came to praising or criticizing his essays and papers! Schepp glanced across the top of the desk, lingering where there was nothing, now, between Doro's hands but a dark mark on the leather surface – and then he remembered what it was that he wanted to do. He found the manuscript, with the final page added by Doro on top. Sorting through it quickly, he glanced over her notes in the margins and between the lines without really understanding them. At last he had all the sheets in the correct order, with Doro's closing comments at the bottom of the pile. He could begin reading.

But that was impossible. Who could read in this situation, beginning at the beginning, reading every word? There was also the fact that the pages began with his own text, the work he had surely discarded long since. It was absurd. Schepp kept looking through them again and again, at the place where Doro's closing comments began – how familiar her writing was! At least there was that to cling

to.

But as soon as he began dipping into the manuscript, the sight of her handwriting made him feel perplexed. Increasingly uneasy, then downright discontented. How could he bear to read what she had written on that final page? Doro had probably not been responsible for her own actions so close to the end. Schepp put that sheet aside quickly, but his eyes lingered on another one of the last pages: 'I am under some pressure, because I must finish this farewell letter tomorrow.' Oh God, what had she been intending to do? Did she realize that her own death was imminent? Or, as she wrote what she wrote had she even – even anticipated it, gone to meet it? No, out of the question, Doro would never have done such a thing.

Or would she?

That morning, Schepp reluctantly turned back into what he had been all his life, a patient interpreter of primary sources. At the end of his typescript, Doro's notes began with a question mark in the margin, and on the back of the final sheet she had written an abrupt 'As if he would have said such a thing in that situation'. Within the text she had crossed out the name of a bar and substituted the name of his local. What was the point of that? Equally puzzling was the marginal question mark nearer the beginning: 'Why not just call him Hinrich and be done with it?' Schepp leafed through the conclusion again. 'You and I know that's not the end of the story.' Good heavens, it sounded as if he would have done better not to read it at all.

But to take the comments in at a glance was impossible. He had to read the entire manuscript. Reading it from the beginning, or it would be far more difficult to endure. And he really wanted to know, for now he was feeling angry, reproaching Doro, and at the same time he was horrified by the strength of the anger building up inside him. There should be no rancour, no harsh words in the face of death. There must be a misunderstanding. He only needed to read the manuscript from the beginning, then Doro's final lines would surely make sense. Yes, now Schepp really did want to know what she had intended to discuss with him, and why she had chosen this particular manuscript, one he had never shown her because ... because he had decided it was a miserable failure and resolved not to pursue his ambitions to write fiction. He had never regretted the decision, or he would hardly have become the authority he undoubtedly was among Sinologists. Very well, so the novel he had tried to write back then, *Marek the Drunkard*, had come to such a hopeless dead end on page twelve that he had had no idea how to continue, and he had abandoned it. Only to add a few more wild, frantic scenes which he then destroyed immediately out of embarrassment, or at least he had tucked them away somewhere safe.

Marek the Drunkard. No sooner had Schepp begun reading at last, beginning with the first line than he noticed that he was not really concentrating. At first he read as if in a trance, instantly forgetting each word. Then he skipped entire scenes, not wanting to linger line by line over the manuscript he had picked up only because of Doro's final comments, wishing still less to dwell on her detailed deletions, rephrasings and additions. The church clock struck twelve. He perceived the sound like an admonition to devote himself to reading the pages with the gravity they required. Shafts of sunlight shone into the room. He saw the motes dancing in them. Schepp now stood at the tall reading desk at the far end of the room, where the light was noticeably more muted. He shifted his gaze wearily to the back of Doro's head, her black and silver shock of hair falling over the chair-back, and noticed a fly circling in the air. With some effort he moved and shooed it away.

His gaze passed over the gladioli to the *chaise-longue*, and he remembered how, in the early years of their marriage, Doro would often lie there reading while he worked at the desk, both absorbed in their separate occupations yet not alone. This arrangement struck him as ideal for the situation

which he found himself.

It was not easy to lift Doro out of the chair. Her shoulders were already stiff, while the rest of her body was so limp that she kept slipping from his grasp. When he had finally got a firm hold on her he felt the dampness of her kimono; the fabric around her hips was soaked. But he managed to downplay the awkwardness of this through assiduity – Doro lay so light in his arms, so light.

