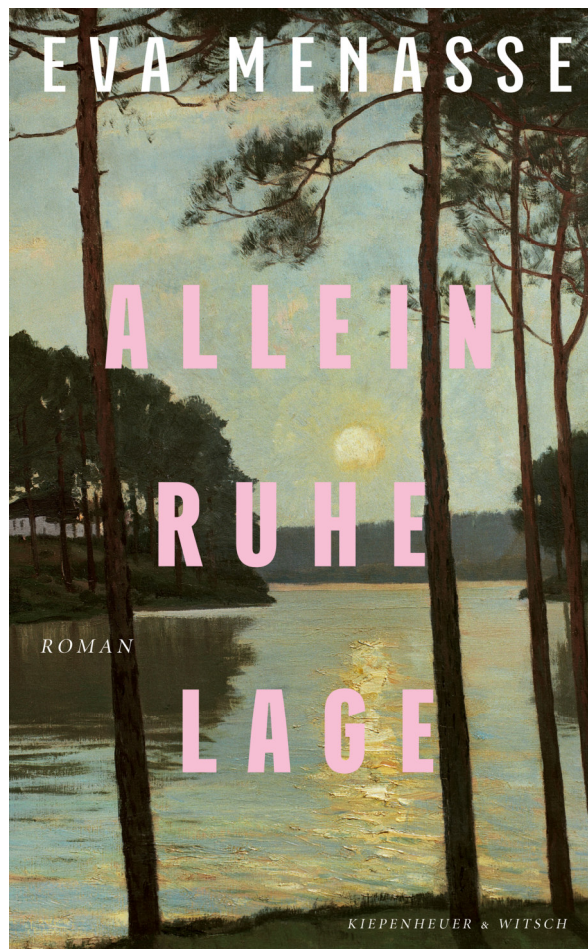


SECLUSION

by Eva Menasse

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House, I'm selling you.

I've often addressed you directly, when I came alone and you stood watching me, inscrutable as a god, or an idol that a person has created for themselves and whose expression they could, in fact, describe: a little different each time, because it is an echo of their own state of mind. Hello, house.

You would nod and look critical, because I hadn't visited you for a long time and everything had run wild, the exorbitant quantity of molehills surrounding you like the mess from Nature's party.

Or loving, because you knew that I was fleeing again. You would usually have something for me then: an explosion of purple clematis, perhaps, wound around everything like a feather boa around the arms and legs of a dancer.

Or haughty, when people came to visit who said I really should dispose of you at last, *get rid of it, why would you want to be out here on your own in the middle of nowhere.*

You were at your friendliest with foreign parcel couriers. Because they had found us, which wasn't easy, though Google did eventually work out where we were. That last summer there were more of them, permanently smiling people making a conspicuous effort in this otherwise pretty migration-free, thus anti-migration, area. Sometimes they would start slightly, their eyes would widen and they would stop to catch their breath, possibly for the only time that day, staring over my shoulder into the distance. They would hand me a parcel over the fence and say, 'Nice here, very quiet.'

House, you witnessed everything: the marriage, the children, the end of the marriage, the loves that followed, the parties, my attempts to get rid of you, my attempts to beautify you, repair you, paint you, to plant, fertilise and harvest; my work, the thinking and writing, an important part of which took place here, protected and inspired by walks around the forest and the garden. Now, though, I am selling you, this time for real. You'll be delivered into the hands of agreeable strangers, and our conversation will cease, because the memories came to life most of all when we were together, you and I.

We both know what happened the first time I tried to sell you, more than a decade ago now. Three scenes took place between my decision and its unexpected retraction; one in February, two in June, the first horrendous, the second slapstick, the third with interim happy ending.

Scene one: arrival, with the estate agent, recommended to me as someone who handled *unusual properties*. You really were an unusual property, in every sense, good and bad. I hadn't dared to come out here in the preceding weeks, after getting the key back.

And so the estate agent and I arrive together, that day in February. Sun shining, frost patterns on the windows, a rare dreamscape of winter snow outside. Inside: an installation of contempt. A chest has been taken away and the drawers emptied out over sofa and floor: felt-tip pens, coloured crayons, Plasticine, chalk, board games, Happy Families, light bulbs, extension cables, tablecloths, cough sweets, candles, tea lights, torches, batteries, fishing tackle, paper napkins, rain capes in their pouches, gloves, scarves, hats, thick socks, too small now for the children – there it all lies, spewed across the room. Several full ashtrays, fuller than any ashtray could ever have got in my presence:

Look, I'm smoking myself to death is what they're meant to inform me, and they reliably do. Empty wine bottles, some upright, others horizontal; they fell over, they couldn't carry on, just like our marriage. On the floor, halfway between the living room and the kitchen, a pair of men's underpants; I send them sailing behind the fridge with a swift kick and hope the estate agent doesn't see them. He's so friendly. He's so understanding. He's immensely discreet and acts as if this is normal.

'I've seen all manner of things before,' he says, when I apologise, when I can't stop apologising. *Seen all manner of things before*: in that moment there is a little explosion in my head, followed by the buzzing power surge I so treasure when I'm writing, to which I'm practically addicted and which, alas, so seldom strikes, whereas in everyday life it's considerably less useful. The associative spark is ignited, my voice rises in pitch: 'Of course — in houses where someone's died, I expect; I'm sure they must look like this, old people living alone, and no one bothers to tidy up before calling you.' Already the words *cadaveric poison* and *decomposition* and *crime scene cleaner* are on the tip of my tongue; I just manage to lock them in my mouth, but I can see the larvae, maggots, flies before me, before my now uninhibited mind's eye, insects the number of which facilitates precise determination of time of death. A forensic entomologist once said in an interview that it was particularly important to train ordinary police officers properly, because it really messes things up if the first thing they do at a crime scene is open a window. And I'm seized with the urge to laugh; my throat constricts, but I can't hold it in, I'm choking with laughter and the tears are streaming down my cheeks: how many maggots are already squirming in the pale corpse of our great love? It has long since deliquesced, that love; it is trickling, seeping away, unstoppably, all

that's left is the poison slopping about in our souls. The estate agent turns away as if he hasn't noticed a thing; he goes and takes photos outside, because he has *seen all manner of things before*.

