

Translated excerpt

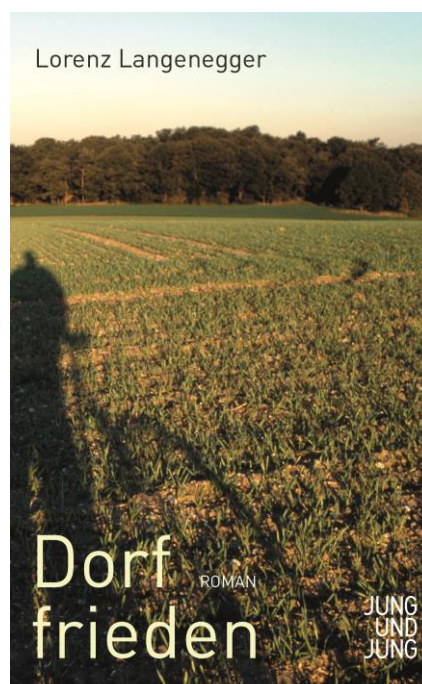
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Village Peace

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Chapter 1

Wattenhofer reclines his office chair and tilts his head back. The smooth ceiling plaster goes blurry in the light of the fluorescent lamp. Wattenhofer blinks and waits for the soothing effect of the eye drops. It's Friday afternoon and things have finally calmed down. The garrulous shoplifter who developed a wild conspiracy theory to explain to him how the frozen North Sea shrimp found their way into his bag has now gone on record and been released, and it's still way too early for the drunken teenagers who boastfully, cockily wait for their parents to assume responsibility for them.

Wattenhofer's bad mood, which hangs in the air of his office like the sour smell of sweat in the locker room after a soccer match, is due to his wife's phone call. Just as he'd finished his second breakfast – a cup of coffee, an apple; no chocolate anymore, doctor's orders – Helen gave him a start with the news that his pharmacist had suddenly died. For as long as he can remember, Wattenhofer's eye, his right one, has been a cause of concern. It gets red from the slightest draft, reacts to pollen of any kind, starts to itch should a cat cross his path, and with every change in the weather the eyelid responds with a nervous twitch. He hasn't forgiven his mother for making him drink the infusion of every bag of chamomile tea she ever placed on his eye. Since earning his own money, he's trusted in the eye drops of the pharmacist from the nearby town. But now Helen has informed him that the deceased man's successor would not be taking the trouble to proffer his own medicinal remedies but would wholly rely on the products of the pharmaceutical industry. The remaining stock of eye drops, all of which were bought up by Helen, amounted to three vials – enough for Wattenhofer to make it through spring, provided the weather is kind to him. He blinks again and feels the itching slowly subside as the trudging steps of Binsmeier approach his workspace. Not now, thinks Wattenhofer. If he sits upright – and he'll have to if his boss stops in front of his desk – the precious liquid will run down his cheek before the burning goes away in his eye. The itching will start up again, and he'll have to do the procedure all over. Wattenhofer's inner defenses are not sufficient to just let his superior walk past him. The footfalls grow silent. The always correctly buttoned-up Binsmeier – Meier with an "ei," head of the local police force – clears his throat. It can't be

anything urgent, thinks Wattenhofer. Not now, not here in this wealthy lake community where the accident of birth put him half a century ago. He went to school here, fell in love the first time here, on a park bench on the lakeshore at minus twelve degrees Celsius, and ever since being sworn-in as a police officer has done his duty here. He knows that there's nothing in his community that can't wait at least a minute until his eye drops take effect.

– Frau Ramsauer, the mayor's wife, called.

– Wattenhofer sits bolt-upright in his chair. The eye drops disperse on the local newspaper spread across his keyboard. The widow! There's nothing urgent, but there is the wife of the former mayor, Frau Ramsauer. Wattenhofer tries to fix his gaze on Binsmeier. The facial features of his boss, not exactly a testimony to his brilliance, don't make it any easier for his little blue eyes to find a place to rest.

– You're not crying, are you, Wattenhofer?

– It's my eye.

– Pollen again?

– Why didn't you put her through?