When he had laid her on the *chaise-longue* a little sigh escaped her, which terrified him. Would she suddenly open her eyes? He so hoped she would that the idea almost frightened him. He even held his breath, but Doro remained motionless. The marks of *livor mortis* on her forearms were large now, you couldn't miss them; good thing the kimono had sleeves to cover them.

Schepp was gasping for breath. Schepp had things to do – suddenly everything seemed important. Once he had managed to fold Doro's hands – they eluded him and came apart again and again, until (I'm sorry, Doro, I don't want to hurt you, you're being so difficult today), until he finally forced them to grasp each other – and once he had put a cushion under her neck, she lay there, the familiar filigree figure. He did not dare to straighten the corners of her mouth, he did not dare to press her jaw shut, and he definitely did not dare to close her eyes. He covered her small, stubbornly twisted body when had he seen it as closely as this during the last few years? – up to the shoulders with a light throw so that she would not be cold.

Now he felt better, now she would be pleased with him. He pushed back a silvery strand of hair from her forehead and buried his head in the hollow of her throat. Hadn't he been wanting to do this for a long time? He pressed his lips to her cold skin just where his favourite mole lay on the other side of her neck. One last time, he considered and rejected the idea of calling a doctor – if he had failed Doro at the moment of death, he would at least keep vigil beside her. If he sat down here and now with the manuscript he could at least share her last hours in retrospect.

He sat on the edge of the *chaise-longue*, carefully sliding a little further back, then a little further back again, pushing Doro's legs up against the upholstery. For a while the fly buzzed somewhere overhead, then silence returned and with it came a sense of space, as if the things all around were moving further away from him, right back to the walls. Schepp was sitting beside his wife and amidst the great silence. Now finally he could read in peace.

No one knew whether Marek had been a heavy drinker before Hanni started waitressing and drove him all crazy, every last one of us. Judging by what we heard about him at the Blaue Maus, seems highly unlikely. After all, he lived in a 2CV Dolly delivery van, on the move practically the whole time, and we had to watch how much he drank. The cool thing was, he had a water container on the roof of the Dolly. A pipe ran down from the container into a sawn-off aluminium bread bin welded into the wheel housing. That was his wash basin. Imagine that! He liked to park at night in alleys or backyards where the coppers wouldn't roust him out in a hurry – a guy like that very likely couldn't even show an official document saying he was unemployed, no fixed abode neither, you can bet the coppers would've liked to put him behind bars. His long hair, torn old army surplus jacket, patched jeans didn't help either – typical dropout, just the sort the law likes to take in for a body search. On the other hand, although we couldn't really believe it, on the other hand Marek, of all people, claimed to be engaged to be married, and when he showed his narrow gold ring with an inscription inside, *PETRA Let's do it – 12.4.1971*, we all had to admit that it was serious, I mean more than a whole year of incredible length of time!

The following evening, again, we couldn't believe it. Marek, secretly and deep down – a bourgeois. However this ominous fiancée of his, who none of us had ever seen, had gone off to Greece witho

him to some island to be an au pair? Wolfi told us, being the manager here, spreading rumours at the bar was kind of his duty. You got so many rumours about Marek that we eventually gave up asking questions and believed anything of him. Apparently his parents came over from some eastern country. Apparently he was a petrolhead and good at tinkering with stuff. Apparently he drove all the way home from Athens with a broken clutch cable, changed gear just by listening, got a great reputation with some of us that way. Not with the girls, though. Not the ladies, at least not with Hanni. She laughed at him outright when she brought him another beer, 'There you go, pet, no laying it on too thick!' While with Big Jörn, who always made a palaver out of putting her tip where she least expected it, with Big Jörn she used to thank him with a cheeky, 'So I guess that gets you a night with me'. Which Marek of course heard, even if he pretended he was too busy rolling a fag.

Actually we didn't know much about him, he didn't say much himself. He only talked about his Dolly. How he bought it with the rusty floor and no MOT certificate and all for 250 marks. How he fell more in love with it every time he hand-picked a spare part for it off a scrap heap and built it in. And how he finally painted the Dolly bright red with a roller. Always something to be welded or greased, cleaned, like in any household, he said. He also claimed that now his Dolly not only featured a proper mattress, 120 by 180 centimetres, but also a duvet, a spirit cooker, a whole lot of candlesticks, oh yes, and the wash basin had an outlet, he had all he needed. Wasn't so good on rainy days when he was in the middle of town, he said, everything getting wet, you had to shit in a bucket too. On those days you were glad to get into bed, and then ...? Well, what he did then we'd no idea. Some claimed he wrote poetry, maybe he read or listened to Jimi Hendrix on his fifty-watt speaker that he'd built in even before the heater and the cooker.

