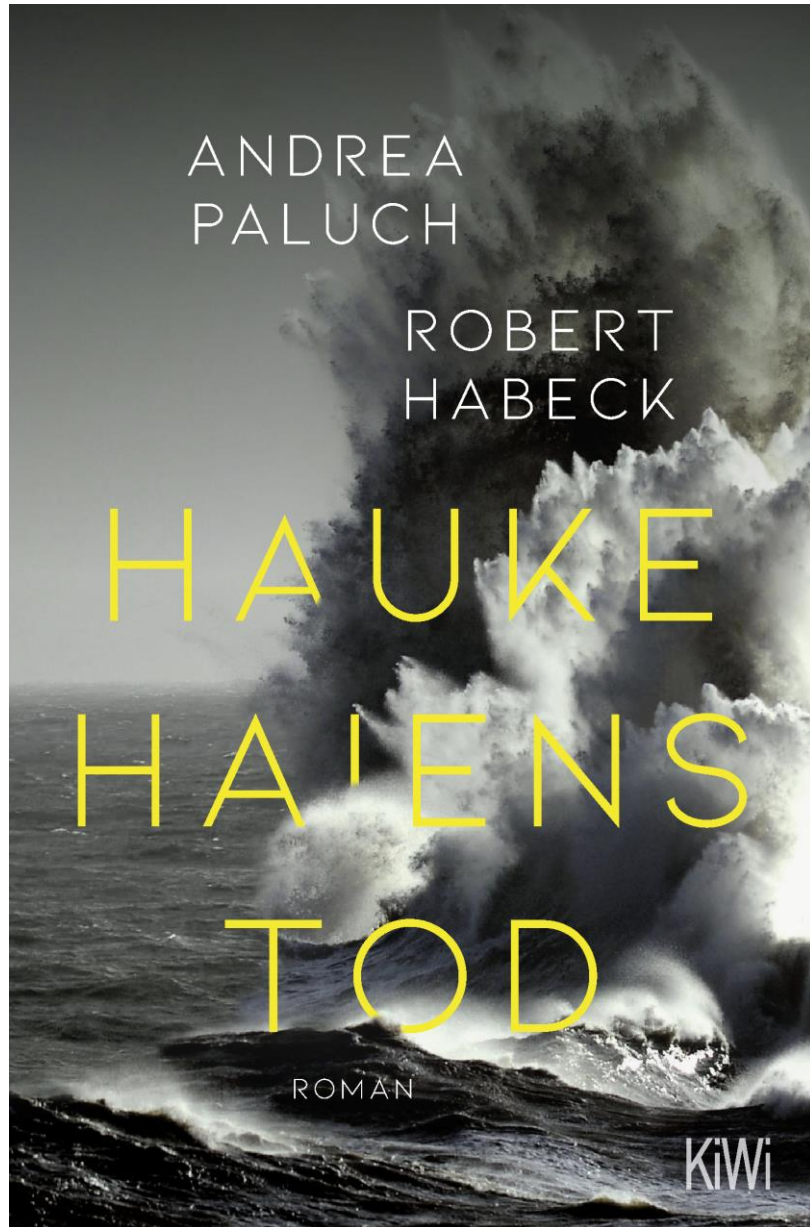


THE DEATH OF HAUKE HAIEN

by Robert Habeck & Andrea Paluch

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

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1

The hamster had been sitting next to the wheel for three days. It squatted in the sawdust and did not even blink when she took it out of the cage. Its body nestled warmly in her hand. She felt its heartbeat through the thin fur. The wet nose nudged against her lips as she kissed it. Then she closed her fingers around its neck and squeezed. The whiskers began to tremble. She held the body tightly so it couldn't wriggle. Its neck snapped with the clack of a stiletto heel on tiles.

The first cut opened the abdominal wall. Warm blood poured over her hand into the sink. She removed the innards with her index finger. Then she tied the small, clawed feet of the hind legs together and hung the dead hamster on the towel rail. With a razor she separated the fur from the muscle of the thighs and pulled it over the ears with short jerky movements. She scraped off the few spots of fat, stretched the skin with drawing pins and hung it in the open window. She put the bloody foetus together with the innards into a plastic bag and threw it into the rubbish.

2

When Iven Johns came home at dawn, Iris was already in bed reading. Iven had given her a flat key three weeks ago. Before that, she had had to wait in the stairwell until Iven had finished work.

The reading lamp was next to Iris on the mattress. Iven peeled himself out of the too-tight dinner jacket and massaged his calf where the elastic of his socks had left an imprint on his skin. Iris slid the open book under the bed.

As they made love, Iven burned the skin above his buttocks on the hot light bulb. The lamp crashed to the floor. He cursed and rolled to the side. Iris patted his behind.

'It smells like roast dinner.' She turned to the wall and fell asleep.

When Iven woke up, the reading lamp was still on. A bloody burn blister grew under his skin.

He heard the shower gushing in the cubicle next to the kitchenette. Then the sound of water died away, the door opened and Iris, who was still dripping, walked over to the chair where her clothes were. A rush of steam spilled into the small room with her, making the air heavy and stuffy. Iven sucked the steam in deeply through his nose and exhaled the taste of clean skin.

Iris always washed herself with hard soap. Every year Iven gave her an expensive perfumed shower gel for her birthday. She never told him that she didn't like the perfume concentrates. So for eleven years, he had regularly bought her different varieties and yet he was glad that she did not use them.

He watched as Iris got dressed. Either she deliberately paid no attention to him or she assumed he was still asleep. She never looked over at him. So often had he watched her slip her stockings over her knees and blow her hair away from her forehead as she straightened, as she took the top and slipped it fluidly over her outstretched arms, every movement she made familiar to him.

Iven waited in vain, however, for the click of the door falling into the lock. Instead, he heard her footsteps coming closer again. Quickly he closed his eyes. Iris was addressing him.

'Iven. There's someone here to see you.'

