

ONE MORE STORY BY INGO SCHULZE



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"Well maybe not Estonians—" Tanya said.

"I know what you're getting at," the student interrupted.

“But surely you know that we Estonians had our own SS, and you only have to consider how many Estonians, how many people from the Baltic in general, the Russians killed and deported even after the war. Only bad things have come from Russia, and mostly good things from the Germans—people can’t help noticing that.”

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“A literary event” (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung): thirteen new stories from one of Germany’s finest writers.

New Year’s Eve 1999, Berlin. At a party to kick off the twenty-first century, Frank Reichert meets Julia, his lost love. Since their separation in the fall of 1989, he’s drifted through life like an exile, remaining apathetic toward the copy-shop business he started even as it flourishes apace. Nothing has the power to move him now: his whole life lies under the shadow of Julia, of the idea that things could have worked out differently. But as night draws on to day, the promised end becomes an unexpected new beginning.

Ingo Schulze introduces us to characters as they stray outside the confines of East Germany into other, newer lives—into Egypt, where the betrayal of a lover turns an innocent vacation into a nightmare; into Vienna, where life starts to mimic art; into Estonia, where we meet a retired circus bear in an absurd (and absurdly hilarious) dilemma—or as they simply stay put, struggling to maintain their sense of themselves as the world around them changes.

Mixed in with these tragicomic tales are some of the most beautiful love stories ever to feature cell phones. And throughout, Schulze’s masterfully controlled style conceals an understated, but finally breathtaking, intricacy.

From the Hardcover edition.

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That had nothing to do with hospitality, it was simply how they felt, after all they were German majors. I was about to ask a question myself, when the youngest and loveliest of the female students, who until this point had only listened, exclaimed, "Why are you amazed? Germans have never harmed Estonians."

"Well maybe not Estonians—" Tanya said.

"I know what you're getting at," the student interrupted.

"But surely you know that we Estonians had our own SS, and you only have to consider how many Estonians, how many people from the Baltic in general, the Russians killed and deported even after the war. Only bad things have come from Russia, and mostly good things from the Germans—people can't help noticing that."

Tanya said that one cannot limit memory to a particular span of years or to a single nationality, and that after

all it had been the Hitler-Stalin pact that had robbed them of their sovereignty.

“That’s true, of course it’s true,” the student said. “But why are you amazed?”

“Why aren’t you amazed!” Tanya blurted out. After that we returned to the university and exchanged addresses.

On the drive to Käsmu in our rental car, Tanya asked me if she had come off as self-righteous. No, I said, just the opposite, but unfortunately I hadn’t been able to come up with anything better to say. Tanya said she couldn’t help being reminded of certain turns of phrase in those Estonian fairy tales we had been reading aloud to each other of an evening. Certain idioms kept popping up, like “She adorned herself in beautiful raiment, as if she were the proudest German child,” or “as happy as a pampered German child.”

We were looking forward to Käsmu. We had read in our guidebook that Lahemaa, Land of Bays, lies about twenty-five miles to the east of Tallinn, is bounded by the Gulf of Finland and the Tallinn-Narva highway, encompasses an area of 250 square miles, and was declared a national park in 1971. The guidebook also noted several endangered species to be found there: brown bears, lynx, mink, sea eagles, cranes, Arctic loons, mute swans, and even black storks.

We reported in to Arne, a gangly man with medium long hair and a beret, who runs a kind of marine museum. He greeted Tanya and me with a handshake: a signal, he said, to his two dogs—setters—that we now belonged to the village. Before handing over the keys, he gave a brief lecture about the especially favorable magnetic field of Käsmu. On the way to the guesthouse, however, Arne fell silent, as if to allow us to take in the view of tidy frame houses without any distraction and appreciate the peaceful setting to the full. The two setters bounded ahead of us, came back, circled us, and nudged against our knees.

When I think back on that week now, six years later, the first thing that comes to mind—quite apart from the incredible events I am about to recount—is the way the light turned every color brighter and paler at the same time.

The house had once belonged to Captain Christian Steen, who had been deported to Siberia in 1947 and has since been listed as missing. The entryway opened on a large, centrally located dining room, where, with one exception, we took all our meals alone at the huge table. At opposite ends of this space were the two guest rooms, and a third door led to the kitchen, which adjoined a winter garden. The dining room’s high windows looked directly out onto the sauna cabin and a mosscovered erratic deposited by the last ice age.

The finest quarters, the Epos Room, had been reserved for Tanya and me. The smaller Novel Room was unoccupied at first, while the two Novella Chambers under the roof were home to a married couple, both lyric poets. We, however, caught sight only of the wife, who, no sooner had she announced in English, “Käsmu is good for work and good for holiday,” scurried off again as if not to waste one second of her precious Käsmu sojourn.

Käsmu has a narrow beach. You walk through the woods, and suddenly there is the sea. Or you stroll out on the pier in the little harbor to watch children fishing and let your fantasy run free as you gaze at derelict cutters scraping garlands of car tires strung along on the sides of the pier. The town is nothing spectacular, but lovely for that very reason. Somewhere there must be a depot for wooden pallets, because pallets lie about everywhere, and once they have been chopped into firewood by the villagers, are stacked along the sides of their houses. The one thing we had a knack for in Käsmu was sleeping.

Käsmu is worth a trip simply for its silence. As we sat in the winter garden in the evening—sipping tea, eating the wildberry marmalade we'd bought from an old local woman, listening to the sea and the birds—time seemed to stand still.

Käsmu's peace and quiet were only disrupted of a morning, by two or three buses that came lumbering down the village street to deposit school classes at Arne's museum. The children stood staring in amazement at whalebones, shark teeth, ships in bottles, fishhooks, and postcards of lighthouses around the world. They would picnic on the lawn in front of the building, run out on the pier, and then be driven away again.

Tanya and I had tried to engage Arne in conversation and intended to invite him to dinner, but Arne resisted all contact with us. Even when we paid a second visit to his museum, he simply greeted us with a brief nod and then shuffled away.

On the third day—it had been drizzling since early morning—we watched from the window of our Epos Room as schoolchildren got off their buses, jiggled at Arne's front door, circled the building, peered in from the veranda, until finally their teachers, equally perplexed and upset, rounded them up and herded them back onto the buses, where we could see them eating their picnic lunch. That evening when we returned from our excursion to the high marshy moorland, the note we had left for Arne asking him to heat the sauna was still wedged in his door. The sky was clear and promised a beautiful sunset.

The fourth day was cold and so gusty we could hear the sea even with the windows shut, and we stayed indoors. Tanya made tea and crawl...

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