Or maybe he just lay there and thought of Hanni. In which activity, God knows, like I said, he was not alone. The Blaue Maus had always been a great place to crash out, known for it all over town. Around about midnight everyone who'd already had a skinful somewhere else was there, ready to make a night of it. But then Hanni came as waitress – as matey with everyone as if she was another guy. And the way she went around in cut-off jeans, T-shirts much too small for her, that didn't make things any better. She'd push her way through the customers, teasing them while she served the drinks – 'Fancy a nibble with that?' – and if someone tried getting back at her, with her freckles and her bold way of making insinuating advances, she'd send him packing, throwing the guy out herself. 'Is his big brother here too? He'd better leave as well.' That on its own was worth a visit to the Maus for all of us.

Life at the Maus was never boring. What with the place being full of alcoholics, jazz trumpeters, philosophers and other such colourful figures, and from two or three in the morning everyone talking to everyone else across tables and up and down the entire bar. In case of doubt there was always Muriel. Because Hanni, as cheerily as she joked, cursed or knocked back tequilas, was basically the opposite of flirtatious. If someone made the slightest move behind her back, suggesting never mind the pretzel and peanuts, he could fancy nibbling something very different, she'd immediately swing round, brown eyes with all those tiny gold flecks in them putting on a fireworks display, hand on her hip, asking as we could all hear, 'Who was it wanted a nibble, then?' And when someone had ordered nuts or cigarettes, reckoning he was in with a serious chance, he'd often take his disappointment out on Muriel. Hanni's dog, a mongrel who regularly hung out with us. Did the old boy know who the kicks he often got under the table at dawn were really meant for?

Hanni. Acting so matey and on a level with everyone meant she shielded herself from all sorts of problems. Seemed like she didn't much care for men. Big Jörn, who late at night would behave as if he could have her at the drop of a hat, couldn't even provoke her into contradicting his claims. As for Marek, the sort who admired her from afar, she mocked him: 'Still a bit wet behind the ears, are we

But he had his devious way of getting closer to her. Through Mutt. Marek treated the dog with particular respect, like an old gentleman. When everything was open-ended chaos around four or five in the morning, he'd move close to the dog to protect him from the worst.

Most of all Mutt had to be protected from Big Jörn. Jörn liked firewater, gave you 'smooth bodied juices and a pure complexion', he said. When he'd tipped enough of it down his throat to set light to his nerve endings he'd go up in flames, all for Hanni, of course. Then Marek just shrugged and took himself off to a quieter corner. There he sat, didn't get much joy in the corner either, couldn't join in the conversation like ours at the bar, just automatically raised his glass when the time seemed right. Couldn't really get real friends that way. Meanwhile Big Jörn was full of drunk boasting: Hanni, let me tell you, what a live wire, you never know if she's going to laugh or bite. So when he said that and more of the same, the only thing Hanni would do is pause in front of him flashing her eyes to shut him up. Those nights Mutt usually suffered a lot.

It could have gone on like this for years. But it all changed one hot, humid July night. 'Love Like a Man' had been playing for some time, it was Wolfi's habitual chucking-out number. But as usual it was only him who set off home, leaving the field to Hanni. And us. Big Jörn really got into his stride on such nights. Entertained the whole Maus with his boastful stories, spiked with racy little details. Stood a round. Firewater for everyone. Every time Marek had to raise his glass to him you can bet he was thinking, the hell with you. 'Another little one won't hurt,' Big Jörn announced, launching into praise for Hanni's charms – if looks could kill he'd have died several times over. But she said nothing at most just flashed her eyes, and still no one knew whether Big Jörn was her boyfriend, her ex-boyfriend or just showing off. We wanted him to verify his claims. Now Big Jörn had a reputation to lose. So he reached for Hanni just as she was trying to steer past him with a tray of empty glasses, and while we were still scattering from their clinking and clattering, he laid her down on the bar and gave her a kiss in front of us all.

But not a nice sort of kiss.

The other sort.

