

Sample translation from

Daniela Krien

The Fire

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On a Friday in August Rahel Wunderlich walks briskly down Pulsnitzer Strasse towards Martin-Luther-Platz. She feels light, almost weightless, and zips past most of the other pedestrians.

At the practice she sorted out her paperwork, watered the plants, and left a note with instructions for the cleaner. In her favourite bookshop she bought one title on recommendation and one by Elizabeth Strout that's been on her wishlist for a while – a mother–daughter story with rave reviews.

Peter should be home in an hour or so. He messaged her from a vineyard in Radebeul, with photos of various bottles of Grauburgunder and Weissburgunder, and asked if she was happy with his choices. She asked for a Scheurebe too and got a curt “ok” in response.

In the entrance hall she empties her mailbox and goes through her post: a flyer from a new takeaway pizza joint, a bill from the painter who recently decorated the kitchen and an official letter from the city council: her penalty charge notice for being caught by a speed camera a few weeks ago. Ninety euros plus twenty-five for the admin fee, plus one point on her licence. Could have been worse; she did run a red light after all.

Rahel climbs the stairs to the second floor of the period building and puts the letters on the chest of drawers in the corridor. As she's slipping off her shoes she hears the telephone in her room. She hesitates briefly; she really needs the loo, but she fancies she can hear an urgency to the ringing that refuses to be put off.

During the call she has to sit down.

His voice cracking, the man on the telephone explains that the holiday let Rahel booked months ago has burned down. After almost a century in the family's possession, he says, the house in the mountains has been destroyed forever.

Rahel can't muster any sympathy. As the man goes on talking, explaining about repaying the deposit and suggesting alternative accommodation, she doesn't think for a moment about the loss of the property, only about Peter and the expression on his face when he hears about this.

"So you'll take the holiday apartment in the village?" the man asks, his tone now business-like.

"No," Rahel says. "Please transfer the deposit back."

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She spent almost two months looking for a place like that. Right at the start of the year, when the first reports of the virus were coming through, they'd agreed to spend the summer in Germany.

It was the perfect find: a cabin in Upper Bavaria in the Ammergau Alps. Standing completely on its own on a grassy hill, a well with a pump and stone basin, accessible only via a bumpy, winding path through the woods. No internet, no television, no distractions.

Peter has been poring over maps for weeks, putting together hiking routes. He's bought expensive walking boots, a day rucksack, T-shirts and trousers made from quick-dry and rain-resistant material, a top-notch coat made by a Swiss firm and special, foot support socks. Rahel has kitted herself out expensively too, and done exercise almost every day in preparation for their hikes.

They would have left in three days. It'll be impossible to find something similar at such short notice, not this year, not in the circumstances. Without much hope she enters her requests on a holiday apartment website. No matches. She tries again on another site – with the same result.

Then she visits the Alpine cabin site. She clicks from picture to picture, from the geraniums in the window boxes to the small veranda with a view of the mountain range opposite, and back to the house, this time from a different angle. Then the stone basin by the well and the colourful wildflower meadow, and all of a sudden she can picture the blazing fire on the mountain. She sees animals fleeing, a column of smoke rising into a night sky lit with stars, and in the middle of it all Peter and herself, as if on a funeral pyre.

Had this happened ten years ago the two of them would have shaken their heads. “Who knows, there might be a silver lining...” Peter would have probably said, giving her a comforting hug. But he was no longer so laid back. His subtle sense of humour often veers to the cynical nowadays, and their lively discussions have been replaced by a graceful friendliness. But worst of all, he’s stopped sleeping with her.

It’s been half an hour since the phone call. Rahel is standing barefoot at her bedroom window, bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet. Her black hair, streaked with grey, is pinned up. She takes in the world outside, the voices of the teenagers who’ve gathered on the benches by

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the church, as if from a distance. The disappointment has left her feeling feeble.

When the phone rings again she doesn't budge. She closes her eyes and waits for it to stop.

But it doesn't.

She glances at the screen: it's Ruth. Rahel instinctively tenses her shoulders, clears her throat, checks the expression on her face in the mirror beside the desk and lifts the receiver.

