



Ewald Arenz
Alte Sorten/
Heirloom Varieties

A Novel, 255 pages

English Sample translation pp.5 - 20, pp. 27 - 37
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September 1st

The air shimmered over the asphalt at the peak of the narrow road that ran between the fields and vineyards. As Liss slowly drove the old open tractor up the hill, the air looked like water that was more fluid than typical water - lighter and more agitated. Summer water. You could only drink it with your eyes.

Across the harvested fields with their gleaming stubble, the wheat still existed, but only in the overpowering scent of straw: dusty, yellow, ripe. The corn was starting to dry, and its rustling in the gentle summer wind no longer sounded green. Its edges were becoming hoarse and whispery.

The afternoon was hot and the sky tall, but whenever you turned off the tractor, you could immediately hear that the bird calls had grown quieter while the chirping of the grasshoppers had become louder. Liss saw and smelled and heard that summer was reaching its end.

It was a good feeling.

Nobody was running after her. Nobody was following her. Nobody had climbed into a car to drive slowly up and down the field lanes, which she had already been traveling for two hours. For the past forty-five minutes, she had only been going uphill. To be honest - why? It wasn't like she needed to report in somewhere every hour. Although she had had to do that in the past.

Sally stopped walking and looked back. The shitty landscape sat beneath her in the sunshine. Ten thousand fields growing something or other, and the city far away on the horizon

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shrouded in a misty summer haze. The clinic was located on the edge of it. Pretty in its verdure. With an allée. With an actual allée that led to the gate. That allée had been important to Mama for some reason. As if the trees guaranteed an especially good treatment.

She sat down in the grass at the edge of the farm road. Not a real road, but concrete slabs that stretched exactly eight and a half steps in length. She had counted the steps because it was important not to step on the cracks. And now she was sitting on the edge of the road with her arms wrapped around her knees. It was hot. She had stopped a few kilometers back, but the guy who had given her a lift had been a stupid asshole. He had talked a blue streak. One question after the other, and the ones he didn't ask you could guess at in between. Where are you from? What's your name? What are you doing here? Are you driving home? Are you on vacation? Am I a crazy, dumb asshole? Do I give rides to girls because I think I'm super social, while in reality I just want to park somewhere and fuck them? What's your name again? Tell me.

At some point, she had simply reached for the hand brake and yanked it. And got out. She didn't need this. Not today. Not ever, actually. And besides, it was better to walk anyway. To climb the mountain even though it was so fucking hot.

Fucking hot. Fucking out. Sally repeated the phrase just to hear her own voice, which had grown dry in the warm air. She pulled her water bottle out of her backpack. It was almost empty. A few apple trees with clusters of apples were scattered across the slope next to her. They might have quenched her thirst, but she didn't move. She wouldn't eat today. Nothing at all today. She hated it when they were forced to eat. Just because someone said so or because that was the way it was always done. Just because it was morning. Or noon. Or evening. Or because you were hungry. She only wanted to eat when she wished to. She only wanted to drink when she wished to. No one understood that.

She took the last two sips of the lukewarm water and screwed the empty bottle back shut. A village was located on the brow of the hill. She'd be able to fill up her bottle somewhere there. And if not, then not.

She stood up to continue up the slope. It wasn't late yet. As soon as she got the village behind her, she would look for somewhere to spend the night. It was warm, and she had... It now occurred to Sally that she had never really slept outside. In a tent, sure. Year after year, at the same campsite in Italy. With the ten thousand other families who all traveled to Italy at Pentecost. What amazing parents she had! And so imaginative. On the other hand... sleeping outdoors was probably just a romantic idea. Ants would probably crawl in her ears and up her nose. And there were ticks, too. But maybe she would come across a barn or something.

The farm lane dumped her out on a village street that was much steeper than she had expected. Past a few farmhouses, the street intersected with the main road after one or two hundred meters. She finally reached the top ten minutes later, where she hesitated to get her bearings. The village wasn't large. From where she was standing, it was only a few steps to the edge of town. She could see far across the land. Windmills marched down the fields in loose rows, their blades rotating easily in the late summer breeze that she could barely feel up here. Thank goodness the windmills were out here. It was so fucking idyllic that she could barely keep from screaming. She felt an urge to crouch down in the middle of the street and piss on it. Just to make something dirty.

