

SANDITZ

by Lukas Rietzschel

Detailed Synopsis

Lukas Rietzschel's novel *Sanditz* (dtv, 2026) unfolds over the course of 480 pages: an epic family saga and historical chronicle that describes the political and emotional topography of East Germany. In precise, matter-of-fact yet poetic language, Rietzschel narrates from multiple perspectives – from the GDR of the 1970s into the present day. The story of the **Moschnik/Wenzels**, a family of Sorbian descent, becomes a metaphor for the entire country: a society that never fully renews itself but continues, albeit changed, in the same patterns.

Prologue

The novel begins with a dark, mythical prologue. A flock of ravens flies over the snowbound landscape of Sanditz, transforming upon landing into ten naked men: the miller boys from the Sorbian legend '**The Satanic Mill**'. Their leader, **Andrusch**, has made a pact: for one night, they're allowed to be human, provided they destroy a symbol of the old powers. On the hill above Sanditz is a new **Bismarck statue**, erected by a town councillor in an attempt to heal the pain felt across the province by drawing on 'tradition and pride'. In an archaically visionary scene, the men topple the statue which they see as an embodiment of perpetually recurring German self-deification. But no sooner has the stone colossus fallen than the curse returns: the men transform back into ravens and vanish. This scene is thematically representative of the novel as a whole: the return of old ideas in new guises.

Tom and Maria

Tom, in his early forties, lives in Sanditz, unemployed and jaded. His girlfriend, **Caro**, has left him. Ever since the Covid pandemic, he has seen the world as nothing but a web of portents and surveillance. His sister, **Maria**, works as a journalist for a local newspaper. After several years in the west of the country, she returns home, only to lose more than she finds there – enthusiasm, belief in society, even language. When the Bismarck statue is toppled overnight, Maria breaks the big story. Her reporting briefly makes it into the news, but her success is short-lived. The symbolism is lost: nothing changes. Instead, Tom interprets

the act as a secret sign. In a ludicrous scene, which Rietzschel narrates with a fine sense of irony, Tom convinces Maria that their phones are being tapped; in a panic, she tries to destroy hers. Only when they both start laughing do they realise how deeply trapped in fear and isolation they have become.

This episode forms the opening of the present-day storyline and demonstrates how long-standing silence and the search for meaning are still in force today – albeit expressed in a different language.

Four Houses

On the edge of Sanditz stand four identical bungalows, built for families who were moved there in the 1970s. They are home to four generations of the Moschnik/Wenzel family: **grandmother Erika**, pious, taciturn, immovable; **Marion Wenzel**, her daughter, pragmatic and lecturing; **Uncle Dirk**, technology-obsessed and lonely; **Maria and Tom**, the children. The houses, once representative of a ‘modern’ GDR, have become symbols of a life frozen in place. Everything is regulated: lawns, fences, electricity bills, TV shows. The four houses stand for four different types of isolation. Communication happens, though nothing is conveyed – a motif that is found throughout the novel.

Flashbacks: GDR Years – Roland and Achim

The novel jumps from the present day back into the 1970s/1980s. **Roland Moschnik**, father of Maria and Tom, is a quiet, punctilious labourer who works at the **glass factory**. The work offers structure but no meaning. His wife, **Marion Wenzel**, joins the religiously leaning circle of dissidents led by the vicar Ms Reinhard. Meetings are held in rectories and attended by intellectuals, labourers, young people; they type out prohibited texts written by Jürgen Fuchs, Biermann, Kafka and Havemann. For Roland, who remains politically passive, his friend **Achim** becomes a foil. Achim is daring, mocking, unfettered. He works at the same factory, but he directs his energies into fighting a system that’s becoming paralysed. He gets Roland involved in his night-time excursions: together, they wander through the old village of Sanditz, which is on the verge of being swallowed up by an open-cast mine. They rescue roof slates, tiles, mementoes – a ritual to counteract disappearance. A deep, taciturn friendship develops between them – it might even be termed love.

Destruction and Friendship

The landscape around Sanditz is changing. The machinery from the open-cast mine circles the fictitious town of Sanditz. This is where Roland discovers how deeply history can inscribe itself into the earth. His friendship with Achim gives him strength for a while. Together, they experience the 1980s as a decade caught between conformation and revolution. For a short time, Achim is Roland’s moral compass, but their relationship comes under pressure as the system starts to crumble. In 1989, during an uprising in the factory, Achim is the one who speaks out while Roland remains silent.

After Reunification – Loss of Orientation

The regime change following 1989 does not bring liberation. Roland loses his job; the glassworks is closed down. Achim falls into precarious employment and remains an outsider. Marion seeks refuge in faith, Dirk in technology. Rietzschel relates how the family lose their language. The big words – unity, freedom – become husks. In the town’s new living rooms, people talk about sales discounts and insurance policies, but not about how things used to be. The men drink, the women plan parties, the children move out. Roland and Achim run into one another less and less frequently, until they lose contact altogether. But Roland’s thoughts keep returning to Achim. He wonders whether he has betrayed, forgotten or simply lost him.

Reunion and Achim’s Death

After decades of separation, Roland finds **Achim** again. He lives in seclusion in Sanditz, in his dead mother’s apartment. Achim is ill, depleted, marked by old age – but his sense of humour is still intact. In the last year of their life, a quiet togetherness develops between the two of them. Roland visits Achim daily, bringing him food and helping around the house. They talk about the past, about their quarrel, about the things that were never said. Achim has cancer. They pray together – Roland, who used to be religious, says a long, clumsy prayer. Achim rests his head on his chest and falls asleep. That night, he dies. His slippers stand next to the bed; on the bookcase, between Biermann and Fuchs, there is a blue-and-white tile from the former butcher’s shop in the old village. Roland stays in Achim’s apartment, hangs the tile on the wall and looks at it every day from then on. It becomes a symbol of all that is left when words are not enough: memory as a work of love.

