

Anja Jonuleit
Raven Women
400 Pages

ISBN 978-3-423-26104-3

Anja Jonuleit: Rabenfrauen / Corvine Secrets

Translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

pp. 9-25

Ruth. For a long time, I believed that Erich was to blame for all of it.

That none of it would have happened without him. I nourished my hatred on him, and only first shortly before I departed on my long

journey did I occasionally wonder if he, too, had not been a victim. Like Christa and all the others who had hurried toward the abyss like lemmings. Although it is hard for me to view those with the cudgels as victims. During those nights when my memories refuse to let me sleep, one additional thought slips into my mind, one that is much more uncomfortable and which I would like to get rid of instantly: That it was, in reality, my fault. If I hadn't accepted Erich's invitation that summer, if I hadn't joined the free church Christians, if I had been open with Christa from the very beginning, if... But the absolute worst part was the betrayal. My betrayal of her and the fact that I simply didn't tell her the truth back then. Because the truth could have changed everything.

And Anne still doesn't know a thing. When I look at her, a large question mark lingers over her face. Why do you want to go there, to the other end of the world? Why are you so anxious to reconnect in person with somebody you haven't seen in fifty years? Especially considering this person might be coming to Germany soon. I can't blame her for thinking that I'm a stubborn, old woman, one of those who suddenly latches onto a totally absurd idea that nobody would consider reasonable. But Anne doesn't know anything. And that's why she fails to understand that I simply can't wait anymore. I have to go, have to head to South America, have to beat her to the punch. I'm not comfortable with Anne thinking that I'm stubborn. But I won't try to change her opinion. She'll end up coming to the conclusion that I have undertaken the hardships of this journey because of an old friendship or because of myself, because it will function for me as a form of processing. Just the word itself causes me to blush. All this sensitivity garbage. And at the end, each person should honestly express what they are feeling! Sure, that's what they all believe these days: that the only way to leave the past behind is by expressing it. By presenting it to the world, once and for all, preferably in front of running cameras. As if some kind of justice can be established or recompense be achieved through all that blabbing! How's that supposed to work? How's that supposed to help? Considering the perpetrators are either long dead or ancient. And the injured parties are so deeply hurt that it can never be set right again. He stole their lives. They're gone! You can't return them somehow. So why dredge up those years again and point the spotlight on them? I don't think the world is capable of comprehending what happened there. And Anne might not ever learn the real reason why I'm being driven there. What I did.

Part I

Spread out both wings

It was on a Saturday that Anne saw them for the first time, and subsequently, that day went down in the weather statistics as the hottest day of 2010. This played a role in so far as it was because of the heat that they actually first met. Because of the heat and the Malaria Tertiana from which she had just recovered. In any case, Anne was underway that afternoon on a "memorial journey." In order to say her final goodbyes to Maximilian, who had died of exposure on the Teufelsmoor during this record-setting summer.

At the point that the bad tidings reached her, Anne was at a research station in the Congo, and whether or not it was related to that news, she came down with chills that very afternoon, threw up her guts, and

eventually sweated so much that she could have floated away on her own perspiration. What followed were days in a vacuum, that never could have been filled, even in hindsight. The time was lost forever in a feverish dream in which the news of Maximilian's death billowed and fused with the sounds of the rainforest, the cries of the bonobos, and the memories of the ravens, which were now colored by something dark, ominous, in light of recent events. She later thought that, however strange it might have sounded, the malaria had kept her from dying, just like that, after her mother's call.

Without much ado, Ruth had simply said: "Maximilian is dead." He supposedly died out on the moor while observing the ravens. Ruth had always been of the opinion that things were never improved by merely talking around them. However in that moment, all Anne could think was that this couldn't really be the whole truth. She had just talked to him on the phone, while he was en route to his shelter. Then something occurred to her: She must have been the last person who spoke to him. The malaria had landed right after that realization, spinning a cocoon of forgetfulness around her in which nothing counted except her body, which would be battered time and time again by new attacks of chills and fever.

She felt feverish again today, which was probably due to the heat that had already settled in between the heath bushes, even though it was only late morning. In general, she was still pretty wobbly on her legs, and she was taking a bike to her destination because the path was long and there was no other way to reach the moor. She cast a yearning glance into the water from the bridge across the Striezel. Even in the hottest of summers, the water stayed so cold that, after a while, you began to feel like you were standing in a freezer. An image that she found thoroughly appealing at this moment.