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She could have driven back to the city, but there were bound to be cops everywhere. Besides she didn't want to see anyone she knew. It had been a long time since she had liked anybody she knew.

Right before she reached the village marker, she caught sight of a yard in which a sprinkler was throwing lazy streams of water onto the flower beds. Sally climbed the fence without even looking around first, unscrewed the hose from the sprinkler, and filled her bottle. When it was full, she took a couple of gulps straight out of the hose, tossed it onto the lawn, and jumped back across the fence onto the road.

Liss had disconnected the cart because the tractor and trailer were unable to maneuver a turn on the narrow lane between the vines. It was more practical to uncouple the cart and steer it by hand. While turning, the front tire slipped into the gully between the lane and the field, and now the tongue was resting awkwardly between the grapevines so that the tractor could not get close enough to hitch it back up and tug the trailer free. The tire was sitting in the gully as if it were in a slot, which was why she couldn't get the tongue to turn. The cart was small enough to be moved around on a level road surface, but on her own, she was unable to get it out of the gully. Suddenly, she had no idea why, she was reminded of Sonny. Of young Sonny from years ago, not the other one. He would have enjoyed something like this because he took such pride in his own strength. When something like this happened, say with the van perhaps, he would have jumped into the ditch and set his shoulder against the side of the vehicle as she gently pressed the gas pedal. This would have continued until the van worked itself free, with Sonny pushing it with all his might and main.

Free.

Liss heard the word echo through her head, and as she straightened up, she squinted and peered downhill. The sharp, crisp outlines of the grapevine shadows on the lane's pale concrete had blue edges. When she glanced back up, she had to shade her eyes against the sharply dropping sun. The land was vast. The river sat like a glittering belt, stretching as far as the eye could see. She was free, she said to herself. She could go wherever she wanted. She jerked as hard as she could on the stuck trailer and then caught sight of a girl walking along the farm road.

Sally didn't notice the woman until she straightened up. Tall. Skinny. In a blue... what was that? A work dress of some kind? It looked a little like overalls... what was it called? A denim jumper. She was also wearing a headscarf. She was in the country. Super fashionable.

She would have preferred to retreat right across the grapevines, but the woman had already seen her, and that would have seemed strange somehow. Sally walked a little faster once she registered that the woman was watching her. In a rather odd way. Not curiously. Simply... maybe the way someone would observe an animal? The way an insect would run across the street. One of those pretty, greenish gold, glittering ones that were actually dung beetles. Because that's the way everything was. Anything that looked like gold lived on shit. She pressed by the cart, which was sitting diagonally across the lane. Although she didn't mean to, she lowered her head a little as she scooted past the woman.

"Could you grab on, too?"

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The question was so direct that Sally was startled. However, it had been uttered so very calmly, like a real question without any demand to it. Not a question in which an order was hidden, as was usually the case. “Don’t you want to eat a little?” “Don’t you want to help me?” “Would you mind handing me the water?” These were the lame questions you always had to answer with *No, I don’t want to*. I’ll do it because you’re stronger than me. Because you call the shots. Because you have somehow arranged things so that I have to do stuff for you. But: No! I don’t want to! Don’t even ask me that! Don’t act as if I actually have a choice. Just order me. Say: Sally, you wench, help me. Sally, I can’t stand you. I despise you and your parents because I only earn half of what your father does working at this crappy clinic. But I can control what and when you eat. Sally, Sally, Sally, Sally, Sally, hand me the damn water, you cunt. But you don’t trust yourself to do that.

“Could you grab on, too?”

It was a real question. A question you could answer with yes or no. She had come to a stop, but now she turned around and looked at the tall woman. And at the trailer whose tire was stuck in the gully.

“Yes,” she said. “Should I push?”

The woman sized her up quickly, but didn’t say that Sally was too skinny or slight. She didn’t use any of the words that other people used to not say what they wanted to say.

“Are you strong?” she asked quietly.

Yet another question Sally hadn’t seen coming. Nobody had ever asked her that. In her totally badass life. What kind of woman was this?

“I’m okay.”

“Then turn the tongue a little more to the left. I’ll try to rock it free.”