Post-Reunification – The Inheritors

Maria and Tom grow up in the 1990s amid new televisions and old stories. The fictitious town of Sanditz becomes the stage for a society that has lost its sense of purpose. Maria goes to university, moves away and comes back; Tom joins the police force but soon quits. Where there were once ideals, now there are screens. Rietzschel shows the ongoing speechlessness in society: fear of the GDR turns into a new form of shame. When war breaks out in Ukraine, Tom joins the Ukrainian army as a volunteer without telling his family. He will end up losing his life.

Love on the Baltic Sea

Back in the GDR era, Dirk, the taciturn uncle of Tom and Maria, had to work as a labourer on building sites in Prora as a ‘construction conscript’: sieving sand and other ignominious tasks. After his mother’s death, Dirk decides to go to the Baltic Sea once more to confront his memories of the past. But on the coast, something unexpected happens: he finds true love.

Themes and Structure

Recurrence: Every generation experiences loss – Achim’s death, Roland’s grief, Tom’s running away. The form may change, but the pattern remains the same.

Friendship and Love: The relationship between Roland and Achim is the emotional core of the novel. This is where the theme of unspoken feelings is concentrated – affection as resistance to ideology.

Home: Sanditz continues to exist – changed, but real. The open-cast mine and advances in technology destroy parts of it, but never the place itself. It stands as a symbol of a community that doesn’t ever vanish but stagnates.

Myth and Technology: The novel comes full circle: the ravens of the prologue transform into drones; old and new spirits fly together at the same time.

Speech and Silence: Communication breaks down over the decades. From the fear of being listened in on during the GDR years to the digital intoxication of the present day, loss of trust is continual.

Sample Translation

By Eleanor Updegraff

p. 73-80

THE STONE

Sanditz, 1978

The highest point in the town of Sanditz was formed from an extinct volcano. This hill was known as the Landesthron, since, like a throne, it towered regally over the landscape – snobbishly, one might say, certainly grandly, in the face of the otherwise pitifully flat surroundings. The Landesthron bordered the old town of Sanditz, where the cemetery transitioned first into a kind of park and then into forest. At its summit was a cafe that was popular as an outing, and, overgrown and forgotten beneath tendrils of ivy and wildly proliferating brambles, the pedestal of a Bismarck statue. Standing up here, you could see ravens flying. Herons wheeled through the sky in search of a body of water. On fine days, you could make out the blue peaks of the Giant Mountains. Somewhere out there, Rübezahl, the mountain spirit, must also have been making his never-ending rounds.

If you looked more closely, from up here you could see what remained of the old town walls, which once had stood in a ring that encircled Sanditz. Within them: the market square, the town hall, the church. Outside the ring, the houses grew larger and the streets were wider. A post office had been built there, close to the railway station. A cafe, too, and a hotel with a restaurant, a hospital, grammar school, library, care home.

A second ring drew itself round the town, formed by factories and their chimneys, which jutted into the landscape and could be seen for miles. The people of Sanditz had come to feel as though they lived in a castle, so dense were the chimneys, like towers and turrets, enclosing the town and dulling the heavens with their clouds of smoke. There were laundrettes here, dye-works and sewing shops, all of them strung out along the river, which trickled out of a nearby cliff face as a little rivulet. Depending on the day of the week, the water was coloured reddish or blue, appeared to be foaming or looked as though it were coated in a rainbow. Aside from this, there was a glassworks, a steel mill, blacksmiths, a brewery, an engineering works and a factory that manufactured mattresses. In the sixties, an agriculture combine, a state-run enterprise, had

been built out here also, on whose facade red banners fluttered in the breeze sent up by passing tractors.

If you looked out from the Landesthron through the smoke from the chimneys, and over the treetops of the forest, you could, finally, also see the foldline of the open-face mine. Within it, tirelessly digging, shovelling, burrowing: the dark, coal-hungry machine behemoths. And this, perhaps, was the third ring around Sanditz. Some Sanditzers said: the last one. For whether it might now expand and swallow Sanditz, the way it had already swallowed smaller villages and suburbs, or whether it would close up to form a ring around the town that turned Sanditz into an island among coal mines – a future in which it would grow again and develop yet another ring – was something that couldn't be foreseen, not even by the most optimistic among the residents of Sanditz.

There, in the outermost ring of Sanditz, where the town frayed into the coalmine or the coalmine into the town, where the factories stood, and the workers' housing, lived a young man named Roland Moschnick. Autumn announced itself with fog. The sun was trapped behind the haze so that it looked like the moon instead, so clearly demarcated were its contours and so weak its light. Roland awoke and, as he looked up through the misted skylight in his bedroom, he knew in an instant: this was an ideal day.

The eight o'clock train passed the house punctually. In the next-door room, his neighbour Hohlbein hawked and spat his way out of sleep. It was astonishing what he brought up in the mornings, and even more astonishing that he didn't choke to death on it. Roland had once made the mistake of glancing into Hohlbein's ashtray, which was placed beside his bed. Since that day, he hadn't been able to eat quince jelly again.

He knocked on Hohlbein's door – 'Whassup?' – and opened it slowly. The narrow gap was sufficient for him to smell the stagnant air, warmed up and worn out by being breathed thousands of times.

'May I—' He didn't even have chance to finish his question.

'Get on with it! Just take the thing. Stop always asking!'

'I'd buy it off you, you know,' said Roland. 'The offer still stands.'

'With what, huh?'