She turned left after reaching the other side and followed the path along the river. At first, she had pedaled briskly, but as the Old Homestead appeared, the paved surface ended, and Anne's tires came to a standstill in the fine, white sand. Anne's Grandma Käthe had always called it Möllersand. She swung down from the bike and gazed down the allee that led straight down to the brick building. Lovely, she thought, as she focused intently on the green of the lindens against the red brick facade. She welcomed any thought that had nothing to do with Maximilian. She forced herself to study the house carefully: the white paned windows, the flight of steps that led to the front door, heavy and black, the rose arch. The house had looked exactly the same, ever since she had swept past along the riverbank as a child, standing there silent and untouched as if immune to the march of time. Once, years ago, Ruth had mentioned something about an inheritance dispute, a family quarrel, which made the sale of the property impossible. How long could something like that stretch on? It was at this moment that Anne heard a child call out. She turned around, looking up and down the path, but she could see nobody and realized that the voice had to have come from the property. Had children discovered the grounds as an adventure play area, just as she had done earlier, during all those vacations she had spent visiting her grandmother? She continued past the manor house and glanced over at the caretaker's cottage, set a short distance back from the main house.

That was when she noticed the change.

Where previously there had only been meadow, phlox and foxgloves and yellow roses were now blooming, while in another area tomatoes and pole beans were flourishing gloriously. Even the cottage, which had looked abandoned all those years ago, now looked different: the front door and window frames glowed a warm yellow, and white sheets were hanging from the clothesline. For a moment, Anne thought she had managed to step into a commercial. The image that presented itself to her was so lovely and pristine. And as if to make everything seem all the more unreal, she suddenly heard children's voices again, a cry: "Alma, Alma!" And then two little girls in flowered summer dresses pelted around the corner of the house, their dark braids flapping as they ran. The older of the two was holding aloft a red plastic shovel, which the other one

was bent on having. Anne had to smile, and for a brief moment, she even forgot what had brought her here and only thought about the fact that this was a wonderful place for a family. Spellbound, Anne watched the two girls as they raced across the meadow, until the older one, obviously Alma, jumped into the sandbox and dropped the shovel. The younger girl lunged triumphantly at it and grasped the shovel with both hands, as if afraid that the other girl would immediately snatch the valuable booty back from her.

Anne stood there for a while, watching them as they sat in the pale yellow sand. The younger girl started right into baking cakes, while the older one let the sand trickle through her fingers. Anne could not take her eyes off of them, until the double door onto the terrace swung open and a woman with wavy blonde hair, dressed in a knee-length skirt, stepped out carrying a laundry basket. She hesitated as she caught sight of Anne. Anne smiled at her and called out a greeting. How embarrassing, she thought, what must this look like? A nosy biddy who couldn't get enough of looking around. The woman responded curtly to Anne's nod and began to take the sheets down from the clothesline.

It was only later that Anne realized what had touched her at the sight of these children, as well as the woman: It had been as if she had been gazing through a window into the past, into a time in which she herself was visible in the photos with jagged edges pasted in her grandmother's album.

As Anne plowed on through the sand, she began to doubt whether it had been a good idea to bring the bike along. She had forgotten what these heath paths were really like. Eventually, she simply abandoned the bike on the wayside and continued on foot, the rose for Maximilian clutched in her sweaty hand.

After half an hour, she cursed her stubbornness. Why had she insisted on doing this today, when it was 100 in the shade! A crazy idea, but that was just the way she was. She had always been reluctant to accept the limitations her body placed on her. All she had to do was think about the nights she had spent writing her dissertation: the liters of coffee she had had to choke down in the end. Or about her research trips to the Congo, where she had come down with malaria every time, which, however, had not prevented her from traveling back down there over and over again in order to conduct her bonobo project. And that was something that she and Maximilian had shared in common: the pushing out of personal boundaries, the attempt to demolish them. And now Maximilian was dead, ultimately because of this very reason.