No one knows exactly how old the widow of the former local mayor is, the stinking rich sole heiress of a textile manufacturer. Seeing her face with its countless, network of filigree wrinkles, you'd immediately think she's lived through an entire century. But her mind is more alert than many an early retiree. The truth about her age most likely lies somewhere in the middle. Since she had no children and outlived all her brothers and sisters, half the village is speculating who will be her heir. In recent years she's been offered honorary membership or positions of patronage in various organizations, all of which she turned down. The local party chapter of Councilman Kaiser, her husband's successor, whose lack of charisma has allowed him to advance no further than to the position of president of the Security Commission and hence chief of the local police, has for years depended on her donations for its livelihood. It is therefore only logical that any calls from her mansion are treated with the utmost obligingness and earnestness. Given that she can't stand Binsmeier on account of his lack of imagination, that Felix, his younger colleague, takes her for a wacky old lady, and that Bruno, who's standing in for the ailing Meyer – Meyer with "ey" – doesn't know the details, in the end it's Wattenhofer who has to address her needs and concerns.

– Friday, March 20, 4:38 p.m., Ramsauer, the mayor’s wife, reports:

Disorderliness at the bike racks outside the schoolhouse.

– Disorderliness at the bike racks. Got it.

– You’re on it, Wattenhofer?

– I’m on my way.

Wattenhofer puts on his cap, sticks the vial with the eye drops in his pocket and is about to leave the office in the line of duty when his superior holds him back.

– It’s Friday, Wattenhofer, did you notice something?

Binsmeier has so utterly internalized the solicitous-lecturing tone of interrogation used by the police when dealing with common citizens that he can’t help using it on his colleagues too. Wattenhofer doesn’t hold it against his boss. Everyone’s got his quirks, and, besides, they’re only human; the ones who haven’t received a promotion and are still working for the local police are probably not the brightest and most ambitious specimens of their species. And the fact that every career-conscious or especially clever creep is kicked up the ladder before long helps ensure a good working climate. That’s why Wattenhofer is willing to put up with his boss’s questions.

– Right about that. Today is Friday.

– And what’s on Friday?

Wattenhofer has no clue what Binsmeier is driving at.

– Friday is cleaning day. Wastepaper basket on the table!

Wattenhofer represses a sigh. Before a speck of dirt can settle in his office, the cleaning crew always makes its rounds. *We’re clean*. That’s rule no. 1 in an internal document Binsmeier wrote and had all his employees sign. And it’s likely, Wattenhofer thinks, that he doesn’t just mean their incorruptibility but is referring to spotless uniforms and a polished desk. Wattenhofer didn’t bother to ask if Binsmeier is even authorized to demand from his employees that they sign a code of honor. He doesn’t think Councilman Kaiser is involved. The only thing Kaiser cares about is that the mayor’s wife, Frau Ramsauer, is happy. And presumably the only reason that Binsmeier spent weeks honing away at his document was to escape the inevitable boredom hanging over the police-station like the blade of a guillotine.

Wattenhofer gets in his new squad car, whose electronics are a constant source of grief. No sooner has he gotten used to one model than they take it away from

him. Once it's reached the set number of kilometers stipulated in the respective bylaw, no rational argument helps and no amount of pleading either: the car is replaced. Wattenhofer backs up onto the street and tries to ignore the beeping sound the car makes to remind him to be extremely careful in reverse.

Police officer with special tasks, responsible for local patrol duty. Who comes up with a job description like that? Is there someone out there who takes malicious pleasure in his having to sit in an office day after day where everything smells new and expensive – and will presumably smell the same way fifty years down the road, because no wet dog, no blood, and certainly not a corpse will ever make an appearance there? If this someone, this higher authority exists somewhere – and it can only be *up there*, thinks Wattenhofer – he must be a lousy storyteller. Even a mediocre bestselling author with the slightest bit of imagination could transform him into a *commissario* surrounded by the smell of brackish lagoon water, or a *chef de police* with the scent of truffles in his nostrils. He's got so many colleagues, thinks Wattenhofer, they've shot up like mushrooms on a damp forest floor, and on days like today all of them are poisonous to him. He cruises down the street and imagines how it would feel if a real writer took up his case, one with both feet firmly planted in the corrupt cesspool of a big American city and who liberally draws his material from it. He would coast down the highway in his cruiser, sun glasses pushed back onto his forehead, star-badge on his shirt, wooden match in the corner of his mouth. His red eye wouldn't even be worth mentioning. He would use cheap whisky to numb the pain of a knocked-out tooth. He would give the shirt off his back to stem the bleeding of a knife wound to the stomach. At the age of seven he would have sacrificed his right index finger to save the honor of his mother, and with ten he would slip his first revolver into his belt, a gun whose trigger he would pull with his middle finger. At the age of twenty he would switch sides, fearlessly battling injustice in shadowy urban canyons. And when, in the final chapter, he collapses bullet-riddled before a mafia godfather, every page would have been worth reading.