The streets were still quiet at this time of the morning. In the neighbouring houses, and in those opposite, the curtains were still drawn. The night-shift workers were already in bed, overly sensitive to any noise, ready to slam their windows open and make a loud pronouncement. Those who were working the early shift had left two hours ago, while the late-shift workers were waiting, catching up on sleep, preparing to sleep, incapable of making plans for the day. And because the children were also out, at nursery, kindergarten or school, carted on buses around the neighbourhood, these early-morning hours had something final about them. The flow of things was determined; the day had

its structure. The rhythm of the streets on workdays was something everyone had internalised.

Hohlbein's moped trailer was still standing where Roland had left it after his last outing. He carried his bicycle up from the cellar first, careful not to bash it against anything, and, for God's sake, not to get the pedals caught in the banister or on the front door. Outside, he leaned it up against the short flight of steps to the entrance and positioned the trailer behind it. He did all this under the watchful eye of Volker Rößler, who was just taking his boots down from where they hung, laces tied together, on a nail in the windowsill. Rößler was afflicted with such smelly feet that his wife had forbidden him to cross the threshold of their ground-floor flat in his 'shitkickers', and shortly afterwards the rest of the building, consisting of Roland and Hohlbein, had also insisted that he please not leave his work boots in the hallway by the front door. It was pretty certain that Rößler still hadn't forgiven them for this.

'That'll come to nowt,' he said. 'Tying it on with chicken wire, or what? How's that meant to hold?'

But Roland had accumulated experience. The trick was to allow the shaft a little room for manoeuvre and not to fix it too tightly to the seat post under the saddle. On the ups and downs of this uneven terrain, this was a crucial factor, which counted for more than paying attention to traction or the weight of the load he was transporting.

'I'd do that differently,' said Rößler.

Roland knew he would have to set off immediately and, if necessary, stop just around the next corner and set about binding the wire all over again. Otherwise Rößler would come to join him, boots dangling down on either side of his neck like boxing gloves after a bout in the ring, in order to 'help'. He swung himself on to the bicycle and rattled along the unmade road.

'See!' cried Rößler after him.

And yet, nothing had happened. Rößler, too, simply wanted to be heard. To have the sense that he had something to contribute. He wasn't any different from the others who lived in the estate or worked in the factory.

The narrow cobbled street had been doused with bitumen. Roland didn't see the cat-sized potholes coming. When he rode over them, he squeezed his eyes shut and hoped that the wire wouldn't snap, that his construction would hold. Old oaks at the roadside, fences made of board. Black horses stood in the mist, heads lowered. He caught the scent of apples rotting in the high grass.

In the second ring thus far, the edge of the town, the houses had decreased in height with every passing metre. They had forfeited storeys, plaster and windows. The distance between them had grown larger. At some point, there was nothing left but old farmhouses and backyard workshops. Three-sided farmsteads lined the main road; the fields belonging to the LPG, the agricultural production cooperative, came right up to the property. At a point which some

people considered to be the limits of the town, two roads crossed – and here was the Black Stag, a country pub complete with dance floor. If you continued further along the main road, the horizon soon featured sky-scraping chimneys. Thin fingers on a giant’s hand, pushing up slowly out of the barren earth. This was the plate-glass factory.

Built in the years before the war, it had become evermore extensive since. Windowpanes for the ruins of Dresden, windowpanes for the ruins of Berlin, windowpanes for buses and trains: the demand was great. One of the workers’ housing estates dated back to the thirties. Small, narrow, wooden houses that stood close together in two rows divided by a street, two-storey buildings whose pointed roofs and various colours meant they were known as ‘Snow White houses’.

Roland lived in one of the Snow White houses in the Snow White estate. He shared the upper storey with Hohlbein; Rößler lived with his wife on the ground floor. On his way to work every day, he passed the apartment blocks that had just been built and hoped he would be allocated one of the flats therein. A school was planned, and a supermarket. Though there hadn’t been an official declaration, this village-like outlier of Sanditz with its cobbled-together houses, this appendix to a town whose natural expansion had been interrupted by the war, had developed into New Sanditz. Funded by the German Democratic Republic, modernity had found its way into this rural backwater. It was part of the town now, its centre not a church but the glassworks. And, just beyond it, the mine.

The mist was dissolving more and more the further he put the glassworks behind him and the closer he came to the forest. For a while he rode along the new roads of the LPG, which were made of concrete slabs, fearful that he might be spotted on the brow of a hill. Not a bush in sight to protect him. The stems of wheat mere stubble. Soon on to cart tracks, then to trodden-down trails. He imagined he could already feel the quaking of the earth, that underground juddering and jolting.

In a clearing in the forest, he laid his bicycle down and concealed both it and the trailer with thin birch branches. The leaves, small and shrivelled, detached themselves at the slightest movement. The pine trees swayed in the wind, more fiercely than usual. Needles rained down upon him. In a circle around the mine, though the diggers hadn’t penetrated this far, nature had already accepted her looming defeat.

The old village stood on the very edge of the escarpment. In the distance the diggers and conveyor bridges, grey steel against a grey sky, as though the French had dismantled their Eiffel Tower and disposed of it in the coal mine. Two great linden trees, leafless, their bark deeply grooved, stood in the place where the village square maybe used to be. Aside from them, there were no trees left. The gardens had been plundered down to the very last rhododendron, the

earth dug up as though by a herd of wild boar. Paving slabs and kerbstones had also been taken away. There was nothing left to hold the ground together. When it rained, the village's last footsteps had been washed into the coal pit. Now and again he thought of the people who might have lived here, but compassion wasn't forthcoming. He was sure that they had it better now. They lived now in Sanditz in large apartments with a view of the department store. Could go to the toilet at night and in winter without having to *pull themselves together*. Sure, they might have lost their old village, but they should think themselves lucky to have their new lives.