He finally lets her go with a triumphant grin. Hanni is breathing heavily, then she starts screaming. Now we all know what to think, and the next moment there's a right old punch-up going on, a real clattering and clanking, and all together we throw Big Jörn out into the street. There Hanni gives him a ringing slap. And just as he's about to get up and scam, Mutt shoots out of the bar barking and snapping at his trouser legs. For a moment Big Jörn glares at the dog, then sends him flying against the wall with a hearty kick. Now everyone would like to kick the shit out of Big Jörn, every last one of us. But while we still stand, gaping, only Marek – Marek of all people, who'd been hanging back until now – first he goes over to Mutt, who's writhing about whining, then without a word he goes up to Big Jörn and smashes his nose in. You should've seen it! Big Jörn howls, there's blood running through his fingers and down his neck, and off he runs.

Next day no one's waiting tables in the Blaue Maus. After much questioning we find out from Wolfi that he's seen this coming right from the beginning, it couldn't end well, a girl who carries on with the customers has no place here. Now what? Now nothing. Still nothing the next evening and the next one. When we threaten to go and drink wherever Hanni turns up if he doesn't take her back of her own free will, Wolfi assures us that he'd rather go bust. But it's not her fault, says none other than Marek, suddenly raising his voice and

Schepp had managed to read up to this point in spite of Doro's corrections, at first with sceptical curiosity, then with horror, finally with mounting anger. At the beginning she had just scored one of

two sets of double lines in the margin to draw attention to something, followed by an exclamation or question mark – he knew her annotation style well enough to understand what she meant. But soon the marginal notes became more extensive, forthright, cutting. Doro had always been a model of discretion, but now that the sharp tone of her comments was unmitigated by lenience, she sparkled with icy elegance. Did she want to make him feel inferior? How was he to take it when she, of all people, told him in the margin what she thought Marek was really doing when the text said expressly that he was just lying there thinking of Hanni? Schepp was embarrassed. In the next section wasn't she openly criticizing not only his protagonist but him, the author, for being inhibited – why did he keep beating about the bush, circling around the subject? Had he never had a little nibble of someone like himself? And when Big Jörn got into his stride, once again there was the remark, 'Oh, why not call him Hinrich and be done with it?' On the back of the sheet, however, she had written, 'Your admiration for him is ridiculous.'

Schepp was extremely annoyed. The solemn mood in which he had wanted to say his last goodbye to Doro was gone. Being dead means no one can answer you back, he snorted at her. But it was his next correction that cut him to the quick. The manuscript slipped from his hands, he got up and looked around him, at a loss. Then he started pacing back and forth, beating time in the air with his index and little fingers to the rhythm of the retorts bursting out of him.

What had put him in such a rage, what had him pacing back and forth in full lecturing mode, was a single tiny pen stroke. At the place where Marek spoke up for the first time, Doro had crossed out the name Hanni and written 'Dana' over it. The louder Schepp's heels tapped the wooden floor, the more baffled he felt. As soon as he had convinced himself that Doro had chosen that name at random, it struck him, however, that this could be no coincidence. She had come looking for him, hadn't she, one evening maybe four years ago, in La Pfiff; she'd seen Dana, even spoken briefly to her. Or had it been five years ago? But what would a girl called Dana, might he ask, have to do with *Marek the Drunkard*? The only parallel with Hanni being that Dana had been a waitress too – although decades later!

Schepp stopped in the doorway through which he had come to begin the day what now seemed a eternity ago. He breathed deeply, in and out, until he thought, again, that Doro must have forgotten to change the water in the vase. With every breath the silence came closer, creeping towards him from the far end of the room. Eventually it once again embraced him entirely.

But this was a different kind of silence. Schepp stood there listening to what was in his mind. Outside of his mind? For a while he heard a buzzing, sometimes closer, sometimes further away, as if it were a part of the silence. Only when the sound stopped did he remember what was causing it. He stepped across the wooden floor as warily as a man about to commit murder, reached the *chaise longue*, saw the fly sitting on Doro's eye just where the lids met at a sharp angle. He could hardly swat it while it was there. Where did a fly come from anyway at this time of year; shouldn't it be dead by now? Only when he was almost touching it could he shoo it away.

Schepp's glance lingered on the little slits of Doro's eyes, moved to the bridge of her nose, which was sticking up in the air, to her lower jaw hanging so inelegantly open. How could he close it without hurting her? All at once he was back to loving her as much as ever; there would be time to quarrel later. Schepp knelt down in front of Doro and looked closely into her open mouth. He could see nothing in that dark space.

He inhaled the smell of death and shuddered at the thought that she would leave her jaws open like that for ever and ever.

How exactly did *rigor mortis* work?