Wattenhofer stops at the first intersection, yielding to a cyclist. He hasn't been banished, he thinks, it was his own decision to work in this peaceful lake community. He knew when he took up his post that not a single shot would be fired here, the army having shut down its firing range due to austerity measures. The emergency light was only used when an ambulance picked up a

geriatric villa-owner whose heart had stopped beating. He took the job because he knew all along that he wasn't the kind of bachelor who broke the hearts of housewives and young mothers. He didn't spend his days off driving to the nearby town to see an underage prostitute he'd hopelessly fallen in love with. He had no lover he could shackle to the radiator with the handcuffs dangling from his waistbelt. No, he loved Helen, his wife, and he loved her to this very day with each gray hair he'd grown since their wedding. He loves his son, who moved out of his parents' house a month ago. And he loves his hometown. He chats with the neighbors across the picket fence. He cracks a joke at the supermarket cash register and makes not only the impatient customers in line behind him but also the stressed-out checkout woman laugh. He belongs to this little world of neatly trimmed arborvitae hedges and color-coordinated primrose borders.

Of course he sometimes wishes he were someone else. He imagines how it would be if his gun sat a little looser in its holster, if he didn't just clench his fist in his pants pocket. Helen reads every spare minute, and she's got a lot of spare minutes since Stefan moved out, racy American detective stories or cryptic Swedish crime novels. It happens sometimes that her eyes show a glint of sympathy for his existence while resurfacing from a case whose resolution brought no justice. Yes, he's a police officer, whose special task consists in patrolling the neighborhood. There's nothing glamorous about it, but nothing objectionable either, quite the contrary. He's convinced that the role he plays allows him to do more good than he would in any other. The only overriding interest he's beholden to are the phone calls of the mayor's wife, Frau Ramsauer. Neither big politics nor the corrupting economy interfere in his work. He does his part for community life. He pays visits to schools to convey to the children the values underlying the prosperity they've inherited from their parents and grandparents.

On the rearview mirror of Wattenhofer's patrol car hangs a pennant of the local soccer club. In his free time he coaches little league soccer, ages 9 to 10. He might get shifted to the pee-wee league, the 7- to 8-year-olds, in the coming summer because, though his techniques may be quite refined, it's hard to keep up with the ten-year-olds when you're fifty like he is. Chief trainer Knup made an exploratory remark but Wattenhofer didn't react to it. He's not about to be shunted off and not be offended. Up until five years ago he was coaching little league intermediate, the 11- to 13-year-olds. But when he sprained his ankle in

a running duel with the Kosovar forward – a future star the world will one day hear about, the coaching staff is agreed on that – with no evidence of foul play, he was finally willing to be convinced by Krup that it was time to let up a little. The Kosovar family has meanwhile been naturalized, their son Beqir was selected for the youth team and went to the European Championship, and is now in the city's minor league. He's the pride of the local community. His speed is legendary. They say that a bus once drove off without him and he caught up with it three stops later. Another time he supposedly sprinted straight through the school building and clear across the playground to hand the janitor his ringing cell phone before his voice mail kicked in.

There are more pedestrians on the local streets on Friday afternoon than there are on other days of the week. The people knocking off work early to avoid the crowded commuter trains from town have joyful anticipation of the coming weekend written all over their faces. Wattenhofer makes a point of driving slowly through the community. *We're role models.* Article two of Binsmeier's code. If it were up to Wattenhofer, no car in the village would be allowed to drive faster than Beqir can run. School kids getting hit by cars is definitely not the kind of excitement he's looking for to spice up his daily routine. When the idea of placing speed bumps outside the preschool was brought up at the last town meeting, two or three enraged citizens made comparisons suggesting that their elementary freedoms would be curtailed if they were forced to slow down to walking speed. Wattenhofer is not surprised that these kind of people exist, after all he has to deal with them more or less on a daily basis. That a narrow majority of voters willingly agreed with their arguments is what really concerned him. He hadn't the faintest idea how to explain this decision at the next traffic lesson in preschool.

