Bodo Kirchhoff

Life Alongside an Animal

Original title: Seit er sein Leben mit einem Tier teilt
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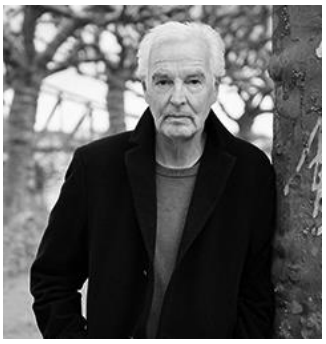
Intimate, subtle, and hauntingly beautiful… An ageing actor being forced to re-evaluate his life

It's four days before midsummer in Northern Italy, where Louis Arthur Schongauer, who once played the sombre German in Hollywood films, has retired aft er the death of his wife. Now he just wants to live a quiet life with his dog amidst the olive groves of Lake Garda. But his peace is soon shattered when two women barge into his life. A travel blogger gets stuck in his driveway as she tries to turn around, and a journalist wants to bring Louis out of his shell with a portrait: two women with an instinct for the trauma in his life. His dog, living only in the here and now, is the only being that has touched his heart aft er the death of his wife and now becomes all the more important to him on his way back to life. Bodo Kirchhoff 's new novel is about that human longing for a person who recognises us – and the pain of opening up.

- On third place of the SPIEGEL Bestseller list
- Previous titles have been translated into Dutch, Greek, Italian, Czech, Danish, French, Polish, and Spanish, among other languages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Bodo Kirchhoff, born in Hamburg in 1948, divides his time between Frankfurt am Main and Lake Garda. Aft er writing a string of widely acclaimed novels, including '*Love Broadly*' ('*Die Liebe in groben Zügen*'), and '*Desire and Melancholy*' ('*Verlangen und Melancholie*'), he was awarded the German Book Prize in 2016 for his novella '*Experience*' ('*Widerfahrnis'*). Most recently, he published '*Twilight and Turmoil'* ('*Dämmer und Aufruhr*') in 2018 and '*Report on the State of the Happiness*' ('*Bericht zur Lage des Glücks*') in 2021.

»Reading Kirchhoff makes you fall under his spell. An effect which – until now – you were more likely to experience when reading American or French writers.«

Hilmar Klute, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

»[...] Bodo Kirchhoff has written a youthful work [...] which can only be admired. There is an economy in this prose, that is rarely seen. In almost 400 pages there is not a single redundant adjective, not a stale turn of phrase, nothing tasteless, even if the plot might lead you to expect differently.«

Adam Soboczynski, *Die ZEIT*

Sample Translation

By Eleanor Updegraff

[p. 9-24]

Chapter 1

One evening in August, shortly before the Feast of the Assumption – or, where the following events take place, Ferragosto. A sloping plot of land with a low-built stone house, former stable block and view over the biggest lake on the southern edge of the Alps, which looks, at this hour, as though it is made of aged glass, the opposite shore barely visible, the mountains hazy above it: a panorama of peace, shattered by the sound of spinning tyres and a barking dog.

The owner of both the property and the dog holds the agitated animal, which is not just barking but also whining, on a short lead; he knows that sound of grinding tyres – oh, how well he knows it – and on this particular evening, he loses his patience. Already dressed for bed in pyjama trousers, but bare-chested – a bony man, older rather than old – he reaches for the weapon he's kept in the house for years: a revolver, .357-calibre Magnum, short-barrelled, once part of a police investigation into him, Louis Arthur Schongauer, who was at that time working in Hollywood under the name L. A. Schongauer. He takes the remaining bullets out of the clip, so as to avoid another accident, then hurries out to the front of the house, while the dog – a bitch – now starts whining more than barking, fully focused on what she can sense rather than simply giving in to emotion – the skill he envies her most.

