Translated excerpt

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Im Schnee

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Snowfall

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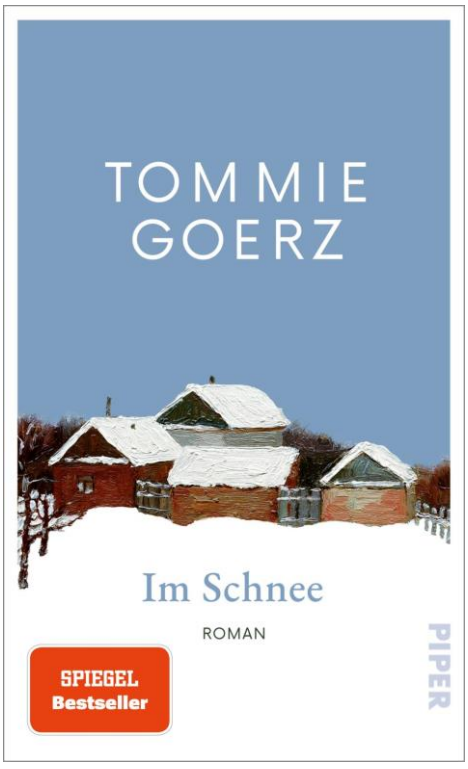

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Death

Snow covers the ground beneath the apple trees. Max stands by the window, gazing out into his orchard and the morning beyond. He has stoked his kitchen stove, brewed himself a coffee, and now he has nothing left to do. It is snowing and there is no need for him to venture outside. He has everything he needs, and no one is expecting him. It promises to be a beautiful day.

Snow covers the ground beneath the apple trees. In autumn, Schorsch used to gather his apples there, barely able to bend over any longer. He favoured the Martini variety for its perfect roundness and juiciness and the fact that it lasted until Christmas. And the Rheinischer Krummstiel, because he also enjoyed eating apples in winter. 'They're not really at their best until after Christmas,' he would chuckle to himself, and they lasted until May – just in time for the White Transparent variety. Schorsch smiled often, though the reasons were known only to himself.

Now Georg, known as Schorsch, is gone. No one ever called him Georg, but that was what his passport said. Georg Wenzel. Yet what do officials know about anyone?

He always took the Martini and the Krummstiel variety, two baskets of each, sometimes three. 'No more, no, because I have to eat them all.' That was how it had been for at least fifty years.

And now he's gone. He hadn't even eaten all his apples yet...

Max had been standing by the window watching the snowfall for what felt like an eternity. It was well into the morning. The snowflakes were like black dots against the endless grey sky and seemed to flow incessantly towards him when he gazed up. Until – and this always happened if he watched for long enough –

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he felt he was in the middle of a maelstrom. He had experienced this since he was a child. It was as if he wasn't standing still, but the flakes were drawing him towards them. Outside, the snow had blanketed everything, from branches to grass to pathways; even the slender tops of the fence slats had been adorned with caps of snow. It took its time. Max stood by the window and watched it, listening to the silence. Nothing rendered the world as tranquil as falling snow. And so peaceful, so gentle.

Gradually, through the silence, the tolling of the death bell had penetrated, very faintly at first, that dingdingdingding echoing from the church tower as if from a great distance. Max hadn't noticed it at first, and when he finally did, it seemed as if it had always been there. Amidst the falling snow, amidst the white caps on the fence, amidst all this serene whiteness. Perched on a branch nearby, a blackbird preened itself, rearranging a few feathers. Eventually, it fluffed up its plumage and tucked its head in deeply. Almost like a ball, it sat there observing the snow, much like Max. It was brown, a female. Max used to always get a piece of beef suet from Angermann's, raw and in one piece, and hang it out; the birds liked it. The birds would flock to it, pecking away at it, and he would watch for hours. But since they no longer had a butcher, he couldn't get suet any more, leaving the birds to fend for themselves in the snow. Did the blackbird still remember and was it perhaps waiting for the suet? Max didn't know, and he couldn't help her either; old Angermann had died four years ago, and Hubert, his son, had no interest in butchery. It was all about stabbing and sausage-making, with blood everywhere, which wasn't to his liking. He also didn't like the smell that always clung to his clothes afterwards. So the butcher's shop had closed, as had the inn. The death bell had tolled for Angermann's Fredl back then. It tolled for everyone who died.