The silence on the moor was oppressive, and the heat resembled the temperatures generated by an oven. Eventually the vegetation began to thin, the trees grew sparse, and Anne dragged herself from one patch of shade to another. She could never linger long in these because the midges were quite a bit more aggressive in the shade than in the glaring sun. Thus, she had a choice between either being struck down by heatstroke or returning as a welt-covered monster. Although she had already received a fair share of welts the previous night. Her thoughts turned to Hermann Löns, who had been controversial because of his poetry in addition to his political leanings, but who had excelled as an authority on nature. Löns had not been afraid of anything, not even plunging neck deep in mud in order to pursue his observations.

Two hours passed before Anne was forced to admit that she was not going to be able to find the spot. The rose in her hand was already drooping, and she had started to feel relatively dehydrated, too. She pulled the topographical map out of her pocket one more time. According to her calculations, she had been going in the right direction, though the information she had received from the fire department had not really been all that precise. After all, people around here would not be all that keen on having to retrieve yet another corpse off the moor.

She gave up in the end. "This is how the Congo researcher fails on the heath," she cursed through clenched teeth before taking the final swig from her water bottle. She had simply underestimated the Teufelsmoor. Besides that, she had assumed that she would come across unmistakable tracks from the rescue efforts. The

corpse had likely been removed by helicopter. How else could things have transpired, considering that no paved path came within a couple of kilometers of the moor?

The walk back became pure torture. She had a headache again, and by the time she had finally left the moor and reached her bike, the feverish tremors had returned, the ones she thought she had overcome some time back.

Luckily she was already at the driveway for the Old Homestead. From that point, she would be able to bike again. Her steps grew heavier and heavier. Suddenly she had the feeling that she needed to lie down, here and now. She propped the bike against a birch tree, rummaged a handkerchief out of her pocket, and wiped the sweat from her face. She urgently needed fresh air. She breathed in and out. In and out. But the air was not fresh, not even in the least. It was stuffy and hot. All at once, Anne felt dizzy. All she could still make out was cottony whiteness, and as she grabbed for the fence, she slowly sank to the ground.

Ruth. His name was Erich, and when I saw him for the first time, he was busy with poles of some kind or another and a tent tarp. I noticed him from a ways off, from the other side of the river, and he caught my eye because he was almost a head taller than the others and was the only one who was not wearing a shirt. The Striezel was not especially wide, and at some points, it resembled an oversized stream. Yet for us village children, it was the only place to cool off in the midst of a landscape comprised of heath and moor.

In any case, July 16, 1959, was a Thursday. I know this with great certainty because our summer vacation always began on a Thursday, which turned this day into something special. The summer wind never rustled more secretively in the birches, the honeysuckle never wafted more sweetly than it did on the first day of the major vacation. And even if this first day had started with the collecting of potato bugs, I still felt the promise of the indescribable days that stretched before us.

Christa and I had started our final year at the Auguste Viktoria High school at Easter. However, unlike Christa, I had done nothing since April except cram, while she, on the other hand, behaved like a typical teenager - entangled in daydreams, shyly exchanging glances with the boys on the train. In any case, I had slowly become fed up with learning, and that's why I had decided not to go to college, though my mother would have done anything to make my studies possible. Even if in hindsight this turned out to be a shortsighted wish, nothing seemed more attractive to me at the time than to earn my own money as quickly as possible and to get away from here, away from the tiny heath village, away from the restrictions and narrow-mindedness that small places like this moor village inevitably brought with them. I would move away the following spring, to the Harz region, and there I would pursue an apprenticeship as a bio-technical assistant. Christa wanted to accompany me, but that had less to do with her interest in this profession as with her desire to be with me. For my sake, she had even passed up on her upcoming annual summer visit to her cousins in Berlin.

I can still recall that summer with an almost sharp-edged clarity: the bent backs, the torrid sun that beat down on us from a pitiless blue sky and drove sweat from every pore. The straw hat under which the heat built up like in a greenhouse. The potato bugs with their hard shells and their legs, scratching lethargically across my fingertips. And the larvae that felt slimy and colored our hands yellow.

For weeks, the heat had been pressing down across the landscape like a leaden bell, and as the noonday light assumed a dirty yellow hue, I had a fleeting thought that this bell would now lower even further and smother us all. But then the clouds of sulfur dissipated, and the sun reemerged, hotter and more merciless than before. When little Hans simply keeled over a few minutes later, farmer Schlüpke released us that day two hours earlier than usual.

