



Translated extract from

Christa Wolf
Ein Tag im Jahr
1960-2000
Luchterhand Verlag
München 2003
ISBN 3-630-8749-6

pp. 5-23

Christa Wolf
One Day in the Year
1960-2000

Translated by Isabel Cole

© Litrix.de 2004

The Wonderful 27th of September

I didn't read a single newspaper.
I didn't stare after a single woman.
I didn't open the mailbox.
I didn't wish anyone a good day.
I didn't look in the mirror.
I didn't talk to anyone about old times or
about new times.
I didn't examine myself.
I didn't write a single line.
I didn't start a single ball rolling.

Thomas Brasch

My Twenty-Seventh of September

How does *life* come about? The question preoccupied me early on. Is life identical with the time that passes, inevitably yet mysteriously? As I write these words, time passes; at the same time a tiny fragment of my life takes form – and fades. Does life consist then of countless such microscopic time-fragments? Strange, though, that you can't catch it in the act. It evades both the watching eye and the diligently jotting hand, and in the end – at the end, too, of a life phase – it has fitted itself together behind our backs according to our secret needs: richer, more significant, exciting, meaningful, story-filled. It reveals itself as more than the sum of the moments. More, too, than the sum of all the days. At some point, unbeknownst to us, these everyday turn into lived time. Into fate, at best or worst. At any rate, into a curriculum vitae.

I was immediately piqued by the Moscow newspaper *Izvestia*'s 1960 appeal to the writers of the world: Describe one day in this year, the 27th of September, in as much detail as possible. It was a revival of the project "One Day in the World" which Maxim Gorkii initiated in 1935 and which had not gone without response, but was not continued. – So I sat down and described my 27th of September.

So far, so good. But why did I go on to describe the 27th of September, 1961? And all the 27ths of September to come, to this day – forty-three years long, more than half my adult life by now? And why can't I stop? I am not conscious of all the reasons, but there are a few I can name: first, my horror of forgetfulness, which, as I have seen, sweeps away mainly the everyday I so treasure. Where to? Simply into forgetfulness. Fleetingness and futility as twins of forgetfulness: over and over again I was (and am) confronted with this unsettling phenomenon. I wanted to write in defiance of this inexorable loss of existence. One day in each year, at least, should serve as a steadfast pillar for memory – described purely, authentically, free from artistic intent, that is: left, surrendered to chance. I could not control what these chance days brought me, nor did I wish to; thus apparently banal days appear alongside “more interesting” ones; I could not avoid the mundane, could not seek, much less rig “significance”. With a certain feeling of excitement I began waiting to see what this day of the year, as I soon called it, would bring me in the coming year. These notes became a compulsory exercise, sometimes enjoyable, sometimes irksome. They also became an exercise to counter reality-blindness.

It did prove more difficult to capture developments this way. All these separate daily logs can hardly be said to stand for the forty years from which they were lifted island-like. But I hoped that the findings which I gathered selectively, at regular intervals, might in time produce a kind of diagnosis: expression of my desire to get to the bottom of situations, people, but most of all myself. Often beginning that same day, usually continuing over the course of the next few days, I noted what I had experienced, thought, felt that day, memories, associations – but also the current events that held me captivated, political developments that affected me, the state of the country in which I lived and took part until 1989 and – what had not been foreseeable – the phenomena of the GDR's collapse and the transition to another society, another state. Also reflected, of course, are my attitudes, sometimes changing suddenly, more often gradually, toward all these complex, complicated events: contentious, combative attempts to come to grips. In this sense these notes are more than mere material, they have also become evidence, by no means complete, of my development. The temptation to correct former misjudgments and unjust assessments from today's point of view had to be resisted.

These diary entries differ markedly from the rest of my diary, not only in structure but in content, and in their stronger thematic limits and focus. But they were not intended for publication either – as were, from the outset, the prose pieces based on the course of a day: “June Afternoon”, “Accident”, “What Remains”, “Desert Journey” – evidence of my

fascination with the narrative potential of almost any given day. On the contrary, it took a conscious decision to publish these notes in which the “I”, no artistic construct, defenselessly exhibits and surrenders itself – even to the uncomprehending and unsympathetic gaze.