The fermentation of bodily fluids, decomposition, decay?

He didn't want to think about it.

~~'All right, Doro,' he said hesitantly, raising his voice, 'if you're going to start about Dana the please take things in their proper order.'~~

Even when the children were still at home, and he was glad to get an hour or two in the evenings devote to the heroic tales of the Tang dynasty or the brushstrokes of Song calligraphy, Doro had sometimes, surprisingly, come back out of her bedroom and over to him at his desk to – well, to say do what? He had never known what to make of it, and if he asked her for an explanation she quite often went away looking offended. As if she had wanted to bring him out of his shell. Yet these kinds of approaches had never been helpful. You have to tackle difficulties head on, systematically, and what use was it now – Schepp was back in the full flow of his perorations, once again speaking emphatically and clearly like a tutor lecturing a difficult examination candidate – what use was it now to drop Dana's name at the very first opportunity and then abandon him with it? Things have to make sense before they can be cleared up, right?

The Dana business was long ago and forgotten now. Still, at the very least, you should begin at the beginning to leave no room for doubt. And anyway, this wasn't how he had imagined their farewell, so full of misunderstandings. The beginning had certainly been his operation. No, actually it had already started in his childhood. Even at the age of five he spent most of his time with books, his glasses would have only got in the way playing football. Yes, it had all started in his childhood, which had consisted mostly of being teased. At least he couldn't be beaten up; he was so short-sighted that he was thought unable to defend himself, almost on a par with a girl. And if it hadn't started in his childhood then definitely in his youth, a time of renunciation. Where his contemporaries succeeded he stood aside. Luckily the details eluded him because he saw anything that was more than three or five metres away only in indistinct outline. Of course he noticed that something was going on. He just didn't let on, learned another language instead. And although at university he was at last considered a genius and quietly admired, he still always had to stand aside when the real prizes were handed out.

Admittedly his tranquil life as a research fellow rather than a university professor had its advantages; he didn't have to bother with feminist Sinology, or modern business Chinese or even online-chat Chinese, all ghastly prospects for a committed scholar like him, devoted to the study of primary sources. You could escape such horrors only by burying yourself in the ancient texts. Nevertheless he had loved life in his own guarded way, and after all he had been lucky once. Although looking back he couldn't understand why a woman like Dorothee Wilhelmine Renate, Countess von Hagelstein had chosen him. Then, in the summer of 2003, after more than two wonderful peaceful decades with her, on his doctor's advice, he had laser surgery on his eyes. Whereupon the tranquillity ended.

It was terrible to see the world in such detail, so sharply outlined, all of a sudden! It had always been so comfortably impersonal in its remote milkiness; Schepp hadn't felt he was missing anything. Now it dazzled him with a confusingly large number of details – could someone like Doro, who had never had any problems with her eyes, ever have imagined that? Overnight his life seemed like one long missed opportunity. If he had previously renounced a great deal, never complained, he was now determined to make up for it. Schepp developed a need for other people which he had never believed possible. He wanted to participate in just about everything, at least as a spectator. And because of all these needs and wants, peace of mind became a thing of the past.

First he encountered afresh his hand-picked coterie of students. Then he realized that it was possible to go to a nearby bar or café after seminars to continue their conversations in a more informal setting, and to develop relationships. Oh, Schepp was so curious about everything and everyone. He

was as hungry for the world as if anything that had satisfied him before no longer counted. As if he had to reinvent himself from scratch and prove himself like a man who had no more excuses left. Not that he had serious ambitions, heaven forbid! But to be open and receptive to everything that previously had been out of sight, out of reach – up to a point, of course; after all, Schepp was married – well, to be receptive to everything there was to be seen and perhaps studied more closely, he should expect that of himself, shouldn't he?

Then came a hot, humid July evening. The unworldly scholar had turned into a positive charm and in the protective circle of his students had become familiar with the few bars around the Free University campus. A PhD student had suggested the dimly lit La Pfiff because it was delightful and empty. This is the moment when Dana appears in the picture, although at the time of course no one knew her name; she was merely an unknown woman standing at the bar. At first glance a woman in a trouser suit, everything about her luxurious, accompanied by a gentleman and another lady. At second glance a woman with short hair neatly parted, strikingly pale skin, alarmingly large eye sockets with weary dark eyes. When she turned her bony face with its prominent cheekbones towards the man on her left or the lady on her right, that was sufficiently exciting for a man like Schepp.