Christa and I went straight to our swimming spot at the Striezel bridge, and as always, Hans trotted after us

at a distance. "Wee Hans" was the neighbor boy who lived in the barracks next to ours. He was like a little brother to me and even looked like it, too. And just as it is with little brothers, I didn't want to have him around all the time, but most of the time he stuck to me like a bur. To me and Christa.

Our steps felt heavy by the time we reached the bridge, a weathered wooden bridge that we had selected as our diving platform. Shortly after that, we jumped into the water - as always, without cooling ourselves off beforehand - and resurfaced, snorting. All of our weariness vanished in an instant. After a while, I'd had enough, so I climbed back up the bridge and stretched out on the sun-warmed wood, which was redolent of summer and sun and freedom. I squinted, and through my half-closed lids, I could see little Hans, who was sitting on the other side of the bridge and dangling a homemade fishing rod over the water. I grinned faintly. Hans had not caught a fish in his entire life, but that didn't really bother him. Christa was splashing around in the water

beneath me, and I knew she was about to try to get me wet. She never failed to take me by surprise. How could my friend, who seemed to be so much more delicate than I, be so completely impervious to the coldness that the river, even in midsummer, kept in reserve? I dozed for some time, while listening to the occasional cries from the men who were working with the tent poles on the other bank. Feeling the light vibration of Christa's footsteps on the bridge, I murmured, "What kinds of tents are they setting up over there?" as I languidly studied the reddish orange pattern painted by the sun on my closed eyelids.

"They're for our youth group camp," a strange voice responded. I sat up, folded my arms across my chest, and gazed into the eyes of the blonde Hun, whom I'd just been watching on the other side. In the meantime, he had pulled on a shirt.

"So..." I drew out the word and tried not to seem too taken aback. Failing at that, I continued quite brashly: "And from which church, may I ask?"

"From various free churches," he replied. I must have looked at him in bewilderment, because he suddenly smiled broadly and added in explanation: "Adventists, Pentecostals, Baptists, and others... Christians who want to encounter God will be gathering here. People who are searching for the right path."

"And you're searching with them?"

"Not any more," he answered without reacting to my playful tone.

Christa stepped onto the bridge at this moment, and I shifted my gaze away from the stranger. I saw Christa move closer, a silhouette against the afternoon light, and the stranger also turned toward her. She joined us shortly after that, and I noticed how the water beaded on Christa's shoulders, like light transformed into glass. A short silence ensued, and to break it, I said: "I'm Ruth."

The man smiled again: "Ruth... the friend. The one who remained God-fearing in the days of dissolution..." I recalled hazily from my confirmation days that there was something like a book of Ruth. That had to be what he was referencing. I nodded as knowingly as possible, and in order to quickly shift the focus away from the subject of the Bible, I waved vaguely in Christa's direction and remarked: "And that is..."

"Christa Bellstedt," Christa interrupted me, and I noticed how she was staring fixedly at the man. She seemed unable to register anything except him. He held out his hand, first to Christa and then to me. "I'm Erich," he said, and only first when he let his hand rest in mine a split second too long did I understand what Christa had seen. I observed his thick, blonde hair which fell with bold panache onto his forehead. Saw the angular chin and noted how the pale blue of his shirt collar nestled against his brown neck.

Out of the corner of my eye, I registered how Christa stooped down abruptly and grabbed her towel. The man named Erich removed his hand from mine.

"Anyway..." he said, "I'd like to hit the water, too... this heat!"

"Yes," I responded, trying to catch Christa's eye though she had turned away. She was rubbing her arms

vigorously dry, and she then hastily pulled her dress on over her damp bathing suit. All at once, she seemed to be in a hurry.

The man had already taken a few steps away from us when he turned around one more time.

“Uh, Ruth and Christa...”

I saw how Christa paused what she was doing.

“If you have time on Saturday, why don’t you come by? We’ll be praying together, playing music and games... and you won’t starve either!”

I once again sought Christa’s gaze, but she still refused to look my way. I thought about the fact I would need to

collect potato bugs in the morning, and later do the laundry and cram for my exit exams. Yet without hesitation I answered: “Thanks a lot for the invitation. We’d be glad to come.”