Why do this? My experience is: from a certain point on, a point that cannot be determined afterwards, you begin to see yourself historically, that is: imbedded in, bound to your time. You develop distance, increased objectivity toward yourself. Examining yourself critically, you learn to compare, becoming no more lenient, perhaps, but more fair. You see how much universality lies in the most personal things, and you believe that the reader’s need to judge and condemn can be joined by self-discovery and, ideally, self-perception.

Subjectivity remains the most important criterion of the diary. This is something of a scandal in times when we deluged with objects and are ourselves objectified; even the barrage of seemingly subjective shameless disclosures with which the media molest us is nothing but a coolly calculated element of this commoditized world. I don’t know how we are to escape and counter this compulsive objectification, which infiltrates our most intimate emotions, if not by developing and expressing our subjectivity, regardless of the effort it may cost us. The need to be known, with all our problematic traits, complete with mistakes and flaws, is at the root of all literature and is one of the motives that drives this book as well. We shall see whether the time has come for such a gamble.

But the pivotal reason for publishing these notes is this: I believe they are a testimony to their times. I see their publication as a kind of professional duty. I believe our recent history runs the risk of being reduced and laid down, even now, to easily manageable formulas. Perhaps testimony such as this can do its part to keep in flux the opinions about what happened, help reexamine prejudices, dissolve rigidity, allow people to recognize their own experiences and gain more confidence in them, let others’ situations touch them more closely...

I have held to the authenticity of the texts. Slight abridgements have been made. In certain cases passages had to be struck to protect the privacy of those concerned.

April 2003

Tuesday, September 27, 1960
Halle an der Saale, Amselweg

The first thing upon waking up is the thought: once again the day won't go as planned. I'll have take Tinka to the doctor about her hurt foot. Doors bang outside. The children are already out and about. Gerd is still asleep. His brow is damp, but his fever is gone. He seems to have gotten over his flu.

The children's room is astir. Tinka is reading a picture book to a filthy little doll: One girl wanted to warm her hands, one wanted to warm her mittens, one wanted to drink tea. But there wasn't any coal. Too bad!

She'll turn four tomorrow. Annette worries whether we'll be baking enough cake. She works it out for me: Tinka has invited eight children over for coffee. Overcoming a small fright, I write Annette's teacher a note: Please let my daughter Annette go home at lunchtime tomorrow to celebrate her little sister's birthday.

While making sandwiches I try to remember how I spent the day before Tinka was born four years ago. It always dismays me how quickly and how much you forget when you don't write everything down. On the other hand, it's not feasible to hold onto *everything*: you'd have to stop living. – Four years ago it seems to have been warmer, and I was alone. That evening a friend came to spend the night with me. We sat together for a long time, it was our last intimate conversation. She told me about her future husband for the first time ...

That night I phoned for an ambulance.

Annette is ready at last. She's a bit poky and untidy, the way I must have been as a child. Back then I would have refused to believe I would ever dress down my children the way my parents did me. Annette has mislaid her wallet. I scold with the words my mother would have used: We can't toss money around like that, what on earth are you thinking?

When she goes I take her head in my hands and give her a kiss. Take care! We wink at each other. Then downstairs she slams the front door with a loud bang.

Tinka calls me. I reply impatiently, try sitting at my desk. Maybe I can get at least an hour of work in. At the top of her voice Tinka sings her doll a song the children are very fond of lately: "In the evening by moonshine, out into the town....". The last verse goes like this:

One evening in the gable
They ate at a table.
One evening at night
The stork brought a child in flight

When I'm there Tinka never fails to reassure me: she knows perfectly well that the stork couldn't carry a baby, that would be cruelty to animals. But it doesn't matter when you *sing* it.

She starts yelling for me again, so loud that I break into a trot and rush over to her. She's lying in bed with her head buried in her arms.

What are you screaming like that for?