Wattenhofer stops outside the supermarket to impress on a group of teenagers sitting on the fountain that the eye of the law is watching them. His rolling stop was intended to remind them that an apprentice position is the surer path to a lease contract on their first automobile than betting on sports or being a courier for dubious clients. In the shopping bags of hobby chefs and housewives, sirloin tips are waiting to be braised at low heat. Seniors flock to the parish center for their Friday group meeting. Guido Montale has set up a stand outside his store with samples of new salami variations and makes an effort to fit the picture they have of an Italian delicatessen-store owner. The apprentice girl of pharmacist Al-

piger hands out balloons and glucose candy to children. At the gas station, Wattenhofer drives between the pumps and waves to Clara. Gas-station robberies, which the media has been reporting on more frequently of late, are a cause of concern for her. Wattenhofer paid for his very first tankful at the register inside. Clara always knows what's going on in the community, who fills the tank halfway – because the month has too many days, measured against their pay check – who's looking for an apartment or selling a children's bed, and her gut feeling, aided by her particularly wide girth, is usually right on the money.

If the mayor's wife, Frau Ramsauer, hadn't called, Wattenhofer would join the merry many preparing for the weekend. He would finish his game of solitaire, shut down the computer and open the top button on his shirt. He would call his wife to ask her if she'd forgotten something while doing the weekend shopping. He would knock on the doorframe of Binsmeier's office, raise his hand in greeting, and while exiting would listen to Patrizia tell him what adventures lay in store for her this weekend in her alter ego as an elf. But since a phone call from the mayor's wife, Frau Ramsauer, is nothing to take too lightly, Wattenhofer brakes at the bike rack outside the school building and parks his patrol car in the no-stopping zone. What's gotten into him today? Why does this privilege, one he usually eschews, give him such perverse pleasure?

The bike rack is almost empty by now, only some older children are still stooped over their math problems. It's often hard to tell the reason for Frau Ramsauer's reporting something. The remaining bicycles are locked to the rack, there's air in their tires, no trace of vandalism. The trash can is not overflowing. Apart from his own vehicle, no car is stopped in the no-stopping zone and none in the adjacent no-parking area. New grass is sprouting on the lawn. He refuses to pick up the crumpled-up cigarette pack, that's not his job. That's for the detention kids to do, armed in the afternoon with tongs and trash bag. He circles the bike rack with increasing remove but doesn't find anything suspicious. No disorder, no foreign objects, no missing manhole covers, not even a loose curbstone presenting a tripping hazard. Tripping, slipping, buckling knees, falling in all of its manifold forms is the greatest fear of old people. He learned that from Frau Ramsauer, the mayor's wife. Falling in the street is the quickest path to the grave. For lack of alternatives – he can't go back to the station empty-handed –

Wattenhofer has no choice but to busy himself with the cigarette pack. Maybe it's not so innocent after all.

To his knowledge there's only one teacher at school who smokes. But after the last intervention by concerned parents the man wouldn't dare light up a cigarette anywhere near the children, let alone toss an empty pack on the ground. The janitor Flückiger smokes constantly, but filterless Gauloises. The petition submitted by a number of newcomers in opposition to this habit was rejected by the local council. Flückiger is an institution in the village. When the petition was discussed at a council meeting, Flückiger himself stepped up to the microphone and reassured the failed signature collectors that if the promises on the packages were correct he wouldn't be around much longer anyway. Wattenhofer bent over to pick up the cigarette packet. It's damp and heavy, too heavy for an empty pack of cigarettes. He shakes it close to his ear and is vexed by the investigative mien he puts on while doing so. An empty pack of cigarettes belongs in the trash can, that's all there is to it. Just because Frau Ramsauer, the mayor's wife, has asked him to come here doesn't mean the packet will do him the favor of exploding in his hands. But the rattle that comes from inside it, which doesn't sound like soggy cigarettes at all, makes Wattenhofer curious. He opens the packet and forgets what he thinks about his face while peering into it. He dumps the contents into the palm of his hand and a single glance tells him it's a key from the lockers at the local swimming pool. How often had he given in to Stefan's begging and exposed his sensitive eye to the pool's caustic chlorine so his son could go down the slide a hundred times or more. What's a locker key doing in a cigarette packet on the grass outside the school? That's a clue worth investigating.