The woman had already stepped behind the cart and braced her back against the rear of the trailer by the time she realized that nothing was happening up front. She turned around, and after a moment of giving Sally another funny look, she pointed at the forked piece of metal with a hole in it at the front of the cart.

“That’s the tongue.”

She then returned to her position, braced her back against the cart, and began to rock it. Sally lifted the tongue. She gradually gained a sense of the rhythm, and started to pull when the woman pushed and push when the woman let go. The tire swung closer and closer to the edge of the ditch, and then suddenly the cart was free. Sally stumbled forward to keep from falling.

The woman kept hold of the side and steadied the cart on the road. She was smiling just ever so slightly.

“Thank you.”

Sally nodded.

“Can you drive a tractor?” the woman then asked.

Instantly furious at this crazy question, Sally spun around toward her.

“Do I look like I can?” she snapped. “Do I look old enough to have a driver’s license? Do I look like I’m fucking eighteen or something?”

The woman’s smile faded, and she once again gazed at her as if she were watching her out of the depths of the sea or from the other side of the mountains. In any case, as if from somewhere really far away.

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“That’s not what I asked,” she replied placidly, as if answering an actual question. Calm, non-accusatory. “But it’s not all that important, either. Could you get fetch me a couple of rocks and put them under the front tires? Not too small, please.”

Sally hesitated. This woman didn’t radiate that social pedagogy serenity that everyone at the clinic did. She wasn’t wearing that none-of-this-matters-to-me face that they all put on whenever you screamed at or insulted them, or just said nothing. That face in which you always wanted to spit.

She walked over to the ditch and looked around. There were large rocks everywhere, as if someone had piled them up down the edge. Okay, someone probably had done that. Hauled out of the vineyard so they wouldn’t be in the way. She picked one out - triangular like a wedge, white and dusty, warm from the sun. The fragmented edges felt good, almost sharp. She shoved the stone under the first tire, while the woman continued to patiently hold the cart and watch her. Sally hurried with the next stone.

“Like that?” she asked curtly.

The tall women let go of the cart side.

“Like that,” she replied. “Thank you.”

She walked over to her tractor, reached inside the motor, and pressed something. Sally listened as the machine rumbled alive unbelievably slowly. Like an old man who gets up but takes his first few steps tentatively, as if he might fall over. It sounded as if you first had to thump the tractor on the back. But then the machine seemed to get its ducks in a row and suddenly began to chug very regularly. The woman climbed into the seat, drove past the trailer, and then reversed the tractor so adeptly that the tongue almost touched the coupling. Sally instinctively reached for the rod and lifted it.

“Just a little more!” she yelled over the noise of the diesel motor.

The woman let the tractor roll an additional ten centimeters, and the tongue sat in the coupling. Sally caught sight of the small iron rod that was dangling from a small chain on the coupling. She picked it up and stuck it through the eyelet. She glanced up at the woman on the tractor, who looked back at her and gave her a thumbs-up.

“The locking pin, too,” she called.

Sally leaned over and saw the little pin that needed to be pushed through the small hole in the bar to prevent it from slipping out of the coupling. It looked a little like a crude hairpin. She stuck it through and then stepped between the trailer and the tractor back onto the lane. The tractor rolled forward. As the woman raised her hand in farewell, Sally picked up her backpack again. The tractor chugged its way downhill between the grapevines, causing a little dust to swirl up. Sally followed slowly. Grapes were hanging from the vines, much smaller than the ones she knew from home. Dark blue with a whitish peel. She picked one and stuck it in her mouth. One was alright, but not... it wasn’t really sweet. You could tell it wasn’t ripe yet, but not like unripe apples. The taste was already there. She spit the peel out and continued on her way. It took a few minutes for her to notice that the tractor had come to a stop several hundred meters in front of her. She could hear the motor running and saw the woman in the seat. What did she want? She picked up her pace and considered once more if she should cross through the vineyard, straight across the rows, but she then chided herself. Why would she do that? The woman didn’t know her, after all. As she slid past the running tractor, she noticed that the woman had rolled

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herself a cigarette. She half-turned toward Sally and said just loud enough to drown out the engine:

“If you want, you can sleep in my farmyard.”