You weren't coming, I *had* to scream.

I said I was coming right away.

Then it still takes forever forever never never never. She has discovered that words can rhyme. I unwrap the bandage from her cut foot. She screams like a stuck pig. Then she flicks the tears away with one finger. At the doctor's it'll hurt too.

Are you going to scream like that at the doctor's? The whole city'll come running. – Then *you'll* have to take off my bandage. – Yes, yes. – Can I have pudding soup for breakfast? – Yes, yes. – Make me some! – Yes, yes.

The pain in her foot seems to ease up. While dressing she scratches the bottom of the table-top with her fingernails and splits her sides laughing. She wipes her nose with the tail of her shirt. Hey! I shout, who's that blowing her nose on her shirt? She tosses her head back, laughs raucously: Blowing her nose on her shirt, poopy-shirt.

Tomorrow's my birthday, so we can start having some fun today, she says. But you forgot I can get dressed by myself already. – I didn't forget, I just thought your foot hurts too badly. – She snakes her toes elaborately through the pants legs: You see, I'm much more careful about it than you. – There are tears once more, when the red shoe pinches. I slip one of Annette's old house shoes onto the injured foot. She is delighted: Now I have Annette's slipper on!

When I carry her out of the bathroom her good foot bumps the wooden box by the door. Bomm! she calls out. That hit like a bomb! – How does she know how a bomb hits? The last time I heard a bomb detonate was more than sixteen years ago. Where does she know the word from?

Gerd is reading Lenin's letters to Gorkii, and we get started on our old discussion: art and revolution, politics and art, ideology and literature. The impossibility of congruence between the mental edifices of politicians and artists – even Marxist ones. The "own world" which Lenin grants Gorkii (and more than grants: takes for granted), for all implacability in philosophical questions. His consideration, his tact for all his severity. Two equal partners working together, rather than a confrontation between the all-knowing one and the one in

need of instruction. Open, generous recognition of each other's areas of authority... We get into the role of experience in writing and the responsibility you bear for the *content* of your experience: but are you free to acquire any experiences whatsoever, perhaps desirable from a social point of view, if you are unsuited for them by background and character structure? You can familiarize yourself with many things, of course. But *experience* them? – There's a dispute about the plan for my new story. Gerd insists that the plan so far is too superficial and should be transformed into one appropriate to me. Or do I want to do a journalistic piece? Then go ahead and start writing. Slight disgruntlement on my part, unacknowledged as always when I really sense that "there's truth to it".

Did I read this? An article by Lenin entitled "A Talented Little Book", referring to a book by a "White Army soldier embittered almost to the point of mental derangement": *A Dozen Daggers in the Back of the Revolution*. Lenin discusses it half-ironically, half-seriously, acknowledging its "expertise and sincerity" when the author describes what he knows, what he felt and lived through. Lenin simply assumes that the workers and peasants will draw the right conclusions from the plain, expert descriptions of the old bourgeois lifestyle, conclusions of which the author himself is incapable, and he seems to grant the possibility of printing some of these stories. "Talent ought to be encouraged" – which again is irony, but also confidence. We speak of the prerequisites for confident behavior in a country where socialist society must develop under conditions like ours. Of the reasons and roots of provincialism in literature.

We laugh when it occurs to us what we talk about endlessly at all hours of the day and night – like heroes of schematic books whom we'd criticize as implausible.

I take Tinka to the doctor. She talks and talks, to talk away her fear, perhaps. Now she demands an explanation of a mural (Why don't you think it's pretty? I think it has pretty colors!), now she wants to be carried in consideration for her sick foot, now she's forgotten all her pain and balances on the stone borders of the front gardens.

Our street leads toward a new apartment building that's been under construction for months. A lift carries up barrows full of mortar sacks and transports empty barrows back down. Tinka wants to know exactly how it works. She has to content herself with an approximate explanation of the technology. Her new, unshakable belief that everything that exists is "good for something", good for *her*. If I so often fear for the children, it's mainly because this belief will inevitably be violated.

