

Translated excerpt

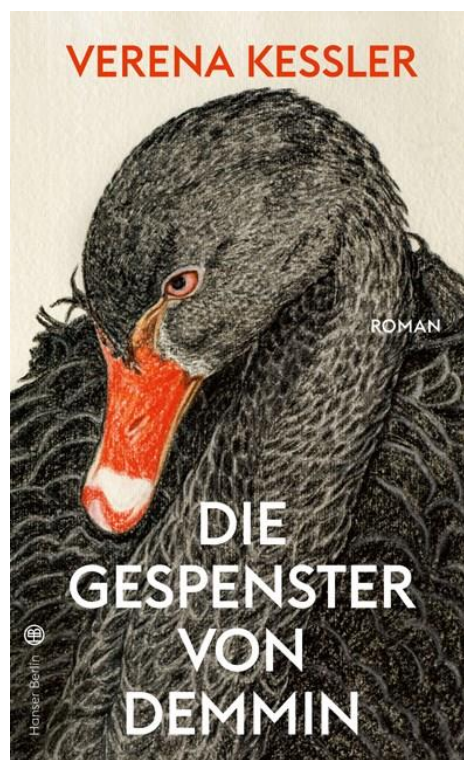
Verena Keßler
Die Gespenster von Demmin

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Verena Keßler
The Ghosts of Demmin

Translated by Lucy Jones



The river here is called the Peene. It drifts indolently along muddy, meandering banks, past stagnant ponds, moors and waterlogged woodland, past virtually untouched nature. Black terns, kites and white egrets circle over marsh orchids, bird's-eye primroses and bog stars. The Peene has not travelled far by the time it runs through Demmin, past Demmin, snaking its way around Demmin. No one knows what memories it recalls, whether it still carries those days in May; days when hundreds of people stepped into its waters, stones in their pockets, children bound to their bodies. Has it washed itself clean or will some things remain on its riverbed forever? Like all rivers, the Peene wants to reach the sea. But its gradient is so slight that when the wind blows in hard from the lagoon, its flow reverses. Then the Peene runs backwards.

My record is 37 minutes. That's the length of time I can hang upside down by my knees from the apple tree. But that's still pretty far from what I'm aiming for. David Blaine once hung upside down in Central Park for sixty hours. That was three days and two nights hanging from a steel rope. His eyes were bulging out of his head in the end – he could have gone blind. But all the blood running to your head is not the only problem. All your organs press down on your lungs and you can't breathe properly. Then your legs start tingling because there's not enough blood in them. The whole thing isn't really enjoyable. And that's not surprising, seeing as it's a torture method. And that's exactly why I have to practice. Because it's pretty likely that I'm going to end up being tortured one day.

It's grey and cold today, probably not even above zero. My T-shirt has slipped up to my chest, exposing the skin on my belly which is taut like it is on my arms, and the wind in my ears feels like someone has stuck Q-tips in them too deeply. But I can stand it – and it's all about being about to stand it. If you can stand it, there's nothing to be afraid of.

When the feeling in my legs has gone, I swing back and forth a few times, picking up momentum, then push off. As you fall, you half to do a half-turn so that you don't break your neck or land on all fours like a total idiot. Sometimes I pull myself up on the branch before I jump. Then I stand up and do a backward somersault. Easy. But not everyone thinks so. When I tried to do it once from the highest rung on the wall bars during PE, my sports teacher had a fit. He went bright red, almost the same shade as his dumb jogging pants and yelled that I should come down – AND I MEAN RIGHT NOW, YOUNG LAIDEE! As if I wanted to make anyone miserable. Overreaction or what? I mean, I've done it in our garden, like, a *thousand* times and it never made anyone miserable. Sure, no one laughed their head off either, but then again: who in this town ever laughs their head off?

'Larissa!'

That's Mum calling. She's the only one who calls me Larissa. I tell everyone else to call me Larry. The problem with Larissa is that it rhymes with 'pisser'. That's Mum not thinking things through, as usual. Thinking in general is not really her thing. Of course, I asked her why she named me Larissa; like, what made her think of it in the first place, whether she knew someone called that or what names came a close second. You have to know these things, after all. But all she said was she couldn't remember. She always says that when she doesn't want to answer a question. 'Can't remember.' Or 'It's such a long time ago.'