And then suddenly he saw her in the arms of the man – no, really the man was in hers – he was unable to fend her off. Schepp drained his glass of red wine in a single swallow. His PhD student could discuss what they liked, he had eyes only for the unknown woman. She surely was going to kick the man right into the ground any moment now. Then she calmly raised her right leg – or was it her left leg? Made no difference – and wrapped it around his hips, drawing him closer, her tongue working in his mouth unabated as if she wanted to devour him there and then. The next moment, however, she was pushing him away, turning from him to the lady, who had been watching with interest, and smiling.

That ought to have been enough for one evening. But then came the kiss between the two women. At first Schepp was sure his eyes must be deceiving him when he saw the unknown woman in the arms of the other lady, whom she did not just allow to kiss her – by now he really couldn't believe his eyes – oh no! The lady bit the unknown woman's neck. When she finally moved away, Schepp saw a mark on the skin. A dark blue tattoo the size of an one-euro coin. A few moments later they were all three standing at the bar as if nothing had happened. Schepp's mouth was dry. For the rest of the evening he couldn't help looking over at them frequently, especially at the alluring unknown woman. Soon he was certain about the sign. It sat right over one of the tendons at her throat, small enough to move every time she turned her head, and she turned her head frequently.

Just once that evening her eyes met his, staring him down, forcing him to look away – what a humiliation – before they went on scanning the room. When she finally left with the other two heading out into a night seemingly so vast that Schepp felt he could see the stars sparkling from where he sat, she passed close to him, and at last he could recognize the sign on her neck, a Chinese character. As he tried to decipher it, he almost became frightened, for he realized that he had seen it often, but where? The curve of the brushstroke was familiar, although it had not been elegantly executed as a tattoo; it was the sign for ... what? Schepp mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. It took him some time to realize that such a coincidence was not the work of Fate, least of all deliberately arranged for him. And that he too could go home now.

After that he dreamt of the sign at night. When Doro regarded him inquiringly during the day he looked down at the floor, ashamed. What could he have said to her? That evening an extraordinary thing had occurred in his life, a life that so far had known only an extraordinary absence of experience. From then on he kept a frequent eye on the scene of this event to see if there would be a sequel. Oh, he

had no ambitions of his own; it would only have been a case of looking, of participating in something he imagined as the simultaneous height of depravity and of bliss.

The devotion he had always received at home now became almost like a burden. He avoided it as much as he could. Yet it was Doro who solved the puzzle of the tattoo: as he sat in her room one afternoon at their usual time with a pot of green tea, his eye fell on the sign quite by chance. There was among the other sixty-three signs of the I Ching; Doro had hung them on the wall here as well. Schepp stood right in front of it; he couldn't possibly miss it. How beautiful it was when written by a master of calligraphy! He immediately asked Doro whether he could borrow one of her commentaries, if possible the Southern Commentaries, if she could spare the book. Doro raised an eyebrow in surprise. But how could he have explained himself?

Having found the sign and studied it almost daily, his peace of mind was definitely gone. The unknown woman, however, stood him up evening after evening, though he became a regular at the bar exchanging banter with this or that member of the staff. Paul, the manager, a jovial soul in his late forties with a well-tended moustache, known to everyone as Paulus, would greet him with, 'Evening Professor, doing okay, are we?' Paulus spent most of the evening behind the bar, an equable presence washing up glasses as if the goings-on were beneath his notice. La Pfiff was not plugged into the cultured bohemian milieu of the digital age; customers came in and either backed straight out again or didn't leave until hours later. By midnight everyone had both argued and fraternized with everyone else. In his own fashion, anyway, Schepp became part of it.

It was useful that La Pfiff was within walking distance of his apartment. The regular course of his days now gave way to an irregularity that in the end became routine, although it was the opposite of the former kind. Hitherto a man of the old school who combed his remaining hair over his bald pate and vacillated between melancholy and megalomania, Schepp took to shaving his head, choosing colourful handkerchiefs for his breast pocket, bought stronger aftershave, gained a certain authority with the occasional clever quibble that earned him a laugh – oh, he was tired of his reasonable mind. He hardly did any research; soon he wasn't even publishing, and there was an admixture of mockery in the respectful empathy he now encountered from his full-time colleagues at the University. He once even overheard someone calling him Professor Unrat, after the nickname – Professor Garbage – of Professor Raat, the protagonist of Heinrich Mann's novel. What did PhD students know about anything anyway? He also, and for the first time, offered an introductory course on the I Ching, much to the surprise of Doro, whom he now only ever saw when they drank tea together in the afternoon.