She can immediately detect the change in Ruth's voice, which is lacking its snappy confidence. But she comes straight to the point: Viktor had a stroke a few days ago. It's all been too much, which is why she hasn't rung till now. Today he was admitted to the rehabilitation clinic in Ahrenshoop, where he's going to spend the next six weeks. A place unexpectedly became free for him. Ruth

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says she wants to go and give him support; she's already organised to stay with their mutual friend Frauuke, a painter who lives in Ahrenshoop. Now she's looking for someone to look after the house and animals in Dorotheenfelde. She's not normally one to ask but...

She breaks off, then starts again: would Rahel and Peter be able to do the first two weeks? Viktor and she would be incredibly grateful.

Rahel almost says *No. No, I'm afraid we can't. We're going to the mountains.* But then she remembers the fire and replies, "Yes, of course, we'd be delighted to. We'll stay three weeks if you like."

*

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Peter is silent. He shakes his head and raises his hands, utterly baffled.

“That’s impossible!” he says finally. “What is the probability of booking the one holiday house that burns down just before you’re about to go there?”

Then he goes to his room, head bowed. It used to be Selma’s bedroom. When she moved out Simon got an upgrade, and when he left the parental nest too, Peter moved in there. Simon’s old room is now the guest room and what used to be Peter’s study is Rahel’s bedroom. They reorganised the apartment as soon as Simon moved out. For a while they looked for somewhere smaller, but everything that came up was more expensive despite not being in as good a location. Here they were on the borders of Äussere Neustadt and Radeberger Vorstadt, which

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meant they could easily get to both the Elbwiesen and Dresden Heath; they didn't want to give that up.

For now she breathes a sigh of relief . She doesn't yet know how to tell him she promised they'd stay in Dorotheenfelde. She goes over to the window, leans out, looks down at the passers-by and suddenly hears Peter's voice behind her.

“So, what are we going to do now?” he asks. He sits down on the midnight-blue chaise longue that Rahel bought only recently.

She hesitates with her answer, but finally her pragmatism wins over.

“We'll go to the Uckermark, to Dorotheenfelde, tomorrow.”

Her smile slips and she can't hold his gaze. As she stares at her painted toe nails she tells him about Ruth's call. Peter makes a noise that sounds as if he's choking.

“Without consulting me...” he says, getting up.
“So that's where we've got to, is it?”

She feels as if her feet are stuck to the floor and her tongue to the roof of her mouth. Peter leaves the room with a look of defeat on his face.

Rahel sits on the chaise longue, exactly where he was sitting. Then she stretches out and covers her eyes with her arm. She looks inwards and immediately wishes she hadn't.

Later, as she's taking clothes out of the wardrobe at random and packing them into the suitcase, she thinks of Ruth. She can see her face vividly. Over the years tiny

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shifts may have crept into the symmetry of her features, but Ruth still always dresses immaculately. Especially on bad days, her external perfection is her defence against the impositions of the world. This attitude has seemed to rub off on Ruth since as long as she can remember. In Ruth's presence she has never let herself go, never dressed or moved sloppily. Ruth internalised this unquestioned discipline in her years at the Palucca School. When they were children she and Ruth's mother Edith began training in classical dance at the same time. Edith chucked it in after three years; Ruth stayed. The girls remained friends into adulthood.

Rahel's relationship to Viktor and Ruth is seamless and as old as she is. Her life calmed down when she stayed with them in Dorotheenfelde. Edith's restless existence, which gave Rahel and her sister Tamara a childhood with

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changing stepfathers, endless moves throughout the length and breadth of Dresden and a number of different schools, was like a storm on the high seas, and although Dorotheenfelde never became a permanent port, it provided beneficial lulls.

Edith and Ruth were inseparable during those days in Dorotheenfelde. Despite all their contrasts, the friends' bond was close and when a few years ago cancer took hold of Edith's body for the third and last time, Ruth came and stayed. Until the end.

They drive all the way without stopping. The satnav had indicated three hours and thirteen minutes; Peter thought that was a good time.

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On the way she calls the children and puts her phone on speaker. Selma is carrying Max, who is whiny. His screeching drowns out Selma's voice.

"How dreadful that you've got to take your holiday somewhere else now, Mama!" she shouts down the phone. "If I get a minute to myself around midnight I'll make sure I feel sorry for you." She hangs up.