'Lar-iiiiii-ssss-aaaa!'

If she wants me to come in, she shouts. She'd never bother opening the garden gate and asking me politely. She'd rather ruin her vocal cords. I start swinging, picking up momentum. Can't even have been 25 minutes yet. *One*. A real waste of valuable time to break it off now. *Two*. But I can't be bothered to argue with Mum. You have to know when it's worth it. *Three*. Lift off. I land on my feet; the grass under my soles is covered in frost and it makes a crunching sound. For a second, everything goes black in front of my eyes, and my knees go weak. But I quickly pull myself together again. I'm used to it.

'L-A-R-I-S-S-A!'

I click my stopwatch: 24:56.

That girl's hanging in the tree again, she thinks, shaking her head, ever so slightly just to herself. She's not someone who interferes in other people's business, not even when she looks over into her neighbour's garden and sees the girl hanging, bare-bellied – and in this weather too – her hair almost trailing into the dirt on the ground. She wonders why the mother doesn't say something. She seems to be at home, after all: the car is parked on the drive, as always. Since her husband left, she's never parked it in the garage. That was ages ago when the girl was still little. She feels a stab of pain in the small of her back and wonders how long she's been standing at the window. She'd actually come upstairs for a lie-down, to rest for a while. She had been about to close the window, draw the curtains and shut out the day. But then she'd seen that the girl was hanging there again. First, it had given her a shock, because it reminded her of old Kastner – although she hadn't been hanging in *that* tree; she'd been in the front garden, and anyway, that was a lifetime ago. She shakes her head again, this time at herself because she realises that old Kastner is still old Kastner in her thoughts. But she's now much older than Kastner when she died – already ninety. Sometimes she can't believe it herself, but at other times, there's no getting away from it. Just recently, two weeks ago, she fell down the last three steps of the staircase at home. She'd lost her balance for a second – her knees had simply buckled – and then there she was, just lying in a heap, awkwardly twisted with a bruised hip and unable to move. She doesn't know what would've happened if Steffan hadn't found her. If he hadn't popped by that day of all days to check on her kitchen drain. He'd scolded her – the things she got up to – although *he* couldn't talk, he got up to things too, and unlike her, he did them deliberately. She shakes her head again. She doesn't want to think about that; she's decided not to get involved.

The following day, he'd suggested the move. Even came by especially with three brochures, as if she didn't know the local old people's homes. 'Out of the question,' she'd said, and that she'd only leave her house in a box. Then she'd thrown the brochures away and forgotten about the whole thing until a few days later, when it happened again. This time, she'd fallen on a glass side table.

The girl has started swinging, back and forth, faster and faster. Her knees don't buckle; they support her. Eventually, she launches herself off the branch with a firm push and lands safely on her feet with a half somersault. She quickly draws the curtain. She goes over to the bed,

needing to rest, just to put her feet up for a moment. When she closes her eyes, the images immediately come back to her. For years they disappeared, but now they've returned, more and more often: the corpses in the river, rushing past.

My mother is sitting on her pouffe in the sitting room. Her pouffe is a colourful, round cushion that she ordered on the Internet during her meditation phase. She used to sit on it every morning, cross-legged, with her eyes closed, breathing heavily in and out. But now she only sits on it when she paints her toenails.

'Where have you been?' she asks without looking up.

'Outside.'

'In a T-shirt?'

I don't answer stupid questions any more. A recent decision. Mum hasn't noticed yet though.

'If you get ill, you're still going to school.'

She bends over her big toe with a concentrated expression as she paints a nail with the little brush.

'What is it?'

Sometimes she just forgets she's called me. I hate that. I have important things to do.

'Can you go shopping today? I won't manage it.'

Yeah, *sure*. I can see she has a lot going on.

'What should I get?'

'Well, whatever you want to eat!'

'Are you having dinner too?'

'I don't know yet. I have to sort something out and it might take a bit longer. Just make a bit more.'

She takes her right foot in her hand and pulls it towards her until it almost reaches her chin, then starts blowing on the nail varnish.

'Money?'

'My handbag's lying on my bed.'