As we go down the steps of the post office I squeeze her under my arm. – Not so fast, I'll fall! – You won't fall. – When I'm big and you're small, I'll run down the stairs that fast

too. I'll grow bigger than you. Then I'll jump way up high. Say, can you jump over the house? No? But I can. Over the house and over a tree. Should I? – Go ahead! – *I could* real easy, but I don't want to. – Oh, you don't want to? – No. – Silence. After a while: But in the sun I'm big. – The sun is hazy, but it casts shadows. They're long because the sun is still low. – Big all the way up to the clouds, says Tinka. I look up. Hazy little clouds float very high in the sky.

A huge palaver in the waiting room. Three elderly women huddle together. One, speaking Silesian dialect, bought a blue cardigan yesterday for a hundred and thirteen marks. The incident is illuminated from all angles. The three of them carp in unison about the price. A young woman sitting across from them finally interrupts the uninformed discussion in a superior tone of voice. It emerges that she is a fabric saleswoman and that the cardigan isn't an "import" after all, as the Silesian was assured when she purchased it. She is indignant. The saleswoman holds forth on the advantages and disadvantages of wool and Wolcylon. Wolcylon is practical, she says, but if you want something nice and elegant, take wool. Good things always make a comeback, says the second of the three women, and I look pleadingly at Tinka, who is about to ask a no doubt inappropriate question. In the west a cardigan like that costs fifty marks, says the Silesian. – Well, explains the second, just do the conversion: one to three. Comes out to a hundred fifty marks too. – True enough.

There seems to be no point to interfering with their conversions.

I got the money from my daughter, says the Silesian. I couldn't have done it with my hundred-twenty marks pension. – All three of them sigh. Then the woman next to her says: That's always been my motto: simple but elegant. I eye her surreptitiously and can't find the elegance in her. – She, unperturbed: This coat here. Bought it in 1927. Gabardine. Peacetime goods. Indestructible. – I gaze at the coat, appalled. It is green, with a slight sheen to it, old-fashioned, otherwise there is nothing striking about it. A coat can't be sinister. Tinka tugs at my sleeve, whispers: When is nineteen-hundred twenty-seven? – Thirty-three years ago, I say. – She uses an expression of her father's: Was I in the works yet? – Not by a long shot, I say. I wasn't in the works yet either. – Oh my goodness, says Tinka. – The Silesian, still brooding over her blue cardigan, consoles herself: At least I won't freeze this winter.

Now the third, a skinny woman who has said little so far, remarks with quiet triumph: *I don't* need to worry about all that, thank God... – Mute inquiry from the others. Finally: You have relatives over there? – No. That is: yes. My daughter. But she just makes the arrangements. There's a gentleman. I don't even know him, but he sends me what I need.

Now he's already made inquiries again to find out what I need for the winter. – Undisguised envy in the others' eyes. Well – then! Can't do much better than that these days!

I'm silent, long since gave up reading. The receptionist calls all three of them out.

Tinka is utterly still as the doctor prods the wound. She's pale, her hand in mine grows damp. Did it hurt? asked the doctor. She makes her impenetrable face and shakes her head. She never cries in front of strangers. Outside, as we're waiting for the dressing, she suddenly says: I'm glad it's my birthday tomorrow!

The sky has filled with clouds. We're already looking forward to the lift. Tinka would have lingered there a long time if she hadn't been in such a hurry to go to the potty. She turns reticent then. She's preoccupied by the big black dog whose kennel we're about to pass. At this point, as always, she tells me that this dog bit a woman in the finger once. It must have been years ago, if it's even true, but the legend has left an indelible impression on Tinka. Effect of stories!

The mail waiting at home is disappointing, a vacuous card from a vacuous girl. But motorcycles stop in front of our house several times, couriers and telegram messengers, a substitute for the telephone. One brings the proofs of Gerd's book on Louis Fürnberg.

