

Translated excerpt

**Bodo Kirchhoff**  
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*Roman*

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**Bodo Kirchhoff**  
*Longing and melancholy*  
*Novel*

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1

When does a life end? When the heart stops beating, or when it seems meaningless that it continues to beat? My wife and I used to be avid movie-goers; we liked the difficult ones, but we also could be seduced by light entertainment, images of love—at the movies you forget about language, or that Homer associated love with failure and death, nonetheless he recommended its imitation. So which is it? More of a blessing or more of a disaster? Puzzled over since time immemorial; the outcome remains open-ended. And yet love is undeniably a beautiful idea, countless films have made a mint on it. But death as a dreadful fact also makes a good film even better, and in the end for Irene, it proved to be the better choice than life. I've been wondering why ever since, and wondering along with that when a life ends: When the heart quits working, or when its work seems meaningless, and, as in my own case, on rainy days, it frequently leads me to a ray of hope—the shows about animals in the afternoon - The Black Panther of Orinoco, The Mystery of the Forest Elephant, the Last Sumatran Tiger -, images that, until recently in May, had brought me into the evening, indeed even to sleep, and then there was that letter lying in the mailbox, white with a border the color of the panther.

2

This day with the letter in the box, shortly before Ice Saints, was a splendid day - blue sky, balmy breeze and a feeling of being immortal, for the time being. Everything was good that day, even meeting my neighbor from the tenth floor went beyond the usual words. I had just put my bicycle in the bike area of the underground garage, when he shot inside with his speeding bullet car, parked it, and let his stunningly beautiful animal out, the dog he'd allowed to go with him on his fitness runs, which otherwise lay around the apartment, dejected, even if this could not be proved. It was a mixed-breed dog, half-Weimaraner, half-Afghan, a third

something could not be ruled out, which resulted in human eyes and ears which you wanted to lay on a pillow, Name: Grandville. A dog, therefore, which was not able to hear a single letter, and which gladly thrust itself on me, even when the neighbor walked around the car and flicked traces of dirt from the tires, while holding in the other hand his connection device to the world. What weather, I shouted, and instead of murmuring his usual hey-hey, he replied oh, yes, and then headed to the elevators, and I walked up the driveway to check my mailbox in the foyer, which I always do after work, on this day it meant compiling questions to help prepare my grandson Malte for his final exams in German and ethics so he can graduate.

And at the front door of the apartment building, I ran into other neighbors from my floor; they changed every three months because they were enrolled in a language school on the ground floor; this time, in May, it was three young Chinese people who had an apartment on the same floor as me and the dog owner.

Every night they excitedly gave a progress report back home, I heard them on the telephone on their way to their door, and in the foyer in front of the mailboxes, they greeted me with a bye. And then there was this envelope lying there with the black border, my name on the front in block letters, each letter slanted downwards to the right, but it looked as if on purpose, as if somebody had disguised their handwriting and simultaneously rejected using a typewriter. I hadn't heard about anybody in my immediate vicinity, family, friends, or former colleagues, dying these last few days, so I was able to calmly ponder whose death I was being informed of. Who had I lost sight of these last few years, without him or her or the surviving family members having lost sight of me? Absurdly, the only person that came to mind, was the only colleague I had become friends with during all my years at the newspaper of newspapers, as Irene had often liked to call it, a man who had long since been buried, as if he had written me from the hereafter, on the anniversary of his funeral, the timing was about right. And only in the elevator did I think

