

Sample translation

## Katharina Hagen: Der Geschmack von Apfelkernen

("The Taste of Apples")  
Novel

Translated by Christine Lo



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THE TASTE OF APPLES by Katharina Hagen

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Chapter One

Auntie Anna died of pneumonia at sixteen. Fighting the illness was impossible, both because her heart was broken and because penicillin had not been discovered yet. She died one late afternoon in July. Her younger sister Bertha ran out into the garden crying, and saw the redcurrants turn white just as Anna drew her final rattling breath. The bushes in the large garden were drooping with the weight of their fruit. The currants ought to have been picked long ago, but no one had remembered them once Anna had fallen ill. My grandmother told me this story many times, for she was the one who had discovered the redcurrants in mourning. After Anna died, my grandmother's garden only ever bore blackcurrants and white currants. Whenever they planted a new redcurrant bush, it would produce white currants instead. But no one minded, for white currants were almost as sweet as the red ones, and juicing them didn't completely ruin your apron. They made a translucent jelly with a pale, mysterious shimmer – 'the preserve of tears', my grandmother called it. The shelves in the cellar pantry still contained large and small jars of currant jelly from 1981, Rosmarie's last summer, which was particularly rich with tears. Once, when my mother was looking for some pickled gherkins, she found a jar of the first post-war tears from 1945. She donated it to the local museum. When I asked her why on earth she had given away Grandma's wonderful jelly, she said that those tears were too bitter to be kept.

My grandmother, Bertha Lünschen, née Deelwater, died many decades after Auntie Anna. By the time she died, she had long stopped knowing who her sister was, what her own name was or whether it was summer or winter. She had forgotten what everything from a shoe to a skein of wool to a spoon was meant to be used for. Over the course of ten years, she stripped away her memories with the same absentminded ease with which she pushed tufts of white hair away from her neck or swept together invisible crumbs on the table. I remember the sound of the dry, hard skin of her hands brushing against the wooden kitchen table more clearly than I can remember her face. She wore rings on her fingers, which seemed to close round the invisible crumbs as if she were trying to grasp glimmers of herself. But perhaps she merely wanted to spread crumbs all over the floor, or to feed the sparrows taking vigorous dirt baths in the garden in early summer, digging up all the radishes in the process. Bertha's hands fell still in the care home, where the table was made of plastic, not wood. She remembered us in her will, which she had made before she lost her memory entirely. The land went to my mother Christa, the stocks and shares to Auntie Inga, the cash to Auntie Harriet and the house to me, the youngest of the family. The jewellery, the furniture, the linen and the silver were to be divided between my mother and my aunts. Bertha's will was as clear as rain, and had the same dampening effect. The stocks weren't worth much, and the fields in the north German lowlands were fit only for cows. There wasn't much cash left, and the house was very old.

Bertha must have remembered how much I used to love the house. We only found out about her last will and testament after the funeral. I made the journey alone: it was a long, complicated route on several different trains, from Freiburg in the south across

the whole of Germany to the village of Bootshaven in the north. The train station was deserted, and the local bus that chugged through the villages and finally deposited me at the stop opposite my grandmother's house was practically empty. I was worn out with the travelling, with sadness and also with the guilt that you feel when someone you love but didn't really know very well has died.

Auntie Harriet had come too, but she had a new name: Mohani. She wasn't wearing saffron robes and her head wasn't shaved either. The photo of her guru hanging from a necklace of wooden beads was the only outward sign of her new, enlightened state. With her short, henna-red hair and Reebok trainers, she stood out anyway from the rest of the black-clad figures that gathered in small groups in front of the chapel. I was glad to see Auntie Harriet, though I felt a pang when I realised that it was thirteen years since I had last seen her, at Rosmarie's funeral. The feeling of unease was familiar to me: I was reminded of Rosmarie every time I looked at myself in the mirror. Her funeral had been quite unbearable –as the burial of any fifteen-year-old girl must be. They told me later that I had fallen into a dead faint. All I remember is the white lilies on the coffin exuding a sweet moistness that clung to my nostrils and bubbled into my throat. I struggled for breath, and was sucked into a white vortex.