While lunch is cooking I read children's compositions on "The Best Day of My Vacation", submitted to the library at the railroad car plant. A nine-year-old girl writes: "It was great at our vacation camp. We had one day off. And we could go wherever we wanted. I went into the forest. And I saw a big deer and a little deer. They both lay there without moving. They were so tame that you could touch them. And I ran back fast and told the camp director. It wasn't far to our camp. I told him everything, and he came with me. He took the big deer with him on a leash, and I got to carry the little deer. We had a little stall, and I put both of them in there and fed them every day. That was my best day."

I'm for giving the girl the first prize in the contest for her unlikely story.

After lunch I go to the railroad car plant for the brigade's party group meeting¹: On the streetcar an old married couple searches their pockets frantically for the ten pfennigs they're short for the tickets. They overspent themselves shopping. I offer the woman the ten pfennigs. Great consternation: Oh no, oh no, they can walk. Finally the man takes the coin, protesting all the while how embarrassed he feels. Something only we Germans are capable of, I think.

¹ In the GDR, brigades were production units within a plant. Not all of the workers in the brigades were necessarily party members. The "party group" refers to the group of party members within the given brigade. (Tr.)

I haven't been at the plant for several weeks. The hall is filled with half-finished cars. They seem to have overcome their production stoppage. But I've gotten my hopes up too soon.

Willy doesn't notice me at first. I watch him working with his new device for preparing the pressure framework. He and J., his brigadier, have developed this simple but practical device and submitted it as a proposal for improvement. It cuts the time for this operation in half. In the plant people started whispering behind their backs, there was bad blood. Today I'm going to find out what's really going on.

Willy looks up. Well, dear heart? he says. He's pleased. He has work to do. I take a seat in the brigade pen, which they themselves call the "open cattle shed". Forty-five minutes left until finishing-time, but there are already three people sitting here and waiting for the time to pass. Still not enough work? Heads shake. The hall presented a deceptive picture – And what do you do the rest of the time? Occupational theory, they say. Ironyard, lumberyard, mending sleepers. – And the pay? That's all right. We make the average. – They're ill-tempered, resigned, angry – depending on their temperament. And the worst thing is: they no longer believe in a critical change for the better. Lothar says: By January we'll be in the soup again, even if we bust a gut now in the last quarter to make the plan. The money gets thrown away on overtime. Is that supposed to be profitable?

His pay is all right, but he's angry about the plant's unprofitability. Can the plant director go to each brigade and explain what's going on with the plant? He can't. But someone has to explain it, in detail, and with the latest every week if possible. People who aren't in the know start to act irresponsibly.

Meanwhile the conversation has moved on to the plant party last Saturday. Jürgen tells how he just barely managed to get his wife back home in a plant omnibus after she drank too much and publicly boxed the ears of an impudent colleague. I was so mad I hit the bottle again the next day, he says. He's a bit worried his wife might have disgraced him. Then the others start telling similar incidents with their wives, matter-of-factly, without the extravagance of emotion – the way men talk about women. I think: the impudent colleague probably deserved to get his ears boxed.

Nine comrades meet in the conference room of the party leadership. They come in their work clothes, unwashed. There is one woman, with humorous, lively eyes; in the brigade I've seen her pound on the table before. Here she doesn't say a thing.

Making a long story short – let's start, says Willy. He is the group organizer. I know what he intends to do today, and I watch in suspense and admiration as he makes ruthlessly

for his goal. Lying in front of him is his brigade's public accounting. I'm familiar with it. But the comrades from the neighboring brigade, the partners in competition, sit rather sheepishly in front of the others' twenty-three pages – they are rivals, after all, friendship notwithstanding. And when you're familiar with the complicated history of the two brigades, which used to be *one* brigade... The plant's star brigade, under the leadership of P., who sits across from Willy, continually mopping sweat and feeling duped.

Rapidly and indistinctly Willy begins to read from the public accounting, a carefully chosen passage. The hand holding the page trembles slightly. For the uninitiated the atmosphere in the overheated room would tend more toward the soporific.