One house stood a little apart from the others. He knew that it had been a butcher's shop because Marion had told him so. She had shown him all of this: the village and its access road, the butcher's shop and the rectory on the edge of the settlement; her mother had lived there after the war. The windowpanes of the butcher's shop had been removed, the counter and blackboards dismantled. Old blue-and-white tiles had decorated the interior walls. Ornamentation, ink-blue garlands and, among them, almost seamless, images of cows and meadows. Each one of these tiles held an extra detail, combining to make a large panorama of agricultural life. One after another, Roland had prised them off.

He stacked them one on top of the other, five to a bundle. Always a packing slip from the glass factory in between; the paper's square shape meant they could have been made for these tiles. String round the whole lot – sorted. He could balance four bundles back to the trailer; twenty fitted within it. He'd manage two trips before he had to get back in order to arrive on time for his shift at the factory.

He was already done with one wall – the right-hand one, looked at from the doorway. On the left-hand wall, the hooks for sausages had been screwed so precisely into the narrow joins between the tiles that he hadn't yet dared to touch them. He set himself up in front of the middle wall, hands on his hips. Something was missing. Tiles had been prised out. A botched job, not his. Now he saw, too, that chipped-off corners were scattered around the floor. He crouched down and gathered up the sharp fragments. Some other person had found the shop; somebody else knew about the tiles. If its former owners had returned and they discovered him here, his goose would be cooked. He couldn't hope to square up against the wife of a butcher.

He tried to hear whether anyone was in the building. He crossed to the frame of the old shop window, leaned against it, poked his head halfway out – taking cover, the way he'd learned during eighteen months of basic training with the army. He'd seen foxes here before, and rabbits; birds nested in the naked rafters. After a couple of minutes' nervous listening and even longer conducting conversations with himself – 'you're alone; there's no one else here' – he stopped paying attention to the noises of his surroundings. There was always rustling

somewhere, stones coming loose or beams breaking, weakened by the weather. But he wasn't alone here. Not today.

The wind gusted over the empty village street; in one of the houses opposite, a door slammed shut. He jumped. In the distance, the squeaking of a digger bucket; in the earth, the irregular beat of a giant heart. He thought he heard footsteps. Hello? he wanted to call out, but he kept it in. He peeled himself away from the wall and ran. Didn't feel his legs, didn't feel the way he leaped. He didn't feel the stone, either, as it hit him on the back of the head. He sank to the ground, and into a deep, dark ocean.

[...]

p. 397-414

GERMANY IN AUTUMN*Sauerland and Sanditz, 1989–1998*

Strange, really, that major events in Germany often took place in autumn. Peter Schulte thought of the Italians and the French, who had chosen the summer months for such things. The country was really alive then, people gathering on the streets, chanting slogans as they sweated. And in the cold months, just as it was for animals, nothing happened, nothing at all; peace reigned, energy was gathered. Germans, on the contrary, seemed to burst into life as the year came to an end. Evidently they needed a whole year behind them to be sure that life wasn't getting any better. Almost certainly there would have been other times when they could have taken to the streets – better, warmer ones – but no, even the *Zonies* had chosen the autumn of '89 for it.

That evening in November, he opened himself a second beer. He couldn't believe what was being reported on the news. It caught him and his wife completely unawares. They didn't know anyone from the *Zone*, the East. They didn't exchange letters, didn't send any parcels like some of the neighbours did, and nor were they particularly interested in life over there. Chernobyl '86 – that had shaken them, but only reaffirmed their belief that everything behind the wall was corrupt and squalid in its own very particular, greyly socialist way. All the same, he turned the news on every evening. Who knew how many more times he might bear witness to historic events. He'd already taken the seal off his fifties.

On the car radio, on the way to work, he listened to the correspondents' reports. There was so much happening that their voices overlapped with one another. More and more reporters from the newspapers and radio stations were gaining access to the crumbling GDR. They took rooms in luxury hotels, went to football matches and factories – all of it now beyond state control. He got the impression that with the opening of the border, an indigenous people had been discovered. Shut off from the world, they had developed unique behaviours, their own language. And now he was allowed to watch as civilisation approached these people. Fascinating, it was, intoxicating! His interest was piqued. This, he said to Sabine, is the truly historic moment!

Previously, he'd never thought (and why would he have?) about which dishes might be served in a socialist restaurant, how the trade fair at Leipzig was laid out, or which animals were kept in the zoo of a town named Hoyerswerda – a socialist model town, by the way, fancy! Built from the ground up, just like that, for the open-cast mine – look at that, Sabine! Nor would he ever even have considered being interested in the financial system of the GDR. In his mind, the people there didn't have any money (anyone who needed anything might barter

a donkey or a hen for it) and accordingly no need to bank it, certainly not to invest it. He was dumbstruck when he saw a photo of a reporter standing in a savings bank. There was a counter there, and women who served behind it, people who looked like customers standing on a greenish carpet, and even the same withered plants in pots that were far too small for them, reaching plaintively towards the curtain-framed windows. He had to say it out loud to himself twice before he could believe it: ‘Peter, they have savings banks there, too!’

He didn’t let Sabine in on his plans. Only after speaking to the branch manager, the district manager, the board of directors and the trustees (in other words, when everything was already settled) did he reach out to take her hand.

She pulled away from him furiously.

But, he asked, what did it matter if she was looking after a childless household in Sauerland or in Sanditz?

She smacked him one.

His ear rang, his cheek burned; she’d accidentally scratched his face with one of her fingernails. He tried to make out to his colleagues that the redness and scarring came from a slip while shaving.