I woke up in hospital. My forehead had hit the kerb when I fell, and I had to have stitches. I still have a pale scar above my nose bridge. That was the first time I fainted, and it's happened many times since. Falling runs in the family.

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We saw the house from a distance. An overgrown creeper vine sprawled all over the front of the house, so the upstairs windows were little more than square gaps in the

dark green growth. The tops of the old lime trees flanking the entrance brushed the roof of the house, and the rough red stone wall felt warm to the touch. A gust of wind rustled the leaves of the creeper vine and the lime trees nodded. The house breathed gently.

The lawyers were standing at the bottom of the steps that led up to the house. One of them tossed his cigarette to the ground when he saw us approaching, then leaned over hurriedly to pick up the butt. As we walked up the wide steps, he hung his head slightly – he knew that we had seen him, and a blush was rising up his neck as he fumbled in his briefcase determinedly. The gazes of the two other men were drawn to Auntie Inga. Both men were younger than she was, but they started competing for her attention immediately. One of them took a key out of his briefcase and looked at us questioningly. My mother took the key from him and put it in the lock. When the brass bell on the door hinge clanked, the same half-smile appeared on the faces of all three sisters.

‘We can go into the study,’ Auntie Inga said as she led the way.

The hallway still smelt of apples and old stone – it was intoxicating. Against one wall was my great-grandmother Käthe’s carved trousseau chest, flanked by the oak chairs bearing the family crest: a heart being sawn in half. My mother’s and Auntie Inga’s heels clicked away and sand crunched under the leather soles; only Auntie Harriet was slow and silent on her Reeboks.

Grandfather’s study had been tidied up. My parents and one of the lawyers, the young one with the cigarette, drew up four chairs – three on one side and one on the other. Unmoved by all the activity around it, Heinrich’s desk rested solidly against the

wall between the two windows facing the lime trees in the driveway. Dust motes danced in the rays of sunlight that filtered through the leaves into the room. The air was cool. My aunts and my mother sat down on the three dark wood chairs and one of the lawyers sat down on Heinrich's desk chair, which he had turned so that he had his back to the desk. My father and I stayed standing behind the three sisters and the other two lawyers stood on our right by the wall. The chairs had such fiercely upright backs and armrests that they forced anyone sitting in them into right angles: feet perpendicular to shins, thighs to backs, forearms to upper arms, necks to shoulders, chins to necks. The three sisters looked like statues in an Egyptian burial chamber. The sunlight glinting through the windows dazzled us, but did not bring any warmth.

The man sitting on Heinrich's desk chair – not the one who had been holding the cigarette – was fiddling with the clasps on his briefcase. This seemed to be a signal to the other two, who were obviously his juniors. They cleared their throats and looked at him attentively as he introduced himself as the law firm partner of the former partner of Heinrich Lünschen, my grandfather.

Bertha's will was read out and explained to us, and my father was appointed executor. A movement rippled through the sisters when they heard that the house was being left to me. I looked at the partner's partner and the man who had been holding the cigarette looked back at me. I lowered my eyes and stared at the funeral hymn sheet, which I was still clutching. The musical notes for 'O head full of blood and wounds' had imprinted themselves on the pad of my thumb. They had used an inkjet printer. I saw heads full of blood and wounds in front of me, hair like streaks of red ink, holes in heads, holes in Bertha's memory and sand in an egg timer. They make glass out of sand when it's hot enough. I touched my fingers to the scar on my forehead, but no sand trickled out. Only dust rose from the skirt of my silk dress when