Peter immediately tries to calm the situation.

"Leave her! She's got two small children to look after."

"She's got a husband who'll do anything for her."

"Sounds like you're envious."

Rahel decides to drop the subject and dials Simon's number.

"Bet he doesn't answer," Peter says, grinning. It's the first smile in days and although she doesn't like the

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reason for it, she feels happier. After the thirteenth ring she hangs up.

“Why does he bother having a phone?” she grumbles.

“He’ll be somewhere in the mountains.”

Rahel nods and drops the mobile back into her bag.

They drive through the village, then take a right turn onto a track. The cul-de-sac sign is faded and crooked. Viktor drove into it a few times before he finally had to surrender his driving licence. They judder along the flagstone track, grass growing up in the middle, then the flagstones come to an end too and they continue on gravel and sand up the slight incline.

Ruth is on the drive. Tall, straight and in a low-cut dress that emphasises her impressive bosoms. No hint of infirmity even though she's almost seventy too now. Rahel gets out and walks over to her, while Peter drives on and parks the car.

The stable is attached to the left of the main house; to the right is a large barn. Refugees lived here after the war, and later the farm was the headquarters of the local agricultural cooperative. After that Viktor and Ruth, along with two other families, lived in the former manager's house, which had a stove heater and outdoor privy. The first family moved away in the early 1970s and the other one left at the beginning of the eighties.

After reunification Viktor and Ruth bought the property, which by now was semi-derelict and renovated

it bit by bit over many years. Now it's starting to crumble again.

Ruth wriggles out of their embrace. "I'm all sweaty," she says and wanders off to greet Peter.

On the garden table a dessert plate with a fly cover and coffee in a thermos flask. Ruth pours and begins to talk about Viktor. As she speaks Rahel wonders whether she'll ever talk so lovingly about Peter. Ruth's words emit a deep closeness, and Rahel can feel Peter's eyes on her.

After finishing their coffee they fetch their luggage from the car and follow Ruth up the steps. On the first floor she points to a room at the end of the landing on the right.

"You'd be best off sleeping in there, in the north-east facing room. It's nice and cool. Although..." she says, pointing in the opposite direction, "... you could take the

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south-west facing one. You can see the lake shimmering between the trees. But what am I saying, you know your way around here.”

Ruth turns around and goes back down the stairs.

Without exchanging glances, they go their own ways – Peter to the north-east, Rahel to the south-west. They close their doors quietly.

Later Ruth gives them instructions. Watering the plants on its own will take at least an hour a day. They should use the barrels that collect rainwater from around the house. Viktor’s studio is at the front of the barn, but they don’t go in. In recent years, Ruth says, his works have got smaller. His physical strength may have waned, but his technical skill and imagination are as strong as ever.

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The animals are the hardest part. Neither Peter nor Rahel have looked after animals before. Now the welfare of a horse, some cats, a dozen chickens and a white stork that can't fly are in their hands.

They wander around the entire farm. One window in the stable must be kept open at all times to allow the swallows to fly in and out unhindered. In the chicken garden behind the stable the apple trees are bearing ripe fruit. The wire mesh fence has been patched up in places. Everywhere they look, they see work that could be done. The countless roses growing up the wall of the barn in the courtyard haven't been pruned in ages, the creeping vine beneath the projecting roof of the stables has withered, Rahel counts three broken windows on their tour, while leaves and twigs from last year still lie all over the place.

Ruth acts as if everything is fine.

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Suddenly she looks up at the sky.

“Seven o’clock,” she says. “Suppertime.”

They eat at an attractively laid table in the courtyard as the onset of darkness swallows the signs of decay. There is solyanka, bread, red wine and water, and in a moment of profound contentment Peter says in a thick Saxonian accent, “Impeccable!”

Ruth bursts out laughing, which infects Rahel too, and both repeat the word in unison: “Impeccable”. A memory flashes in Rahel’s mind.