Since Schongauer began living life alongside an animal, the thought has sometimes crossed his mind, on sleepless nights, that he would have liked to have been born this animal, with a memory purely for good and bad, friend or enemy, and with no knowledge of time. Giving time and memory the slip was, in fact, what he was hoping for when he moved to this hillside plot – a pipe dream, to be sure, until the evening on which he finds himself armed with a weapon from his American years, ready to use it to ensure that some person

will never again be able to trespass on another's property. Gun in one hand, dog on its lead in the other, he runs the length of a dry-stone wall towards a steep driveway, panting and grimacing with fury, although he has never truly trusted in his own expressions of emotion – an actor's affliction that he has never quite managed to shake.

Reaching two cypress trees, which share a trunk up to roughly half their height before splitting into individual tips, he hesitates: he could still return to the house, to invisibility. Yet the wheels of some vehicle are still spinning out there; yet again, someone is still trying to turn around in his steep driveway, come hell or high water, carving up the ground as they do so, now with much shrieking of the clutch as well. It's been like this all summer – people who don't know the area getting lost in the sunken lanes that wind through the sloping olive groves – but for the first time he's prepared to do anything, and someone ought to be telling him, Leave it, calm down, put the gun away, but the only person who could have told him such a thing has been dead for five years, and he in turn can't say to her that it's got out of hand, all this turning around in his driveway. Duped by the little arrows on their screens, smart alecks are perennially following a shortcut recommended by Google Maps, which takes them over the hillside, with all its branching lanes and only one properly designated road, into the village of T on the eastern lakeshore. But right after the entrance to his property they come to a place where the road narrows, leaving them no choice but to reverse back down, at which point they decide to turn around in his precipitous driveway, often in the dark, and after much spinning of wheels have to give up and get out of their tank-sized cars, just as he finally turns up to announce in a movie-star voice that they appear to be up the creek without a paddle.

Schongauer shies away from using this voice, and he'd much prefer not to show himself at all – only recently, down in the village, an elderly tourist lady came up to him, took his hands and cried, I know you, I saw you in some film; it was only a little role but my, what a German you were! Do you live here? And she'd accompanied her question with a look that implied he could keep her company on holiday, and he'd said, No. No, madam, sorry – and in any case, you must have mistaken me for someone else! And with those words he had more or less fled from the echo of his own voice in one of the village's little side streets – a

voice which is just same as the one that suited his role and which emanates from a mouth that is still young, a mouth that time seems to have passed by entirely, component of a face that was once just right for being the wrong sort of German – at least in the American imagination – right for playing people who never made it to the end of the film alive. And still someone is trying to turn around in his driveway, and already the air is filled with the stench of burning rubber.

To retreat or to appear – Schongauer considers what to do. The person stuck in the driveway could, after all, be the person he wasn't expecting until tomorrow, a woman who plans to dredge him back up into the world by means of a profile. And there's something else making him hesitate, too: the dog, a sheepdog by nature, picked up in Romania, is whining now as though the person there is someone she thinks she knows, and so he lets her off the lead and at once she sprints off in the direction of the engine noises. Now there can be no more hesitation, now he has to show himself, and he follows the dog past an outbuilding, along to his steep driveway. And there he sees, first of all, a campervan parked on a hopeless diagonal and, second, a young woman kneeling in front of his dog, holding out her hands to be sniffed – he sees all this before he turns away and looks at the damage the tyres have done, but it would be better altogether if he wasn't there at all, with his chest bared, not to mention unshaven and holding a gun in the face of a woman – if he isn't mistaken – who's dressed in tiny black shorts and a floaty vest, hair cut boyishly short, and two furrows between her brows that nonetheless lead to soft cheeks, a girl's face. He has, in fact, already seen too much, and he has to pull himself together to say what he always says in these cases: Looks like you're up the creek without a paddle – words he immediately wishes to take back, but what's said is said.

I was looking for a place for the night and got lost, replies the owner of the campervan, one hand already in the dog's fur. I just wanted to turn around here, and you show up with a gun.

Shongauer doesn't know what to say to that. Nor does he know where to put the weapon – his pyjama trousers don't have pockets; at the most he could hold it behind his back, but that would smack of malevolence. He only knows that this deceptively girlish and

perhaps also deceptively animal-loving campervan driver needs to get herself and her vehicle off his property as quickly as possible. I don't want to hurt you, he says, I just want to help you get away.