I closed my hand in a fist and moved one leg in front of the other. I watched a ladder run up my tights from my knee into the black silk. I felt Harriet looking at me and I looked up. Her eyes were full of pity. She hated the house. It was rosemary for remembrance. Who used that expression? I've forgotten. The wider the ladders in Bertha's memory grew, the larger the chunks of memory that fell through them. The more confused she grew, the crazier her pieces of knitting became. She dropped stitches constantly, knitted rows together or started new rows at the edges, going off in all directions, so the pieces grew and shrank, developed gaping holes in parts and clumped together in others, unravelling all the while. My mother had gathered all the pieces of knitting from Bootshaven and taken them home with her, storing them in a box in her bedroom wardrobe, where I happened to find them one day. I had left home by then, and Bertha was in the care home. I placed one knitted sculpture after another on my parents' bed, horrified and amused at the same time. My mother came into the room and we looked at the woollen monstrosities together for a few moments.

We've all got to keep our tears somewhere, my mother said defensively, as she packed everything back into the wardrobe. We never talked about Bertha's knitting again.

We trailed out of the study in single file and down the hall to the front door. The bell clanked in a tinny way. The lawyers shook hands with us and left, and we sat down outside on the stone steps. Almost every one of the smooth ivory-white slabs had a crack in it, not down the edge, but along the length. The narrow pieces that had broken off lay loose, and could be lifted like lids from the steps. There hadn't been so many of them before – only six or seven, which we had used as secret compartments to hide feathers, petals and letters in.

I still wrote letters back then, still believed in all things written, printed and read. I didn't any more. I was a librarian at the university library in Freiburg: I worked with books, I bought books and, yes, even borrowed books for myself sometimes. But I didn't read them. I used to read – I read non-stop before. In bed, at the table, on my bicycle. Then I stopped. Reading was like collecting things, and collecting things was like preserving them, which was the same as remembering them, which was the same as not quite knowing any more, which was the same as forgetting, which was the same as falling, and there had to be a stop to that.

That was one explanation.

I enjoyed being a librarian though, and for the same reasons that I no longer read.

I had studied German language and literature at university, but all the assignments after the one on cataloguing and classification had bored me. Like hermetic poetry, catalogues, keywords, reference manuals and indexes had a subtle beauty that evaded the casual reader. Via a general reference work, its pages soft from much use, I would find my way through several other volumes until I held in my hands a highly specialised monograph that had not been touched by anyone else but a librarian. The contentment that filled me then far exceeded the satisfaction I got from my own writing. Besides, anything that was written down didn't have to be remembered. Everything that could be read could be comfortably forgotten because you knew where it was now – on the page.

What I especially loved about my job was the times I stumbled upon forgotten books; books that had been in the same place for hundreds of years and had probably never been read. Covered in a thick layer of dust, these books had outlived the millions of

people who had never read them. I had found seven or eight of these books already, and visited them now and then, but never touched them. Sometimes I sniffed them a little. Like most library books, they smelt repellent – anything but fresh and clean. The book on ancient Egyptian wall friezes was the worst of all – it was completely blackened and foul. I only ever visited my grandmother in the care home once. She had sat in her room and been frightened of me, so she had made a mess in her pants. A care assistant had come along and changed her. I had kissed Bertha farewell on the cheek. Her skin had been cool to the touch and I had felt the network of wrinkles that covered her skin with my lips.

While I waited on the steps and traced the cracks in the stone with my finger, my mother sat two steps higher and talked at me. She spoke softly and did not finish her sentences, so the sound of her voice seemed to hang in the air. Irritated, I wondered why she had started doing that recently. It was only when she put what looked like a pantomime prop – a large brass-coloured bowl with a beard hanging from it – in my lap that I realised what was going on here on the broken steps. This was about the house, about Bertha's daughter, about her dead sister who had been born in the house, about me and about Rosmarie, who had died in the house. And this was about the young lawyer with the cigarette. I almost hadn't recognised him, but there was no doubt about it. He was the little brother of Mira Ohmstedt, our best friend. Rosmarie's and my best friend.

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It must have been very early still, for the few people that I met, all walking their dogs, greeted me with the discreet, conspiratorial smile by which true larks, up early even

on Sundays, recognise each other. It was easy to find my way to the pond. Like almost all paths here, mine went straight over the field and through a small wood. At some point I turned off to the right and cycled on a cobbled street through a hamlet of three farms with their barns, silos and tractors, then went round two hills and over the fields again. At the next patch of wood I turned right. There it was: a pane of black glass.

