

Translated excerpt

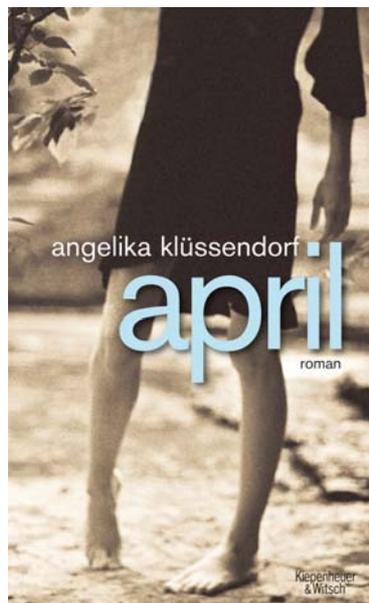
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April
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Angelika Klüssendorf
April
Novel

Translated by Zaia Alexander



The young woman rings the doorbell of the ground floor apartment. Fancy lettering on the nameplate: Frl. Jungnickel. A bird chirps, two short trills, then silence again. The man next to her clears his throat and presses the doorbell, impatiently, insistently. This time they hear footsteps, the barred window in the door opens, an old lady peers through it, motionlessly, except for a quiver of the eyelid. After a while, she seems to realize what the man from youth services is trying to tell her. The young woman and the man need to identify themselves before they are allowed to enter. They follow the old woman through the hallway into a tunnel-like room. The young woman looks around, feels an icy draft on her face, the window must not be sealed properly. She will have to spend the next few months here, maybe even years. She's just turned eighteen and the room was assigned to her by youth services, just like the office assistant position at the central power plant.

They walk into the kitchen with the old lady. Never has she seen such a dreary kitchen, even the man looks astonished. The floor tiles are pitch black, the walls are coated in a dark, glossy oil paint, the kitchen cupboard and even the sink is lined in black linoleum.

It's because of the *Dest*, says the old lady, with a thick Saxon dialect. She hears the word for the first time and asks: What's *Dest*? She can't quite follow the explanation, but thinks it means soot, and yet the kitchen is immaculately clean, not a speck of dust anywhere.

The man says goodbye and wishes the young woman good luck for her future life, as if it were a game of dice.

Fräulein Jungnickel, a scrawny woman of about seventy, disappears into her room leaving the door slightly ajar. The chirping and the old woman's voice grow louder, she is having a conversation with the bird.

The furniture she was allowed to choose at a moving sale will be delivered in the afternoon, a sofa, two armchairs, an old glass cabinet, some pots, dishes, and bed sheets.

She has spent the last few years in children's homes and has been dismissed into adult life with a hundred marks in her pocket and allotted an apartment. She has given herself the name April. April owns a single

suitcase which contains her meager belongings and heaves it onto the stove. She will have to buy coal, half the winter lies ahead of her. It's Saturday afternoon, she goes to the store, buys bread and a huge supply of packaged soups. On the way back, she tries to memorize which buildings have piles of coal on the sidewalk.

When she goes into the kitchen to cook a package of soup, Fräulein Jungnickel comes inside and stands in front of her with her arms crossed. The Fräulein just stands there watching April without saying a word. The second a drop splatters on the black linoleum, she grabs a folded cloth and wipes it away, then she goes right back to standing in front of her again—this goes on for quite some time: she stirs the pot, a speck, a tiny drop flies through the air, the old lady swoops down on it like a hawk for its prey. April knows she has to get along with the old bag, so she smiles as if at a little joke.

She makes her bed on the sofa, wraps herself tightly in the blanket. She hears the clock chime as she tries to read. At the stroke of ten, the door opens and in comes the Fräulein who wordlessly switches off the light. April lies on her back and gazes into the darkness. From upstairs she hears a persistent knocking that continues to echo behind her forehead. When the noise stops, the room seems very quiet to her.

She wakes up early in the morning and the first thing she registers is the ugly wallpaper, then her feet which are numb from the cold. She stuffs the blanket in front of the unsealed window, lights the gas stove in the kitchen and warms herself in its flames. It sounds to her as if the bird is wailing, she gets dressed and leaves the apartment. Harsh morning light falls on the deserted streets, snowdrifts piled against the curb are covered in soot, it smells of exhaust fumes, coal dust and sulfur.

She wanders aimlessly, the snow crunching under each step. The shops look as if they had been abandoned years ago, the usual depressing stuff in the windows. April thinks about what she'll buy when she gets her first paycheck: no matter what she has to have a record player: how often has she imagined listening to Janis Joplin in a room of her own. She's proud of the album, she had swapped a Wolf Biermann for it, which she previously

had traded for the complete works of Shakespeare, a magnificent edition bound in green leather.