Iven didn't open his eyes, wondering what she could possibly mean. Finally, the door did fall shut, louder than usual. Iven heard someone breathing. He opened his eyes. Iris was gone. A stranger was standing in front of the bed. She was about twenty, gaunt, had straw-blond hair tied back in a bun, and wore an old leather coat with fur trim, although these May days were unusually warm. Even her shoes were fur-trimmed. She did not move and stared steadfastly at Iven while he eyed her from his bed. Seagull eyes fixed on him. As long as Iven lay still, her eyelids

did not close once. Only when Iven's burn blister began to itch and he sat up did she blink.

'Good morning, Father.'

3

A herring gull settled in front of Iven on a rotten wooden post to which three new electric wires with staples were nailed at twenty-centimetre intervals.

Iven fiddled with his flies. In the lee of the dyke it was so quiet that he could hear the fence humming. The seagull stared at him with its black eyes. Its gaze followed him as he walked the strip of sand beside the flagstone path past the Passat. A narrow flight of exposed aggregate concrete steps led up to the top of the dyke.

The sea swam in the oily morning light. The water was rising and yellow-grey waves were already licking at the foreshore. The sea had already washed over the breakwaters.

At the water's edge, scattered beach carnations braved the hem of the tide. It was said to be bad luck if the sea wormwood blossomed too early. The shadow of the dyke reached to the last rows of piles and patches of brushwood that were not flooded. The air was clammy and the North Sea as still as melted lead.

The seagull that had watched him pee now stood motionless above him. Iven bent down and threw a stone at it, missing by a long way. He was out of practice.

The burn blister was oozing. Iven faltered only briefly when the stranger called him father. The distance between this greeting and Iven's still sluggish morning brain was too great for him to overcome. Groaning, he pushed himself out of bed to throw the woman out.

With one hand he held the pillow in front of his loins and was thus able to grab her with just his left. Her upper arm was sinewy and muscular. Although she looked gaunt and fragile, she freed herself with a twist and jerk and took a step back.

'Why did you put me in the home?'

Stunned by the strength with which she had wriggled out of his grip, he could not avoid her question.

'What is your name?'

'Elisabeth Schmidt.'

Iven swallowed. He had thought of her often at first. Then he began to forget her. At first with a guilty conscience, then he forgot that too.

Now she was back.

He searched for the girl in her from before. In the dim light behind the drawn curtains, her face seemed sallow. She was strikingly fair-skinned, her nose narrow, a slanting shadow over a wide mouth whose compressed lips were almost white. From her father she had inherited the colourlessness, the ash-blonde hair and the ice-grey eyes; from her mother the shape of the face, the high forehead, the prominent cheekbones, the angular chin and the long fingers.

In the disparity between the robust toughness and the consumptive weakness, he recognised the child's sensitive, vulnerable and yet brittle and dismissive nature.

Iven calculated how long it had been since he had brought her to Hamburg. She had been four at the time when he drove her, sleeping, in the car against the curtain of rain. Too young to remember what they had left behind. There was no way she could remember him. Now she had to be nineteen. She had probably long since stopped living in the orphanage and had been put in a residential care facility.

'I am not your father. Get out!'

She didn't respond, just glared at him unblinkingly. He was talking to a madwoman.

As a child, she could do the same thing for hours on end. She would sit at old Trina Jans' window for whole days without getting bored. When she talked, she asked strange questions. She wanted to know if the sea had legs and why the tide was black.

She had talked to the old midwife in a language that no one understood. When Trina Jans had finally died, the child had come to Iven and wanted to know what death felt like.

Iven did not touch her again. He gathered his things from the floor and began to dress awkwardly. As he pulled up his overalls, his T-shirt slipped into the zip, which immediately snagged on the fabric. Iven tugged at the zipper. Suddenly the woman was standing close to him, holding the T-shirt so that he could twist the zip out of the fabric.

'Jesus, get lost, I said!'

She did let go of the t-shirt and backed away again, but she stayed. She followed Iven as he walked down the stairs to the car, and when he got in, she climbed into the passenger seat.

While Iven worked, she sat on the pedestal with the petrol pumps and watched him paint a car body. She got up just once. Iven saw her in the phone box punching in a number from a piece of paper.

When his shift at the cash register began, she sat down on a camping chair next to the freezer. The whole time she didn't say a word, didn't eat, didn't drink, didn't go to the toilet. Iven's colleague ribbed him. But Iven had already resigned himself to the woman's silent presence next to the freezer.

Suddenly she was gone. The cars backed up to the road and irritated businessmen manoeuvred between the petrol pumps. Iven was distracted for a few minutes. When he looked up again, the chair was empty. 'How much longer?'

He wheeled around. She was standing behind him, pointing with an outstretched arm at the clock hanging on the wall.

'Until nine.'

'How long is that?'

He realised that she couldn't even tell the time. He showed her the nine.

'The big hand has to go round three more times'

'Three times,' she repeated tonelessly and sat back down on the chair next to the freezer.

At nine sharp she got up and walked to the car. As a matter of course, she expected him to unlock the passenger door for her.

'You really are a pain in the arse.' Iven moved out into the still heavy traffic but could not concentrate on the road. He stopped on the hard shoulder in front of a sausage stand.

'Want some?'

She didn't respond.

'Fine.'

He bought a currywurst and a non-alcoholic beer. Then he sat back down in the car. She saw the sausage and ran her tongue over her chapped lips.

'Can Elisabeth eat it?'

'First you don't want anything, then you eat my supper.'

The woman rummaged in one of her furry coat pockets and thrust an unused hundred mark note into Iven's hand.

'What's this?'

'Money for the sausage.'

Iven slipped the note back into her pocket, got out and bought another sausage.

They sat in the car and the sausage skin cracked as they took a bite. The woman giggled. A trickle of frying fat ran down her chin. Iven had to grin.

Further out, a crab cutter could now be seen, its dredges on the spars looking like broken bird wings. A flock of seagulls swooped around the boat. But the wind drowned out the screeching.

Iven walked down from the dyke to the car park.

The herring gull stood motionless in the air above him, its screech a raucous laugh.

5

At the end of the village, he passed the sign for the seal breeding station. Iven drove back through Büsum to the main road. He took the route via Wesselburen and the Katinger Watt to get onto the B 5 after Tönning.