I would look in the wardrobes for old swimming costumes later on. I didn't want to make a public nuisance of myself, after all. But it would be all right this time – there was nobody there. I didn't even have a towel with me, though. There were two or maybe even three giant trunks full of them in the house. I pulled my dress and shoes off quickly and walked into the pond. It was completely overgrown, with only one small patch of sand in the corner: a beach for one. I waded in slowly. A fish darted past me and I shuddered. The water wasn't as cold as I remembered it. The soft earth squelched between my toes. I pushed off quickly and started swimming.

I felt safe when I was swimming. The ground couldn't be pulled away from under my feet. It couldn't crumble or sink or slide away, nor could it rise up and engulf me. I didn't bump into things that I couldn't see or tread on things by mistake, didn't hurt myself or other people. You knew where you were with water – it always stayed the same. All right, sometimes it was clear, sometimes it was black, sometimes it was cold, sometimes warm, sometimes it was still and sometimes it moved, but its nature stayed the same whatever its condition. It was always water. And swimming – that was flying for cowards, floating without the fear of falling. My stroke wasn't anything to look at – my leg movements were asymmetric – but I swam swiftly and surely, and could keep going for hours if necessary. I loved the instant of pushing off from the

ground, the change in elements. I loved that moment of trusting the water to carry my weight. Unlike the earth and the air, it did – as long as you could swim.

I swam right across the black pond. My hands grew soft and liquid as soon as they touched the smooth surface of the water. Herr Lexow's story slipped away from me and every story slipped away from me. I became the person I was again. And I started feeling glad about the three days in the house. What about if I kept it? To begin with, at least. When I reached the other side of the pond, I didn't climb out. As soon the plants at the edge brushed against my foot, I turned round and swam back. Things touching me underwater had always frightened me. I was scared of the corpses that stretched their soft white hands out towards me, of the giant pikes that probably darted beneath me at the spots where the water suddenly grew cold. When I was little, I once bumped into a large rotting tree trunk while swimming in a quarry pond. They turn up now and then in quarry ponds, floating just beneath the surface of the water. I screamed and screamed and screamed, and didn't want to go back on land again, ever. My mother had to come and get me out.

I looked at my bicycle in the distance, and the small pile of dark clothes on the white patch of sand. And then I saw another bicycle and another pile of clothes, which had been placed as far as possible from mine, which was not far at all, because my clothes were pretty much in the middle of the patch. I wasn't wearing a swimsuit. I hoped the other person was a woman. Where was she?

I saw the dark head in the water. It was coming towards me, and white arms were rising and falling steadily in a crawl. I couldn't believe it. Not again! Max Ohmstedt.

Was he following me? He was approaching surprisingly quickly. He must have seen my bicycle before he started swimming, but had he recognised it? And the black dress?

Max didn't look up as he ploughed his way quietly through the black water. I could have swum past him, got dressed and cycled home without his noticing. Later I wondered if he had not deliberately been giving me the chance to do so. But I called out in a low tone:

'Hi.'

Max didn't hear me, so I had to raise my voice.

'Hi!'

And:

'Max!'

He turned his head towards me then – it was at the same level as mine. He pushed away the wet hair clinging to his forehead and looked at me, perfectly composed.

'Hi,' he said, slightly out of breath. He didn't smile, but he didn't look unfriendly either. He seemed to be waiting. Finally, he raised his hand out of the water in a hesitant wave that was both embarrassed greeting and surrender flag.

His earnest expression moved me a little, as did the hair he had pushed away, which was now pointing straight up from his forehead. I had to laugh a little.

'It's just me.'

'Yes.'