Not that long ago, two years perhaps, they were also sitting here and laughing, with Viktor, Ruth and Simon, and there was solyanka, bread and wine. Simon turned down a drink and when questioned by Viktor he explained why. Rahel and Peter knew already. After

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studying sports science at the army university their son planned to take the exam to become a mountain ranger, which would take two or three years of preparation. The training included elite-level climbing and skiing in impassable terrain high up in the Alps and in the worst weather conditions, as well as endurance and mental strength. For him it all began with giving up alcohol. Rahel had already been horrified by her son's decision to pursue an officer's commission in the army. His desire to become the leader of a mountain unit was another shock, and she was not reassured by his claim that the whole thing was more like a sporting challenge. That afternoon Viktor had been likewise unconvinced. "And then if it comes to it you'll put your head on the line for this country?" he said in disbelief. "Nobody will pay you back."

She finds Ruth uncanny sometimes. As if her friend were able to read Rahel's thoughts, she suddenly asks about Simon.

“Still at the army university in Munich,” Peter replies.

“He hasn't called me back yet, our would-be officer,” Rahel mutters with an anxious glance at her mobile. Then she opens the folder with the photographs, most of which are of her children or grandchildren, but Ruth's comments are no more than pleasantries. At the right moments she says in a deep voice, *Oh* and *How nice* and *I see*, but her gaze keeps wandering and her laughter doesn't sound genuine. Yawning behind a hand, she says she plans to leave early.

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“You don’t have to get up with me. Let’s say
goodbye now and leave it at that,” she says with her usual
assertiveness.

Week One

Monday

When Rahel gets up it's almost eight o'clock. She must have turned off the alarm, but she can't remember. She didn't get much sleep; Simon only answered her message at around one o'clock.

Hi Mama, really sorry Bavaria hasn't worked out. I would've defo come along and shown you a few nice routes. Oh well, another time! I'm fine. Training in the Karwendel mountains. Say hi to everyone! Simon

Although she was relieved for now, she was well aware that the risks would always be present. The demons that tormented Rahel at night had presented her with images of his crushed body.

They turn up to her practice from time to time – the mother whose only child was run over while crossing the road, or the father who watched his daughter drown in the Baltic. They sit facing her like lights that have gone out, lacking the joy for life and lacking the energy to put an end to it.

Rahel gets up, goes into the bathroom next door and removes the night guard from her mouth. She too would become one of these burnt-out individuals if one of her children died. She dismisses the thought, cleans the guard, puts it back in the plastic box and drinks from the tap. Then she goes into her bedroom, swaps her nightie for a black linen dress and looks out of the window. A figure goes into the woods, heading for the lake. Rahel fetches her glasses from the bedside table and peers out again. The

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person has vanished from sight, and all she can see is the stork trudging along behind the house, its head drawn in.

“Snakes, mice, moles. Living, of course,” Ruth had said, answering with a straight face the question of what the stork ate. After savouring their expressions of bewilderment, she allowed a smile to dart across her lips. “But you can also take the little fish that are in the fridge. Or the chicks and mice from the freezer. And if it ever rains again you can collect the snails from the lupins and hostas.”

The bird has no name.

Rahel wanders barefoot down the long landing to Peter’s room. She knocks, waits, knocks again, then goes in. The windows are wide open and she hears the sparrows making a racket in the elder bush whose branches almost

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reach into the room. His bed is empty, the duvet neatly folded. She sits on the edge and runs her hand beneath the duvet to feel for his warmth. But the sheet is smooth and cool.

He's piled the books he wants to read on the desk: *Propaganda* by Steffen Kopetzky, the first volume of Ricarda Huch's *In the Old Reich. Sketches of German Cities*, the collected essays of Montaigne, Tomas Tranströmer's complete poems, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Corsair Writings* and Ernst Jünger's *The Forest Passage*.

In the middle of the desk is a freshly sharpened pencil on a new notebook, behind it his glasses and a pack of tissues. For some reason this careful arrangement touches her deeply. She goes out of the room without leaving any trace behind and wanders downstairs.

Rahel feels slightly at a loss as she enters the kitchen. What she would give now for a cappuccino from her own machine, complete with frothy milk and a touch of brown sugar. She walks around, opening cupboards, and gradually pieces together the order behind Ruth's apparent chaos. There is no coffee machine, just a cafetière. Ruth and Viktor are passionate devotees of green tea. Peter noted to his delight the large selection of pots, teas and cups soon after they arrived.