Why the weapon, then? Look at your dog – he seems to like me.

She, says Schongauer. And just because she isn't barking doesn't mean she likes you.

So what does it mean?

The riposte is uttered in a calm voice; at the same time, she pulls out of her back pocket the device that led her astray, and takes a photo of her failed attempt to turn around: the campervan diagonally blocking the driveway. And may I also take a photo of him – I mean her? she asks, indicating the dog; an almost ironic question, he thinks, only crowned by her asking the dog for its name instead of addressing him. Hey, what are you called?

Her name is Asha, he says and, in the course of replying, the language he has used less and less in recent years, both here on this hillside and down in the village, gets the better of him. And you – do you have a name, too?

Frida. With just an i. How old is Asha?

Another inquisitive question that he should ignore; better if he were to think about whom he might call at this hour about the campervan, so she doesn't end up spending the night here – a wholly intractable problem so close to Ferragosto, when even the hardest-working are already gearing up to celebrate the high point of summer. Only Luan the Albanian occurs to him – not a proper mechanic, but a Jack-of-all-trades and one of the few people in the village who doesn't talk too much, but who smokes constantly instead and stares in a way that makes one weak at the knees, thanks to that movie-star face he's been stuck with; not that he really knows it, and he, Schongauer, also avoids saying: Luan, you look just like a young Franco Nero! He could ring him, to ask for help. But first he does say how old the dog is – five, chipping off a few years as he'd do for himself.

And perhaps emboldened by this number, his inquisitor states her own age, too. Twenty-four.

Twenty-four? Schongauer finds it hard to grasp how anyone can lay claim to this age, but then the entire thing is hard to grasp, barely even to be believed, and this girl who is

twenty-four, then, and now standing up, dust on her knees, looks at him with those furrows between her eyebrows like the sister of Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*; he saw it last year in an exhibition, that painting. And again he would prefer not to be here, not to be tempted to say something that won't at all improve matters, a temptation to which he succumbs at once – Do you know what a woman said to me once, when I was that age and foolishly told her so: Nobody is twenty-four!

Who'd even say that? No one says things like that.

Schongauer can only give a hum of agreement. He had almost entirely forgotten that incident – just one more reason to wrap this up as quickly as possible; he already has enough memories on his hands. It was a famous actress, he explains.

Which one?

You won't have heard of her, says Schongauer, and she's dead now, too.

But you knew her. Where from?

That doesn't matter. Frida as in Frida Kahlo?

Schongauer can't help but ask that question, and she responds: Not Frida as in, just Frida without an e. Is there a car repair shop down in the village? A valid question on her part, and all he can do is to shake his head – at himself, as much as anything, and his inability to hold his tongue as he usually would. Yes, there is one, he says, but not around Ferragosto; it's the biggest holiday here, in summer. And you're travelling all by yourself? Words he is already regretting, when she answers simply by raising one hand and letting it fall again. Schongauer pulls the dog towards him now, as though she doesn't have a will of her own; he looks at the campervan, still smoking from under its bonnet, only so as not to have to look at its driver any longer than is good for him, and perhaps also for her. I assume the clutch has failed.

Do you know about stuff like that?

You can smell it, he says.

It smelled like that right from the start. And on the subject of my name: I know there was a young Mexican woman who ran out in front of a tram and then spent her whole life trying to please a well-known mural painter with pictures of herself as a victim. That's how

it went, isn't it? She smiles, and Schongauer says: Diego Rivera – that was the painter's name.

Thanks. And your name is?

Another thing that doesn't actually concern her, and he takes a couple of steps back and raises his hands, a plea for a little patience – at what point does one realise that a person could become a touchstone for one's own life; surely not after a mere ten minutes. The woman stranded on his property closes the distance between them, barefoot by now, flip-flops in her hand, and then, as though he's been drinking or otherwise forgetting himself, he tells her his full name. Louis Arthur Schongauer.