After this, we work together almost without speaking; he opens all the windows and indicates the angle from which he wants to take the photo, sketching lines in the air with the side of his hand, and I clear everything out of the way, push furniture, rubbish and chaos outside his boundary lines; no sock toes, no cables will be visible later in the photos, they show a cosy home flooded with sunlight.

Thinking about it now, I must have gone back again well before June; shortly after the estate agent visit, in fact. Yes – I did, with Wilma, who has always saved me whenever I've hit rock bottom, in her brusque, decisive way, with her occasionally authoritarian impulses. But when you fear the evil spirits that haunt a place – or no, not spirits: what actually remains, and the way it has been left – you need someone like her who'll tell you what's what and how to deal with it, who has already brought along a thick roll of rubbish bags, XXL, tear-proof. We stuffed everything in without stopping to think or consider: the underpants, the children's clothes, the toys, everything. The only things we separated out were the bottles, good Germans that we are – that even I am, now. I remember Wilma kept shaking her head and saying *awful*; sometimes she also said *arseholes*, without specifying who, and there's something very comforting about this banal, formulaic female solidarity, just as while there's nothing sophisticated about a big, colourful sticking plaster, it definitely does help.

Scene two, June: I got hold of a phone number in a roundabout way – a Ukrainian tradesman knew a Polish cleaning woman who knew

someone who did gardening jobs – and now I’ve arranged to meet a husband and wife at the train station. ‘Know Vogelsang?’ the woman said on the phone, repeating my question ironically before bursting into heartwarming, nicotine-stained laughter. ‘Go through twice every bloody week, when go bloody Berlin and back.’

A car with a Polish number plate is already there when I arrive, and two people are leaning against it, smoking. Alla, small, wiry, in red dungarees with a cleaning company logo, has a shock of jet-black hair and long false nails painted a garish neon colour. Over the years that follow, the colour keeps changing; I’m always curious to see the new shades, as they are infinite, almost like the RAL colour chart with which I will also become very familiar. And it will never cease to astonish me that – and how – Alla does everything with her bare hands: using heavy equipment to knock down walls and ceilings, chopping wood, mixing concrete, wallpapering, cleaning, because ‘with bloody gloves, no feeling’.

Bolek is very overweight: a metabolic disorder plus diabetes plus worn-out knees plus plus plus. Later, with his authorisation, I will apply for his German pension on his behalf; the Berlin authorities are not easy to deal with, even for foreigners like me, but it does help if German is your mother tongue.

Habibi: Since when do you Austrians speak German?

– Shut up, you don’t come in for ages yet.

So as with Alla it’s the black hair and neon nails, my first impression of Bolek is his Obelix-like silhouette and his eyes, warm with flashes of irony. No idea how he manages to convey kindness and mockery at

the same time. I have yet to become acquainted with his idiosyncratic German (he had a German mother): whenever possible, he reduces each noun to a childlike, fond diminutive: a wee cigarette, a wee coffee, a wee ladder, a wee shelf. These two will soon tackle one of the big construction sites in my house, which includes slicing through steel joists and redoing the underpinning: the construction of a *wee staircase*. But that comes later.

Alla's German is wilder and more unruly, like her. These days I could write a grammar guide for all those who find her hard to understand. She forms every future tense with *would*, but every subjunctive becomes *would have*. You need to know this when listening to her. *That would look good* is a promise already about to be fulfilled; *I would have come tomorrow, but must see until when work*, on the other hand, sounds logical only to her.

She will soon be passed around enthusiastically among my friends, because she really can do practically anything. 'I builder from Moldavia, study construction school, four years, just no certificate!' I'm the only one who can halfway understand her. It's a shame others find it so difficult; I am fascinated by the creative simplifications she uses to hew our tricky language into shape. They illustrate which elements are so difficult, and why. 'I take out that,' she says, for example, not separating the verb; and she stubbornly insists on stressing the 'o' in 'renovate', whereupon no one understands it. Why is that? Why does the stress make such a difference to this word, and not to so many others?

Alla's favourite German saying is *No such thing as can't*, which says as much about her as it does about the German mentality. Or should we say: about German wishful thinking? Because unlike the operation of

German trains or the reduction of red tape, with Alla it is actually true. Whatever she decides to do gets done – eventually.

It's a sentence I've come to hate: standing behind her with a howling vacuum cleaner, for example, for what feels like half an hour as she attempts to bore through the chimney with a hammer drill. I've been inordinately sensitive to noise since birth; when I was two, my parents had to leave the zoo with me at a run because a lion had roared. Mechanical noise drives me insane; I had a terrible fear of flying until I found the shelf in the DIY shop with the ear defenders, which have since been replaced by noise-cancelling headphones.

I tap Alla feebly on the shoulder and wave at her to stop. I switch off the vacuum cleaner and suggest we get hold of an angle grinder or some other, heavier tool. 'You can see it's not going to work.'

To which, like an exuberant child, she replies, 'No such thing as can't!'

Of course: how could I forget. Just as I cannot forget her delicious satisfaction when, soon afterwards, she succeeds in fitting the soot door in the chimney. Exhausted merely by doubt and the holding of the vacuum cleaner, I say, 'Incredible that you managed to drill through this wall. I'd never have believed it.'