Now he was annoyed that he had driven all the way to the dyke to have a pee. All that diversion for a gloating seagull. He snorted through his nostrils, swallowed his bitter saliva and put his foot down on the accelerator.

Fields passed to the right and left. Rows of mud that would one day become cabbage fields, beans that had just been planted, rape that was not yet yellow. Away from the road, the bulky thatched roofs of the typical coastal farmhouses, the

Haubargs, rose up defiantly, their hay supply now depleted. The cattle were already out to pasture. A pair of white storks had built their nest on the turbine house of the Eider Barrage. The tunnel swallowed the sea wind coming from the side.

An illuminated concrete ceiling hung above him, below him the throttled tide gurgled through the dam chambers into the land.

Four years ago, Iris had asked him if she meant anything to him. It was the first time she had asked him such a thing, and it was clear to Iven that Iris was hoping for a sincere answer. It was Easter Sunday. The sun was nailed over the high-rise building across the street.

Iven hummed assent.

A pause arose. Iris waited for more. But he couldn't think of anything. He stood up and swatted a mosquito. Disappointed, she looked at the fingertip-sized bloodstain on the wall.

'I have sweet blood.' Iris scratched the side of her nose. While the mosquitoes feasted on her with relish, they disdained to stab Iven's flesh. They left him alone as the smell of petrol and heavy metal emanated from his pores. When Iven sweated and ran his tongue over his stubble, he tasted not of salt but of iron.

Later that Easter Sunday four years ago, after a silent breakfast, they had driven to the game reserve in Harburg. A deer came up to the wire mesh fence and Iris fed it acorns she had bought for six marks at the car park.

'You are the only person in my life.' Iven tried again and the deer's white tongue licked Iris's hand. She didn't turn around and emptied the bag in front of the stag's hooves.

'It's all right, Iven. I shouldn't have asked you. Let's head back.'

Iven was relieved. They had a routine that had stood the test of time. When he got home, Iris was already there. He let her in and they made love. In the

morning she got up before him and showered while he lay there until the door slammed shut.

It was a tender closing of the door, a click like the goodnight kiss they never gave each other, the invitation to doze some more.

As soon as he was alone, he got up, got dressed, drove to the petrol station and thought no more about Iris until he met her again in the evening. They rarely spent a day together. Only a few times had they had breakfast together.

That Sunday walk through the deer enclosure and Iris's sentimental question disrupted the usual understanding.

Driving along the sheep paddocks in the flat, boggy marshland, the fens separated only by overgrown sluices that could hardly be seen from the car, the thought occurred to him that Iris loved him.

The land resembled a deep green puddle streaked with morning shadows.

He thought of Ann Grethe.

6

Ann Grethe was already working as a maid for the Haiens when he had started on the farm. Carsten was just starting the second year of his apprenticeship. He was a lanky youngster with fuzz between his acne pimples. On the very first day, he let on to Iven that if you positioned yourself on the silo, you could watch Ann Grethe undress in the evenings. He caught Iven there that very same evening.

'It's better than always having to go to Husum to the whorehouse!' Carsten puffed himself up mightily.

'You have a big mouth,' Iven grumbled.

When Carsten didn't stop grinning, Iven shoved him. Carsten tumbled down the silo ladder. When Iven went to check on him, the light went on and Ann Grethe

appeared in the window. She propped both hands on the window sill and gazed into the night for a while. Iven did not dare to move, even though he knew she could not see him. Then she began to undress. Four metres as the crow flies and a single glazed pane lay between Iven and the naked breasts that would not leave his mind all summer. Carsten was right. Only the worn-out Hamburg whores came to Husum.

The image of Ann Grethe's breasts slowly disappearing behind a honey-coloured curtain had burned itself into Iven's brain. Sometimes he pictured Ann Grethe when he slept with Iris. He had tried to shake off the image of her green cat eyes and blonde hair. However, he did not succeed and eventually he stopped resisting it. At times he even wantonly conjured up the image of Ann Grethe. This gave momentum to sex with Iris. After such nights, Iris sometimes slept on his arm.

Ann Grethe was different from Iris. Especially with Carsten, she talked about love like a servant.

'If Haien doesn't give you credit for the apprenticeship year, I'll stand by you.'

Fortunately, Hauke Haien dealt with his apprentice skilfully and Carsten did not get a chance to find out whether Ann Grethe was making a joke or a promise. Haien forced the stropky boy to quit himself by getting him a job with Ole Peters.

For Iven, dealing with Ann Grethe was easier now that Carsten was no longer on the farm with his malicious remarks. Carsten always had an easy line ready and Iven thought he was daring enough to put his boasts into practice. After he was gone, Iven could reciprocate Ann Grethe's jokes and teasing in his own way. For although she could not banter with Iven as she did with Carsten, she provoked him too.

He fell in love with her. And he imagined that he did with her body what she mockingly promised him during the day.

Without running the risk of Carsten catching him, Iven now climbed onto the silo's platform every evening. Ann Grethe knew that he was watching her every evening and meanwhile left the curtains open. Iven was quite sure she was expecting him.

One March night, without knocking, he went into her room. In front of her bed, his own decisiveness surprised him and he did not know how to proceed. For quite a while he remained standing in the darkness, listening for the soft intake of breath from the sleeping woman. If only it could stay like that for ever. Iven paused in the soundlessness whose metre was the silent in and out of breath. He absorbed the image of the resting body that he could only guess at from where he was

The moon hung in the small patch of sky that lay between Ann Grethe's window and where Iven stood, dissipating in milky streaks of cloud. Iven's eyes slowly became accustomed to the diffuse light and made out the shadow of a head on the pillow, the folds of the blanket over the body. He imagined undressing Ann Grethe. Finally he bent down and kissed her on the mouth. Her hair smelled of silage. When she turned her head away, he held it with both hands. Her temples throbbed under his fingers. Ann Grethe woke up. Iven realised she was trying to scream but couldn't get any air because his mouth was on hers. He didn't want to hurt her, but he didn't want her to screech the whole house down either. So he continued to hold her and kiss her. She kicked him and finally bit his lip. Her bite was hard and his lip burst like a cherry. Iven spat blood and let her go. Ann Grethe had no breath to scream. Her mouth was open and gasping for air. He left.