She rinses the cafetière with hot water and finds some coffee in a black tin. Rahel gives the coffee a sniff; it seems fresh. Then she hears the door close followed by Peter's footsteps in the hallway. He enters in a good mood and tells her about his swim in the lake.

“Oh, so you were the person in the wood,” she says.

He nods. “I was the only swimmer in that entire huge lake.”

“Shall I make you a cup of tea?” she asks, laying a hand on his arm.

“No, I’ll do it,”

Peter discovers to his delight that the kettle has temperature settings, so it’s simple to make tea with water at 70 degrees. Meanwhile Rahel makes porridge. They divide up the tasks. Peter, who’s never been interested in animals and always stubbornly rejected the children’s requests and pleas for a pet, announces to her amazement:

“I’ll look after the animals.”

Rahel is pleased about this. She prefers the garden.

Peter hurriedly leaves the breakfast table. She sees him heading for the stable, from where he reappears soon afterwards with the bridled horse.

The horse is a twenty-three-year-old sorrel mare called Baila. For the past five years she's been enjoying her dotage here after having to retire from show jumping following an injury. She plods behind Peter, seemingly reluctant to move to the paddock. Baila keeps stopping, putting her ears back and digging her hooves into the ground. Pulling and coaxing have no effect. Suddenly Peter grabs the halter rope, spins it around and gives the obstinate Baila a lash on the hindquarters. At once she gets moving and duly walks behind him.

A little later Rahel watches him feeding the stork, which has its fish served up in a plastic bowl and greedily sets about its breakfast. Ruth let the chickens out and fed them before she left, while the cats seem to be full and content too. They're lying on the ground, roaming the

courtyard or stealing into the house via a cat flap, where they disperse on the ground floor.

Leaving the dishes in the kitchen, Rahel goes outside. She picks up one of the watering cans but the rain barrels are empty. In this region too summers are getting hotter, drier and dustier. The spruces and beeches are dying in the woods, and in August it already looks like autumn. She turns on the tap by the front door, unwinds the hose attached to it and starts watering those plants she believes have the best chance of survival. Hibiscus, rosebushes, a rhododendron, a variety of hydrangeas, marigolds and hostas are drooping limply, but stand back up again after a while. Only the lavender is thriving without any help, forming wonderfully fragrant islands. How Ruth, soon to be seventy, and her ten-year-older husband manage to keep on top of the house, garden and

animals is a mystery to her. She doesn't want to contemplate what will happen if Viktor doesn't get better.

Peter is busy until lunchtime. Rahel laid out the contents of the vegetable drawer on the table, chucked away what was rotten and decided to make a soup out of the rest. There's still plenty of bread. She sets the table outside, puts up the umbrella, dips the clay wine cooler in water until it turns dark and chooses a Weissburgunder from the wines they brought.

In the fridge she finds two lamb sausages, both of which with a sigh she leaves for Peter. For a while now she's been eating less to keep her figure.

Over lunch Peter says he's planning a longer walk with Baila this afternoon. Ruth asked him to exercise the mare for at least an hour per day. He doesn't look at Rahel, nor does he ask if she'd like to come with him.

When they're clearing up he drops a glass, which smashes on the stone outside the door. Peter freezes, staring at the shards scattered on the ground. He doesn't move for several seconds, he just looks, and it's this expression that stops her from helping him. Rahel turns away. A ray of sun hits her face and she closes her eyes. When she opens them again he's squatting on the ground, sweeping the shards with a brush.

Peter sets off with Baila; Rahel wanders around the house which has stood here for more than one hundred and fifty years. Like an organism with its own laws it keeps taking in new people, enveloping them, absorbing them, permeating them, working first in them, then through them.

Deep scratches scar the light wooden floor, some of the terracotta tiles in the kitchen are cracked or chipped, and there are no free surfaces. Everything horizontal is covered – every windowsill, every chest, every table carries piles of newspaper articles, exhibition catalogues, books, photos, CDs, notes, sketches and hosts of carved figures for the children Ruth never gave birth to.

Rahel spots those that Viktor made for her years ago. She picks up one of them – an elf – and takes it on her tour.

When the phone rings in the corridor she hesitates. Ruth didn't leave any instructions for possible telephone calls. The phone is new. The instruction booklet and till receipt are lying next to it. Before the answerphone can click in she picks up.