And she replies: 'Tell me – when comes Alla from Moldavia, has wall a chance?'

Right now, though, we still don't know each other. Can I trust them – can we trust her? They seem to smoke in synch; they flick away the cigarettes, get in their car, follow me for a kilometre and a half through the forest, and when the three of us are standing outside my garden gate

and I turn to them imploringly, not only are the cigarettes in their mouths again, they're already synchronously half-smoked.

You, house, whom I also think of as the ruler of the garden – you really showed me back then, and I never let it happen again. The whole plot had run rampant, shoulder-high. It must have rained a lot that spring, which in my anxiety I had allowed to slip by without deciding what to do with you.

It still amazes me that anything managed to grow right up to the garden gate, and so high, because the driveway is set with cobblestones, three cars long and two cars wide. But remorseless Nature, which will reclaim everything if you let it, was surging forth from every nook and cranny. You, house, could scarcely be seen any more. I daresay you found this amusing.

I can barely open the garden gate; I have to hurl myself against it to push the first half-metre of wilderness back and clear a gap for the three of us to squeeze through. As if in the field of corn in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, I turn to the others, afraid that they may have thought they only needed to clip a few hedges into shape, and so would turn down the job.

To this day I can still see Alla's fingernails on the cigarette as she slowly takes it out of her mouth, surveys the scene, gives an impish grin, turns to Bolek and utters the deathless line: 'Think we have to bring own tools, hon.'

Scene three, June, just a couple of weeks later: a call from Alla. 'You can come weekend, for inspection?'

'What, are you finished already?'

By now, I know that she works in Berlin during the week as a supervisor for a big industrial cleaning company, while Bolek looks after the chickens, dogs and vegetable garden in Poland, twenty minutes over the border. On Friday afternoons they meet at my house, do a few hours' work, and Bolek takes Alla back by car the rest of the way. On Sunday midday they drive in the other direction, work in my garden again, and Alla gets the train back to Berlin. Only on Saturdays are they free of external constraints; that's when they work on their own house. I picture – I assume correctly – a cement mixer in the driveway surrounded by pecking hens, nettles and rubble. They also sow vegetables, harvest them, cook and pickle them, gather and dry mushrooms, freeze chopped herbs, keep geese and ducks. Soon I will be the beneficiary of all this: gifts and more gifts. Later, Alla will bring eggs to Berlin for me, and my child will demand fried eggs or omelette or scrambled eggs for breakfast every day. Anyone who has tasted Alla's eggs knows that supermarket eggs taste of nothing – 'Cardboard,' Alla snorts. Her eggs, on the other hand: she holds up her fantastical fingers, which generally have a cigarette jammed between them, as if to swear an oath, and declares, 'With me, all is one hundred per cent organic.' She is a wild Eastern European dream. Incidentally, she doesn't touch a drop of alcohol, not ever, and nor does Bolek, because she was once beaten almost to death by her first husband, a Moldavian alcoholic. The story has a surprising punchline. She returned to her parents' house that very night, she says, and the next day, when her husband of brief duration tried to fetch her back, she turned him away, saying: 'Otherwise next time I kill you.' If at this point you give a nervous laugh, chilled by her glacial resolve, she taps her forehead

and remarks that, logically, ‘I not spend whole life in slammer because of bloody idiot.’

Now, though, she chuckles down the phone, filled with pride and satisfaction, after no more than twenty or thirty hours’ work on an overgrown, one-thousand-square-metre plot of land in lush July. ‘Ha – come see!’

And that day, house, our stories, yours and mine, commenced anew.

It must have been one of those perfect days: everywhere you look, tiny jewels seem to sparkle at the edge of the picture among the whispering leaves. Little birds shoot calls back and forth like forceful arrows. Everything shimmers, hums, quivers with the joys of summer. Light and shade interplay like lovers’ fingers. One of the guests to whom you showed your gracious side remarked once that, as you walk up to the house from the parking space, the sea could easily lie beyond the crest of the low hill in front of you. It doesn’t, unfortunately; only a half-smothered lake, of which more later. You – both of us, until now – could be found by turning hard left just before the hill. In summer, when the sun is high, as it is on this June day, you and your garden look like an artificial paradise installed deep in a perfectly ordinary forest by a set designer high on ketamine – now even more than then, with all the hydrangeas and roses, German and English, that I’ve planted since, though I was too indolent to learn to prune them properly. And the summer lilac bushes in their different purples, currently being stormed by butterflies – brimstones, peacocks, red admirals – as if a Taylor Butterfly Swift were staging a concert there. A surprising clearing, full of sunshine and colour, and in the midst of it the house, like a cheese triangle stood on end. So pointy, quaint and strange, a house with no

depth, no back end. In June the grass still glows a pale baby-green, which made me leap about like a maniac whenever the mole burrowed too close. ‘You’ve got the whole bloody forest, you clodhopper,’ I would shriek, Alla-like, as I stamped on its molehills. Soon, though, I learned to enjoy controlling my emotions, skilfully opening up the molehill and using a flexible stick to shove a rag soaked in butyric acid deep into its passageways. I possessed multiple boxes of FFP2 masks even before the pandemic because of this strategy for repelling moles.

Anyway, it must have been a day like this when I came for the *inspection*. Alla and Bolek were standing side by side on the mown lawn like the proud owners. The cobblestones in the entryway were scoured practically white – I preferred not to ask what post-Soviet poison they had sprayed there – the hedges clipped, the firewood stacked, everything prepared as if for a gardening magazine. In my memory, which of course deceives, they are for once not smoking but standing like cadets with their hands along the seams of their trousers, eagerly anticipating my rapturous enthusiasm.