In the pub '*Zum dicken Fritz*' he met Carsten and got drunk with him. His lip was swollen. The beer ran past his mouth onto his shirt.

'Even Iven wants to risk a fat lip once in a while.' Carsten called him fish mouth all evening. Iven remained silent and drank his beer with the other side of his mouth.

When he threw up, Carsten had to support him and on the way home Iven ran into an electric fence twice. They took the shortcut through the marsh to get to the dyke. Ole Peters, who owned the land, grazed sheep on the crest of the dyke. He had electrified the fence and did not switch off the electricity even when the paddocks were empty.

The electric shocks did not make Iven sober up. On the contrary. The tension took a run-up through his body and threw his brain dully against the wall of his skull. Iven rebounded and plunged into a black hole. When he came back to his senses in a daze, he saw a white horse on Jevershallig. The horse had turned its head towards him and was staring at him. Its mouth was wide open like Ann Grethe's mouth after the kiss. Iven pointed shakily at the nag. Carsten burst out laughing. He suggested rowing over to ride the decrepit old horse. Iven let him talk. Back home he found himself in front of a locked door because he had lost his key somewhere on the dyke. He slept in the stable. It was cold as hell.

One day later, the whole village knew that Iven had seen a white horse on the Hallig while drunk. From that night on, Ann Grethe drew her curtains every night.

7

At the nightclub, Iris was already behind the bar. She was wearing a blouse with a plunging neckline. There was not much going on. The show would not start until it had become more crowded. Soft pop music whined in the background. Only the white flakes of light from the silver disco ball flitted across the dance floor. Iven pushed the strange woman onto a stool at the bar and ordered her to stay put.

He avoided all eye contact with Iris, who was looking over at him and the woman the whole time. She was cashing up and before she could speak to Iven, he had already disappeared backstage.

In the dressing room, two strippers were loitering and smoking. Iven unlocked his locker to exchange his green mechanic's overalls for a shabby dinner jacket.

The trousers pinched. They had been a tight fit for a long time, but they had never been as tight as they were today. Grimly, he looked for a belt so he could leave the top button undone. Finding none, he picked up one of Iris's suspender belts, which had the advantage of being stretchy. Just as he was threading it through the belt loops, the Slovak appeared from behind the locker door. Iven was startled.

'Can't you knock?'

The Slovak grinned broadly. He owned the club. He pointed at Iven's belt.

'I didn't know you were into the fetish scene.'

Iven growled something unintelligible. The strippers giggled. When the Slovak was in a good mood, Iven couldn't stand him.

He knew his boss from the old days when the Slovak had owned a small car repair shop in the neighbouring village. Iven took Haien's Jeep to him for a service and there was always something to tinker with on Elke Haien's Mustang. He also used the garage to resell his own cars, although that got him into trouble in the village. Once there had even been a fight over it. Shortly after Iven had seen the white horse and his nerves were on edge, Carsten had called him a wog-lover. Iven had been drinking again. He went for Carsten with an axe and three men had to hold him down. In the following elections, the Far Right got twenty-three percent in the village. The Slovak went to Hamburg. He offered Iven the chance to take over his workshop, but Iven didn't want to. He stayed on the farm because he still had hopes for Ann Grethe. The Slovak did not find a buyer. After the brawl, nobody

wanted any more cars from Iven. An old VW Beetle was rusting away in the workshop garage.

When Iven turned up at the Slovak's house after the North Sea flood with no money and no job, he had already set up the nightclub. It was an old plan that Iven had put him up to because he had always complained about the brothel prices. The Slovak made him a bouncer.

'Who's the bird?'

'She's with me.'

'I got that. Who is she?'

'Nobody.'

'Nobody?'

'She's not for you. Not for customers.'

'Does she think that too?'

'What do you mean?'

'If you want her for yourself, I'd hurry up if I were you. Because she's already pulled her first client.'

Iven hurried back into the bar. A man in a blue double-breasted suit had taken up residence next to the girl and Iris was serving them piña colada. Iven pushed him aside and pulled the woman off the stool.

'Keep your hands off her.'

She turned to him.

'Why are you all dressed in black?'

Iven had to think for a moment to relate her question to his dinner jacket.

'Why do you wear those funny furs?'

'They're Elisabeth's animals.'

Shaking his head, Iven took up his post at the door of the club. The woman followed him. She stood beside him and looked down the Reeperbahn.

'It's nice and colourful here.'

Iven let a few customers in. A little further on, a whore with a plush boa around her bare shoulders leaned against a battered cigarette machine. The woman walked closer, tilted her head and addressed her.

'Nice fur.'

The whore did not respond.

'Green.'

Without opening her mouth, the prostitute growled.

'Get lost. I don't do bi.'

'What are you doing?'

The whore frowned.

'I'm waiting for a man.'

'So is Elisabeth.'

'But not here. This is where I have my business.'

'What business?'

The whore appraised the eccentric woman in front of her. She was pale, thin and spindly. No curves, skimpy clothes, no competition.

'Are you having me on? I am selling love.'

A man wearing a dinner jacket like Iven grabbed the green boa from behind and pulled the whore away. The woman naively trotted back to Iven and sat down next to the club door. There she fell asleep.

Iven requested Georg as a stand-in through the intercom. The Slovak came himself to find out who the girl was. Iven refused to answer him again and carried the sleeping girl to his flat directly above the nightclub. She was even lighter than he had expected. Suddenly he was carrying not a woman but a child. As he laid her on his bed, she began to talk in her sleep.

'Fourteen, two and three times seven,

Where has my child gone?

Four, five, eight, three, nine and ten -

Oh, I can't see it any more.'

Iven took off her musty coat and shoes. He hesitated a moment, then felt the leather. In the inside pocket he found a wallet. He flipped it open. Behind a transparent window was a disabled person's identity card. Her name was Elisabeth Schmidt and she lived in an assisted living facility.

The lean, shivering body lay before him. Her bare arms poked out of a sleeveless T-shirt. They seemed extraordinarily long to Iven. Her nails were stained with ink. He pulled the duvet from under her and covered her with it.

Then he joined Iris at the bar.