No one takes quotes more seriously than Willy. He reads what Lenin said about stepping up work productivity. And how are we doing that? he interrupts himself. A colleague says: before we started trying to become a Brigade of Socialist Labor, we always agreed with each other. Now there's nothing but squabbling. Willy raises his voice. Now he's coming to their proposal for improvement: the simple device I just saw in action. There was a huge to-do! he says, lowering the page, and looks straight at P. over his wire-rimmed glasses: Savings of fifty percent! That's unheard-of – for us, anyway! People questioned the realism of the proposal. Yes, you did to, P.! Don't talk, it's my turn. But the proposal is realistic, there's no denying it. Sure, we got a bonus. Sure, we're both going to earn handsomely the next few months. For me it comes out to a thousand marks, if you want to know. And what of it? Don't material incentives hold for us comrades? Everything would have been fine if the two had shared their bonuses, plugged people's mouths with a few bottles of beer. But that's over and done with! Willy shouts. No more egalitarianism. And the next time the brigade has its evening out, we'll buy you all a drink.

And so the perfidious question emerged in the department: Are you a communist or an egotist?

And that, Willy shouts, in an advanced stage of agitation, stumbling over his words, we all knew that. Or didn't we? And what kind of a showing did we make as comrades? We didn't. How could we! Couldn't come to an agreement ourselves. Get more specific! calls someone from the neighboring brigade.

Willy, louder and louder: Yes sir! As specific as you like! In the union leadership the two of us are proposed as activists. Who speaks against it? Comrade P.! In the party leadership they want to display our pictures along the "Street of the Best" on the Day of the Republic. Who advises against it? Comrade P.! Specific enough?

Could I maybe get to say something now, P. demands. Please, says Willy. Just one more thing: It's about the issue at hand, not whether I don't like your looks or you don't like mine. Everyone here at the table remembers P.'s remark from the days when Willy, with his "deteriorating cadre development", was new to his brigade: Him or me, that's the question here. One brigade isn't big enough for the two of us. – On May 1st P.'s picture still hung on the "Street of the Best". Even to talk like this today, both of them must have forgotten a good deal and thought things they would never admit to themselves. One needn't expect the conflict to come to a head and be "had out" according to the rules of classical drama. It's already a lot for P. to admit: Your proposal was realistic. It's right that you're getting the bonus. – That exhausts his supply of self-denial. He evades the issue, dredges up an old story and hashes it out at length. He can't simply admit defeat. There's a give and take between the two brigades, the tension fizzles out, Willy has to come down a peg too, which is none too easy for him.

His brigade's accounting is still lying in front of him. A week from now P.'s people are supposed to be at the same stage. Suddenly the thought of the work frightens them. Willy treats himself to this little triumph, as everyone can see. But enough is enough, they have to come to an agreement. They discuss who should help P.. If you want me, crank that I am... says Willy. – Old fool! P. retorts.

Someone hits on the idea of inviting the wives to the brigade's accounting, that's the thing these days. No one can contradict openly, but it's clear that the suggestion lacks fiery proponents. The women all have their hands full with the children, says one, especially after work... Günter R. is glad: You can only bring along your wife if you have one.

Well, and you? Willy snaps at him. I suppose you don't have one? – No, says Günter. Not anymore. – What's up with your marriage anyway? Don't let me down because of a thing like that! Willy threatens. Günter is the youngest at the table. He gestures dismissively, but he's gone bright red: It's nothing. Don't even mention it!

Later P. tells me: Günter was sent to G. for a few weeks' socialist support at the sister plant, and when he arrives home unannounced one day, the foreman comes strolling out of his bedroom. Of course he went straight to court the next day. And there's no hope of patching things up...

Gradually the mood turns cheerful. Jokes are cracked. When I claim that none of them are interested in culture, they protest. The invitations for the public accounting are passed around, white folding cards with the word "Invitation" printed in ornate gold letters. That's just about fancy enough for them. They want to invite all sorts of guests, "set an example", as

Willy says. Now he lets the meeting slide, hardly tense at all any more, looking quite happy. He winks at me and grins. Pretty slick, I say to him later. Have to be, gal, he says. Never get anywhere otherwise.