Max didn't yet know for whom Gunda was tolling the bell. Gunda Mehlmeisel always tolled the bell when someone died, so that everyone in the village knew that someone else was gone. She had been doing that for well over twenty years - since the day her mother, Traudl Mehlmeisel, died, who had done

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it before her for what felt like an age. But Gunda's name wasn't Mehlmeisel, it was Grantner, because she had married Ludwig Grantner; just as her mother, Traudl Mehlmeisel, wasn't called Mehlmeisel, but Grabowski, because after the war she married the refugee Jaroslaw Grabowski, who had somehow ended up in Austhal, and she had to take over the Mehlmeisel farm because her older brother Alois never came back from the war. She hadn't wanted the farm at all. But nobody said Grantner here, they said Mehlmeisel.

Max stepped aside to look at the snowflakes again. Where he had been standing, the window was fogged up from his breath. Now he could see again the snow falling, and his thoughts had space again.

Some people were still called by their farm names here, regardless of their actual names. If you were from the village, you knew who the name referred to; if not, it was none of your business. It had always been like that, but it was changing. Only the older generation still used the farm names; the younger ones no longer did. And the newcomers often didn't even know them because they weren't from here. They had built up in the new housing area up there or bought one of the old farms that had been abandoned. But the farmers didn't like selling.

Schorsch is dead, and snow lies on the ground beneath the apple trees. It was Lisl who told him that it was Schorsch. She had shouted it to him through the falling snow, from outside, from the path. And made the sign of the cross. Somehow, Max had already sensed it, but he hadn't allowed the thought to take hold. He would have liked to give something to the blackbird, but he had nothing. Angermann's Fredl was no longer around, and the butchers in town didn't have the suet strips, that's what he had been told by Manfred, who brought him what he needed from the city. Lilo had long since closed her little shop, where there had been everything you could need. From mousetraps to toilet paper and all kinds of food and drink. Because she had been too old, hardly anyone came anymore, and for a long time it hadn't been worth it. She could barely walk in her last years; her hips were damaged from all the standing and lugging things around

in the shop. But the young people bought everything with their cars in the city anyway.

At first, he thought it was Lilo when he heard the bell; she hadn't been doing well for a long time. Until Lisl shouted from outside, from the path, to him. So now it was Schorsch.

Max stood by the window and looked out. How long had he been there? He didn't have to do anything. Snow lay on the ground beneath the apple trees and Schorsch was dead now. In spring, they would bloom again and in autumn bear apples, like every year. Like they had for so many years now. The blackbird still sat on its branch and there was complete peace outside. He added another log to the fire and loved that it was warm. Let it snow; he had enough wood. He fetched the pot of leftover soup from the larder and put it on the stove. Beef broth with noodles from yesterday; that would warm him from the inside. With an egg cracked into it, and a piece of bread - that was enough for him. He didn't need much these days.

What would life be like now without Schorsch? He shook off the thought. Just don't think about it. The beef broth would give him strength.

After the soup, he cut an apple and ate it slowly, slice by slice, while snow was still falling outside. Max looked at his wrinkled hands and thought of Schorsch because the apple was a Martini. Maybe he would put one of those in his grave, and a Rheinischer Krummstiel as well; he liked those so much. Schorsch had always liked coming, and he had liked it when Schorsch came. They had often worked together. They had gone into the woods to cut wood or repaired the old Fendt tractor, split and cut wood, sharpened the saw blade, or replaced roof tiles. Often they had just sat on the bench in the courtyard and done nothing, or in winter here at Max's on the chaise longue, where it was nice and warm. Sometimes they had also lain next to each other and taken a nap; the chaise longue was wide enough for that. This had gone on for decades. There had been something between them; they just got along well. And now Schorsch was no more.

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Max took one of the newspapers that Mane always brought him and put it on the table. He flipped through the pages and looked at the pictures, but he wasn't interested. The world out there was so far away; it had nothing to do with him. It was chaotic; he no longer understood it. War in Ukraine, war in Israel, wars in Africa, people drowning off the coast of Italy - but here it was snowing. In two or three days, Schorsch would be in the newspaper. Max looked at the obituaries, but he didn't know anyone. They were just folk from the town, on whom the snow was falling now. “Suddenly” and “unexpectedly”, often “after a long illness”. There was nothing about Austhal in the newspaper. No wonder. And that was good, thank God. He added another piece of wood to the fire and lay down on his chaise longue; it was time for his nap. The log crackled in the stove and slowly carried him away.

Max lives at number 27. In the village the houses only have numbers; the streets have no names, not even in the new housing area. But his house is called Platform Three. Because it was the only one back then that stood so close to Platform Three. Platform Three hasn't existed for years now, but the house has retained the name. The platform used to be just a siding for loading wood. When the wood was no longer needed for firing porcelain in Selb, Marktredwitz, Meissen, Arzberg, or elsewhere, they eventually dismantled it; they probably needed the iron from the rails for something else. They had stopped making porcelain everywhere back then. Many people had moved away, some from Austhal too, because there was no longer any work.