about the women who had fulfilled my life, the most important one also in the hereafter, not an exact word, but a comforting one. Another one was from the nearby *Vordertaunus*, an internist, early forties when we first had met, tall, blond, interested in culture, Marianne. I was never her patient, except for certain afflictions that can't be found in any medical book. She actively supported environmental groups, but enjoyed driving in her two-seater with a man, who didn't have a driver's license, yet kept warning her about the perils of the road. Might she have met her death in a traffic accident? But who would have sent the message; consequently, no. Drove or drives, imperfect or present tense: how should one speak of a person from whom one has separated, yet still exists? For nearly two years Marianne and I were a quiet couple, the period of time in which Irene, the woman of my life, no longer could cope with herself. A summer day in the city, she had left the apartment at noon with a small backpack and announced she was joining a rally to protest the expansion of the airport, so that she could become a new person, adding an ironic twist to a serious matter was hardly a rarity for her. But Irene did not drive to the airport; towards evening she was photographing young couples with a child at the Opernplatz, I found that out later from a colleague working in the culture section for national circulation- I was responsible for the local area. She recognized my wife and called me after the horrible thing happened. Irene was not at the rally, rather Irene was strolling around alone, while I was sitting alone in the apartment and didn't want to become a new person, not a person who could manage to live alone. And the next day she was found at the foot of the Goethe Tower, shattered after falling from a height of forty-three meters. She has put an end to her existence. Or summoned Death from an unknown future, however you want to look at it.

The elevator stopped on the tenth floor, and I ran into the manager of the house, Herr Kerb, our encounters were always held in mutual esteem ; I was just able to hide the envelope behind my back. What weather, I shouted again, and Herr Kerb agreed and took me aside and mentioned

the neighbor with the dog – he supposedly had told another tenant the dog always thrust itself onto me, the living dead. An insightful bit of information, I thanked him and walked to my apartment and placed the envelope on the kitchen table. People like calling a person, who hasn't got anything better to do than watch animal shows in the afternoon, the living dead; Fact is, I've been receiving a pension for some time now—not a nice word, but very common—, enough to keep an apartment with a view of the city. So far, I'm doing well, health-wise too.

The organ, which offers itself to poets and pop singers alike, doesn't fail any exams, and to prepare my grandson for his exams, I could make a significant contribution, yet still I was not satisfied. After a meal in the kitchen, I sat down with a notebook from my last years at the newspaper, along with books that belonged to Irene, Novalis, Heine, Eichendorff, for the oral exam on romanticism in German, as well as Aristotle, Kant, and Schopenhauer for the exam in ethics, I was still missing a few newer names, but the night was long; I sat by the open window with a view of the city, while the Chinese people were giving a progress report back home. The moon was a delicate comma, and from the treetops came solitary bird whistles, quiet as the weeping of Malte at Irene's grave, she had something more youthful than the boy's mother, my daughter Naomi, and she, too, wept at the grave, that was nine years ago.

3

Irene had one of those faces that impose a tragic responsibility on women, faces in which everybody can read anything they please. Her mouth, on the one hand, belonged to so-called reality, on the other to the realm of dreams; I believed in that mouth and in Irene in general, and now I believe in the calming effect of animal shows or green tea. I made it while taking a break, while the envelope with the black border remained unopened on the kitchen table. You could say I believe in green tea, in the same way I had once valued culture as an editor: it safeguards our human

coexistence from barbarism. And it's always the same procedure, if not identical, night after night, add a spoonful of tea leaves to a cylindrical strainer, pour hot, not boiling water, allow it to steep in the cup, wait by the kitchen table. Green tea should steep in 70 degree hot water, that's how it acquires its full effect, the effect that likely makes it possible to outlive all of one's former acquaintances, but nobody talks about that. Finally, the first sip, a slight citrus touch that dissipates to something neutral, indeed, dull. Green tea is air to drink, and it directs your thoughts inward, away from taking action, even if only to open a letter; I had opened the letter, mentally, so to speak, and imagined a person from former times, barely more than a name, from now on, beneath the name of the dead person, all the way to the back of an internal list, and then I put the envelope in the table drawer, between old photos and instruction manuals, things you don't necessarily throw away. Then the second sip of tea.