The Fräulein doesn't show her face the entire day, she can even cook the package of soup without being disturbed, but she hears the conversation with the bird well into the evening hours. This time April switches off the light before the clock strikes ten, relieved that Sunday is over.

She wakes up before the alarm clock goes off, quietly goes into the bathroom, brushes her teeth over the sink. She wants to appear neat, which means she can't wear her favorite outfit, a pair of torn Levi's and a T-shirt from the West, the one with the US flag embossed on it.

It's still dark when she exits the tram in the city center. She joins the others heading towards a large, low-rise building with the power plant's name—*VEB Kombinat Starkstromanlagenbau Leipzig – alle*—written in neon over the main entrance. Actually it should read *Halle*, but the letter *H* is not illuminated. For some reason it cheers her up; strictly speaking, she's not too keen about her new job. But what other options did she have? Apart from finishing a basic school education and dropping out of an apprenticeship at the LPG agricultural cooperative, she had nothing to show for herself.

The porter escorts her to her department. The stench of disinfectant lingers in the corridors. Everybody looks up when she enters the room; a middle-aged woman gets up from the head of a large table and introduces herself as the office manager. She gestures towards the empty seat at the window as though she were a hostess. April counts seven more people, all staring at her inquisitively. The office manager introduces her to her colleagues, but the names barely sink in. The woman to her left immediately starts lecturing her about the various tasks: allocating cable to companies, filling out a form for each allocation, and adhering to the coding from one to ten, the number one refers to government projects which have priority. The woman produces a lot of saliva as she speaks, April discreetly tries to wipe the spit from her face. A man with thinning hair combed over his scalp repeatedly draws his pencil along the hard edge of a ruler; he is the only man in this room.

After only an hour, April has to muster all her willpower not to fall asleep on the table. She tries to fill out the forms in her best handwriting. During the breakfast break she buys coffee, a *Bockwurst* sausage and some rolls from the kiosk. She feels intimidated by her colleagues, who gape at her as she eats; she thinks she detects a genial sense of superiority in their eyes. She'd love to tell them: when I'm as old as you, I won't be here. With her first paycheck, 320 marks, she buys a record player and a beautifully illustrated old volume of *Grimm's Fairytales*. Whenever she reads her favorite tale, "Clever Gretel," it takes her back to her childhood, to when she was locked in the cellar as a punishment and had to fend off the hunger by reading this story.

She reads the fairy tale with the feeling of having escaped, for the time being. All she has left for the rest of the month is a measly 28 marks. But there are other ways to make ends meet. She pockets things every chance she gets. Back in the children's home she was the slyest thief, once she nicked ten bars of chocolate right in front of the saleslady. Before she heads to work early in the morning, she puts the album on the turntable and keeps setting the needle to the track with, "Summertime," by Janis Joplin, her favorite song that winter.

She tries to get along with the *Fräulein*, although for some time now she has stopped putting up with everything. When the old lady switches off the light in the evening, April switches it back on, she ignores the nagging, knows when to play deaf.

She buys some coal and misses paying a month of rent. She lives on packaged soups and breakfast from the kiosk. During work she daydreams about meeting interesting people. At night in her room, she writes long letters to an unknown lover, she plays all sorts of roles, sometimes as a student of veterinary medicine, sometimes as an actress, or sometimes just an adventuress.

One particularly freezing day, she keeps putting more coal in the oven until late in the evening. She wakes up coughing and finds the whole room full of smoke. Bleary-eyed, she switches on the light and discovers her suitcase smoldering on the stove. Half asleep, she tears open the window,

drags the suitcase into the hallway, woozily leaves it on the wooden floor, staggers back to bed and immediately falls back to sleep. She is awakened again, this time by a deafening crash, and when she opens the door, two firefighters head towards her through clouds of smoke. Fräulein Jungnickel wanders through the hallway dressed only in a nightgown, one of the men tries to calm her down, and the bird squawks pitifully for dear life. The men carry the suitcase outside, hose down the floor, and one of them shouts incredulously: how could anybody be so stupid.

Along with the suitcase, April loses everything that connects her to the past: letters, diaries, things she had collected during her lifetime. Once things have calmed down again, it takes her a long time to go back to sleep. Maybe the fire was a sign, a sign of a new beginning, but she has no idea what that's supposed to look like.

Ever since the incident, Fräulein Jungnickel doesn't let April out of her sight.

The old woman enters her room any time she feels like it, comments on every speck of dust in her sing-song Saxony accent, she even follows her to the toilet and waits outside the door. She complains loudly to the bird about April, and several times she hears her utter the word *Dest*.

Some friends from April's old crowd visit her for a housewarming. They travel from villages, from the boondocks, to see the one who made it to the big city.