So, which: Louis or Arthur?

My mother always said Louis; my father just L. A. He was American. A sergeant in the army. And you're travelling alone – may I ask that?

You already did. Yes, on my own. And now I'm allowed to ask another question: do you live here all by yourself?

Most of the time, says Schongauer, and then he just goes on talking, quite uncharacteristically: But I'm expecting someone tomorrow. I thought, when I heard the wheels spinning out here, that the lady in question had got the date wrong. Fortunately not.

And what would you have done then? Would you still have come out with a gun? Would you have yelled: You're too early!

Schongauer doesn't know what to say to this, because it's true somehow, even if he'd never yell that. But he can look at someone like that. And will have to be very careful not to look that way tomorrow, with furrows between his eyebrows, too, though hollow-cheeked. It would be best if this freelance writer, as she calls herself, weren't to come at all. Replying yes to the letter that contained her enquiry was a mistake; the first he's made since coming to live here, the result of a weakness for handwriting that slopes gently to the right, deep-blue ink and, at the end, a couple of blotches by her name, Almut Stein, caused by too much pressure on the S – little drops she'd concealed slightly with Tipp-Ex, instead of writing the whole page out again – and it was this laying herself bare that had made him reckless. He hadn't even looked up any pictures of her, so that he might retain his image of a nervous letter-writer.

The woman stranded here with him – he barely even dares to think her name – leans back against the campervan, and he shows her the gun's empty clip.

Nothing in there, he says.

What's it for, then?

To reassure me. There have been far too many people turning around here recently. Or trying to turn around and getting stuck, like you. And? What happens now? Schongauer looks down at himself, at too-long toenails. He considers what would be best, but thinking doesn't seem so easy any more when suddenly there are two of you. Your thoughts start doing what they want, just like your eyes, which are looking at her again – in her physique, too, she resembles a figure that doesn't exist, Michelangelo's Bacchus in all its softness yet stability, the way she stands there leaning on her anything-but-new campervan, half tilted back, as though hoping to prop it up where it stands diagonally across the driveway. And then her phone starts ringing with a melody that doesn't exactly suit her, or might do only if one knew her better – a buoyantly summery hymn is what he thinks he hears, he's just at a loss for its name, but in fact he's at a loss for everything right now, not just a solution to all this, but also the thick skin that's needed for him to put his foot down, or else the substitute glass of wine. I'll fetch us something to drink, he says. And make a quick call, so you can get on your way this evening.

Schongauer goes into the house, while the dog – he'd dearly love to know why – stays behind by the campervan; Leave was what he'd actually wanted to say, but after the little word Us it had no longer been possible. In his fridge, aside from butter, cheese and eggs, there is only a tin of mackerel fillets, one beer and two bottles of wine – the wine bought with a view to the woman who's coming to visit him, a simple local custoza which he can offer now. The Albanian can be reached later on as well, though he can barely say how late it is now; judging by the darkness, probably gone nine already. The clearest concept of time he has is that of the visit tomorrow morning, and by that time the campervan needs to be gone, meaning chiefly its young driver, who only raises questions.

He returns the weapon to its usual place, in the bedside table drawer alongside the remaining bullets; then he goes back, bottle and two glasses in hand, into the open air, with

a gait that comes entirely from the hips, even though they seem to crunch. He's as good as seventy-five, and apart from this way of walking, and his mouth and also his confusing voice, everything about him seems it; his hair is greying to white, the grey-white of ashes, like the ones in which he found the dog, half dead, as a puppy, warmed by the ashes – hence her name. His eyes, once fit for the silver screen, now constricted by wrinkles, are the colour of old leaves with a trace of red – great burning eyes was how they were described a long time ago in Variety magazine, eyes for glances that catch you when you yourself are falling. Schongauer is aware of this effect, only he no longer believes in it; instead, he believes his eyes are clouding over, or why else would the olive branches be blurring, the ones under which Frida – he thinks her name experimentally, now – is making a phone call, pacing up and down as though to evade the person on the other end, a person to whom she's explaining in a low voice where she is stuck and even with whom: This guy, she says, can you imagine, he has something to do with famous actresses, his name is Louis Arthur Schongauer.