To go to work, people used to depart from Platform Two, catching the train at five or six; back then the train ran almost every hour. They also returned by train, in the afternoon or evening, sometimes even at night. It ran until eleven. On the return journey, people arrived at Platform One, but that was a long time ago. Now the train only comes three times from Arzberg, around seven, around one, and around seven. And three times from Wunsiedel, half an hour earlier. It only stops if you press the button in the train or someone is on the platform, otherwise it just passes by. So it rarely stops in Austhal anymore, sometimes not

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at all for a whole week. There is only one platform left; they have also dismantled the other one. They left the station building standing, but it is vandalised with graffiti, shattered windows, wind whistling through every crevice, and rubbish strewn about. No one cares. No one has cleaned up or tidied up there for years. The train also no longer stops there, but a hundred metres further on, just beyond the level crossing. There is a bench under a narrow roof; the ticket machine has been broken for weeks. But the automatic display still works. 'Next departures: Towards Arzberg 19:32, towards Wunsiedel 19:58', runs there, depicted by a series of yellow dots, endlessly scrolling. Because half an hour after departure, the small train from Arzberg returns. Now everything over there is white, with scant snowfall. No one clears it from the platform. It's already getting dark, it's mid-January; like in December, it's already dark as night in the afternoon. It will still be weeks before it gets noticeably lighter.

Max has brewed himself a tea and stands by the window, from which he can see the platform. Nettle, peppermint, and all sorts of colourful things he gathered in summer, dried, arranged neatly on a board and mixed in a glass. Schorsch also used to like drinking this tea, but he is probably lying at home on his bed now, on his back, hands folded on his stomach, mouth slightly open, maybe even with a cross in his hands. Or they have already taken him away. Hardly anyone wants a dead person in their house anymore, not even on the first night. There was no vigil for the last three who died. The deceased were picked up on the same day they died. Then they lay at the undertaker's in the cold storage and were only brought to the cemetery chapel on the day of the burial. But they were not laid out anymore - the coffin had long been screwed shut. You didn't even know if the dead person was really in there. You can't say goodbye properly to a deceased person like that. A vigil was much nicer. You had a whole night to chat and cry, and then you also drank something, a schnapps or two or one or two beers. Whatever helped. Also, it helped that you were there with others and not alone.

Had they already taken Schorsch away? Max hadn't heard a car, not here at the level crossing. But if they had come over Fuchsberg or from over there through Weiselswald, he wouldn't have heard anything anyway, especially not with the snow. Or perhaps there was a vigil tonight after all? That would make Max happy - then Schorsch wouldn't just vanish. Just two days ago, they were sharing a beer at Stanglwirt's - and now, just gone, forever? That wouldn't be a fitting farewell, not after all they'd been through together.

Max stood by the window, cautiously sipping from his mug. The tea was still piping hot. The grey sky hung so low that it already swallowed up the spruces on the ridge of Lehnerts Hill behind. Amidst the snow-white expanse of Lehnerts Meadow, which gently rose up the slope behind the tracks and the federal road, two deer stood silhouetted against the forest's edge. They glanced about before bounding back into the forest.

Why Lehnerts Hill was given that name and Lehnerts Meadow was termed Lehnerts Meadow, Max couldn't have said. But it was actually wrong. It belonged to him, so it should rightly be called Malters Meadow; at some point his father had bought fields and meadows from farmer Schmitt - who might have once bought them from Lehnerts farm. Or had Anna Schmitt hailed from Lehnerts farm and had brought the meadow along? He wasn't sure; none of the old ones who knew that were still alive. Yet it hardly mattered. The further back in time you went in the village, the more connections you found between the farms. He married her, she had a dispute with him, she had a child with him, he sold to them, and heaven knows what else. It was better not to get involved in it, to leave everything as it was. After all, the forest, which stretched from the upper edge of the meadow over the hill bore the name Malters Grove, named after him or his father or perhaps his grandfather. It was his and it was there that he chopped his wood for winter or when he wanted to build something. He had spent a lot of time there with Schorsch because he also had a lot of wood from him. Last summer, Max had built a bench from a piece of tree trunk there and put it up with Schorsch up there at the edge of the forest. Because you could rest

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so nicely there and had a picturesque view from there, spanning Austhal and far beyond to the wooded hills and mountains, which seemed to become bluer and paler towards the horizon, and down to the old sawmill on the Aus, where the saws had been silent for years since old Kuno Birker had simply collapsed and died one day. And from that vantage point, you could also see the narrow Aus shimmering as it meandered through the meadows. You could see it best in spring, before the willows sprouted and the grass of the meadows and the nettles on the banks were too high, because the Aus had dug deep into its bed there.