During her apprenticeship, she spent her free time with them, raced around on the back of the motorcycle, always seeking new thrills: a trip to Brno to watch car racing, eat goat cheese, drink dark beer; in March, the first swim in the Baltic Sea; once they'd even spent the night in a church. Black Paul has brought two cases of beer, he is a sheep shearer and his powerful arms could carry five of her. He greets her as if he'd just seen her yesterday. Hey skinny bones, he says, it's pretty darned cold in your flat. He shows her a bruise the shape of a sheep's hoof on his hand.

Fucking animal, he says, I almost choked it to death.

She likes her nickname, skinny bones, sounds comforting; the guys had a lot of other names for her before: bag of bones, string bean, chopstick.

Sputnik arrives, she is named after one of many Soviet satellites; she was the only one at school who could compete with her in long-distance running. Sputnik eyes her room skeptically, fuddy duddy wallpaper, she says, and who's that old geezer out there?

The old geezer never was young, says April, she was born old, and with her cleanliness mania, she'll even blow my nose for me, if I don't watch out. She tells them how Fräulein Jungnickel keeps her under surveillance - they quickly agree: The old Fräulein is bonkers.

You can't put up with that shit, says Black Paul, and he squints slightly so that he looks threatening.

It's late afternoon and the whole gang is gathered in her room. They drink, smoke, talk about the good old days like war veterans, Mickey imitates Walter Ulbricht, they sing hits from the sixties. Mickey is even skinnier than she is, his features sharply chiseled like a wooden marionette. April has never heard him speak about his illness, but Sputnik says he's a goner. In the evening they take the bus to the "Riviera" a small town disco and patiently wait in line to get in.

By the time the pockmarked bouncer waves them through, the best seats next to the heater are gone, so they warm themselves up with a "traffic light," which is a mix of peppermint, apricot and cherry liqueur; Mickey buys one round after round. April plows her way through the packed hall, the atmosphere is sizzling, she is flying high and manages to jump on the stage to ask the DJ to play "April" by Deep Purple. She has no desire whatsoever to go home when day breaks, doesn't want to stop dancing, but they turned on the glaring houselights during the song, "Je t'aime." She snuggles up closely to Frieder as they dance and when the music stops, she remains standing motionless, like a statue, her eyes closed as she returns Frieder's kisses.

She is the first to awaken early in the morning, her friends are lying in sleeping bags all over her floor, her room reeks of alcohol and stale smoke. April is shaky and hung over. Outside the window, she notices a

sparkling icicle, dissolving drop by drop, she thinks she can hear the drops burst as they fall. Frieder is lying next to her on the sofa.

She is trying to remember what happened the night before, but only remembers making out with him. April is in love, which means nothing, she's often in love. She can catch a stranger's eye and dream of him for nights on end, a brief encounter is enough to make her heart beat faster, but it never lasts long. Frieder has a beautiful mouth, but his kisses are hard and dry. He enlisted in the army for three years because he wants to be a doctor. The girls are really into him, and not just because of his looks. He wears Levi's and knows about music. She cautiously crawls over him, and as she puts the kettle on the stove in the kitchen, she notices she doesn't hear a single bird trill from Jungnickel's room. One by one, all the others wake up, Mickey finds a bottle of *Bergmannschnaps*, high-proof Miner's schnapps, in his backpack,

She only sips at it. At some point, Black Paul comes up with the idea of paying a visit to the old lady and her bird. Although April isn't thrilled at the idea, she agrees.

Let's flip a coin, says Mickey, heads or tails, and the winner has to chirp a tune for the old lady, naked. Heads, shouts Black Paul and wins. He strips off his clothes as though it was the most normal thing to do, Sputnik whistles in admiration, everything on his body is frightfully large. At this point, April wants to call the whole thing off, but Black Paul is already on his way.

They hear him belting out, "Ramona, goodbye, I tell you goodbye," then a high-pitched shriek that escalates octave by octave, interspersed with the bird squawking like crazy, and when Paul Schwarze comes back, he looks pale as death. The old lady's never seen a naked man in her life, he says, that's for sure.

When she says good-bye to her friends that evening, April doesn't dare go into the hallway. She hears some banging noises, as if furniture was being moved around, it lasts way into the night, and she imagines the Fräulein barricading herself behind the wardrobe and thinking about Black Paul.

One of the first early mornings in spring, she throws on her torn Levi's and T-shirt with the US flag. The din of screaming birds makes her feel cocky. The office manager sends her home in a rage, she orders her to change her clothes and then later make up for the lost work time. But she can't, she's got an Imp inside of her that makes her disobey orders compulsively. She goes to the zoo instead and watches her favorite monkey, the rest of the time she wastes in the city center. She'd love to sit in a café, but she doesn't dare to. In the evening, she paces restlessly in her room, the birds outside the window, there must be thousands of them, seem to be rehearsing for a big concert. Later, she takes a tram back into the city and gathers her courage to go inside the "Thüringer Hof." A rope is strung across the entry. As soon as she lines up behind the other guests, she feels like vanishing into thin air. A grumpy waiter shows her to a seat at the end of the room; she wishes she could quickly and inconspicuously disappear again, but the path to the door is far away, so she remains seated and orders beer after beer, until she's the last to leave the pub.