Sally’s first impulse was to act as if she hadn’t heard her. How did she know she wasn’t heading home? Her second impulse was to run away. She looked up at the tractor. The woman had struck a match and was lighting her cigarette. She didn’t glance back down at Sally until she had done that.

Screw it, Sally thought. Screw it. She tossed her backpack into the trailer, climbed up one of the tires, and swung herself over the tail lift. She didn’t join the woman on the tractor. If necessary, she could jump down from here.

The woman exhaled smoke and accelerated. The tractor belched smoke. Sally sat with her back to both of them in the cargo area, pulled her legs up, and watched as the village behind her grew indistinct in the shimmering air before slowly dissolving in the late afternoon light, and finally disappearing. A person should be able to evaporate like that, she thought, into hot air and light.

September 2nd

It was almost ten thirty when Sally stepped out of the room Liss had given her and into the kitchen. Nothing special, as far as rooms were concerned. Sink, cabinets, refrigerator - the decor was the kind you would forget the moment you left the kitchen, Sally thought. However, where there had once been a window out onto the farmyard, there was now a glass terrace door. It was half open. A wide sunbeam stretched diagonally across the floorboards. On the table sat a plate, a cup, and a covered bowl. A teapot beside them. Everything looked clean and organized. Sally sat down on the bench that ran along the wall and from which you could see through the door out into the yard. She removed the plate from the top of the bowl. Diced fruit. Apple. Pear. Kiwi. A few nuts in between. And honey. You could smell it. She hesitantly covered the bowl and touched the teapot with the back of her hand. It was lukewarm. Sally poured herself some tea. It was black tea, for which she was grateful. Why was there a basic rule at every damned clinic in the world to only have herbal teas on offer? Everything always smelled like chamomile and peppermint. Even if you managed to scrounge up some other kind of teabag, the tea still tasted the same. The taste had probably eaten its way into everything. Or the clinic's dishes were saturated with it so that anything you cooked automatically turned into peppermint or chamomile tea.

She had to chuckle as she thought of this and was a little startled because the sound was so foreign to her.

She uncovered the bowl again, picked out a piece of pear with her fingers, and stuck it in her mouth. It tasted sweet with a faint twinge of some mild spice Sally didn't recognize. She wondered if it was the pear or if Liss had added spices to the fruit salad. She plucked out a piece of apple. It tasted completely different, and she tried the pear again. Maybe it was because she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday morning, but the pear tasted peculiar. She selected a walnut. It tasted just like walnut and honey. Sally took a sip of the lukewarm tea. She liked the way the bitterness initially blended with the honey taste, and then turned clear and bitter in her mouth. She hastily covered the bowl and stood up. She took the cup with her as she walked through the terrace door and into the farmyard. The tractor wasn't there, but the cargo trailer was parked halfway through the barn entrance, right where they had unhitched it yesterday. Sally strolled across the yard. Yesterday she hadn't looked around any. Liss had showed her the room where she could sleep - it wasn't until they were standing in the modest room that she had told Sally her name. Sally hadn't answered at first. Only later, after she had returned to the kitchen, did she tell Liss her own name. Liss had nodded, though without the satisfaction that other adults often exhibited, which revealed that they had just been waiting for her to finally come to her senses. To finally recognize that she had / done / behaved wrongly and had now capitulated / yielded / eaten crow. That nod which always resembled the hoisting of a flag or a trumpet heralding victory. That nod which seemingly indicated understanding, but actually concealed a slow whiplash.

Sally set one foot on the tongue and took a sip of tea. Liss was strange. She had never met anyone like her. What kind of woman was this? The house was much too large for just her, but Sally had immediately sensed that she lived here on her own. You could always tell if a

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house was lived-in or not. And this house was big and empty. The room in which she had slept hadn't been used in a long time.