February 1961. Amerigo Vespucci. Didn’t that sound like the wide world?! I’m standing there on deck, squished between the other passengers. I am a little frightened that the ship might tip over, since everyone is crowded here on the one side. But now it is being cast off, and it is as if they - the wavers on the pier - are sliding away. A swarm of hands, a fleet fluttering of birds! Nobody is waving at me. But who should have been there? After all, this is Genoa, and no one knows me here. On the other hand, things would not have been any different if I were departing from Hamburg. Nobody would have come to bid me farewell there either. If you do this, if you leave with them, you’re no longer my daughter.

The wind tugs at my hair, and I step behind the lifeboat, where I reknit my headscarf. Then I go back to the railing, turn my face into the wind, and look forward. Just like I will be doing from now on! I bend forward in order to intensify the feeling a little. My old life lies behind me. I have broken with everything. This thought takes my breath away for a moment. But then an effervescent joy wells up within me, and I want to throw my arms up and yell at everyone: I have found the love of my life! There, at the end of the world, I will soon see my beloved husband again, and we will finally be back together again. How is it possible that life can suddenly hold so much happiness for me, after such a difficult time? And that is why I must and want to do anything and everything I can, in gratitude toward God and to be pleasing to him.

No, we haven’t always had it easy over the past year and a half. There were moments of testing. But it is as Uncle Paul says: The path to life is narrow, and the gate is small. That’s why I’m going to do everything I can to help the people down there and to participate fully in the community. All I have to do is think about the newspaper photo that Magda showed me from the earthquake in Valdivia! Who will offer aid there if not us? The countless deaths. Thousands of people lost their lives in the earthquake, and so many of the survivors still have no roofs over their heads. Above all, I want to take care of the children. That’s why I’m learning Spanish, whenever the opportunity arises. Besides that, I’m not alone. Magda is standing close to me, and there is Resi with the children.

Oh yes, Elfriede and Else are also here. But I shouldn’t let that spoil my joy. Especially considering that Else had hardly boarded the ship before she was hanging over the commode, throwing up her guts. I certainly don’t begrudge her that! I’m aware that after our tour of the ship, I’m going to need to immediately confess these sinful thoughts.

pp. 31-35

Ruth. We were both outsiders: I was the refugee child from East Prussia, while Christa was the daughter of a suicide. And whenever I think back to that hot Saturday in the summer of 1959, I only wish one thing: To turn back time to a point before that afternoon when Christa was standing there in her brown skirt and white

Sunday blouse on the edge of the meadow, leaning against Frau Bottke's bicycle as her gaze swept searchingly across the site. Brushing across a couple of women in apron dresses, stirring something in giant pots; across a girl in long braids taking towels down from a clothesline. Erich was nowhere to be seen. Just like there were no other men in sight. Instead a voice boomed out from the largest tent, probably that of a preacher. Hans was tugging at my hand. We'd had to bring him along at the last minute, and he was now demanding his rights.

"We're supposed to go swimming!"

At home, everything had functioned just the way I had imagined it would. I had worked in the field that morning, then biked straight home and taken care of the laundry as quickly as I could. But just as I was hanging the sheets on the clothesline, Erna Bottke, little Hans' mother, who was once again pregnant, came waddling out of the neighboring

house. Gisela and Jutta, Hans' little sisters, were in tow, as they fixed me with their black cherry eyes. Frau Bottke called over the fence: "Oh, take Hans along with you to the river!"

Christa and I exchanged glances, and I hurried to say: "But that's a bit far for the little boy... to go down to the river in this heat." The last thing we needed on this day was a small boy who would blab around afterward about where we had been.

However, just like every other time we tried to clear the boy out of our path, Frau Bottke knew better: "Take your bikes! You may take my old bike, then you could carry Hans on the luggage rack."

In the village, Frau Bottke was not considered fully kosher. Flapping tongues claimed that her husband, little Hans' father, was neither her husband nor Hans' father. She had five children, lived on welfare payments, and had recently gotten together with a burly fellow by the name of Ernst Stuck. I suspected that he was more or less regularly beating Hans and the other children, as well.

