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**A Different Time**

Novel

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## 1

### Summer 2019

Someone had moved into the house across the street. Or had they? It was the talk of the village. Enne had seen lights on in the house, so had Christina, but then she saw ghosts too. Some suspected a homeless person who had taken up shelter for winter early, after all, summer was coming to its end. Why shouldn't someone like that occupy a vacant house that no one wanted anyway, because of the old stories and because all that was keeping it from falling apart was the ivy. Hiding, however, was hardly going work in the long run, because here people depended on one another. Even the new ones had understood that fairly quickly. There was no shop, no doctor, no bank, only vastness and nothingness. That's exactly what the new people had been searching for, only then they had to deal with it. There was enough to do. The new ones liked to potter about their houses, which was good, because that's what the older ones did too, it was a way to exchange ideas and get to know one another. The newcomers also liked to paint or write books, you had to give them that, even though, according to Albrecht, that didn't benefit anyone. Enne too had a penchant for useless things She told stories, but she also grew vegetables. One balanced out the other and so they got by.

When the Wall came down, so many had left to see the world and earn good money in the West. Only Enne had stayed to close the gap that Suse had left behind. She had watched the life drain from the small fishermen's village, just as it did from her mother. Lore didn't

understand any of it. She thought that Enne was capable of disappearing just like that. Not Suse. Now Enne had stayed. Life was unpredictable. It even returned.

After all those lonely years there was light again behind the windows of the once so hastily abandoned houses. This tiny village in the middle of nowhere drew the ones who yearned. Christina was the first to arrive. The cousin from West Germany had always dreamt of living in the countryside. There were repercussions. After her came the hermits, artists and doers. They bought one derelict building after the other and renovated them. It was astonishing. Now a motley crew inhabited the land. Enne supplied them all with plum jam. They had enough, after all, and they had to keep the newcomers happy so that they wouldn't pack up and leave again.

At the time, Eddy had been sceptical of all the strangers coming to the village. As had Albrecht, of course, because what did they know, but everything turned out well. Together they rebuilt the culture centre. Eddy got the old tractor from the shed which he had saved from a scrap yard back in the early nineties. It could be used for all sorts of things, tearing down old barns or digging trenches for foundations. Eddy also laid bricks and cables, repaired old doors and windows. He was in his element. Only the accordion stayed in the attic, slowly rotting away. Enne had hoped that he would pick it up to finally tend to the broken keys so that they could play together, maybe at one of the village gatherings that they started up again. Singing the old songs that the newcomers surely wouldn't know, that's what Enne wanted.

Just as they had done then. In the past. Before.

She often thought words like these.

When the ferry started running again, they organised a party, which would have been a good occasion, but Eddy refused to play even a single note. Ruben, that crazy guy from Hamburg, had converted his old boat. He had come over from the North Sea to do something new. In his old life, he had been a computer programmer, now he was a ferryman. Word quickly got out that there was a ferry to Usedom now. One thing led to another. Soon someone parked a food truck at the harbour. Coca-Cola, chips, bratwurst. In the summer months, Enne set up the old trestle table underneath the plum tree. On weekends she sold coffee and home-made pastries, lemonade and juice for the children, all for a donation. Sometimes Christina would join her with her tinctures and balms, socks she had knitted and the wool, everything plant-died and handspun. She kept two sheep because the thing with the ghosts wasn't enough to make a living.

The summers now were lovely and sunny, they often sat together at the harbour once their work was done and watched the sunset until their eyelids became heavy. Bottles of wine were passed around, Enne told stories. Those were good days. That's when life was easy.

Later in the year, when the visitors stopped coming and the fogs arrived, when they began to brush the cobwebs from the chimneys and light the fireplaces, it became clear who was really suited to life in the back of beyond. Some moved to their second homes in Berlin. Others wintered on La Gomera. When the darkness crawled from the heavy soil and settled on the soul, only the brave remained.

But now it was August still, winter was far away and autumn was late, because this summer was tenacious. Usually, there would be dewdrops hanging on the cobwebs like clothes on a washing line by now, but it was far too dry, the land a steppe.