The cup in hand – more vessel than cup, a replica of a Roman drinking cup with handle, a gift from my daughter, who works in the nearby Museum of Ancient Cultures, who uses such replicas for advertising purposes – so with the green or rather pale sage tea in beautiful contrast to the terracotta-colored porcelain, I walked from the kitchen to the living room, to my window facade overlooking the city, which for so many years was our facade, mine and Irene's, five large, windows framed in aluminum that barely could halt the scorching sun. The blinds are lowered in the summer, only the center window remains free and is usually open, in winter when there is frost, ice gathers on the aluminum. A house from the seventies, Irene and I were among the early residents, our little daughter had just learned to speak when we moved in, by the age of three her vocabulary was terrifying. And with the vessel in hand—rather than continue working on the key questions in the subjects romanticism and ethics for my intelligent grandchild, to summarize it more as a presentation— I stepped over to the center window and looked at the park with its old Chestnut trees, known as the Museum Park. It's called that

because it connects two of these types of institutions, the Museum of Applied Arts, not to say handicraft, a white building, which is often soiled, and the house in which my daughter works as the right or left hand to the director; she is also a curator and has been working these last days on the final stages of an exhibition that has been prepared for a long time, Eros in Pompeii—the first impulse for such a project can be traced back to Irene. After our visit to the National Museum in Naples and the ruins, she literally recreated the ancient things through her way of speaking about them and, thus, planted a seed in Naomi that came to fruition. But even more wonderful was that after all the years abroad, my own child would become second in command of a villa from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that I can see from my apartment, which houses the Frankfurt Museum of Ancient Cultures. Naomi is ambitious and far from being easy, but my pride in her compensates for that; I'm as quiet in her company as I am after green tea.

And on that night, too, shortly before the Ice Saints, the tea did the trick—this envelope might just as well be opened tomorrow morning, confident that human curiosity would surely prevail in the day ahead, plus my respect for the death suffered and the grieving relatives. Typical tea thoughts, until I got disrupted by Grandeville's noises which sounded like dolphins in underwater movies, sounds, as if he were lying in my bathtub. But they came from the neighbor's bathroom, where the dog probably had his basket, I put the cup in the kitchen and walked into my bathroom and put my ear to the tiles, but now it was quiet on the other side, as quiet as after a single self-conscious shout, Is somebody there?

And I wanted to respond, with sounds from human to dog, this alleged living dead to a living being, that was merely looking for contact, but before it came to that, the doorbell rang, three short times and as far as the rest of the evening was concerned, I had the unique feeling of having been saved.

My grandson Malte stood in the doorway, to me he'll always be the little guy and also the son I had always wanted, in vain, his head nearly bumped against the frame. By age twelve he had reached my height, and since then, from year to year, he gets even taller than me, but he always looks up to me in such an elegant fashion, even with his recently acquired driver's license—he at the wheel and his grandfather at his side, who never had driven a car, yet is able to steer thoughts into complicated realms, Romanticism, says Malte, can we talk about that for a sec?

As far as I'm concerned, we could have done so all night, but how are you supposed to talk to an eighteen-year-old about Heine and Eichendorff and Novalis, when he's holding an iPad in his hand and checking the veracity of everything being said? It couldn't simply be a matter of wanting to acquire knowledge; he'd only need use his fingertips to see it on his screen.

So what remains is the heart of the matter, the eternally relevant, which even somebody such as he could be moved by, that is if he has already learned that love does not make us strong, but rather weak, in fact, that it is dependent on having a weakness for just a single trait of the other; and that love does not start at the beginning, initiated by the click of a mouse, but gradually, almost behind the backs of the participants, afflicts them like a disease, as beautiful as it is incurable. Thus far, though, my grandson has neither been in love, I would have heard about that, nor did he remember any of Irene's darker sides. In Malte's eyes, the world belonged to the living, not the dead, and that alone was an obstacle to helping him understand romanticism and the suffering of existence. His only link to a bit of suffering: he is the child of divorced parents, but the situation was handled in the most pleasant way possible. Every two weeks Malte's father, a man in the electronics trade with the unfortunate name Carsten—a mistake my daughter had made at the age of twenty—takes his son for a few non-alcoholic cocktails in slick bars, which is light years away from the spirit of romanticism. The very lever was missing that



could have propelled him into the nature of things, and that night it seemed as if even he himself had felt that was the case, a glimmer of hope. You know Hinrich, I'm not so into the love and death thing, he explained upon entering the apartment. But what must be must be; they want to hear that kind of stuff in the exam, they're totally into love and death.