Which I poured over them in waves, because everyone wants to be praised for good work; who knows that better than artists, who struggle through deserts of loneliness and the fear of failure until maybe, possibly, the time comes when they are in luck and the cosmic constellations happen to align. But all my effusive praise for the two of them and their Herculean effort ended with the words: ‘Now the estate agent can really make something of it.’

The sentence subdued us all. But that had been the point of the exercise: to beautify it in order to flog it. The sentence crumbled even as it left my mouth. I walked back to the garden gate to take it all in. And there, for the first time, the rose in the shady front garden was

really putting on a show, its teeming blossoms casting a kind of carpet over the weeds. There were dozens, each filled with so many petals that it looked as if it wanted to be the world champion blossom-filler, or fat blossom producer, who knows what roses want. It had been given to me for my birthday years earlier, a tiny, potted thing; I was still in my thirties then, ferociously ambitious, often despairing, often arrogant, usually in a hurry, too much going on. We must have planted it here, but I'd forgotten; we had small children and too little money, all the craziness of those years. Had this rose really always been there? Why had it multiplied like this particularly now? Roses suddenly starting to behave like a pair of frisky rabbits? Bolek walked up to me and looked in the same direction, at the kitschy clearing that looked as if it had been cut out of the dusky forest, the baby-green lawn, the reeling butterflies. He smoked, and gave us both time. And then he uttered the words that kept you and me together, house, for many more years: 'You know, a house like this you buy only once in a lifetime.'

That was why I kept you, then: because a Moldavian builder and a Polish retiree, of all people, gave me back a little self-belief and pride of ownership, because they showed me what I had in you and promised they would actively assist me. It was the professionally supported new beginning my marriage didn't get to have.

2.

There was a time when my mother wished she had a holiday home. Other families had one, those who *had it better*; we, however, spent the weekends, and every other afternoon when it wasn't snowing or pelting with rain, at the tennis club. A seven-and-a-half-minute walk from our apartment, which had been rented for that very reason – because it was *just over the bridge*. The tennis club was my father's paradise: he'd made it there while still alive, and truly he deserved it, after being forced to spend much of his childhood alone, without family, in a foreign land. My father *didn't need an expensive car or yacht* to keep him happy, as he remarked when interviewed in his old age; he just needed people with whom he could play tennis and cards, with whom each day was *a laugh* – fun, amusement, distraction. He was a born player and sportsman, already successful as a boy at chess, table tennis, football; it was only much later, after his death, that I wondered to what extent these sociable talents may have helped to minimise the trauma of having been a refugee and exile. They were probably crucial. Perhaps that was why the tennis club was so important, with its predictability and reliability. It was a positive iteration of Bill Murray's Groundhog Day; it was home, his sporting village; you went *just over the bridge* and there would be someone to play with, no matter what.

Nonetheless, there was a time when my mother's yearning for a bungalow did at least elicit a response. I must have been about six and my sister two when friends of my parents, a childless couple we called Uncle Walter and Auntie Hupfi, built a house in Lower Austria. I vaguely remember visiting the construction site and the shell of the house with some other friends and their children. Uncle Walter

persuaded us children to ring the neighbours' doorbell and ask if they had something they could give us all to eat and drink. This resulted in an improvised picnic; the neighbours, put on the spot, brought whatever they had, picnic tables and benches, wine, bread and sausage. It was not an atypical scene; all his life Uncle Walter was bombastic and shameless, but with him you always *had a laugh*. A con artist with gold cufflinks and a big mouth, the more naïve of character were easily taken in by him. His best role was that of the affable millionaire who could afford to do whatever he liked, and he played it until he did in fact fake his way to becoming a millionaire. Once he stole an ornament from a restaurant toilet in Venice, a little lemon tree in painted porcelain, forty centimetres high; he liked it, so he simply took it, and carried it out of the restaurant under his arm, grinning. I can still see my mother's face, the corners of her mouth twitching. I, too, a primary school kid, was shocked and fascinated in equal measure. I knew you weren't allowed to do this, but he did it anyway and found it funny, too, which turned it into something akin to a heroic exploit. And the fact that he looked down on everyone who let him get away with this sort of thing – even that was intuitively apparent to me.

As a consequence of Walter's house-building we did, on a single occasion, go to look at a plot of land. My mother must have expressed her wish, Walter had asked around, and *voilà*. The site was on a hill with a nice view of the Danube. Unlike the village where Uncle and Auntie had their house, this one had an ugly name, not exactly Unterstinkerbrunn but something along those lines. The plot was covered in rubble and nettles, and we stood gazing at it apprehensively – who was going to clear all this away? Ultimately, building a house was something my father simply could not imagine doing; he would

have been more likely to ski across the Arctic. If everyone were like him, humanity would still be living in caves and tents. He was a gifted sportsman but a wildly impractical human being. If ever anything at home needed to be installed or repaired, or if even a picture needed hanging, my mother would call the tennis club groundsman. My father didn't take the slightest manly pride in the use of tools, one of two clear differences between him and the non-Jewish post-war generation of my schoolfriends' fathers. The other was his lack of ambition. Now that things had turned out well for him and his family, contrary to expectation, he just wanted to live, and to do so as comfortably as possible. He didn't want to become anything, he didn't want to forge a career; he just wanted the modest prosperity he was able to achieve with minimal effort. Beyond that, he wanted to be left in peace: *quietly elegant* was his life's motto. Work in the morning; club in the afternoon, by three at the latest. The office job he had found immediately after his return from exile offered him precisely this, and so he stayed where he had happened to end up thanks to the only advantage of his childhood exile – perfect English. It drove my mother mad. She had set her sights on greater things, and her ambition – a perverse cultural technique from today's perspective – was directed solely at her husband. 'You could have done anything,' she would complain, 'with your abilities.'