'I can't tonight.'

'Because of the girl?'

'Yes.'

'Who is she?'

'I'll tell you later.'

8

The Slovak's nightclub was not much different from the one Iven had sometimes visited in Husum. The same red table lights, the dim ambience, a dance floor, the same plush cushions that smelled of dust. A stage with a pole where the girls danced when they undressed, rooms upstairs. Only the whores were younger than in Husum and yet no more expensive. One of the rooms on the second floor had been Iven's home for fifteen years. It had a kitchenette, next to it a shower cubicle and a small hallway piled high with old shock absorbers, discarded mufflers and sets of cylinders.

The room was good enough for Iven. He had got used to getting up late and coming home at dawn. He lived with Iris, with the smell of petrol on his skin

and with the brown, worn carpet that had been in the flat when he moved in. He hadn't chosen the carpet and he hadn't chosen Iris. On Iven's thirty-fourth birthday, she had just been there, sitting on the stairs outside his door, reading. He had been given a little time off work and had gone to the '*Musche!*', a pub at the harbour.

Since that night, Iris had kept coming back and waited for him outside the door. Even then he had the bitter coffee taste in his mouth that was the taste of his saliva after a night shift outside the club. The numb morning taste was the one thing he never got used to.

The bitter coffee taste set in punctually on the B5 behind the barrage, even though Iven's daily routine was disrupted.

Three weeks ago, Iris had caught a bad cold because the hallway was terribly draughty. The next day Iven had a key made for her.

'I always need a kick up the arse.'

On the night of the North Sea flood, Elke Haien had pressed her child into his arms.

'Take good care of her.'

The storm had blown down the electricity pylons early in the evening, and the tail lights of the Mustang Elke was driving to the dyke in resembled two glowing albino eyes in the otherwise lightless night. Immediately after Elke left the farm, Ann Grethe made her way to safety.

The village was evacuated. Haien had already sent Stina Jansen and her son to the village in the afternoon.

Ole Peters came back from the dyke and organised the evacuation.

Iven stayed on the farm with the girl. She whined for her parents until she fell asleep. After a while she became too heavy for him. He carried the little girl into the annex and put her in his bed, because the wind whistled icily through the cracks

of the makeshift hut in front of her room window. Then he went into Trina Jans' unoccupied room to look at the dyke. Iven peered through a narrow gap between the shutters that rattled in the storm. He stared towards the sea, but that night everything was black. At some point the rain subsided and the wind died down.

Iven did not see the water coming. By the time he heard it crack beneath him, the sea had risen to the shed. The old dyke had not withstood the storm surge. The surrounding countryside was flooded. The Haiens' farm lay on a hillock and was not at risk even at a water level of five metres above sea level. Now, though, the tide was over six metres. Iven heard the pigs squealing in fear in their pen. Outside the window, the North Sea raged gloomily, now already crashing against the doorstep of the house. When the rabbit hutch that was full of water slammed into the wall of the house, he decided to surrender the farm.

He went into the barn and turned the cows loose. They banged against the stalls and ran against the walls in panic. They almost trampled him down when he opened the barn door. Up to his hips in water, he could hardly avoid them. He unchained the farm dog Perle and pushed open the poultry cages. The ducks quacked away, but he had clipped the wings of the fledgling hens only last week and they couldn't flutter onto the ceiling beams. The hens gathered the chicks under their wings and drowned. The cows crowded against the wall of the house, up to their bellies in water. A calf was swept away by the flood and drifted off, roaring.

He swam to the shed, which was already flooded. The water was freezing cold and cut into Iven's flesh. The current had trapped the rabbit cage between the stilts of the silo. The drowned animals floated on top and were pressed against the wire mesh. There was nothing more he could do for the pigs.

The flood had pushed in one wall of the shed. Iven shimmied up the loose boards and tore the wall away completely. The old trough shot past Iven into the open with a gush of spray. He swam into the shed and manoeuvred Elke's kayak

out into the open. The boat was wedged between the inlet wires of the discarded eaves. A red rubber ball and several empty jam jars bobbed under the roof, while all the tools, the tractors, harrows and ploughs were under water.

He dragged the boat to the house.

Shivering with cold, he changed his clothes.

Iven needed money. He found two hundred marks in Hauke's desk and took it. Then he tried to open the safe, which was in a corner of the living room behind a painting. The painting showed a young woman lying on her bed, haunted by a nightmare that squatted on her chest as a small grinning goblin. In her sleep, she had opened her mouth to scream. Through a window, a white horse gaped yellow-eyed at the viewer. Iven took the picture down and put it face down on the living room table so that the stupid horse wouldn't keep staring at him.

The safe had a number combination. He couldn't open it and tried unsuccessfully to break it open with an axe. Then he took a hunting shotgun out of the gun cabinet, loaded it, put the barrel next to the safe lock and fired. The shot bounced off the steel and a ricochet grazed him on the shoulder. When the smoke cleared, the lock sat as firmly in its socket as before. The lead bullets had left only small dents in the steel.

He got the child out of bed, wrapped her in a blanket and put her in the kayak.

After three hours he reached land. The girl had woken up when he put her in the boat, but remained silent the whole time and looked at him steadfastly. Iven said nothing either.

He threw the hunting rifle into the water before they landed.

A Danish television crew picked him and the child up. Iven learned that the Haiens were dead. The Danes took them to the neighbouring village. Iven went with the girl on his shoulders to the Slovak's former car yard, where his Beetle was

rotting away. He put the child in the back seat, short-circuited the ignition and set off for Hamburg. Behind Husum, the rain and storm set in again.

After work he climbed up to his flat and unlocked it. The woman was lying in his bed, screaming in terror. She was flailing wildly. Her struggling subsided under Iven's gentle counter-pressure. He lay down in front of the bed and covered himself with her fur coat, which smelled dully of blood. He could not sleep. When he got up again, he had decided to tell the woman who she was.

9

Iven raced parallel to the sea through the dawning day. He didn't take his foot off the accelerator in the towns either. Sulphurous rays of sunlight peeked through the passenger window. His side of the road was empty. Only in the opposite direction was the rush hour traffic slowly beginning. No one was driving north.