Sally made a round through the barn. It was so nicely dark on this bright September morning. A row of farm machinery stood there in the dim light. She didn't recognize most of it. What did Liss do? Was she a farmer? What did she do by herself on such a large property? Sally looked up. Light was shimmering down through the cracks in the roofing timbers. There wasn't a staircase up to the hayloft, just a ladder. She set her cup down on one of the machines and climbed up it. As she pulled herself through the hatchway, she was surprised at how much brighter it was up here. Up in the roof, there were regularly placed openings that had been covered with glass tiles. Only the gable ends contained actual windows. The giant loft looked so peaceful and still, which might have been solely due to the clear September day and the sun's high position. The dust floated so slowly through the sunbeams that it almost seemed to stand still. You had to look very closely to see that it was falling, incessantly falling. A large pile of hay was sitting in the back third of the loft. Ropes were hanging from the beams, and a huge wooden wheel was secured up above the hatch. A rope ran over the wheel, the long end of which was coiled in wide loops beside the hatch. It was a good place. For the first time in a long while, Sally's mind was completely quiet for a moment, and she stayed perfectly still in order to not break the silence again. She studied the dust in the light and felt just like it, as if she were falling very slowly, so slowly that she didn't need to be frightened of the landing.

Some time later, she climbed back down the ladder, picked up her cup, and strolled across the yard. Past the empty stable and down the path to the garden. Past a chicken coop, past circular piles of firewood around which hens were pecking, past an ancient outhouse that was leaning acutely into an empty rabbit hutch. The garden itself was more of an elongated meadow, as large as a field. One section was fenced off and being used as a vegetable garden. Sally wondered why you would build a fence inside your own garden, but then she recalled the chickens. Across from the vegetable garden sat a low, windowless building with wide sliding doors. Sally pulled one open and saw that it was a machine hall. A second, ancient tractor sat there, as well as a plow and several other pieces of equipment whose uses were unknown to her. There was also a pile of sacks, in addition to a motorcycle. Curiosity drove her inside. She had driven a motorcycle once, illegally of course. Sally swung her leg over the seat and tested the kickstarter. The engine didn't turn over. She tried again, lost herself in this effort, and floored the starter. Nothing happened. She kept trying over and over again until she got a thigh cramp and had to get off to stretch out her leg. Annoyed, she kicked the motorcycle, and it toppled over. What was she doing here? What kind of crazy game was this?

She strode out of the hall, back down the garden path to the farmyard. Dashed through the kitchen into the house and up the stairs to the room where she had slept. She grabbed her backpack off the chair and automatically felt for her phone. She instantly remembered where she had left it. Jammed behind the back wall of her wardrobe in the clinic. Turned on. If they tracked her phone, then she was still there. She grinned. She was free. Nobody knew where she was. She could go wherever she wanted. She pulled on her backpack and ran back downstairs. She stopped in the kitchen. Wonderful. The question now was where she actually wanted to go.

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“Away isn’t really a direction, is it?” she asked aloud.

The door stood open. The kitchen was empty. The sunbeams had wandered around the table and were now stretched out across the doorframe. The sun was at its noon zenith, and its light vanished from the room. It was just that simple for the sun.

“The sun rises in the east, plots its course in the south, sets in the west, and is never seen in the north,” Sally tonelessly recited the little chant from her kindergarten days. She had also hated kindergarten.

It didn’t really matter where she went. The point wasn’t to arrive somewhere in particular. The point was to get away from everything.

As she pulled the terrace door shut behind her, she recalled the teacup. She had left it sitting next to the motorcycle in the equipment shed. For some reason, it felt wrong to leave without returning the cup to the kitchen. She retraced her steps past the wood piles. The hens darted between her legs as if she weren’t a stranger. She looked around for the cup in the machine hall. She had left it in a precarious spot on the tractor’s green, dusty fender. But before she reached for it, she took a few rapid strides to the fallen motorcycle and set it back up. Then she quickly picked up the cup and ran out of the hall and back up the path. The moment Sally reached the farmyard, Liss drove the other tractor through the gate, sprang lightly from the seat, and reached into the engine to turn it off. The chugging fell silent. Liss looked at her with a smile.

“Are you leaving?” she asked with a glance at the backpack.

Sally shook her head and lifted the cup.

“I was just in the garden,” she murmured and went into the kitchen.

[...]

September 5th

It was Friday, and nobody had found Sally yet. No one had talked softly to her in a long time or fussed at her, pity and concealed hatred behind every soft word. Hatred toward her because she didn't want to comply, because she kept running away, because she didn't listen to the gentle, pitying, empathetic voices. Instead, she would stare into their eyes until the fake wall of professional niceness and warmth and understanding crumbled, and she could see behind the boredom and disinterest and loathing.