Our house isn't really a proper house. It's actually a flat that happens to be standing alone on a piece of land. It only has one storey, no attic and no cellar but a strangely large garage where everything except the car gets parked. My mum's bedroom is the smallest room in the flat but I also think it's the nicest. Her wardrobe, chest of drawers and bed are all white and she only uses white bedding. Only the curtains are dark blue because she can't stand any light coming in when she's asleep. When the curtains are open, there's a really good view of the garden. Well, you can see the apple tree at least, and that's the main feature. My room looks out onto the street. And because we don't have a proper front garden, just a small strip of lawn between the fence and the house, people always gawp into my room when they walk past. Sometimes I wave at them and then they quickly look away.

I pull the heavy purse out of her bag. There are two twenties in it, a ten, two fives and a thousand receipts. My mother always hangs onto them forever. 'In case I have to exchange something.' There are no receipts for the things *I'd* like to exchange. I take out 35 euros. I probably won't use more than 30. The rest is my tip.

While I'm putting on my shoes, I hear a clicking sound and then a hiss. When I come home later, the smell of hairspray will still be lingering in the air even though Mum won't be there. Whether she's back for dinner depends on how things go. But I have no idea because she hasn't told me anything. I'd prefer it if she just told me straight when she has a date.

Lidl is just seven minutes away. But I'll go there later. First, I'll do my bending circuit. That's what I call my shift at the cemetery. Once or twice a week, I pick up all the rubbish from the graves, throw mouldy bouquets on the compost or water the plants if it hasn't rained for a change. In return, I can collect a tenner from Mrs Ratzlow, the cemetery admin lady. She's almost seventy and could have retired a while ago but I think she's afraid of switching places.

Saturdays are the best days for my circuit. That's when all the widows are there. Those who can still manage, that is. They put fresh flowers on the graves or light candles and when they see me taking care of things, they're already clasping a banknote in their hands. Or at least clinking some change. They thank me for raking the flower beds when they were in hospital – mostly because of trouble with their knees or hips, as they're not getting any younger – and I smile my nicest 'my pleasure' smile. I'm good with the oldies. Perhaps it's because they don't know me and just concoct some story in their minds. *The nice blonde girl with the watering can.*

Today there's another funeral. Over at the back where the urn plots are, there's a tiny group of people dressed in black. Nothing tragic then. The fewer the number of mourners, the older the person who's died. Unless it was a real scumbag who no one liked, which could also be the case.

I always start my circuit at the same place:

Heinrich Ehrlinger

1927-2001

Life is limited but love is endless

The graves right next to the wall are often covered in rubbish. People just chuck their trash over. At least I think they do although I've never actually caught anyone. I don't know if I'd tell on them either. I'm not the Rubbish Police. Apart from that, it's how I earn my money so why should I get stressed about it. I pick up a Snickers bar wrapper from the little hedge that runs around Heinrich Ehrlinger's grave and stuff it in the rubbish bag that I've brought with me. Next is Erika Lindmann. I could say all the names here off by heart in the right order.

With all the dates of birth and death. Sometimes I wonder whether I've clogged up my brain with them all.

Over on the other side, the little troupe of mourners has set off. Some of them look as if it's not worth the trouble leaving the cemetery again.

'One of those foundation people. Ninety something. About time too!'

I turn around. Three graves on, Mrs Nienhoff is standing by her husband. Well, his grave, that is.

'Mrs Nienhoff!' I say in a way that sounds like 'Nice to see you' as well as 'Don't be so disrespectful!' She likes that and laughs.

'We all have to go at some point.'

'That's true.'

'Well, it's still a way off for you.'

'And for you, Mrs Nienhoff.'

She laughs again and starts fishing around in the bulging pockets of her anorak. I bend down while she's doing this to pick up a wet paper tissue that's covering the first two letters of Otto Bode's name.

'Here. Take this.' She stretches out her hand to me but before I can reach her, her fingers suddenly open and the five-euro note sails to the ground. That's happened with her a couple of times. No idea what's going on there. Perhaps she's not in control of everything she's doing any more. In any case, I don't think she means it nastily because she always looks crushed when it happens.

I quickly pick up the banknote and take her bony old-lady hands in mine, squeezing them briefly. 'Thank you very much.'

'Well, I don't know what I'm supposed to spend it on anymore!'

She laughs again, and I shake my head at her like she's a naughty girl. She lives in one of the old GDR high-rises behind the church with a balcony overlooking the street. I've often seen her sitting there. She's quite proud that she can still manage everything by herself at over

eighty. I get that. Old peoples' homes must be hell. It must be like waiting forever for a bus without even knowing if there's one running.