He sped over a road bump doing eighty. The Passat's axles groaned but did not break.

Iven shaved. He used shaving foam from a dispenser that always spewed out too much. To avoid wasting the soap, he always spread the mountain of foam all over his face. His skin had disappeared under the white mass, which crackled like snow dew. Iven had already scooped half of it away and scraped off the stubble underneath when he saw in the mirror that the woman was waking up. He went to her and sat down on the bed. Sleepily, her gaze slid past Iven, then returned and a memory flitted across her face. She rummaged in her leather trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of banknotes. She hesitated, then gave Iven ten marks.

'What's this?'

'Selling love.'

'What does that mean, 'selling love'?'

'When you wait for each other.'

Although he knew she was retarded, her naivety annoyed him.

'Selling love' is when you sleep together.'

'That's what we did. You down there, me up here.' She pointed to the floor.

'No. You have to sleep in the same bed. Naked. Together.' The woman looked at him uncomprehendingly. He only realised she wasn't surprised at his clarification when she stuck her outstretched finger into the shaving cream that was drying on his face. She sucked the tip of her finger. He had to stop this nonsense.

'Listen, I'm going to tell you who your father was, and then I'm going to take you back to where you came from.'

She misunderstood him.

'Where's that?'

'I mean to the home.'

The woman was silent. Iven made it concise and to the point.

'I took you to a children's home fifteen years ago. The North Sea coast had just been hit by a heavy storm tide. A dyke had broken and everything was flooded. I saved you. Your father's name was Hauke Haien and he was the mayor. Your mother's name was Elke. They both drowned in that storm. Your father was killed because he wanted to save the dyke. Your mother died because she went out to join him on the dyke. You were christened Wienke. Not Elisabeth or Schmidt or anything else. Wienke Haien. And now I'm going to finish shaving and then I'll take you back.'

'Take Wienke to where her parents drowned.'

They drove along the arterial road towards Bergedorf. Iven did not look at Wienke.

'I'll drive you to where you live.'

'That's where Elisabeth Schmidt lives.'

Iven said nothing in reply. He had looked at the route on the city map beforehand, but only found the home for the disabled after driving twice in circles through the new development area. He had expected it to be different, more conspicuous, with a fence or at least signs. It was a house like all the houses here. The whole neighbourhood had been built up on a marshy meadow in the last three years. A cat-sized rat ran across the street and jumped into a ditch. Eventually he drove through a one-way street in the wrong direction to cut things short. The home was housed in a multi-storey, red-bricked house with mint-coloured door and window frames. Wienke got out of the car. He held out his hand to her, but she simply walked away and unlocked the front door.

When he got back to his flat, he still had half an hour before his shift at the petrol station started. Maybe he should call Iris to explain himself. But he had never called her before and didn't know her phone number. Instead, he looked for the book. Between an old car battery and a pile of yellowed newspapers from the days after the dyke broke, he found a crumpled photo. It was a group photo of the volunteer fire brigade on the occasion of the inauguration of the new fire truck. A bunch of young men from a cast-off life. Iven was standing behind Niß. Ole Peters was group leader, behind him stood Carsten, his arms folded in front of his chest. Iven still couldn't get it into his head that the boy had become a machinist.

He put the photo in his pocket.

During his break, he drove into town. He had no idea where there was a bookshop, so he went to a department store. In the newspaper department he asked for the book.

It was bound in blue cardboard and disproportionately expensive. On the back was a photo of the author. Johann Pappé looked cleverly into the distance.

‘Does this book sell well?’

The man behind the cash register knew his stuff.

‘Quite well, actually. People ask for it every now and then.’

‘It’s been fifteen years.’

The cashier looked at him in irritation. Then he smiled politely.

‘The North Sea flood,’ Iven helped him, ‘I wouldn’t have thought anyone was still interested in it.’

‘Disaster stories always sell.’

The cashier put the book in a plastic bag for him.

Iven didn’t drive back to the petrol station, but sat down in the ‘*Muschel*’. He had been here with Pappé. Armed with a large beer, he started to read.

Pappé had turned up at Iven’s about half a year after the North Sea flood. Before that, he had tracked down the Slovak. He had already spoken to all the other people from the village. A young man who was training to become a history and German teacher. Iven didn’t like him from the start.

Pappé wanted to write about the North Sea flood, background information, a portrait of the people and their fates. He had already made contact with a publisher who wanted to bring the entire story out in a big way. He persuaded Iven to give an interview. But Pappé already knew everything he told him. He asked him only a few questions, to which Iven could think of nothing to say.

Johann Pappé paid.

That same evening, the Slovak took him aside.

'Did that Pappé guy come to see you?'

'You shouldn't have given him my number. How did he find you anyway?'

'I used to do business with Haien.'

'What kind of business?'

'You know what kind.'

'Did you repair his cars from Hamburg?'

'I got him some explosives. Guess that Pappé got wind of it.'

'Explosives for what?'

'To blow things up, probably. That moron tried to play dumb with me, wanted to know how long I'd been in Germany and if I had valid papers.'

'And?'

'And what?'

'Do you have valid papers?'

The Slovak made a sly face and pulled open a drawer.

'Plenty.'

Another six months later, Iven was sent a book. It came directly from the publisher. Even as Iven read the title, he knew that he would not come off well in the book. Pappé referred to the story about the white horse on Jevershallig. With that, he hit Iven's only really sensitive spot: Ann Grethe. Although Pappé knew nothing of his nightly visit to her, the old scar tore open again. He twisted the words around in Iven's mouth and turned them against Hauke Haien, so that Iven not only became part of the hatred, but even fuelled it. Yet he had thought of anything but Haien that night.

Iven went to the Slovak, who had also received a book. It was still shrink-wrapped on his desk.

'It wasn't like that.' Iven held the book up to him.

The Slovak didn't care.

'His story is as good as any.'

'But you haven't even read it yet.'

'What for?'

The book was teeming with mistakes. Pappe couldn't even tell the points of the compass apart. Still, it worked out. Iven had pored over the events of that unlucky night for a long time. Now there was a version that brought order to the confusion. The book brought peace to Iven's memory. He finally accepted Pappe's version and suppressed his own images of that night.