It was Friday, and nobody had found her yet.

She was stretched out in the bed in the sparse room, which lacked everything she used to think she needed to feel well. There were no pastel colors and no tasteful pictures on the wall, no friendly wallpaper and no cozy rug on which you wished you could vomit the first time you walked on it. It was just a room with whitewashed walls, no rug. The only other thing in the room was a slightly wobbly chair. There weren't even any curtains on the window. It was a room like clear water, and it felt good to lie in here. It had rained yesterday, and she had spent almost all day in the house. That morning she had listened to the noises Liss made in the kitchen and the bathroom. She had gone downstairs once the sounds stopped, and had again found tea and the covered bowl filled with fruit. Bread was also sitting on the table, along with butter on a saucer. No demand. Just an offer that looked as if Liss had seen the bowl of untouched fruit the previous day and assumed that Sally preferred bread. Sally set the butter into the refrigerator, which wasn't in the kitchen but in the small pantry. The latter's ceiling was slanted because the staircase ascended above it. She had looked into the bowl to see if there were any pears in it, and she ate all of those pieces along with two or three walnuts. She took the tea upstairs with her, and spent the entire day sitting at the window and watching the farmyard, the road in front of the house, and the bakery across the street on the small village square. She observed the people buying bread. Despite the rain, some of them stopped to chat in front of the shop. She observed the hens which, over the course of the morning, migrated from the garden to the farmyard. From there, they moved onto the narrow, unpaved strip between the fence and the road to search for earthworms. She observed Liss, wrapped in a yellow raincoat, drive her tractor back into the farmyard around noon. She then vanished into the barn for hours, only to come back out with very dirty hands, without glancing up at Sally even once. She drank coffee with Liss when the woman called through her closed door that coffee was ready. They didn't talk. Liss then got back up and went outside, and Sally set the coffee pot on the stovetop and washed the cups. She went back upstairs later, stretched out on her bed and read a book she had found, and must have fallen asleep even though it wasn't dark yet because now it was Friday.

It was Friday, and nobody had found her.

She stood up and walked over to the open window. It was still quite early, but it was going to be sunny. A fine mist floated over the farmyard, thanks to yesterday's rain.

The farmyard. Why was she living her alone although she was willing to let people just stay here? Images from various psycho thrillers flashed through her mind. Lonely farmyard. Fog.

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Forest. A garden full of dead young girls. She grinned the pictures away. Where she came from, the house was full of dead girls. They just didn't know it and simply kept on moving. Zombies.

Besides, she wasn't like that. But what was she like? That wasn't super easy to say... it would probably be easier to say what she wasn't. Witch. Psycho killer. Social-psychologist-pedagogical-trust-me-bitch. There weren't really all that many people who honestly confided in you. At least, not without them always having to repeat that in order to convince themselves it was true. But strange. She was definitely that. Strange. A cool kind perhaps, but strange nevertheless. She thought about it, but she really didn't know anyone who lived all alone. Much less in such a large house.

Someone knocked on the door. Sally turned around, expecting the door to open before she said "Come in," because that was always what happened. But Liss actually waited. Sally went to the door and opened it.

"Good morning," Liss said.

She was wearing a blue linen headscarf, which framed her face in an unusual manner. Sally grudgingly thought it looked pretty.

"I have to harvest the potatoes today. Can you help me?"

"Right now?" she asked.

"I don't mind waiting until you're ready. There's enough to do around the farmyard," Liss replied with that little smile Sally already knew.

"I'm coming," she said.