'All I can do is pay,' he would reply, and laugh. This was especially true where craftsmanship was concerned. But paying for a whole house was not on the cards. It was much too expensive, they were bound to be cheated, they didn't know what they were doing in this regard. Worst of all, they would have had to drive out there every weekend: a tennis-club-free zone, *nothing but local yokels and country bumpkins*, as he called the country people with whom he, unlike his pal Walter, couldn't

find anything in common. My father wasn't matey or bombastic; he had the sort of nonchalant urbanity Italians call *sprezzatura*. Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Natalie Wood, Senta Berger and many others he dealt with in his work were a delight; vintners and pig farmers who spoke in dialect were a problem. And while my mother did have a driver's licence, she had forgotten how to drive, because she was never allowed behind the wheel. The bungalow plan was quietly dropped. We visited Uncle and Auntie instead; we children would sleep at their house while our parents had to stay at a bed-and-breakfast. Walter and Hupfi sold it to us as *giving them privacy*. I don't know if that was true. To my parents, it may have felt a little like child theft. But at last we would go on the long walks my mother loved so much, and my father would usually at some point, on top of a hill or surrounded by fields and meadows, raise his arms to the skies and cry *Taxi! Taxi!* in mock despair.

Many years later, I told my mother over the phone that we were buying a little house by a lake in the forest. She sighed, and said she too would have liked to have had something similar, *but you know what your father's like*.

When we were looking for a house in the countryside, the internet was still in its infancy. Back then it felt great to be looking at properties online instead of trawling through newspapers and calling one estate agent after another. A site with a long-winded name, something like weekend-homes-new-eastern-states.de, had endless rows and columns of thumbnail photos, ten by ten at least on every page, and there were many pages. When you clicked on one of these postage-stamp images, the content behind it took forever to load, from top to bottom; I quickly

lost patience. And so we scrolled through superficially; we just wanted to get an idea of prices, but for that you had to click at least once and comb through the property description; that's how badly it was done in those days.

This was our best time, though, those early years. There were quite a lot of them, all told, before things went downhill, steeply and fast. Back then, though, everything was fine. Christmas was over, the children were asleep, snow lay thick on our narrow balcony; the S-Bahn thundered past at brief intervals, the vacant factory behind it silhouetted against the sky, a backyard Hopper painting. We had white wine, lots of love and attraction for each other, and a new plan: a house in the countryside that would, at a stroke, provide us with independence from the no-longer-all-that-flexible grandparents in the far south, and from the generosity of those who were happy to lend us their holiday homes for a week or two, which came at the cost of horrendous car journeys criss-crossing central Europe. Independence, too, from the rigid holiday plans, laid down months in advance, of our two children from previous relationships. He had a brought a son to the marriage, I a daughter. This meant there were two other parents involved, with children constantly having to be picked up and ferried back again in a logistical egg dance; vehicle breakdowns, unpredictable traffic jams and sudden bouts of illness were the bane of those years, along with the dreaded *handovers*. All that, we hoped, would be easier if we had a house of our own, somewhere not too far away, in the countryside.

Ten years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the internet site with the long-winded name was like a car boot sale for the remains of the GDR. It was a dark, brutal time for the former East Germany, when mountains of accumulated hopes, trust in the world, entire lives were allowed to

shatter. The country is still dealing with the consequences today. This internet site offered soot-blackened factories, village schools infested with dry rot, half-built family homes whose owners had run out of money; you could buy barns and stables and regional train stations, as well as manor houses and small castles that looked as if the Red Army had only just withdrawn. For adventurous West Germans with money, it was a veritable gold rush. At the same time, when I went to the former West the most common response was a mixture of ignorance, shame and guilt: ‘Oh, really – in the east? You’re brave. But yes, we really should go and take a look at these new eastern states sometime.’

Hidden amongst the hundreds of thumbnail photos, our future house peered out. It was at the bottom of one of the crowded pages, on the far right-hand side where it was least likely to get clicks. People gravitate towards the centre, and although that may be less true politically these days, it still applies to the spontaneous selection of other things. Even in this tiny picture you could see that the house wore its sign across its forehead.

‘Look, someone’s selling their pub,’ we said, and click, the image assembled itself with maddening slowness, from top to bottom. Did we still have those modems then, with all the extra-terrestrial buzzing and beeping? We were just about to stop poking about in the pile of photos looking for our house; we were tired and drunk – back then, during that relentless weekly cycle, when both children had to go to their respective schools each morning, I couldn’t have stayed awake beyond their bedtime for so much as a single evening without alcohol. Now, though, we were as excited as hunters who have caught a glimpse of their prey. No one else could be allowed to bag it now.

Later, there would often be a couple of deer standing outside the house at daybreak. As soon as you opened the door they would flee, with those extended bounds that always seem a fraction of a second too long, too close to a hover, like a cartoon.

The image assembled itself, line by line, pixel by pixel, and the house held up its sign for us: *Forest Tavern*, both romantic and twee. The house stared out at us for the first time, cantankerous and proud, or so it has tended to seem to me ever since. Probably because of the two first-floor windows, wider than they are high, like narrowed eyes. In these initial photos it looked intact, whole, a house with no flaws or visible need for renovation; furthermore, it was in the coveted *secluded location* – there was a picture of a lake surrounded by reeds. And a price that we might perhaps be able to afford, somehow, let's see. We wrote it all down, the estate agent's name and number; if you saw something online in those days you could never be sure of finding it again.