Malte has always called me by my first name, Irene was responsible for that, even if she only saw Hinrich as a name missing a letter – wherever did you leave the little e, she sometimes asked, not with me? And in fact she had the biggest problem with her own name. Actually her real name was Isabel, her father's wish, and just her middle name was Irene, in remembrance of her mother's deceased sister; Isabel Irene, alias Isabel, a nice harmless name, until she grew into a strikingly beautiful young girl, while others got pimples. She was so beautiful, they mocked her for it, and that in a city such as Rome, where she had spent her childhood because her father worked in consular services. *Isabella la fica*, the boys shouted, Isabel, the fig, which in German also means coward, a terrible, cruel compliment, but she was unable to cast away the tyranny of her name, to do that other things needed to occur. Essentially, there is just a single word that truly matters to us, and that is our own name, which is connected to our consciousness, and which in turn connects us to our organism, something nobody can explain - why I, Isabel, am in this beautiful body and in no other? Or why I experience me, Hinrich, in this organism and not in Malte's? You cannot get out of your own skin, but how do you get into your skin? Such questions go through my mind when I think of Irene – who had discarded that one word that really matters to a person, her name Isabel, at the age of sixteen. In our daughter's eyes, it was the very reason for the ensuing rift she had with herself, not in my eyes. Whoever ends their own life has more than one reason, yes, in fact he has more reasons than necessary, as do most murderers; a bleak subject, and not so distant from the subject of romanticism that Malte had wanted to discuss with me. That said, he still believes Irene's death was a

kind of mishap, the view he had held back when he was half a child, and not something romantic souls, apart from love, are most preoccupied with.

Meanwhile, Malte sat down on the sofa, which Irene had chosen, velvet in a sepia tone, and stared pensively, a young man in whom I would have fallen in love with on the spot, had I been a girl, the quiet type, yet self-assured. Romanticism today, what comes to mind, he said, his alert eyes focused on my slippers. So, what comes to mind—it came to my mind that Facebook is a romantic project: Who doesn't want to be a friend of the entire world, even at the cost of being transparent. And the love of travel occurred to me. Away, away from here! The eye sees the doors open, the heart revels in bliss, said Heine in one of his letters from Berlin. But don't we also know this feeling of reveling when we surf the net and the whole world seems to stand wide open for us, yet another romantic project. Why only seems, objected my sensible, and as far as the path to his graduation was concerned, somewhat jaded grandchild, and I said that was just my impression, or did he think the whole world was open for him just because he could view his next beach vacation on Google Earth? Your heart, I shouted, when does it revel in bliss, that's something I'd love to find out! An emphasis on my part, something I've kept from Irene, wearing my heart on my sleeve, and Malte just placed a hand on my arm. Meaning to cool it, he didn't have to say it, since the year abroad at a school in the United States, this placating gesture found its way into his language: de-escalation, they used it in the drama class there. Before that though, prior to Irene's death, when our daughter frequently brought Malte to us on weekends, because she wanted to spend a couple of hours being a couple with her electronics husband, and we played with a grandson on the carpet, I certainly saw in Malte's child's eyes a trace of blissful reveling. I believed I could see his future predisposition for carrying projects through to the end, which would later turn out to be useful, as stable as our towers of Lego blocks, except that it was more likely I was reading my own dreams from the sparkle in his eyes. And with each farewell, when