We behaved as though we were standing opposite each other, doing our best not to wobble on top as our legs beneath the water paddled furiously to keep us from

sinking. While we were doing this, we struggled to find something to talk about in a friendly but distant manner. There I was, stark naked, talking to my lawyer. All these thoughts crowded into my head, not exactly adding sparkle to my conversation. At the same time, I was desperately trying to think of a way to make a dignified exit. A little nod and smile, not too broad, and a casual 'See you' before swimming on. That seemed the best thing to do. So I took a breath and raised my hand in greeting, but splashed so much water into my mouth by accident that I ended up choking and spluttering – it had been a deep breath – and beating the water around me frantically with my hands. Tears sprang into my eyes and I must have turned an extraordinary colour, for Max leaned his head to one side and frowned at me in concentration as I flailed around in the black water of the pond that had been so still a moment ago. A coot fluttered into the air. I coughed, ducked down and rose again. Max swam a bit closer.

'Are you all right?'

When I tried to speak I spat a little water into his face.

'Yes, of course! Fine!' I croaked. 'And you?'

Max nodded slowly.

I swam back to the shore quickly, but had to stop every so often to cough. I looked back just as I was about to climb out, and there was Max behind me. He had turned around too, and was no longer doing the crawl. Goodness! Did I really have to dash out of the water naked and racked with coughs? I could picture it already – how I would try to pull the black dress over my head quickly, tug at the shoulders and get stuck in it with my arms high above my head because I wasn't dried off. Unable to see, and handcuffed by the sturdy cotton dress, I would trip over my bicycle and get the armholes of the dress caught in its pedals when I tried to get up again. Tied up this

way, I would hobble away hurriedly, dragging the bicycle – a men’s model – along with me. And my muffled cries of animal distress would carry way back over the black pond. And anyone who was unlucky enough to hear me would feel the blood freeze in their veins and never, ever . . .

‘Iris.’

I turned around. At least I didn’t need to tread water this time – I could touch bottom.

‘Iris. I . . . Well . . . I’m glad to see you. Really. Mira loved this pond too. It was just . . . well, you know how she is.’

‘It was black. I know.’

It was black, I know? Had I really just said that? Max must have thought I was a moron. I pretended as if I had just said something really clever and asked, ‘How’s Mira?’

‘Oh, fine. You know. She doesn’t live here any more. She’s a lawyer too. In Berlin.’

Max could touch bottom now too. We stood about two body-lengths apart.

‘Berlin! That must suit her. She must be in a trendy law firm, wearing expensive black suits and black boots.’

Max shook his head. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but was thinking it over first. He said hesitantly, ‘I haven’t seen her for a long time. Not since your cousin died. She never wore black again after that. She doesn’t come here any more. We talk on the phone sometimes.’

I don’t know why that unsettles me so much. Mira no longer wearing black? I look at Max. He looked a little like Mira, but with more freckles. Mira must have used loads of freckle cream. His eyes were multi-coloured: brown and something light-

coloured: green perhaps, or yellow. He had the same heavy eyelids – I remembered those. I recognised his eyes from childhood, but his body was unfamiliar. He was now a good deal taller than me, and a little stooped. Pale and smooth, not broad but toned.

I gave myself a little shake. ‘Max.’

‘Yes?’

‘Max, I don’t have a towel.’

He gave me a confused look, looked at his pile of clothes and opened his mouth to speak. But before he could offer me his towel, I spoke again, quickly.

‘And I don’t have a swimsuit either. Not on me, I mean.’

I lowered myself a little deeper into the water as Max’s gaze passed over my shoulders. He nodded. Did I see the beginning of a grin there?

‘Sure. I wanted to swim some more anyway. Take what you need from my stuff.’

He finished speaking, nodded at me and swam away.

What a pleasant, serious young man, and so polite, I murmured to myself as I stepped out of the water, wondering why that sounded so sarcastic. I didn’t want to take his towel at first, but then I took it after all and dried myself so thoroughly that it got soaked through. I pulled my dress on, and as I got on my bicycle to leave, I looked round at the pond and saw Max standing on the far bank. I waved. He raised an arm in reply, and I pedalled off.