The estate agent did answer the phone the following morning, even though it was *between the years*, as they say in Germany, but he was about as keen as my father on furthering his career. The owners were on holiday, the house had been empty for some time, maybe we'd like to drive out there and take a look at the exterior first, see whether it was really the kind of thing we were looking for. This made us nervous and suspicious. Did they already have a potential buyer? Did they no longer want to sell? Did it have some serious problem not visible in the photos? Was it haunted? Was it poisoned – heavy metals, LPG wastewater? The only thing we didn't think of at the time was Nazis. You often read about them looking for remote houses deep in the eastern forests to hold their sinister meetings and paramilitary sporting exercises. As we found out later, Nazis had in fact come to check out our area a few years

earlier. There had been a derelict complex at the far end of the lake, several buildings with plenty of space around them, even Stasi bunkers. They had supposedly had their eye on it. In the end, though, it was bought by a developer from the West who built a hotel, a genuinely tasteful edifice in the middle of nowhere. The prices he charged were commensurate with the high quality of the building and its facilities: individual terraces, balconies, suites, some with private saunas. What they were not commensurate with, for a long time, was the standard of personnel. Sometimes, in summer, we would take the children to the café to see if the spotty youth who served the cakes, ice cream and drinks still stank so badly of sweat. We debated whether he should be told. Perhaps, we agreed, we could politely mention it to his boss. But we never did. *The stinky waiter*, the children would whisper scurrilously in the car before we even got there, and we would make them promise never, ever, ever to say it within his earshot.

You couldn't find workers around here of a standard to satisfy rich guests from Munich, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, and good workers from elsewhere would chew off their right arm before they'd move to this godforsaken part of the world.

The investor also purchased several lakes in the region. Because even that was possible, for a time: the Soil Company PLC, so-called, could sell certain lakes deemed assets of the bankrupt GDR to private individuals if the municipalities or administrative districts were broke. And not only lakes as remote and obscure as ours. If you were to pick a single story to exemplify everything that went wrong after the reunification of East and West, the story of Lake Wandlitz would fit the bill. In GDR times, the Socialist Unity Party bigwigs lived in the nearby *Waldsiedlung*, or *forest settlement*, encircled by a wall and supplied

with luxury goods. The lake was therefore synonymous with the hated communist elite.

At the start of the new millennium it was bought by a West German lawyer, who proceeded to issue charges, legally, to the residents of lakeside houses who had constructed jetties on his property – meaning: on the surface of the water. Most of them responded by dismantling their jetties; only a few paid up. But then the new owner had his lake re-measured, and made it a matter of official record that the water surface had significantly shrunk. Because he had purchased the lake at its former size, a piece of the shore now also belonged to him. The lawyer proceeded in a manner that was positively biblical, if this adjective can be used to describe a crude mixture of harshness and unpredictable mercy. Anyone who resisted or refused to pay eventually lost an expensive court case; anyone who was poor, old, sick, or simply accepting of the new situation (*it belongs to him, I have to pay to use it*) could reckon with a discount, being met halfway, reaching an agreement. It was a cautionary tale about times of upheaval, greed, and the injustices that automatically result from a change of legal status, a tale enacted on people who had longed for capitalism as a thirsty man longs for a sip of water and had been flooded instead.

There would be strife with the private owner of our lake as well, as well as a lot of bizarre stories and allegations for which he, the owner, was only minimally responsible. The rest of it was projection by our neighbours, some of whom were soon so far gone that they would have seen even an earthquake or a meteorite strike as yet another example of West German guile.

For now, though, we packed the children into the car and drove there.

3.

We had some very happy times in Vogelsang, perhaps the happiest continuous period in both our lives. Someone once wrote that he had been happy in his first marriage but never content, whereas in the second he had been content but never happy. For many years, I thought of *contentment* as a concept for retirees, those few pathetic, decisive steps down from *I want it all*. Slowly, though, the idea materialises on life's horizon that a degree of contentment might actually be desirable, one day, when all remaining hopes and desires have crumbled to dust or time is running out. Events can rob you of all vitality; aggressive diseases can carry you off. From where I'm standing, though, there still seems to be quite a way between here and that horizon.

I think I can speak for us both when I say that for us, back then, the house's newly-minted owners, it was version one that applied, pure and undiluted. It wasn't our style to *content ourselves*, and we didn't, not for a single day. Instead, we chased chimeras, projects, concepts, measures of success, objectives, but we did so together, with our fingers intertwined. For my part, I believed for a long time that we were invincible and indivisible – the absolute opposite of the wine glass I crushed in my hand in an apocalyptic fight at the very end.

In the beginning, it was all incredibly complicated. The house was classified as a business, but we wanted to buy it as a family home. Built as a pub on an East German campsite, the house suddenly found itself in a conservation area of the Federal Republic of Germany, which is just one step down from a nature reserve. You're not allowed to build anything in it; only what's already there is allowed to remain. They call

this *protected status*. According to building regulations, a change of use application is synonymous with new building work, as for example when a field has to be reclassified as building land in order to construct something new. *Change of use* was the magic phrase; change of use was the path we needed to go down – but this was precisely what was forbidden in the conservation area, in any direction, forwards or backwards, up or down. If you're not a lawyer, it's utterly incomprehensible: that a pub with a car park, noise, and considerably more refuse and wastewater is permitted, but a family home with two children (later three) is not. But that wasn't the issue; the issue was change of use. And this was forbidden, because conservation area – conservation, as in: no change, ever again.

‘And if the classification stays the same, what then?’ we asked the notary.

‘Someone could insist you run it as a pub.’