Max remained by the window, enveloped in thoughts of Schorsch. The deep sky suggested more snow was on the way and the darkening grey outside in the middle of the afternoon already hinted at the coming night. The three yellow lamps on the platform flickered on; they would be on until midnight now. A lone figure stood on the platform. There were still hours until the next train. What was he doing there? Did he really intend to wait so long? Max set his cup aside on the stove. He would drink the tea later; it would stay nice and warm on the burner. He fed another log to the stove. He still needed to go to Schorsch, or rather to Maicherd, Schorsch's wife, to ask about the vigil. If there were to be one, Max needed to know when and how. Bundled up in his thick, frayed wool jacket, with his woollen cap pulled snugly over his head, he trudged out into the snow, cane in hand. Outside, he hunched his head between his shoulders. The wind was blowing quite cold.

The women had already partially prepared Schorsch, though he was still without his Sunday best, a task usually entrusted to the undertaker. Yet, there he lay, hair neatly combed, flanked by candles. It almost smelled like church, and they had threaded a rosary into his folded hands. Schorsch wouldn't have liked that; Max knew, and so did the others. But there was no talking to the women about it.

According to Maicherd, it had happened quickly that morning. Schorsch had poured himself a schnapps because he wasn't feeling well; he felt quite sick in fact. Then he uttered the words: 'I think I have to go now,' before sinking onto

the couch, ceasing to breathe. And that was that. He had laid himself down as if he didn't want to cause any trouble.

Max felt relieved hearing that. So Schorsch had known he was going. He accepted a schnapps and planned to come to the vigil in the evening when the men were there. Around seven or eight. The men, as was customary, would stay until midnight, then the women would take over until morning. That would be enough vigil; perhaps the priest would come, but Max doubted Maicherd would send for him. After that, they would pick up Schorsch and prepare him nicely again. They would then take him to the funeral in the coffin.

'I might stay until tomorrow morning,' he had told Maicherd, 'for the women's vigil too.' The women were used to it and had no objections. Never had. Max had always done a lot with the women, along with Schorsch. [...] Now Schorsch lay cold and stiff and would no longer tie brooms or churn butter. He wouldn't do anything together with Max and the women anymore. They would only spend the second part of the night together, and then that would be it. That's why Max wanted to keep vigil with the men first, and then with the women. The women saw it as completely normal and the men didn't care.

Max nodded to Maicherd, pulled his woollen cap lower over his forehead and trudged back home. He had to walk carefully, as it could be slippery under the snow. Perhaps he should get his shoes resoled again for better grip. But where? Anton Sperck, who could have done the job for him, had been buried the year before last. He hadn't been fond of such work, but if you just left your shoes with him, he would eventually get them done. Anton wasn't even a cobbler, but he had the tools from his father, Luck, and had often had to help as a child. That's where he learned everything. And his father hadn't been a cobbler either; he had actually been a saddler, but if someone was already working with leather, an awl, needle, and thread, then you could also bring him your shoes. That's how the whole village did it. But now? There was only Erwin left, and he couldn't do any of it. So Max would have to watch his step carefully in the snow to avoid slipping. But he had his cane with him for that.

It had started snowing again. Not very heavily, but a few flakes were already blowing into his face. He watched them dance in the yellow light of the street lamps and slowly settle to the ground, merging with the white below.

Back at home, he first placed a log on the remaining embers in the stove and opened the front fret. When he peered out of the window, the man was still on the platform, now bathed in yellow light. The man paced back and forth, rubbing his hands over his shoulders. He was cold - no wonder. Did he really want to wait for the train like this? For at least two more hours? Why didn't he go to Stangl's? It was warm there, especially on a Friday. But how could he have known?

Max opened the window. 'Hey!'

The man on the platform stopped, looking around. Where did the call come from?

Max called out again. 'Here!' He waved to catch the man's attention.

Now the man noticed him.

'Come!'

The man on the platform gestured to himself. 'Me?'

'Yes, you. Come! Come inside!'

By now, it was almost dark. Max closed the window and sat down on his chaise longue. Shortly after, there was a hesitant knock.

'It's open! Just come in!'

Outside, the door handle turned cautiously. 'Hello?' came a tentative voice.

'Come where there's light. Come on in.' The kitchen door had a large pane with semi-transparent yellow ornamental glass, sporting a crack that had been there for decades, perhaps thirty or forty years, if not more. Kahl Schmittn had kicked it in because he wanted to leave and go home. He couldn't help it, Kahl, he was only ten or eleven at the time. Max was supposed to watch him for just half an hour until his folks came back from the field. But Kahl always wanted to go home. He wanted to, and he did it every day from morning till evening, just