Sabine insisted that he left the car *at home*. He should settle in first, then they could sell the house, and only after that would she follow him in the car. That way and no other. If at all. He could jolly well take the train and have himself picked up at the station.

‘But Sabbel,’ he said, ‘which train? What are you picturing? Don’t they run on Russian tracks? You can’t get there that way.’

But yes, you could. Via Bebra. It took an entire day to get to the far eastern end of this strange country; he’d stood at draughty checkpoints, bought cigarettes at the station in Leipzig (a cathedral of a station!) and, keyed up as he was, immediately smoked four of them on the platform. He clasped a newspaper from *back home* like a talisman, didn’t read it. Instead, he stared at the other people in his compartment so blatantly and eavesdropped on them so obviously that he was called out on it several times. The walloping he was threatened with if he didn’t stop staring was only avoided by revealing his origins. ‘I’m not from here,’ he said apologetically, as though no one had noticed.

At Sanditz station, he got off. The platform was paved, the stones loose. The light from the lamps cast the track in an orange glow. It was light and dark at the same time, dim like the Christmas scenes in an old Advent calendar with pictures behind the doors. The town, which must have bordered on the station somewhere, wasn’t visible. *Sanditz*. In his head, it sounded like Atlantis. An undiscovered, unknown place. Whether behind a wall or at the bottom of the ocean – unreachable. Until now. The night had swallowed it and distorted the grimy windowpanes in the station building beyond all recognition. He would discover it.

‘Good evening. Are you Herr Schulze?’

‘Schulte,’ he answered self-consciously. ‘Yes, I am he.’

The woman apologised for getting his name wrong and introduced herself as Frau Wenzel. He was astonished by her firm handshake. Even more amazed that she seemed to have brought her entire family with her. There was her husband, a bearded man with kind eyes, a younger woman (probably her daughter) and two children, a boy and a girl. They had lined up in height order and wore immaculate, uncreased clothes. As though he were a state visitor, the girl stepped forward and presented him with a bouquet of flowers.

‘Welcome to Sanditz, Herr Schulze!’

‘Schulte,’ he corrected. ‘How very nice of you.’

The carnations were wrapped in layers of transparent plastic film. He laid them rustling on the back seat of the car they had brought. As there wasn’t enough space for him and the whole family and his suitcase, the younger woman and the children stayed behind at the station to take the bus.

‘Out of the question,’ he protested. ‘I’d rather walk!’

Herr Wenzel laughed. ‘But you don’t even know where to.’

‘If you give me an address and a map, I’ll find my way just fine.’

Herr and Frau Wenzel acted as though he’d told a joke, and then they set off.

There were lots of flats as of late, Frau Wenzel told him on the journey. Where previously they’d been lacking, there was now a surfeit. Whole storeys of the new-build blocks suddenly stood empty. Some flats had been abandoned fully furnished.

This didn’t apply to the flat they had found for him. There was a narrow bed, a little galley kitchen, a red bulb screwed into the light fitting in the bathroom. Nothing else – that was it.

‘We already brought up some coal for you,’ said Herr Wenzel. ‘And you’ll find newspapers for kindling here.’

He fell silent. He’d been banking on a hotel, a guesthouse, at the very least a spare room. Now he was standing here and supposed to get a stove going in an almost bare rented flat. When had he last done that? As a child, perhaps, in his parents’ living room. But had he even been allowed to stack up bits of wood and set fire to them back then? As the oldest son of a widowed mother who was afraid of yet more loss? He couldn’t remember. He stuck his hands in his pockets. From a flat below or above him, he heard a child’s voice. In the apartment building opposite, on the same floor as him, he saw a family eating their evening meal, shimmering through the curtains. He thought of Sabine. He wanted to hear her voice.

‘Where will I find a telephone?’

‘There’s a phone box on the street outside,’ said Frau Wenzel.

He waited until they'd said goodbye, and then he went downstairs. Breathed into his palms and fed a couple of coins into the slot. The phone box was papered with scribbled callback requests and initials. He read them all; he had time to, torturous minutes' worth because Sabine wasn't picking up. Please, he thought, please. Tell me to come back, and I'll come back. His throat tightened; he sobbed. With icy fingers, he wiped the tears from his cheek. This damn phone box, this miserable dark little town!

'Are you going to be much longer?'

An older woman knocked on the glass. A small queue had formed behind her. All of them craning their necks to see him. A man crying in the phone box – look at him! Who would be so stupid as to show his emotions in there?

He buried his face in the collar of his coat as he walked past them. It dawned on him that he wasn't the one discovering an unknown people. He himself was the exotic one, an alien. He fled back to his flat and locked the door behind him. He dragged the mattress off the bed and into the hallway. He slept there on the floor. Far away from the windows through which he could have been observed.

The next day, he walked into the savings bank. Brown shoes, blue suit with a waistcoat, two spritzes of cologne. In his suitcase he'd found only his black belt; Sabine had put in the wrong one for him. Brown shoes, black belt – that wouldn't do, really it wouldn't. No belt, then, and his shirt pulled out a little so it concealed part of his waistband.

He was still tweaking his clothes as he walked into the foyer where the counters were. Here he found himself confronted with the same completely surreal sight of crease-free people who had arranged themselves like a choir. The entire staff smiled the smile of a champion marksman to welcome him. Although, more properly speaking, it was that of a champion markswoman – because he found himself facing around forty women, nothing but women. This would not have happened in Sauerland.

It felt wrong to teach these women, who had in some cases spent their entire working lives at the savings bank, about what he called the 'new era'. That he should be doing it – he of all people, a stranger who didn't even know where the toilets were located. But they didn't know a thing about loans for private individuals or the credit system in general. This was his hobbyhorse now.