he'd give me a quick hug at the door, which made me feel that slight pain of separation, I always also felt the great pain of not having a son. We discussed Heine and Eichendorff and how they relate to the present, for example in Eichendorff's Harz diary, an illustrated edition with small Irene-like comments that had first gotten me interested in reading the romantics, more so than was necessary for my job at the newspaper, when all of the sudden Malte said he had to leave, he had a date, but first he wanted to settle something. And, as it turned out, it was the real reason for his visit that evening, normally our conversations concerning his graduation took place in the afternoon. It has to do with money, he began in a businesslike tone that seemed peculiar to me, the little bit of money which is still in Switzerland; we should go get it, before it's too late. Just the two of us. Naomi doesn't have any time anyway, it would be best if we didn't say anything to her, what do you think? Malte got up from the sofa, walked to the window and looked at the park with the Museum of Ancient cultures, while I smoothed the indentation he left behind on the sofa, a movement as if whoever was guiding my hand, was as gentle as it was relentless.

The bit of money was black-market money and dirty to boot, originally two hundred thousand Deutsche Mark, Irene's bounty from the sale of a field near Weimar, a coup of her cousin, now deceased. He insisted she should loan him a small amount of cash for the purchase of the yet worthless field, which she did, and she even pawned family jewels, suspecting nothing about his old Stasi contacts, and was then horrified at how much money it grew into almost overnight. The cousin - for Irene just *the Terrible* – had stashed the entire amount in Switzerland and routinely cashed in on his lion's share of it, until it was almost completely squandered away, while Irene only drove to Zurich once with me to arrange, in the event of an emergency, that we both had access to her dirty deposit, as she called it, but she didn't count lack of money as an emergency. We shied away from using it, and it remained that way after her death, it went so far that I would even make a detour to avoid

Switzerland, although the mountains had attracted me, since I was a boy at a school camp in Bodensee with a view of the Swiss peaks. These peaks were the unattainable, freedom and happiness, both of which I had found at the end of the school year back on my home turf, in the arms of a classmate - a term which is true on the one hand, on the other hand, doesn't convey in the least what it had meant to have lain in precisely those arms, Almut Bürkle's, who later plunged into the divided city of Berlin. But despite all the detours to avoid Switzerland, the deposit remained in a bank with the trustworthy name of its founder, and one day it should at least benefit Naomi and my grandson; so on Malte's sixteenth birthday I informed both of them about it, with the result that Malte touched on the Zurich problem, as he put it, from then on. And on that evening, when he came around to me with questions about romanticism, he also had an idea about how the problem could be solved. Malte wanted to take Naomi's car—a fairly worthless BMW 3 Series with a convertible that Irene had bought used for our trips—to drive straight from school to Zurich, in fact the coming Tuesday would be ideal. And in Zurich we would stay at a cheap hotel near the bank, eat something in the city afterwards and then talk about romanticism and ethical issues such as justice. The next morning we could go to the bank, an old building on the Limmatquai - already on his pad for me to look at - we'd withdraw all the money and there in the hotel, as long as we still had the room, we'd hide it in our luggage, so that in the noontime quiet, we'd leisurely drive to one of the smaller border checkpoints and be back by nightfall. With all the dough, he added casually.

According to Malte, it was a perfect plan, even though I saw gaps in it, dogs trained to smell money, and tax fraud investigation agents who probably were hanging around the respective institutions in Zurich. And yet it was a good plan, because it was a beautiful plan: from a boy who had thought of saving some black-market money with his grandfather, a ridiculously small amount compared to other saving's accounts, on top of it money that neither I nor he had brought to Switzerland. Everybody

involved was dead and the living simply solved a problem left behind for them. These were the circumstances, and that was my answer, it's a deal, next Tuesday after school, and we'll tell Naomi we're taking a day trip to the Harz Mountains on old Eichendorff's trail.