He certainly wasn't careful there, then; his own language got the better of him, in part because he's out of practice at speaking to women, especially one so young. He approaches her and, when she sees him, she brings the phone call to an end in none too friendly a manner: Enough, I can manage here without you, she exclaims, hangs up and shoves the device into her back pocket, waving her other hand at the campervan: Can this stay here overnight.

It can't be magicked away, he says.

Can I sleep here as well, then?

It's tipped too far over for that. Would you like a glass of wine?

And Frida slowly shakes her head but nods at the same time, so he pours her a glass and hands it over – it reassures him, actually, when a woman drinks with him, only they were always older, a few scarcely younger than he is, with just one exception about whom he doesn't wish to think. Cheers, he says, to use one of the now barely needed words in his vocabulary, and she sips at the wine; still holding the glass to her lips, she asks him who he's expecting tomorrow and if she'll need to be gone by then – I can make myself invisible, okay? She looks at him over the rim of the glass, with a gaze that comes from an old movie,

something like *To Have and Have Not*, only he isn't the man who needs to have his heart melted in order to help people escape from a dangerous island in a boat by night; he doesn't need or wish to be softened into doing anything, and here he only has a little boat moored to a buoy for making trips across the lake and swimming in the peaceful shadow of a cliff. There, the beautiful is also the good, and he needs to be careful that his indolent eyes don't get snagged on excessive beauty, which might expand and drown him. We'll see to it that you can get away, he explains. The main thing is you get away. Or what do you think? The addendum of another, almost anxious question to himself – what he actually wants or doesn't want, but perhaps does want after all: for her not to be gone again immediately.

I think you could use the informal You, answers the stranded woman, now with one hand on her cheek, little finger so close to her mouth that it's too much for his eyes and he looks up at the pair of cypress trees. Up to you, he replies and would like to continue speaking with the vocabulary on which he was brought up and which was part of his childhood with a GI for a father, until one day he disappeared, leaving behind a mother who hardly ever stopped crying. Spend the night here as far as I'm concerned, he says. We'll take a view in the morning. There's a chap around here who might be able to get her going again.

Schongauer takes another sip of wine. His gaze moves from the pair of cypresses to the woman drinking with him, and from her mouth to her feet and across to his own feet: he should cut his toenails tonight. He sips his wine and looks now at the mountains on the other side of the lake, the dark mass of them above the lights along the shore. For the past couple of nights, the humidity increasing, he's seen sheet lightning over there; before the week is out, perhaps even the day after tomorrow, the big August storm will break, just as it has done every year he's lived on the hillside.

Is it an important visitor he's expecting tomorrow, asks Frida, and he says it's only an author who wants to write something about him. He doesn't add anything further, which only makes what little he has said seem larger. And you – Frida – what do you do with your life?

What do I do? She smiles for a moment, suddenly seeming all dolled up in the rags she's wearing. I write, too. But about travelling. And why would an author be writing about

you – are you someone, are you famous? This last is accompanied by a second smile, one of the don't-tell-me variety, and he finds himself tempted to really tell her something: that he used to act in Hollywood films, but only ever bit parts as a Nazi German, a supporting character for the stars. No, he says, no, I was never famous, I was only L. A. Schongauer for a couple of years. Does that old campervan belong to your parents?

It belongs to me. My father thinks it's dreadful, my mother even worse. Normally, they only agree with each other once a year at the Bayreuth Festival.