He promised them that the Sanditz savings bank would be leading the field in no time at all. It would be a beacon of the new banking system in 'the East'. 'No one will lose their job!' he cried to them. No, more than this, he went on: we're even going to make new ones!

The women clapped enthusiastically. He invited them one after another for a private conversation in his office. He was pleased to see the familiar faces of Frau Wenzel and her daughter. He had them bring him coffee and two peeled

tangerines on a saucer. The whole room smelled of them. The plush armchairs, the weak light from the desk lamp – the office was as comfortable as a sitting room. Nothing indicated hard work. If the toilets, which he had found by this time, hadn't been located at the other end of the corridor, he would have camped out here overnight, too. There was heating here, there were curtains here, there was a telephone here.

In the evening he got through to Sabine. 'But, darling, you can't hold it against me. I didn't know! ... How was I supposed to know? ... Which people? They won't have known either. No one would guess that they still use coal for heating here. Sabbel, I almost froze last night! ... Why are you being so mean? Don't you have any sympathy? ... My plan – that's not true at all! It's all for us, you know. And in any case, they need me; they'd be a sorry lot without me. Come and you'll see yourself what's going on here! Just tell me which train you're on and I'll pick you up ... Well, then, I'll come and meet you halfway, and we can travel together ... But why on earth not? I've already apologised! That's why I want you here with me *now*. We can do this together ... Oh, so I'm good enough for that still, am I? How much do you need? ... Yes, I'll send you something ... Yes, fine ... Yes, see you later. I love—'

Hung up.

'I need to know urgently where I can get a meal here and where I can have my shirts washed.'

Frau Wenzel looked at him with wide eyes.

'And this business with the flat. You said there are so many empty properties around here, didn't you.'

She cleared her throat and looked at her daughter.

'What? Did I say something wrong?'

She shuffled forward to the edge of her chair. 'Those are personal questions, Herr Schulte. About personal matters.'

'I don't understand,' he said. 'You've already helped me out personally.'

'But now we're sitting in your office as your employees, not as your friends. That's just how it is, Herr Schulte; the two things ought to be kept separate.'

He thought this silly, but he respected it. She had something intimidating about her in her directness. He had never before encountered someone speaking to him in this way. It wasn't cheeky; it was staid and totally old-fashioned. Without knowing her better – her background, her past – he was sure he'd met with a Prussian work ethos. He was enough of a businessman to recognise how this would benefit him. None of his conversations with his employees had been aimed at anything specific thus far, but now he had a goal.

'I'd like you to be my secretary,' he said.

'That's not possible.'

He was surprised all over again. ‘Why not?’

‘I’m too old.’

‘Frau Wenzel, please! I bet you’re younger than me, and I myself am only just starting out in a new position here.’

‘The work that I do, I do well. There’s no reason to train me up in a new role just before I retire. If I might offer you a bit of advice ...’

‘Please do.’

‘Get the younger generation involved. Marion, for example.’

He studied her daughter for a moment. From her shoes to her dark tights to her blouse (the same shade of green as her mother’s) to her curly, almost frizzy hair, which she wore loose. ‘I’ll consider it,’ he said. ‘Thank you for the suggestion.’

Not knowing where to begin with the kitchen in his flat, he bought sandwiches from the bakery opposite the savings bank. In the evenings, he ate in the Black Stag (prices hadn’t been that low in Sauerland for years; only the elderly still remembered them). At weekends, the Wenzels invited him for lunch with them. At their house he ate the best butter-tossed spaghetti of his life. Beef roulade and veal goulash, too: all of it fantastically filling and wonderfully heavy. A small triumph if only because he managed to preserve the hearty taste of the food in his mouth all day long.

The family didn’t eat pork. Nobody drank or smoke (except for the taciturn son). Peter didn’t question it. He was still in the process of getting to know this people.

The Wenzels took him everywhere with them. Excursions in the mountains, the weekly market in the square, the former military swimming pool that was now open to the public in the grounds of the old barracks, Sunday visits within the community. He made friends with the children, Tom and Maria, bought them ice cream and chips when their mother or grandparents forbade it. He avoided their father, a certain Roland, in as far as was possible. He found him boorish and bad-tempered. Whenever he saw him – which, fortunately, was only every couple of weeks – he dragged his mood right down. If he was so unhappy with his job in Frankfurt, why didn’t he quit and look for a new one? Some people seemed imprisoned in their own sourness. And yet the whole world was open to them – and it truly was, now. So much freedom, so many opportunities! He found it incomprehensible. For him, success was a question of attitude.

With the rest of the family, he got on all the better for it. They introduced him as a ‘friend of the family’, never as their boss or superior. And never as a West German, which surprised him greatly. ‘This is Peter Schulte, a friend of the family.’

He bought a car with Herr Wenzel; with Frau Wenzel’s help, he arranged a meeting to buy a plot of land in close proximity to the savings bank. He even

had her investigate the possibility of constructing a new bank. He imagined a new build, an imposing edifice with large front windows and polished granite. A palace of money, a safe become architecture. If it worked out, he would live directly opposite, in his equally new house with equally large windows. He would be like one of those early factory owners who built their villas in the factory grounds. There was no doubt: his father would finally have been proud of him.

One evening he stood at the window in his office and watched as Frau Wenzel set out for home. After locking the door of the savings bank, she glanced up once more, quickly, as though to reassure herself that he was still working. He opened the window and called out: ‘Wait a moment, please!’

It was only when he reached the street that he buttoned his coat. Spring would send the occasional warm gust of wind over the road these days, but not on this particular evening.

‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked, coming to stand next to her.