This time she sat on the tractor, too. There were two seats mounted above the large back tires. One of them was made of strips of wood that had been worn smooth and shining over the years. The other was composed of the same bare metal as the fender. A steel tube ran around both seats, functioning as both the seat back and handle. Sally could feel every vibration. They drove through the village out onto the rural road. The vineyards sloped off to the right. She could see far across the valley in which the morning mist still hung over the distant villages, while up here it was already quite sunny. Fields stretched off to the left all the way to the forest, which was about a kilometer and a half away. They turned down a farm lane. Behind them, the machine Liss had hitched to the tractor jolted and clanked. She had explained that it was a potato spinner as she hauled it out of the machine shed in the garden. That, of course, wasn't really an explanation. The lane followed a gradual curve along the hedge, but they then came to a sudden stop. A field was located to the right of them. Liss pulled out a jute sack from the pile underneath her seat and tossed it toward the edge of the field. She handed Sally an iron basket before stepping over the tongue and releasing a lever. The spinner sank. It looked like some kind of plow, but a wheel was mounted to the back of it from which extended regularly placed, slightly bent prongs. It looked a little like the round front brush on a street sweeper.

"How do you know when the potatoes are ripe?" Sally asked.

Liss jumped down from the tongue and pointed at the embankment.

"Dig one out."

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Sally crouched down in the furrow and burrowed her fingers under the potato plant. The dirt was warm and still damp from yesterday's rain. When was the last time she had dug in the ground? When was the last time she had put her hands in dirt? She couldn't recall.

"Here," she said as she hit the potatoes and dug them out.

She saw eight or nine tubers of various sizes. She crumbled away the dirt and looked at them. They were pale. In the September sun, they almost glowed.

"Rub them hard," Liss urged her.

"And?" Sally asked after she had rubbed a potato completely clean.

"When the peel stops coming off, they're ripe. You can dig some up, and cook them to see if they taste alright, but that takes too long for me."

Sally looked up in surprise. That was the first joke Liss had uttered.

"Collect the potatoes in the basket and then in the sacks," instructed Liss, who was already back up in the seat. "Don't drag the sacks once they're too heavy. I will toss more down when you need them. And take your time."

She accelerated the tractor, and the large wheel began to turn. Sally now knew what the plow was for. It lifted the dirt out of the embankment, and the brush spun it, as well as the potatoes, to the side. It looked a little ridiculous, unprofessional, almost clumsy. But as she walked slowly after the tractor and down the furrow, she saw that it worked. All you had to do was pick up the potatoes.

All you had to do was pick up the potatoes! Once the first two hours had passed, Sally's back hurt so much that she could no longer lean down, but simply scooted along in a permanently crouching position. Liss had finished with the digging a long time ago and was now also gathering. Sally watched as she emerged from another furrow at the lower end of the field, moving like a machine. Lean. Gather. Shove the iron basket a few meters. Lean. Gather. Empty basket into a sack. She was much faster than Sally. She noticed this because Liss kept intersecting with her in the next furrow further and further up as they advanced across the field. And they still hadn't done one-third of it.

"Screw this!" she shouted in sudden rage. "Just screw it!"

She hurled the potato she had just unearthed across the field, but because her arms hurt, the gesture was a little ridiculous. It only flew a few meters. Sally straightened up. What was this? Some kind of work therapy? Did Liss really think she would fall for this shit? Because she was allowed to live with her, Sally had to play along and dig potatoes in order to heal herself through healthy farm work? Was that it? She looked at Liss. She was about seventy meters downhill. Lean. Dig. Potatoes in the basket.

"No!" Sally said furiously. "No! Just bite me. Bite me, you assholes!"

She walked over to the next, almost full sack and tried to knock it over. That wasn't so easy, though. It toppled over quite slowly, and hardly any potatoes rolled out. Sally leaned down and tried to grab the two lower edges. She reached through the raw yute, grabbed a potato in each hand, and simply screamed in fury without uttering any words. With all her strength, she yanked at the sack and suddenly tumbled backward as the bag emptied itself much too quickly. She lay there for a few seconds gasping, before she jumped up, still full of rage, and ran to the

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edge of the field and past the tractor which Liss had cut off. On toward the forest as fast as she could run.

Liss watched the girl. Her first reaction had been to jump up and run after her, but then she simply stood where she was and watched her. You can't run away from work, her father had coldly said once when they were about to rake up the hay remnants on the forest meadow left behind the cargo trailer. It was the dullest work in the world. The hay wagon in front of you, always a step faster than you could rake. The monotonous, metallic sound of the scraper that shoved the hay down the trailer floor once the prongs had gathered it. All the noises were monotonous, weaving a net of gray threads in which she hung, in which she was dragged behind the wagon and compelled to rake up the ridiculously small amount of hay that the prongs had missed. How much was it, she wondered, and for a moment, the bitter taste of hatred rose up within her. A wheelbarrow's worth perhaps? Or two?