I hurry home, keyed up, my thoughts in a turmoil. All over again I hear what they say, plus what they don't say, what their looks don't even reveal. Who could possibly fathom this almost impenetrable web of motives and counter-motives, actions and counter-actions... To make big the life of people seemingly condemned to small steps....

This time of year it's already cold by evening. I buy what I need to bake the cake and pick up some birthday flowers. In the garden the dahlias and asters are already withering. I think of the enormous bouquet of roses on my bedside table in the hospital four years ago. I think of the doctor I heard saying: A girl. But she has one already. Oh well, I'm sure she won't mind... His relief when I had a name already. The nurse who informed me how unwelcome girls still are sometimes, and all the things you see, especially with the fathers. If it's a girl again they just don't come, believe it or not. That's why we're not allowed to say what it is on the phone, a boy or a girl.

Everyone wants to help bake the cake. The children are constantly underfoot. Finally I put on a fairytale record in their room: "Peter and the Wolf". Afterwards they lick the mixing bowls until I take them away. Annette tells about her day at school: We learned a new song, but I don't like it much. Republic rhymes with vic-tory – how do you like that? I think it's boring. We have a new Russian teacher. She was surprised how many words we know already. But do you think she told us her name? Nothing doing. And we all had to write down all our names for her on a seating chart. I don't think she thinks anything of it. – They mill around restlessly for a long time, unwilling to accept the fact that you have to sleep even the night before a birthday.

In the oven the cake rises beyond all bounds. Now that it's quiet I seem to hear it rising. The pans were too full. The cake rises and rises and drips in the oven and fills the entire apartment with a burned smell. When I take out the cake one side is black, I'm mad and can't find anyone to blame but myself, and then Gerd comes and calls the cake "rather black", and I tell him indignantly that it's because of the bad oven and the pans being too full and the gas too high. Oh well, he says, retreating.

Later we listen to Antonin Dvorak's Violin Sonata op. 100, which Fürnberg wrote a poem about. Sweet, pristine music. My anger dissolves. We both realize simultaneously that we smell of burned cake, and we start to laugh.

I still have writing to do, but everything bothers me: the radio, the television next door, the thought of the birthday hubbub tomorrow and of this tattered day on which I got nothing done. Listlessly I set the birthday table, arrange the candle wreath. Gerd leafs through some book or other, pronounces it “well-written”. For some reason that bothers me too.

I look through the beginnings of the manuscripts that lie piled up on my desk. I’m galled by the lengthiness of the process called writing. A few faces do stand out from the simple brigade plot, people I know better, people I have linked together in a story which, I clearly realize, is still much too simple-minded. A country girl who comes to a big city for the first time in her life, to study here. Before that she does training at a plant, in a difficult brigade. Her friend is a chemist, he doesn’t get her in the end. The third is a young foreman sent to this brigade on probation after making a mistake... It’s odd how the banality of these banal incidents, “taken from life”, is heightened beyond endurance on the pages of a manuscript. I know that the real work will not begin until I find the “overarching idea” that makes the story tellable, and worth telling. But it can only be found – if at all, which I seriously doubt this evening – in this long process of preparatory work whose futility is clear to me.

I know that neither the pages already lying nor the words I write today will remain – not a letter of them. I write, and then I cross it out again: As always Rita was wrenched from sleep in a flash and was awake without the memory of a dream. Only there had to have been a face. She wanted to hold onto it, it faded. Robert lay beside her.

Before falling asleep I think: life consists of days like this one. Points which in the end, if you’re lucky, are connected by a line. That instead they could fall apart into a senseless accumulation of past time, that only an ongoing unwavering effort gives meaning to the little time units in which we live...

I just manage to observe the first transitions into the images before falling asleep, a road appears, leading to the landscape I know so well without ever having seen it: the hill with the old tree, the slope falling gently to a stream, meadows, and on the horizon the forest. You can never really experience the moments before falling asleep – you would wake up otherwise – and I will always regret that.