Now Iven could no longer ignore the lies. Pappe had his book end with Haien's suicide, after his wife and child had drowned. But the child had not died out on the dyke, she was living in a care home in Hamburg. No one except Iven had known that Wienke had been rescued. But her parents had known she was alive and would never have killed themselves as long as they had to fear for their daughter's life.

The story that Iven had kept secret for so long was now on his mind. It was disturbingly easy to invent a reality.

[....]

16

At the entrance to the village there was a sign saying that three years ago this had been the most beautiful village in Schleswig-Holstein. After the destruction caused

by the breach of the dyke, it had been rebuilt as it had looked three hundred years ago. At least that's what the sign claimed. In fact, Iven found the new place more beautiful than the old one. He struggled to recognise the village.

There was a multitude of typical Frisian thatched-roof houses that hid the fact that they were new buildings. The roofs of the cottages were pulled down low so that they almost obscured the new date of their house fronts. Only a handful of old buildings remained, among them the schoolhouse, its wall thick with hedgerow roses. The tarmac, which had just been freshly laid before the North Sea flood, had been taken up, exposing the old cobblestones. The houses on the main street had crocheted curtains and fittings on the brightly painted doors. There was a tourist centre, a pottery shop, two antique markets, the pub '*Zum dicken Fritz*', which now had a hand-carved sign, an ice-cream parlour and a kiosk on the dyke. Ivy climbed up the facades. The roses had learned to duck their buds away from the wind. They bent against the plaster. The large hotel complex in front of the town housed a Greek restaurant called '*Bacchus*', germanised to '*Backhus*' by the locals.

The town hall, Haien's town hall, had been demolished. The unadorned church, built of boulders, had been given a fountain, following Husum's example. The squat bell tower was depicted on the sign at the entrance to the village. The façade had only recently been cleaned with a sandblaster. The front yard was bordered by a row of whitewashed stone.

Giving the village its old look was an idea that had existed before the North Sea flood. But the mayor, Hauke Haien, had put all his money into building the dyke.

The hotel complex on the new road to the dyke shone white. A few tourists had been there over Easter, but they had long since left and the summer season had not yet started.

Iven bumped his car along the cobblestones of the village street. It was half past seven. He parked opposite the old schoolhouse where Pappe now lived, pulled the handbrake, locked the steering wheel and got out. In the former schoolyard behind the half-high wall was an apple tree from which the sparrows were screeching loudly. They were not disturbed when Iven got back into the car and slammed the door.

In the schoolhouse, the curtains were still drawn and a newspaper was stuck in a gap in the wall of the thatched and rose-covered archway next to the letterbox.

Iven rolled down the window, tasted the salt in the air, pushed the seat back and turned down the backrest. He closed his eyes. His pupils itched under his lids. The awareness of other people's daily rhythms returned only sluggishly.

He had given up his resolution to wake Pappe the moment he crossed the road to the old school building. The air from the sea had drawn a film of haze in front of the sun. But one could already sense the coming heat of the day. The road lay peacefully in the refracted light. A pretty village awoke from its nocturnal slumber. The shutters still hung wearily in front of the windows. Geese cackled, pigs grunted in a sty.

The sense of responsibility that had built up more and more in him in Hamburg, until finally he could not put it off any longer, melted away in the few metres from one dropped kerb to the one opposite.

He was back in the place to which he had never wanted to return, and it seemed as wrong and crazy as the woman he had taken this journey for. A nutcase who skinned her pets. A stubborn woman who talked to dead creatures and had now decided to look for her dead parents.

Iven's eyes snapped open. He got out of the car again and walked through the gate into the former schoolyard. He had played football here as a boy.

[...]

28

Around half past two, the phone rang. Johann Pappe was one of the first to know. It had become a habit in the village to inform him of everything that did not fit the tramlines of everyday life. This call came from the local editor of the *'Husumer Tageblatt'*. A whale was lying on the beach in front of the old dyke.

Due to the changed conditions after the dyke was built, the sand was washed away every year, but the emerging tourism trade had ensured that it was regularly replenished.

When Pappe arrived, the whale was still alive. A pack of dogs yelped around the giant of the sea and two men tried to keep the animals away with clubs.

It was a sperm whale, lying in the sand like an oversized overturned ice-cream cone. The hulking, blunt skull rounded into a torpedo-shaped belly bulge just behind the eyes. Pappe estimated it at fourteen metres. The square head was the size of a man. Its lower jaw was wedged into the sand.

Fishermen had discovered it in the morning and informed the police. At around eleven o'clock, a zoologist arrived from the seal breeding station. He immediately realised that this whale could not be saved. It had been brought close to the dyke by the rising water and was now, at low tide, lying almost two kilometres from the sea in the blazing midday sun. There was no way to drag this colossus over such a distance back to the sea without its skin being completely torn open by its own body weight. It would probably not survive the remaining five hours until the next high tide on a day like this.

Pappe waited for an interview with the reporter from the '*Tageblatt*', then he approached the zoologist.

The seal researcher took himself seriously. He was the only one at the scene with expertise until the group from the Marine Biological Institute in Kiel arrived.

'A female,' said the zoologist. 'And that's peculiar. The bull whales sometimes deliberately seek death on land, let themselves be propelled along and, when you drag them out again, they immediately turn around and swim back to shore. They do not want to be rescued. Sometimes their group follows them to their death. But this is rare and a freak of nature. The group follows its leader, even if he is already done with them. This female, however, is alone. It is a young animal, but sexually mature.'

'Perhaps it is sick?'

'That's the only explanation. Something wrong with its sense of direction.'

'Is there nothing that can be done to save it?'

'Nothing. It is stewing in its own blubber.'

'What happens to the carcass?'

The zoologist shrugged.

'It used to be ground up into animal meal. Until last year they fed it to pigs. But now it goes to the incinerator. Too many pollutants. The whales are contaminated with flame retardants. Their organs are more polluted than sewage sludge. The whale's stomach has to be flensed or it will explode like a bomb. The stomach develops putrefactive gases in this heat. If it bursts, you'll need to build new dyke.'