She looked at him. Not a single strand had escaped from her hairdo.

‘Why are you helping me? Why are you always so kind? We don’t even know one another.’

Frau Wenzel seemed not to understand. She furrowed her brow, deep creases forming. ‘Well, it’s just the done thing,’ she said. ‘Wouldn’t you have done the same for us?’

He wasn’t sure about that. Not like *this*, he wouldn’t have. He couldn’t make sense of this family. Had they stood to gain position and influence through their behaviour, he’d have been able to understand it. But the Wenzels weren’t boot-lickers. The only wish they’d expressed (and it had been more a well-meant piece of advice, really) had been that the role of secretary should be filled by a younger woman, namely the daughter.

He granted their wish and assigned young Frau Moschnik tasks that her parents had already carried out for him, but added new ones as well. She washed and ironed his shirts, she collected his orders from the bakery, she filled his new car with petrol, she drove him to the swimming pool, the Black Stag, the office and his flat. She made lists for him of all the savings bank employees, lists of all the important – and therefore influential – people in the town, and lists of all the Stasi informants who had been unmasked thus far. If there was any overlap, he was to be told at once. She dealt with the tradesmen who were building his house, and with the officials who would have to sign off on the building of a new savings bank. She arranged meetings, declined invitations in his name and organised his days down to the hour, including into the evenings. If initially he had still doubted her abilities, she very soon disabused him of this. She was just as hard-working as her mother. And what further distinguished her: she was young. She didn’t let her exhaustion show. He had never once seen her leave the savings bank in the evening and change her shoes in the dark.

Meanwhile, he had got to know many of the people in town who were, to one degree or another, influential. He had a meeting with the newly elected mayor. He also had a meeting with his successor and then with his successor (the process of accounting for the Stasi past of individual residents was relentless; not many of the new politicians stayed in office for long). He became acquainted with the local vicar; with the master baker and butcher; with the head of the allotment gardening association, on whose land the new savings bank was to be built. He soon knew all his employees by name, even those he had to let go. He knew the neighbours in the buildings round about, he knew the labourers on the construction site of his house, he knew Herr Gasling from the newspaper, every single member of the town council and, in the end, even all the customers of the savings bank who queued for the counters at the beginning or end of every month.

The Wenzels had made him king of the town. If he drove past people, they'd wave at him. If the mayor requested a meeting, he'd have him wait on the line until he'd found a 'free slot'. If he stood by the foundations that had been dug for his house, the builders would offer him a cigarette.

'It's like in a fairy tale,' he said to his wife. 'Would you ever have thought this would happen when I first moved here? In such a short time?'

Sabine looked into the construction pit where the basement was taking shape. Rain beaded the layer of bitumen on top of the masonry. 'I didn't know you'd started smoking again, Peter.'

He felt caught uncomfortably red-handed and crushed out the cigarette in the mud. 'Oh, only now and then,' he said, reminding himself that she knew him *from before*. For her, he hadn't just appeared out of nowhere, a man without a past. With her, he couldn't pretend.

Yet he still put her up in the Black Stag, because he didn't want her to see his flat. Last winter, while trying to empty the bucket of ash from his stove, he'd slipped on the steps in front of the house. Covered in ash from head to toe, he'd looked like one of those rigid grey corpses from Pompeii. Embarrassing, it was, highly embarrassing for a king. It should not and must not happen again, certainly not in front of Sabine. He was a different man here.

'You must try the ragout,' he said that evening in the dining room of the pub. 'Really tasty, the way they make it here. And let's raise a toast to this. A bottle of fizz, please! It's so good you're here, at last.'

'Peter, I want a divorce.'

'What? Why? Impossible. I've had the new house planned with a bathroom just for you. You always wanted one of those.'

'I wanted you to stay at home.'

'Now you're starting *that* up all over again.'

'No, it's just one in a long list of things. It was the last straw, only you can't see that.'

‘Of course I see that! I said to you, didn’t I ... No, no fizz after all, thank you ... I said to you, didn’t I, that you should follow on after and I’d make things nice for us here.’

‘Things were nice for us, until you went and made one of your plans again. If you want something, you get it – there’s no discussion, no compromise. I’ve had enough time to think things through, Peter. Now I want to make a decision, too.’

‘I don’t understand. You could have told me you weren’t happy.’

‘You were hardly ever at home the past few years.’

‘There was a lot to do.’

‘I know. There’s always a lot to do.’

‘But I had them plan a bathroom just for you, and a bookcase for all your books.’

‘You’ll find someone who’s happy to have those things. Or sell it on. Then you’ll have two houses you can sell.’

He looked at her. Until now, he’d been staring at the tablecloth as though under a spell, his fingers pushing around a crumb of peppercorn. ‘Why two houses?’

‘You can keep it, of course, if you want, but you’re here now and you have a new one. I don’t need it any more. I’ve been living with Walter for a while now.’

‘With Walter? What does Eva have to say about that? Did they get divorced as well?’

‘Eva is dead, Peter. It was a year ago now. Walter sent you a letter, about the funeral, but clearly you had something better to do.’

He tried to remember a death announcement, pictured himself at the postbox belonging to his flat, mentally rummaged through the desk drawers in his office.

‘What did she ...?’

‘Breast cancer.’

‘And the children?’

‘They’re coping.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said quietly.

‘Me too.’

He tried to reach for Sabine’s hand, but she pulled it back.

‘And you and Walter ...’ he started.

‘We were there for each other. Often we just sat there saying nothing, but sometimes that can help. We went on outings. We’re good for each other.’

He nodded.