We tapped our foreheads and decided, in conjunction with the notary and the vendors, to include an escape clause in the contract. If we didn't succeed in getting the change of use approved, the contract would be null and void. We bought it on that proviso and transferred the money. However, the vendors didn't receive it: it remained in a notary trust account, inaccessible to all of us, for years. We moved into the house and began remodelling it the way we wanted it. We bought garden tools, beds and compost, and a stack of wooden planks we planned to lay as floorboards. The first thing we did was rip out the pub furnishings. The vendors allowed us to make alterations to a house they might still have to sell as a pub. None of us knew how it would end. Basically, the situation seemed hopeless, yet we all still took the risk. A great many people in the *new German states* must have felt like this at the time. It

was complicated, illogical and bizarre; it was both lawful and unjust, as always happens when one legal system is replaced by another. Like the story of the bank of the shrunken Lake Wandlitz that became a veritable gold coast for its shameless new owner.

When the first so-called neighbour came round, we welcomed him in. He didn't want to enter the house, where we were in the middle of tearing down a wall, the two of us with few serviceable tools; that didn't interest him at all. He strolled round the back, into the garden, and surveyed it attentively, humming all the while. When he had concluded his walkabout and deliberations, he hummed louder, then fixed us with a challenging look and asked what we had paid. We were so startled that we told him. We were proud of the price, because all our friends living elsewhere had congratulated us. For people in the south and west of the country, even for Austrians in the south-east, the price sounded almost unbelievable: a huge house by a lake, with a cellar and a big garden – and, to cap it all, in a *secluded location*. But this man started laughing; he opened his mouth so wide we could see his fillings and bridges, and doubled up as if punched in the stomach. 'I wouldn'tve,' he gasped, and made his way out of our garden, bent over and laughing derisively. 'I wouldn'tve!' And then he was gone.

The next to arrive was an old man in blue overalls with a white ribbed vest underneath. It was only on second glance that you noticed he was very handsome: tall, lean and tanned, with a striking, well-proportioned face. His silver hair had been wet-combed, its hard stripes fixed in place with setting lotion or cream. He looked like a film star playing the role of an allotment gardener. Soon we would get to know each other well, but the first time we saw him we just stared in his

direction; we didn't rush over as we had with the first visitor. The hummer, with his sudden malice and delighted gloating, had made us cautious.

'I just wanted to introduce myself,' this second man called from the other side of the fence. 'I'm your next-door neighbour.' We walked over slowly but didn't open the gate; we shook hands over it, as we often would from now on, sometimes several times a day. I enjoyed the way people like him ceremoniously shook hands; it reminded me of Austria. West Germans are much less likely to shake hands; the English hardly ever do. And we'd never heard of pandemics back then; we would call them the plague, a phenomenon belonging to an uncivilised past, long since overcome.

Our ageing Adonis went by the name of Paul Woitek and lived almost within shouting distance. Two hundred metres further round the lake was the start of a dacha settlement, forty tiny houses arranged in four rows. The quality of construction varied, depending on the row. The biggest, most robust ones were at the front, closest to the water. In GDR times they had belonged to state-owned enterprises that would send employees here on holiday. I never bothered to find out who exactly was entitled to what, but it was a system I was familiar with from Austria. Even now, Austrian Post employees can take their families on inexpensive holidays to the post hostels situated all over the country.

The dachas in the front row must originally have been identical, built wider and a little higher than the others, probably with bunks underneath the pent roof. By now, though, a decade after reunification, the new owners had made all sorts of changes. Here in the east that meant, first of all, painting them in bright colours. People had

apparently had so little colour in their lives under communism that afterwards they often overdid it. Above all, though, it meant enlargement: an extension, the enclosure of a terrace, permanent summerhouses, open air bars and sheds. Some even dug elaborate cellars to create more storage space. Allotment gardeners love storage more than anyone, as it directly enlarges their cramped living space: every cubic centimetre counts. Carports were also popular: garages without walls, wooden posts set in concrete with a roof on top. I thought carports were tacky and contemptible, especially in the middle of the forest, and fiercely rebuffed all of handsome Paul's attempts to persuade us to erect one. But in these woods we were constantly being fired on from above. The monocultural pine trees planted decades earlier – shelving for IKEA and others, made by East German political prisoners during the Cold War – are determined snipers and throwers of cluster bombs. All day long they do nothing but fling their hard little cones around in a desperate desire to propagate. They do it almost casually, they don't need wind, and as soon as you notice it, it starts to feel obsessive. They keep flinging down their cones, not particularly loudly, but relentlessly. It's the hardness of the packaging that's the problem. Other trees have found better solutions: inconspicuous, floating seeds with nothing to encase them. But these poor, ridiculous pines, once so beloved because they grow fast and produce cheap, pale wood, these trees that no one likes any more because they've been gnawed half to death by bark beetles and burn like tinder in our new, parched summers – all they have are these hard little bullets with which to make generational progress. They hit you on the head, dent the car, and you have to pick them all off the lawn before you mow it or they'll wreck the lawnmower.

Not for nothing are *garden* and *forest* antagonists. But as soon as humans take over anywhere, they want to lord it over everything else. They can't rise higher than the pine trees, but at least they can provide the car with a berth. And so the carport is raised over the car.

The vast majority of our neighbours' plentiful and creative additions and extensions were not permitted (conservation area, remember), but the dacha dwellers had enlarged nonetheless, had added and extended nonetheless; their defiance was blatantly apparent in word and deed. It was this *nonetheless* that enabled us to sign the notarised agreement with the escape clause, that enabled us to move into and convert the house. It was this *nonetheless* that would ultimately save us all, in a rare instance of solidarity between us and the dacha owners. But more of that later.