On those nights, Enne couldn't go to sleep. And so, she had once again preserved fruit instead of tossing from side to side in the bed. The fruit were already bursting. It was high time they were used. She had been in the kitchen until the morning came, her arms up to the elbows in plums and before that in the raspberries, the currants and the blueberries. She thought about what she had seen, on a different sleepless night a few days prior. She hadn't dreamt that. The figure had crept around Alma's house and then she had seen a light, like the beam of a flashlight, through the windows. She told Eddy about it the next day. He said that it was just an animal and reflected moonlight. He still thought that because they would have noticed if someone had actually moved in. Even a hermit would have to get groceries at some point.

In the morning, Enne had packed a basket. Three jars of freshly made plum jam. She had set it down in front of the door because no one opened, despite her knocking and calling. Now it was noon and the basket stood clearly visibly in front of the wildly sprawling privet hedge, right by the road. She went to fetch it. The basket was empty. She stood at the fence and waved at the opaque windows.

“Hello? I'm Enne! I live across the street! If you need anything, just let me know!”

No movement. The door remained closed, the old curtains hung behind the windows like rags and the same dead potted flowers stood on the windowsill, but someone had taken the jam. That someone must like plum jam but dislike neighbours. It felt wrong, only no one had forced her to make that welcoming gesture.

Christina rode up on her bicycle. She was wearing one of her colourful flowy dresses, it hung loosely around her skinny body. She squinted her eyes as the glaring sun blinded her. Behind the wrinkly skin, her youthful face was still visible. She her long hair flowed over her shoulders, it now was the colour of tinged silver. Enne thought that Suse would look this way

when she was old too. There had always been a certain similarity between the cousins, apart from the eyes. Suse's were the colour of amber. Christina's were light brown like Enne's.

Christina got off the bike and saw the basket in Enne's hand.

"Are you coming from the mystery man?"

"Who says it's a man? Could be a woman."

Christina closed her eyes briefly and then looked at her meaningfully. "I see a man."

She saw all sorts of things when she wasn't looking, even dead people, at least that's what she claimed. Now sweat dripped into her eyes from the heat, she wiped it with her arm.

"Where have you been?" Enne asked.

"Picking herbs. Plantain. It's good for coughs and colds. And then –"

Before Christina listed every weed she had collected, Enne interrupted her.

"Our special person over there, by the way, took my plum jam. He is there. Or she."

"I know that."

Christina got back up on her bike, supporting her weight on one foot. "Will you come by for tea later? I have cake."

"I'll see."

Enne went home. She felt hurt by the rejection. She thought that this wouldn't have happened in the olden days. Back then, people would have said thank you at least. Another *back then*. Well, she was almost sixty after all. She was allowed to have old thoughts.

Albrecht returned from his rounds, his dog trotting along after him. He stopped in front of the open kitchen window from which Enne was waving at him.

"Mornin'!" Albrecht patted the dog's grey muzzle. "Well?"

"Well nothing! Tea?"

"I have stuff to do. Have to get rid of a tree back there, its branches are covering half the street. Before something happens. Those stupid beavers."

The beavers were a pest, just like the racoons.

"Eddy caught one, by the way," Enne said and lowered her voice. No one could overhear this, because it was forbidden but the little beasts climbed the fruit trees at night and ate everything.

"Is it still alive?"

"It's sitting in the fox trap in the shed."

Albrecht nodded. "I'll come over later."

He would bring his shotgun. Then he raised his hand in greeting and shuffled off in the heavy gumboots he wore even in the sweltering heat. The dog sat down and didn't move.

"Bobby!"

The animal got up with great effort and followed his master in a trot. Already walking away, Albrecht turned around once more. "So, have you actually seen our new neighbour yet?"

"Nah."

"Why don't you ask at the post office if someone's living there?"

"Over there?" Franz asked later, as he parked his yellow truck in the middle of the street because it was rare for someone to want to pass here. He handed her a pile of mailshots. She only glanced at them briefly.

"Go on, tell me. Is someone living there?"

"Hm. Maybe."

He grinned and kept her in suspense.

"Fine. Keep it to yourself then. It's not that important."