‘It could all have been so different, Peter. But actually, things are good the way they are. You’re here and you seem to be happy. And I’m fine, too. I’m not angry with you, Peter. I stopped holding it against you a long time ago, really. If

you want, let's order that fizz after all; we can toast to the good times we had, and then I'll go.'

The waiter seemed not to have put the bottle of fizz back in the fridge, because the glasses didn't mist up. A couple of bubbles rose sluggishly to the surface. They clinked glasses, very gently and quietly, just the merest graze of the rims. And then he took Sabine to the station.

It had grown late. There were no more trains going west.

Perhaps she could get as far as Dresden or, with any luck, Berlin or Leipzig, she said.

Would she not just like to stay in Sanditz, he asked. The room at the Stag was paid for, after all.

But she declined. If she didn't go now, she said, they'd keep talking all night and not be able to leave one another. They'd fantasise their way into something that would stop working all over again. 'I know what we're like. It's happened often enough.'

He smiled, she smiled, and then they embraced. She asked the guard on the train that was waiting at the platform where it was heading.

'It'll be all right, Peter,' she said. 'I'll muddle through.' She got on to the train and waved.

Whether on his mattress or in the car, in the office or in the queue at the bakery – he thought for a long time about Sabine's visit which, it dawned on him only gradually, had been a farewell, a farewell forever. Only in hindsight did he realise she had cut her hair. Her kindness, the lack of anger or rage – this was what he thought about. 'I know what we're like.' That one sentence remained like an echo.

In Sanditz, Sabine had only existed in his imagination. In his plans, in one version of his future. Her absence became most evident to him when he visited the building site for the new house. What am I going to do with all these rooms now? he thought. The second bathroom, the large kitchen, the atrium, the balcony, the bookcase, the underfloor heating. At some stage he found it impossible to stop thinking about the house, pictured himself alone, pressing all the light switches, each time a light going on somewhere he hadn't wanted it. In his dreams, he turned off taps and raised the thermostat.

One Sunday when he'd been invited for lunch with the Wenzels again (there was carp), he asked in the middle of the conversation: 'Would you maybe like to move in with me?'

Silence fell. Even the two children stopped talking and looked at their mother, and she looked at her mother and she looked at her husband, and he looked at him and so on, right round the table.

'What do you mean by that?' asked Frau Moschnik.

‘Well, you live in two different houses here, so you’re separated from each other, and the children have to share a room. I was thinking, I have so many bedrooms and the house is so big.’

‘And what about your wife?’

‘Marion!’

‘Sorry.’

‘No, it’s all right,’ he said. ‘You’re allowed to ask – no problem. So, my wife is going to stay in Sauerland; that’s what we’ve decided.’

Frau Wenzel was the first to speak after the family had once again exchanged glances. ‘And how do you imagine this, Herr Schulte? Don’t you see how it will look? The fact that you come here for lunch and Marion got the job as your secretary is cause for enough talk as it is.’

‘I’d like to give something back to you. You’ve been so kind to me. But yes, you’re right. It’s a silly idea.’

He wiped his mouth and put down his cutlery at twenty-five past, the way he’d learned to do here. He thanked them for the fish (though it had had too many bones for his liking and tasted of murky pondwater) and reminded himself who he was: the boss. No more setbacks, no more sentimentality. And if this newly discovered people only spoke the language of work, then work was what he would give them – gladly.

‘Please see to it that the fizz for the opening ceremony is cold,’ he said to Marion.

The fizz was cold – ice cold. It ought to have been warmer. Perhaps mulled wine would have been a better choice. The guests took off their gloves to hold the delicate champagne flutes. Their lips stuck to the rims like tongues to an icy flagpole. They’d all come: the mayor and his various predecessors, the woman in charge of the county council, Herr Gasling from the newspaper, the former head of the allotment gardening association, absolutely everyone who had a name and status or simply one of the two. The wind blew through the newly laid car park; the trees that had been planted were still too small to keep it out. Marion passed champagne flute after champagne flute into the frozen red hands of their guests. Peter nodded to her, tried to indicate that she didn’t need to trouble herself; no one was drinking anyway.

‘Maybe mulled wine would have been better,’ he said into the microphone.

People laughed.

He sketched the story of his arrival and thanked them for the kindness with which he’d been received here in Sanditz, particularly from the Wenzel family. He asked for a round of applause.

Frau Wenzel waved it away.

They'd achieved a lot in the shortest amount of time, he said. The new savings bank was a sight to behold. It was a guarantee of growth and stability in these uncertain times. And this promise could be seen just by looking at it – they'd probably used enough granite in the building of it to repave the entire town.

More laughter.

Granite stands for stability, for strength, for security, he went on – everything one would and, quite rightly, can expect of a savings bank. But with all those windows, the bright offices and the well-lit lobby with its brand-new counters, the building also spoke the language of modern design and would live up to all the demands made on a modern savings bank. A bridge between tradition and the future. 'In the past, you were able to rely on us, and you'll be able to do that in future, too.'

The last sentence had come to him spontaneously; he was especially proud of that. He'd caught a chill – he could feel it in his throat – but it couldn't dampen his enthusiasm for what had been a successful opening.

After a tour of the new savings bank, they moved on to a reception in his new house. The two buildings differed only in size. The architects who had designed the savings bank had also used nothing but granite in his house.

'It looks just like it does over there,' said the mayor, 'only smaller.'

Peter laughed along, but he could see the mayor's envy. There was only one atrium as magnificent as this in the whole of Sanditz.

When the last guests had gone, he left everything standing. The glasses, the half-eaten canapés on plates, the high tables, the ashtrays on top of them. All the lights stayed on, even when he went to bed. The gleam of that day was to last forever. His glory, his greatest triumph, his kingdom. Strange, really, that major events in Germany often took place in autumn.

[...]