Schongauer looks out at the now-darkened lake dotted with the lights of the fishermen's buoys. The last woman under thirty not to give up on him was the one he doesn't want to think about, back before he was married. So you write about your travels, he says and risks another glance: at her, now bathed in the white-blue light of her little screen, though without losing anything by doing this, and in the process of writing something using just her thumb on an even smaller area, as though, throughout the course of human history, thumbs had lacked their true purpose until recently; evidently, she is looking for something, and she seems to find it quickly. She looks at one or two pictures and nods to herself; possibly they are pictures of him, if she's typed in his name – some things survive on the internet despite, for him, having died long ago. Was she looking him up, he asks, and she swipes her little finger gently across the screen so the pictures vanish. No, just something I saw here, she explains. I write a travel blog; it has to be accurate.

And can you earn money from that?

Depends how many people read it. But I don't do hotel adverts, I just write about landscapes, nice places and nice things. I'll write about what happened today, too.

Your vehicle needs straightening up first, says Schongauer – how about I do that for you? He steps back a little and plans how to shift it, hardly using the engine but relying more on gravity and the brakes; even if he himself no longer has a car, he knows every inch of the driveway. Best get out of the way, he calls as he climbs in. In case it tips over.

But the bone-hued campervan stays on its four wheels throughout the manoeuvre, which requires only a little bit of support from the engine so it doesn't break down even further, but all the more skill at the wheel and a feeling for the brake pedal. Schongauer

steers it into a level position, with the nose against a fountain that stands between the house and the shed. For a bigger repair job, it will need towing, perhaps not until after Ferragosto; smaller repairs could be done by his acquaintance here – to call him a friend would be saying too much; the Albanian has shown him how to renovate the interior of an old house, but Luan also demonstrates how it's possible to be stuck with a movie-star face and not grow bitter.

He gets out again, and his dog leaps towards him, followed by Frida. Has she already eaten, he asks, and would she like to use his bathroom, he asks too, so as not to be impolite, while she not-very-politely waves the offer away. I have everything I need for one night, she explains, and, as though to prove this, she gets into her vehicle and turns on a light – a light that rather seems to darken everything it touches, bathing it all in a reddish hue. And he is just about to ask what kind of light that is, when the telephone starts ringing inside the house, still only just audible to one ear, the other long since deaf – the ringtone is the chorus of an ancient folk tune that his abandoned mother often used to hum to herself. See you tomorrow, then, he calls through the open door of the campervan, and its young driver appears once more, holding a piece of cheese which she offers to Asha, without having asked what the dog can eat and what it can't. I know I'm disturbing you, she says. But I'll be gone tomorrow.

He has heard this before, many years ago, just in a different language, and then that person was so gone that there was nothing left for him to save, and he could only hope that it would somehow all turn out OK: everything he'd done, out of recklessness, an explanation he still sometimes clings to in the night when it all comes flooding back to him like a bad dream. Schongauer goes over to the dog, past the myrtle bushes he planted, past the rosemary and caper bushes and an oleander tree that was here before him, its flowers seemingly varnished red. He should really be tired at this time, but he feels more awake than he has for years. Something has happened to keep him on his feet, to stem the erosion within him, to cover up the destruction – he knows himself very well, but not well enough. An amateur, his wife called him, when it came to feelings – this wakefulness, he senses, has something treacherous about it, like the mule that keeps a kick in reserve for its master.

Remaining calm is what is required now; a television would be helpful at this moment, but the house doesn't even have the right kind of socket for one. Frida the Stranded is watching him; she smiles and he wonders why. Somehow she is overwhelming him without doing very much, just as Almut Stein silently overwhelmed him with her handwritten letter, with the covered-up ink blots at the end that laid her bare in a way she seems able to live with. Listen, there's just one thing I'd like to know, he says, making an attempt on the mule within him – this breakdown of yours here in my drive, will it be going into your blog as well?

Breakdowns are a part of travelling.

Just leave me out of it.

A plea, if only in tone, and the twenty-four-year-old – he simply can't believe it, that someone can be so young – runs both hands through her hair, cut short in a roughly boyish way, ears bared. As you wish; you can read it all, if you like, she says – hashtag TravelBlogs, Frida Slash, Go forth my heart and seek. And your gun, if I saw correctly, is a revolver. Smith & Wesson, .357-calibre Magnum, short-barrelled. Goodnight.