Enne turned around. That's when he gave in. "Alright then. You're right. Someone is living there."

"Who!"

"A woman."

"Really?"

"I just delivered a letter to her."

"And?"

"And nothing!"

He hooked his thumbs in his waistband and bounced on his feet. There he was again, that pompous Franz that Enne knew so well. In the past, he had managed to impress her with his act.

"Spit it out already! What's her name?"

"Postal privacy."

Enne rolled her eyes. Franz took postal privacy as seriously as it suited him at any given time.

"Fine. Her name is Ilse Pohl. But you didn't hear that from me."

That was his way of taking revenge. On the world. And on the job centre. Since he had only become a postman because of the case worker there. He had pushed him into that job after

music hadn't worked out. The post had been his last chance. Enne thought that he could have done worse for himself, like Eddy. He had managed to stay afloat with his small workshop after the agricultural cooperative was shut down, had pieced together Trabant transmissions and tuned mopeds. Only then no one wanted to drive all that old junk. The new cars didn't interest Eddy. Too much electronics. Instead of lying underneath the vehicle and listening to the motor, you now put a cable into a jack and readout the error code on a computer. He didn't even own one, as a matter of principle. He refused to buy that type of infernal stuff. Instead, he took apart broken lawnmowers, sewing machines or toasters and put them back together so that they might keep working for a little while longer. He wouldn't allow new things in his house. Things that were beyond repair were bought from a second-hand store and replaced. He believed that things acquired a soul through constant use, such as his beloved tractor, a 1956 RS 04 with a water cooling system. Those new monstrosities one saw on the fields now might be running better, but they were only dead monsters.

This was well received by the newcomers. They flocked to him with their nostalgic junk they bought on eBay. Christina had brought him a gramophone whose crank was broken off. She collected records, old recordings with voices from the other side, from more than one hundred years ago. It was nothing but wretched howling, if you asked Enne. Eddy didn't care what Christina listened to, he was only interested in the gadget. He fixed that too. Only his old accordion stayed broken. Enne would never understand why.

"Won't you come in for a quick coffee at least?" she asked Franz. He refused. He had a very special kind of freight onboard and had to be off. "Half a pig. Refrigerated goods. The things people order! Say hi to Eddy!"

"Alright then." Enne raised her hand to wave goodbye. "Better hurry before those pig halves run off."

The post van turned around and drove out of the village, then Eddy came over from the dyke on his rickety bicycle. Enne could hear the broken ball bearings creak before he turned around the corner. The old fish bucket he had inherited from Enne's father was dangling from the handlebars. Indestructible. The enamel on the rims was chipped, the iron underneath rusty. The bucket still didn't leak. Eddy got off the bike and nodded at the mail Enne was still holding in her hand.

"Bills?"

"Just mailers."

"Good."

He lifted the bucket off the handlebars and set it down. Immediately, two cats appeared and prowled around. Eddy shooed them away.

“Franz says hi,” Enne said, watching the tenches in the bucket. There were still some hanging up in the smokebox.

“You talked?”

“I asked him something.”

“Was it about that?” He indicated Alma’s house. How well he knew her.

“Her name is Ilse Pohl. Franz told me that.”

Enne couldn’t deny herself a small triumph. “So I was right!”

Eddy leant his bike against the plum tree and sat down on the bench underneath it. He was looking tired recently. Like her, he wasn’t sleeping well.

“Want me to get you something to drink?”

“Nah. That’s alright.”

The way he was sitting there, slumped and grey. Enne sat down next to him. He looked at her, with his crooked smile that she found moving. She thought that she would like to put her arm around his shoulders now, but she stopped herself. There was too much she wanted to say. It was about Suse. She should deal with that herself. Or shouldn’t she?

She looked at his profile. His head was lowered, his hands, broad and worn, were resting on his thighs. When had he become so grey? She hadn’t even noticed.

“Tomorrow,” he said and Enne knew what he meant right away. Suse had disappeared on August 19.

Eddy rubbed his forehead. He had left early this morning. “I can’t remember her voice,” he said.

Enne thought that she was still angry, actually.

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