For a while, we lingered uncertainly on the edge of the campsite, and although nobody was paying attention to us, I felt uncomfortable. But just as I was about to say, "Let's just head back," the tarp of the large tent was pushed aside, and the congregants streamed out. At the head of the line strode a man, who although not particularly tall, somehow had a compelling effect. Like the other men, he was wearing a shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Erich followed closely behind him. I quickly looked away, since I didn't want to give even the slightest impression that I had been standing here and watching for him. Instead, I bent down to Hans and said something trivial to him. As I straightened back up, I recognized to my surprise two other familiar faces: Berta Löwe, who like my mother worked in the Grösitz Sawmill owned by Christa's father and who also came from East Prussia, and

her daughter Magda. I was just about to wave at the two of them, when someone behind me remarked: "Red hair and freckles are the devil's comrades."

I spun around. There stood the compelling-looking man, grinning wryly at a point beyond me. That's just what I needed - for someone (if possible, in Erich's proximity) to make fun of my appearance! I furtively looked around for Erich and found him right behind us, where he was setting chairs around a long table. Had he heard the comment about my red hair? Christa giggled, and just as I was about to get annoyed with her, the man crouched down beside Hans and ruffled his hair. I then realized that I was not the focus here, rather it was Hans, who had stuck very close to me.

"Come, come, there's no reason to hide behind your big sister," the man said, laughing. "I'm Uncle Paul. And who are you?"

"Hans," Hans squeaked, and I noticed that Christa had suddenly drawn herself fully upright, like we had been practicing at her house with books on our heads. And then I sensed that someone had walked up behind me. I turned around, and there was Erich. As if from a distance, I heard Paul talking to Hans about eating, if he

was hungry or something along those lines. But everything rushed by me, and the only thing that I really processed at this moment was Erich's blue gaze and the fact that he was really pretty tall. Then the moment was over. The man who called himself Uncle Paul - whose full name was Paul Schäfer, as I later learned - straightened back up and said something I didn't comprehend. A moment later, I looked directly into his face and was startled: Because only one of his eyes was looking at me, while the other was focused somewhere else. It took me a few seconds to realize that he had a glass eye.

Turning back to Hans, he said: "Well, come along. We don't want to see you starve." And then the man walked past the line that had built up at the serving table. When he reached the front, he called out to the women in a jocular voice: "Hey, you food ladies, give a double serving to my little friend here." I saw how Hans turned red, this time in joy and pride.

"Would you both like to eat, too?" Erich now asked, and I was very pleased to note that I was the one he gazed at the longest.

"If we can actually get something," Christa answered before I could. Her voice sounded completely foreign to me.

"Your wishes are my commands, noble maidens," Erich declared with the hint of a bow, before joining the line.

I gazed after him, and suddenly I realized what the face of the man called Paul reminded me of. The creepy, old crucifixion picture that had accompanied us all through art class and which Christa had found "So dreadful. Ugh! Disgusting!" The image depicted a thorn-crowned Jesus. Men stood around him. And one of them looked like Uncle Paul.

pp. 173-176

Get up at 5:15, every day, seven days a week. I can no longer recall what my previous life was like. At least, it all seems totally unreal to me at this point. The present relativizes the past. I also think a lot about home these days. About Father, who only ever meant well. He never raised a hand against me, not even once. But I didn't realize back then how good I had it. Berta, my manager, is actually right when she calls me a stupid wench. But she only says that because I stumbled in sheer exhaustion while carrying the feeding buckets. Once I'm done in the chicken coop, the night shift begins, and I bake roof tiles in the concrete plant. They're for the new hospital, which everyone here just calls Neukra, and for the Zippelhaus, which is supposed to become our assembly building. Along with the other women, I bake until I collapse.

The men are no longer around at this hour. Men and women are not allowed to fraternize together, since this would be sinful. Even those who are married and have five, six, seven children live apart: the men with the men, the women with the women, and even siblings are kept apart from each other. I registered the bewildered look on little Heiderose's face, when she greeted her brother Werner on the path, and he acted as if he didn't know her anymore.

However, the worst thing was seeing little Hans recently. He struck me as very small, small and mute, and he slipped past me with his head lowered. I dare not think about the fact that I'm the only reason he landed here. Yes, I'm a stupid wench, because I didn't recognize the truth when there was still time to do something about it. I wanted to lead a completely normal life. That was all that most of them here wanted. A family, children, perhaps a little cottage.