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“Hello, Rahel,” Ruth says. “I’ve arrived safely with Viktor and he sends his fond greetings. He said it to me three times; it seems to be extremely important to him.”

“Thanks! How is he?”

“Alright, considering the circumstances. Listen, I’ve got to go again because a doctor’s coming to discuss the programme of therapy. Just quickly, how are the animals?”

“Fine! Excellent! Don’t you worry, we’ve got everything under control.”

“I’m so glad. I’ll call again. Bye, bye, sweetheart and say hi to Peter.”

“I will.”

When Ruth hangs up Rahel remembers all the questions she ought to have asked. Where is the Hoover?

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What day are the bins collected? Should I forward your post? For a moment she just stands there by the telephone, then she puts the elf in the pocket of her dress, goes outside, crosses the courtyard and opens the door to Viktor's studio.

At the far end of the room, out of reach of the sunlight, is a life-size sculpture on a pedestal. A naked woman, her legs slightly apart, torso and arms arched backwards. A dancer's pose or an expression of intense pain. Stepping closer, Rahel gets a shock: between the legs, right beneath the pubic region, a large spider has spun a web. At once disgusted and fascinated, Rahel watches the animal, which suddenly retreats.

She fetches a chair so she can take a closer look at the sculpture's face. Ruth, no doubt about it. Not Ruth now, but Ruth as a young woman, Ruth before she got

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married, as a dancer, as the muse of the artist Viktor Kolbe.

On the wall to the right his chisels hang in a neat row. There must be a hundred of them. On a workbench is an open box with carving tools and beside it a few unfinished works, almost all of them looking religious. There is a book too: *The Way of a Pilgrim*. On a piece of paper it says in Viktor's expressive handwriting: *Pray continually! And Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*

Astonished, Rahel leafs through the pilgrim book. As far as she knows Viktor isn't religious.

She puts it back and leaves the studio in a strangely glum mood.

From her room she fetches a towel, puts it around her shoulders and makes for the lake. The voices of young

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people drift over to her from a bathing spot on the other side, but here she's alone. She swims naked, as usual. The cool, clean water envelops her body, and it's this moment of immersion that she loves, when the sounds of the world disappear and she's surrounded by total silence.

On the way back she tries to imagine what they would be doing in Bavaria now. But nothing comes to mind.

Peter is sitting in the shade on a bench in the courtyard. He's pulled his hat down over his face, crossed his arms and seems to be dozing. As she approaches he raises his head.

They sit side by side without touching each other. When he tells Rahel about his walk with Baila he makes her laugh. At the start the mare acted as if she were lame. She kept stopping, tossing her head or trying to eat the

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grass by the side of the path. On the way back, however, she suddenly broke into a trot and Peter had trouble keeping up with her.

Just as Rahel is about to tell him what she found in the studio he gets to his feet and says, "I'm going to have a bit of a lie down."

"That's OK," she replies, without meaning it.

*

Before dinner Rahel studs two lemon halves with cloves and puts them on the table outside to keep the wasps away. In the fridge she finds a bit of cured beef, a small soft goat's cheese and a few olives. They'll have to go shopping tomorrow.

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She fancies some red wine, but the prospect of a bad night's sleep puts her off.

Rahel carries out the tray with the cutlery and crockery, sets the table and sees Peter coming out of the front door. He's carrying three large tins of cat food and he shares it out between several bowls. Then he steps a few metres away and watches the mob as they eat. A little cat with reddish-brown fur, who's missing an ear, tries in vain to get to the food. Peter shoos the others away, picks up one of the bowls, grabs the little cat and takes her some distance away where she can eat undisturbed under his protection.

"You're upsetting the pecking order," Rahel calls over to him. He nods, looking quite satisfied.

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After supper he pushes his plate to the middle of the table, takes a gulp of his beer, puts the bottle down, stretches out his legs and crosses his hands behind his head – a pose that Rahel has seen many men assume before, but never Peter.

“It’s actually good that Bavaria didn’t work out, don’t you think?” he says, and although this thought has crossed her mind too, she replies, “No. I don’t know what’s good about it.”

He gives her a serious look. Then he sits up, quickly finishes his beer and begins clearing the table.