Pappe sat down on the dyke a few metres away, as the marine biologists arrived in their car. The whale glared at him from little beady eyes.

'It's drowning on land,' thought Pappe. He pulled a small notebook out of his jacket and flipped through until he found a blank page. Then he wrote a poem

about the whale. The animal experienced death as a redemption to perfect beauty. A thought he had come up with a long time ago. There are only sparse possibilities to give meaning to life. Once you have seized one of them, the hardest part is yet to come: you have to preserve the purity of your deed. Against this, however, stands a powerful enemy. The transience of time itself. Only cunning can help against such an enemy. One must acquire the weapons of the enemy. To surrender one's life in order to become a legend, to assert permanence in transience. He had tried to talk to Jantje about it, back when he first met him. After all, he was a priest and dealt with spiritual questions. But Jantje did not understand what Pappe meant at all. The only person who might have understood was dead. Pappe still regretted not having known Hauke Haien personally. He had been a man who knew the loneliness that comes from being beholden only to oneself. Haien was like Ahab. Pappe could do him no better honour than to make his death a legend. That he did Jantje a favour and strengthened his own position in the village was initially a coincidence. Pappe did not know at the time that he would remain in the village.

His poem about the whale developed along the same lines as his book about the flood. From the abandonment of the giant of the sea grew the decision to sacrifice himself.

The air became poison. Its lungs gave up in the enormity of a white pain. No rescue could harm it. The heaviness of its own body suffocating it like Jesus on the cross became a delicious floating. The brain of the whale melted into a gelatinous happiness.

Pappe dated the poem and put the notebook away again. And as always when Pappe had written something, he experienced a surge of emotion that left him feeling somehow weightless.

The whale cow had died while Pappe had been scribbling in his notebook. The moment of death had slipped past him. He only realised it when the marine

biologists broke open the whale's body with a huge black knife. Immediately the seagulls were there and swooped down into the bloody bed.

People had come from the village. He saw Harke Niß, who was not fishing today but loading pallets of canned beer from his boat and selling it to the onlookers.

Pappe had seen enough and had written his poem.

The slaughter fest was not for him and he did not want to let the buoyant solitude in his head be spoiled by the onset of the fairground-like hustle and bustle. Twenty metres behind him, a figure squatted in a brooding pose. Curious, he approached the huddled human bundle. By the coat she wore despite the piercing sun, Pappe recognised the woman Iven Johns had been looking for and who now lived in Niß's inn. He had asked Krista Niß to keep an eye on both of them. Johns, for all he knew, had always been loyal to Haien. When he had tracked down Iven Johns in Hamburg fifteen years ago, his reticence had been clear. At that time, Pappe had already uncovered all the secrets and his visit had only been for the purpose of finding out how much Johns knew. He could not completely rule out the possibility that Johns suspected something. But after talking to him, it was clear that Johns was not intelligent enough to be dangerous to him. He hadn't even tried to get money out of him for the interview. Pappe prided himself on his knowledge of human nature. This was a good opportunity to test the girl.

Wienke did not see Pappe coming and did not hear his footsteps on the thick carpet of grass. He approached her from behind.

'Are you on holiday here?'

Wienke turned around. She had collected two handfuls of mussel shells and placed them in a circle, which she had been left open at the top because she did not have enough mussels.

Immediately Pappé was sure he had never seen her before. This was a face he would have memorised, a face whose sick pallor cast back his gaze like a mirror. He couldn't make out what kind of person the white skin was hiding.

'The parents are out there.'

He followed her indeterminate gaze to the far-off water.

'Your parents are walking on the mudflats?'

'They're in the sea.'

Pappé reflexively grasped the strangeness emanating from this woman. She slipped from his grasp, his questions. But she was not wilfully eluding him, not because she was suspicious. It was something else. And that something else was threatening.

'Who are your parents?'

'Hauke and Elke Haien.'

He felt dizzy for a moment. Breathing deeply, he sat down so as not to lose his balance. If this was a trick by Iven Johns to double-cross him, he had to be alert. Pappé would not be taken off guard. He forced himself to calm down and think. What he knew of Wienke Haien was not much. She was Elke and Hauke Haien's feeble-minded child, who had drowned together with her parents in the flood.

Pappé now understood what had irritated him about this girl. She did not obey his logic. If she was only feigning her absent-mindedness to him, she was doing it very well.

'You mean you are the daughter of Mayor Haien, who died in the flood?'

'Wienke Haien.'

This woman wasn't just pretending to be crazy. He could sense when someone was trying to fool him. But if she was indeed insane, what made her think she was Wienke Haien? The only solution was that Johns was behind it. All Johns had to do was find a hyperactive blonde orphan aged nineteen and make her

believe that he knew her identity. She would believe him. But why had he done that?

'My name is Johann Pappe.' He held out his hand to her. The gesture went unrequited. But this was not down to her rudeness – rather awkwardness.

'They say you drowned in the storm.'

'Yes?'

She was giving him the run-around. Pappe decided to attack.

'I am a local historian. I wrote a book about the flood many years ago. Perhaps you know it?'

Now the woman looked at him again. This time attentively and curiously. So she knew his book.

'Wienke has seen the book.'

The answer puzzled Pappe again. She was vague, without him being able to say what was wrong with her. But he didn't have time to think about it. He had to find out what Iven Johns wanted.

'You can perhaps imagine that it is of great interest to a local historian like me to talk to the daughter of Hauke Haien. Would you perhaps like to visit me sometime? Tonight, if it's convenient for you?'

'You know all about Wienke's father?'

Pappe sensed his chance. Or was he just walking into the trap Johns had set for him? He decided to go for it.

'I know what people have told me about him. They've told me about you too. About you as a child.'

'Wienke's coming.'

'Fine. Shall we say around seven? The big red house on the Dorfstraße. Number eleven. The old schoolhouse. It's easy to find.'

Wienke nodded.

'Good.' Pappé stood up and offered her his hand again. He noted, astonished, that her handshake was strong. Her hand was sinewy and hard.

'Come alone.'

'Why?'

'I mean come without Iven Johns.'

'Why?'

'It's better to talk alone.'

[END OF SAMPLE]