Whenever the alarm goes off shortly after 5:00 these days, it's always as if something in my head might explode. And when I take the feed buckets into the barn only a short time later, I'm so horribly tired that I can hardly keep my legs under me. Today, I'm falling asleep as I walk, slumping down as I carry the pails. I

jolt up again, as a hen screeches. I had almost smashed it flat with the bucket. Otherwise, the work in the henhouse is not all that bad. I get along just fine with Magda. We've known each other for a long time, and you could possibly say that we complement each other nicely. Even if she can't say a single word to me, of course.

I keep mulling over what I heard about Hanne. Hanne, whom many find too "cheeky," above all the pious aunties. Does Magda know about all this with Hanne? She's allowed to go to the assembly meetings. Ideally I would ask her about this. However, I can't trust her, you can't trust anyone here, since this world is full of informants and traitors, whose consciences function in accord with Tíos' decrees. But I won't complain. There are worse things than Magda, much worse. And I get along with Magda at this point. When my physical strength fails, Magda jumps in, and when there is a lack of labor organization, I set things up. Like with the eighty-kilo sacks of the feed mixtures. In order to minimize the amount of time we have to lug these around, we now simply slide them down a plank and straight onto a dolly. I want to build a little ramp next, so that we can roll the dolly right onto the scale without having to lift the sacks one more time. Another challenge is the loading of the single-axle handcart, which we use to transport greenery, such as clover, grass, and oats. It's always tipping one way or the other, and when it hasn't been loaded correctly, we have trouble counterbalancing the weight. With a wide array of gestures - I'm not allowed to speak - I indicate to Magda how we have to load the cart, so that it stays in balance and all we need to do is pull it.

Sometimes I'm scared that my intellect will grow dormant. Day in, day out, the drudgery, this monotonous life. To keep from going totally crazy, I'm secretly teaching myself Spanish vocabulary in the outhouse. Who knows what it might be good for? I sometimes marvel that they didn't take my Spanish book away from me long ago. I also use my brains wherever I can. I calculate how much water I carry to the barns on a daily basis, and I come up with 1,800 liters. We don't have running water in the henhouse, which is why we haul and haul the water and feed. We're slaves, that's what I frequently think. We're no better off than the slaves way back when on the cotton plantations. Uncle Tom's Cabin. We read that back in high school, and I complained to Ruth that I didn't want to read something like that because I thought it was dull. Since all of that had ended a long time ago.

In terms of feed, I figure that I tote 1,500 kilos of it every day, and every two to three weeks, when we make the feed mixtures, we - Magda and I - transport ten tons of weight.

And my appearance.

I once saw my reflection in the window of Tío Paul's Mercedes. I didn't recognize myself at first. My eyes - the light of the body - were dead. One of those faces that showed up in the newspapers back then after the war. Photos of returning soldiers. Or concentration camp inmates. No wonder that my body is completely confused. I haven't had a period in months now. I have to think hard about when my last one actually was. Last time, I drenched my allotment of cloth sanitary pads in chicken blood and then rinsed them out, so I wouldn't draw the attention of the laundry controllers.

And then I observe something that I'll never forget. It's evening, shortly before mealtime, and I'm quickly helping Gerlinde take the last load of sheets from the clothesline. I hear the growl of a motor. I recognize the sound as the car that Uncle Knolle always drives around in. I keep working mutely, removing the clothespins from the line and tossing them into the bag, folding the sheets. The noise breaks off abruptly. Car doors open and shut again. Then silence. I'm curious. What are they doing here this time of day? Isn't it time for the men's assembly? I cautiously squint between two sheets. And that's how I see how Uncle Knolle, Uncle Knut, and Lulatsch drag a lifeless body out of the Jeep. My heart pounds thunderously, as if it's going to burst. Gerlinde, who is standing a short distance away, has seen nothing. But I have recognized the pale blonde hair: It's Hanne that the men are carrying into the sick station.



Two days later, the pito that announces the assemblies goes off, and when the meeting is over, I learn that Hanne has died in the hospital from a lung infection. Why am I more than just a little certain that she was dead before then?