In the back rows, deeper in the forest, the dachas became increasingly flimsy; the last row could only be described as wretched. The houses looked as if they were made of cardboard, with cardboard roofs and cardboard walls; the word *mock-up* immediately came to mind. At best, these objects would protect you from the rain, and the pine trees round about protected them from storms, but it was almost unimaginable to me that, in inclement weather, whole families sat, ate, played and slept in these cardboard boxes, that some of them even made love. When I tried very hard to imagine it and still couldn't, I felt bad, because this was a nice thing for those who couldn't afford more. Who would want to badmouth their little patch of countryside; who would want to picture the prefab concrete apartment block that was probably their main residence? You weren't allowed to register this as your primary address. This was a *weekend settlement* – again, per *classification*: rubbish collection April to October only. House: it was

only many years later that I would come to understand the depressive effect of this restriction on property value, when I really did decide to sell you. When I betrayed you.

We were the bottom rungs of our respective ladders, the back-row dacha dwellers and us. They in the very smallest dachas, in the dark forest with all the midges; us in the oddest house in the eastern sticks, the only thing we could afford, but *so lovely and quiet here*, as the foreign parcel couriers who couldn't even get themselves a cardboard box in the forest would say, many years later.

And yet, nonetheless, the person with the house looks down on the person with the hut. Conversely, the DIY handyman whose dacha has been renovated with all mod cons, external silicone coating, brick-effect chimney, glazed pantiles, who has expertise, sealant or grinder on hand for every eventuality – *corner grinder not to be confused with belt grinder, if you please* – is only too happy to laugh at these bookworms who think they can simply lay a wooden floor. There'll be plenty of time for him to relish watching them fail, those cack-handed city intellectuals.

They saw us as rich and supercilious; we saw them as gloating and mean. And yet the reverse was also true. They were rich in practical knowledge, though stingy about passing it on; we laughed at their garden gnomes and ceramic ducks. Essentially, there's no real distinction between a garden gnome and the white stone nymph we dragged in to stand amid our pines. She was just considerably heavier and more expensive. Whichever way you look at it, *homo homini lupus*: man is a wolf to man – especially, perhaps, in the forest. And if we hadn't been there, they would have fought amongst themselves even more than they already did. Because someone is always the last to come

along. Someone who doesn't really belong. Who has particular ideas and desires of which they must at once be disabused. So they definitely don't think they're *summat better*.

In the fluid situation post-reunification, one extended family had managed to secure several dachas for themselves. This family consisted of several siblings and their children, now also with children of their own, all confusingly related to one another – uncles, aunts, great-nieces and -nephews. They constituted a veritable dynastic power in the association of dacha owners, of whom there were more than thirty. But even between these relatives, the local yokels, so to speak, of Western Pomerania, there was no love lost. On one occasion, one of them poured his heart out to me, saying how aggressive his uncle was, which I could only confirm. What astonished me, though, was that he poured it out to *me*, the ultimate outsider. The southerner, the one with the house that towered over the dachas. The one who always had to be told all the things she wasn't allowed to do here, and who definitely shouldn't get the idea that anything had ever been done the way she thought it should. The one who learned far too late to clap back with proportionate rudeness once all else had failed and it was no longer possible to maintain a constructive dignity. At least I managed never to say *arsehole*, though I did think it many a time.

This young man pouring out his outraged, humiliated, nephew's heart to me was – and it took me an embarrassingly long time to realise this as well – the opposite of a triumph: it was the easiest option. Only with me and me alone was the nephew's anger as safe as nuclear waste in a glass mould. He didn't need to worry that he had unintentionally gifted me a glorious anecdote, because none of the yokels would have understood what was funny about it. When I wanted to have a bit of a

moan as well – *quid pro quo* – he instantly and vehemently dismissed my conflict with his uncle, because his, the one he had come crying to me about, was of course far more serious and fundamental.

– But you 'ad a run-in with 'im Friday – no wonder, he'm on a short fuse then!

– What, why? What's the day of the week got to do with it?

– Well, 'e gets 'is morphine patch Saturday.

It took a moment to register. Morphine patch – aha. So the day before, the old one was more or less ineffective. My city friends loved this story. 'Is the morphine patch guy still alive?' they would ask.

And for years I nodded and tried to keep a straight face. The uncle probably just had a bad back.

Incidentally, the additions and extensions to the cardboard dachas in the shabbier back rows were more compatible with the *classification*. If someone simply parked a trailer by his cabin, it was still within the scope of what was allowed, even if he somehow established a mysterious structural connection between the two. Sometimes I pictured tunnels big enough to crawl through, similar to the ones dug under the Wall between East and West Berlin, but they would be at bed level so you could crawl straight into bed from the corner couch. All the building authority saw was the trailer, which could be wheeled away again. Though that would never happen; though, on the contrary, it had practically taken root.

The back rows of the dacha settlement were probably closest to something we see in films and read about in the papers during the financial crisis: the trailer parks of the American dispossessed, the last resort for those who were wiped out when the banks called in their loans. And for a while the very back row of that bungalow settlement

in Vogelsang may have been where the largest collection in Europe of a certain kind of typically East German trailer was to be found. Several of the dacha dwellers owned two, using one as a spare-parts depot for the other. But these favela-like structures remained virtually invisible. The cardboard boxes with trailers docked onto them on all sides were hidden deep in the forest and screened off with tarpaulins; they formed the outer edge of this settlement and, as with our house, you first had to know they existed in order to find them.

‘When you’re sure you’re completely wrong, you’re right’ was what we would say in the early days when explaining to friends how to find our house. Now I no longer get the joke, or rather, I no longer understand what it means to *be right*. I did try: I just wanted to be there, in my little house, not bothering anyone. I don’t even look like a foreigner; at most, my speech is a little strange to local ears. But there came a day when somehow I just couldn’t do it any more. Ideally I would have taken my house with me, somewhere else. But unfortunately I am not a snail.

[END OF SAMPLE]