It takes me about an hour to cover the whole place. I do the big meadow patch last. Sometimes I leave it out altogether and just pick up the worst from the edges. It's not that the mass grave creeps me out. And I'm definitely not afraid. They're all dead after all. But I imagine them all lying higgledy-piggledy down there, with someone's feet in another person's face, and then my chest tightens so much that I feel like running a bit, just because I still can. Which of course I don't because it's a cemetery. No running in swimming pools or cemeteries, says Mrs Ratzlow. I once asked her if it was weird to work in a place like this, knowing that dead bodies were lying everywhere. She looked at me in astonishment and shook her head really hard. 'Dead bodies are no different from compost,' she said. And anyway, she said, dead people went wherever they wanted. Maybe working at a cemetery for too long does send you a bit round the bend. But I still like Mrs Ratzlow. When I go and pick up my money during the week, I stay for a while in her office. She always has a story to tell – who's died lately, whether there were fancy requests for the burial, whether the funeral was more of a party or a sad occasion. Sometimes she spills the beans on stories from ages ago that she's only heard from other people. And she's been told quite a few over the years. People come to the cemetery to remember, is how she explained it to me once. And once they start remembering, they want to talk and talk.

I carry my full rubbish bag over to the large bins. The lid is frozen shut and it takes all my strength to open it. Next to the bin, there's a tap for the watering cans which I wash my hands under. The water is icy. I watch my skin slowly turning red – a good opportunity to train my resistance to cold. But I turn the tap off instead because I have something left to do.

A little way off behind the three pines is grave No. 46. The flat white gravestone lies on the ground, slightly askew, and round it is a small rose hedge. It looks nice when it blossoms in the summer. I squat down and brush away a few brown pine needles from the stone and rest my hand for a moment on the golden lettering. There's only his name and both dates, far too close together, nothing more, no inscription, no endless love.

'I didn't manage very long today,' I say, really quietly so that only he can hear me. 'Mum interrupted me. But next time I'll do three-quarters of an hour. It'll be a doddle; my legs have got really strong. I've been doing wall squats every night.' I hear steps on the gravel

path and wait for a moment until I'm alone again. Sure, I know many people talk to the dead – I've seen it often enough here – but I don't want to be disturbed. It's a private conversation. The steps fade away and then all is quiet again. But I call it a day anyway – the moment has passed. 'Don't get into any scrapes!' I say as I leave, then stand up and set off for Lidl.

Her head feels heavy when she wakes up, her limbs stiff, and it's cold in the room. The window is still open. She must have forgotten to close it earlier on. It takes her a moment to remember where she was this morning with Steffan – then she recalls the washed-out yellow walls of the corridors in the old people's home and a wave of anxiety washes over her. She's allowed to take practically nothing with her. The rooms are small and everything is provided: furniture, bedding, towels, curtains. 'Everything you need,' the young manager of the old people's home had said with enthusiasm and she would have dearly loved to ask her whether she too lived in a space of 18 square metres, and slept in some stranger's bedding. But she just nodded politely and at the end, she signed. The thought of having to clear out the house she has lived in her whole life over the next few weeks – to pack everything up, give things away or, even worse, throw them out – seems absurd. She sits up and throws back the cover. An icy wind gusts through the room. In the home, it had seemed awfully warm to her, as if the radiators in all the rooms had been turned up full blast. The air had been very dry and smelled sickly-sweet. It had made her think of the past: those days and weeks when the bodies had not been disposed of and a sweet smell of corpses and burning hung over the city like a pall.

She gets up, extremely slowly. She doesn't trust her legs anymore and has to walk a couple of steps before she feels steady enough. In the home, there will always be someone to help her, said the manager, and she can also use a walking frame. The corridors are wide and there's a lift. She shuts the window and supports herself for a moment on the windowsill. This morning she had walked arm in arm with Steffan, the whole time, never letting go; that's another way to do it. In the lift was a woman sitting on the seat of her walking frame. 'Which floor?' Steffan had asked, wanting to press the button for her, but she'd only said 'Meyer' and stared at the door. When they'd taken the lift down after the viewing, the woman had still been sitting there, just going up and down the whole time. She won't be using a walking frame, she thinks: where is she supposed to go in the home and what plans is she supposed to have?