She can barely open her eyes the next morning, her head is pounding. She puts on her torn Levi's and T-shirt again. On the tram, she feels the urge to spit right in front of all the people with their daily grind faces, her arrogance makes her dizzy.

At the office she gets sent to the department head, but he seems distracted, he insinuates she ought to wear a bra to work. At first she thinks she hasn't heard him correctly. He doesn't say a word about the US flag on her T-shirt. Is he making fun of her? She doesn't detect any humor in his face, just a hungry glimmer, and as soon as she realizes what he means, she grins and bears her teeth at him, silently burying him in a pile of curses. Sometimes when she wakes up early, her tongue feels thick and furry. In such moments, she has no idea where she is. She misses her friends, but she doesn't feel like traveling to the village, or perhaps it's out of fear. As if there were a risk of infection, if she returned to the place of her youth and then she had to stay there forever. The only person from

the old crowd who visits her is Frieder. When he is on army leave, they lie silently on the sofa, and even though he wants to do more than just make out, she refuses to put out for him. At least that's what she had heard Frieder say to Black Paul: Skinny bones won't put out. The sentence gives her a sense of power, as if she's a person who can grant something, or not. So, she doesn't want to, or not yet. Is she waiting for the right person? She feels aroused enough, likes fooling around without having to deal with the consequences, and it feels safe as long as they play by the rules. The spring days intensify her sense of restlessness. When the birds get wild before dark, she feels impelled to leave the house. April discovers they don't seat people late at night at the "Thüringer Hof," so she finds an empty table and pretends she doesn't notice the other guests gaping at her. She doesn't like alcohol, she prefers soda, but the first beer loosens her up.

A couple comes and sits at her table. The man is wearing a tie, even though he doesn't look like the type to wear a tie. He looks more like a tapir in disguise, his big nose quivers when he speaks. His girlfriend, on the other hand, looks like a *Kombinat* combine worker, only her mouth is a tick too red and shaped like a little heart. The man orders a round of brandy, and when the waiter serves the glasses, the tapir pushes a glass towards April. He leans over to her and says: they call me Adam Tie. He sounds like a tipsy braggart. He points to his girlfriend and says, this is Eva, you know, as in Adam. The man seems weird to her, at least until she chugs three glasses of brandy in one go. Then she thinks Tie—he insists on being called this – is really funny. During the course of the evening, Tie mentions they didn't have a place to stay that night and asks if they could stay with her.

Late that night, the two make themselves comfortable on her sofa. April lies on the floor wrapped in an old winter coat. The next morning she manages to get up and goes to the office, but the office manager just looks at her and shakes her head. You look like a corpse, she says, where were you last night? While everybody comments about the rings under her eyes rings, April can't help but think about the couple in her room, and

wishes the man and woman will be gone by the time she gets home.

During the breakfast break, she tries to fall asleep on the toilet lid with her arms and head resting on her knees.

The rest of the time she spends in a semi-conscious state, dreamily gazing out the window, but when the woman to her left coughs loudly and reproachfully, she realizes her colleagues are glaring at her. Herr Bluemel shouts, dear girl don't fall asleep. April notices with a touch of malice that his scalp has started to twitch beneath his thinning hair. That always happens when he gets upset. That evening she's in a terrible mood and when she enters the apartment, Tie shouts to her from the kitchen: today we're serving goulash. April wants to be alone, she wants the two of them to leave, but she is too cowardly to tell them how she feels.

She tries to make the best of it, drinks beer after beer, and tells herself goulash is a welcome change from packaged soup. A few hours later, they finished off the beer bottles. Tie tells stories, loses track of the plot, chain smokes, wheezes and coughs as he laughs. Sleepily she hears him talk about his plans to rob a museum, rob a bank. Then he talks about a foolproof plan to rob a batty old lady, and after a moment she realizes he means Fräulein Jungnickel. On Tuesday the old lady has toilet service and comes home later, he says, and his huge tapir nose quivers.

That's how she finds out how Fräulein Jungnickel earns extra money.

He engaged her in a conversation: The old lady is bonkers, but she's got to have a lot of money stashed under her mattress. You can't be serious, she says, the old lady will have a stroke. April tries to make his plan look absurd, does a few slapstick skits, the old lady gasping for her bird, or tearing out her thinning hair. You'll get your share, says Tie, and his girlfriend pats her arm. The next day, the police are waiting for April at her home. She denies knowing anything about the burglary. Fräulein Jungnickel sits in the kitchen crying and points an accusing finger at her. April doesn't feel any pity, she's just glad to be rid of Tie and his girlfriend.