It could probably have gone on like this for ever. But then she reappeared – the woman of whom he thought every day with a shiver of admiration. Schepp had long given up any hope of seeing her again, but when he entered La Pfiff one evening he almost stumbled into her. There was no doubt, it was definitely her. With that Chinese character tattooed on her throat she was unmistakably branded. For a Sinologist, that was not a coincidence, but had been arranged by Fate especially for him, the only one there who understood the sign. She was standing at the bar with a tray in her hands on which Paulus was placing a round of drinks. She had come back.

This time to work as a waitress.

Her name was Dana, and she was from Poland 'or somewhere in the east'. Paulus knew almost nothing about her. No, he couldn't remember ever having seen her at La Pfiff before. Or if he did he wasn't saying, and Schepp was careful not to mention it. For the rest of the evening he watched her as casually as he could; he was bound to glance at a new waitress now and then. Once more their eyes met briefly, once more hers rested on him without any interest. When she served him she even asked the same question she had asked at the table next to his:

Where had a nice lad like him left his girlfriend this evening?

Schepp gulped down the contents of his glass so that he could order another drink quickly. The time he asked her straight out about her tattoo, saying he had seen her here in the summer, he was certain that he knew her.

In her charming accent Dana replied that she knew him and his sort too, and particularly that trick he'd have to think up something subtler.

'Oh, please!' objected Schepp. It wasn't like that at all, as a Sinologist he must protest, he'd have known a sign like the one on her neck with his eyes closed! He would in fact have liked to have leaned to his feet and bitten her right on that spot. He didn't say that, of course. Instead he asked whether she knew what a fateful mark she was carrying, an oracular pronouncement of which Kung Tze himself had said –

This was *too* subtle for her, said Dana, turning away.

Schepp sat there red-faced for the rest of the evening, not sure whether he should feel more offended as a man or as an academic. Even now, years later, he was overcome by embarrassment when he conjured up the scene; he ought really to have given Dana a slap in the face there and then, and that would have been that. Especially when he thought of her scent, some cheap Polish perfume that gave her an improper air, as if both the perfume and the woman were cheap and available.

He shook himself, pulled a face, as if his room, too, were full of Dana's objectionable perfume. He certainly wasn't going to think about that today. It was highly unsuitable, and damn it all, he had thought of that woman Dana far too often, thought of her every day. Every night. Well? Did that make him a worse human being, a worse husband; hadn't he always lavished care and attention on Doro? Although, even so, it was a long time, yes, a very long time since he had actually touched her.

Good God, it happened to so many men, it didn't have to mean anything.

Schepp forced himself back to the present. How long had he been kneeling in front of Doro? Always loved you, you know I did.

But you don't know about Dana, he thought, getting up with difficulty. His knees hurt. He stepped away from Doro and the *chaise-longue*. He had always thought that she had known nothing about that, nothing at all. And in actual fact it really hadn't been anything more than a few rather unseemly passing thoughts. Why had he lapsed into thinking about Dana today, anyway? Shaking his head, Schepp set off along the fishbone pattern of the parquet. How could he be recalling such a person at the presence of death? How she repelled him in retrospect, how he despised her, how he hated her!

His right hand beat time in the air to his muttered exclamations of annoyance, index and little fingers extended, the rest of his hand clenched into a fist. Until he remembered why he had thought of Dana, whereupon his hand stopped in mid-air and dropped powerlessly to his side. It was Doro's own fault! There was a sudden rushing in his ears as if the ground were about to give way beneath him. As he clung to his desk, however, his sense of equilibrium was restored. After he had said out loud several times that Dana was really, really entirely different from Hanni, you could almost say her opposite – surely that was obvious, he hoped that showed once and for all how absurd Doro's corrections were – he remembered what his initial intention had been. Wasn't he going to keep a vigil at Doro's side? Wasn't this his chance to read her final message? He had to continue the reading, never mind Hanni, never mind Dana.

He returned to the *chaise-longue*, picked up the sheets of paper from the floor and put them in order. He looked for that passage with Marek, the scene in which he spoke up to defend – no, not Dana – to defend Hanni. Schepp decided to ignore that comment in the margin, even though Doro had stuck to it consistently, crossing out Hanni's name every time and changing it to Dana's. It was no use, he

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