At some point, she just stopped moving. The wagon rolled on, and she stayed behind. How old had she been? Thirteen? Fourteen? She couldn't remember. She had watched the rake tip over, its prongs pointing skyward. Good. And then she had gone into the forest. The sounds dangled off of her like threads. The chugging of the motor. The excruciating, scraping noise of the iron plate against the floor of the cargo wagon. The horrible, never-ending whistling of ungreased metal against metal from the hay spindle underneath the wagon. She walked farther and farther into the woods until she could no longer hear the sound. And when she returned home hungry later that afternoon, he had locked the kitchen. And the pantry. Even the cellar.

If you didn't work, you didn't eat.

Sometimes she wished he would slap her. Or shout. But he didn't do that. No shouts. No laughter. Nothing at all.

You can't run away from work. If you didn't work, you didn't eat.

She had picked some unripe apples. Tomatoes from the garden. They had fought for two days, mutely, stubbornly. Locked kitchen. Locked pantry. Locked cellar. Wherever the invisible threads didn't reach, there were locks. Eventually, she had climbed on the tractor after hitching on the barrow and had driven to the forest meadow to rake up the hay. And as she did that, she imagined herself setting fire to it in the winter, the hay in the barn. He would be standing underneath it and wouldn't notice, not until the loft burnt through and collapsed on him.

Liss inhaled deeply.

Run, girl, she thought.

She then leaned down to pick up the next potato.

It was already dark by the time Sally came back. The village was quiet, but not completely still. An occasional car drove by. In the stables she passed, the chains on the cows clinked. They couldn't run away, Sally thought. They always had to stand there. A blue light flickered behind many windows. The people were watching television, she thought with weary disdain. They were sitting in their narrow houses, actually believing they were seeing things happening far away. In reality, they were chained to their living rooms and staring at a single wall, just like their cows.

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Her legs ached. She had ran for a long time, had kept pushing herself until she hit the flow for which she was running. But at some point, that had ended, and now everything hurt. Her legs from running. Her arms and back from picking potatoes. And something else inside of her, which always ached though she didn't always feel it.

As she reached the farmyard, she stopped. The light was still burning in the kitchen. Had Liss also chained herself up? She was tired. And she felt hungry, a feeling she was usually able to push off, but now she was too tired. The air was still warm. A cloud of moths was buzzing around the street lamp. Sally leaned against the fence and gazed into the farmyard. The tractor stood there. The potato spinner had been swapped for the cargo wagon, which was holding the potato sacks. She heard a quiet, sleepy clucking from the chicken coop. The terrace door onto the kitchen was open a crack. So what, she thought, so what. She pulled herself together and strode through the farmyard and into the kitchen. A plate was sitting at her chair. A saucer with butter. A small cup with salt. And a black enamel pot. Sally stood beside the table, too exhausted to put up a fight. She lifted the lid from the pot. Potatoes. Cooked in their peels. They were still slightly warm. Sally stared at them. Then she pulled one out, broke it in half, and carefully dipped an end into the salt. It tasted like coming home, and suddenly tears sprang to her eyes. She ate another one. With the peel and a tiny dab of butter. And then another, only with salt again. She quietly placed the lid on the pot, turned out the light, and set the butter in the pantry. She then went upstairs to her room.

September 6th

Liss stood in the kitchen, looking at the table. The pot was still sitting there, but the butter had been put away. The knife had been used but not the plate. She lifted the lid and looked inside. She then carried the pot into the cool pantry. She paused a moment after she set it down. Years ago, they had butchered here in the farmyard. The pantry still held the heavy chopping block made of beech - long, dark and worn smooth. The boning knives hung above it, thin and sharp, as well as the cords for the sausage. A cleaver hung there, too, and you could tell that over the decades it had been sharpened over and over again. All these things that had once had a purpose, now just looked lovely in their forgottenness, no longer useful.

Some people were like that, too.

She was like that.

On the other hand, the girl could still find her way in the world.

A scrap of cloudy gray September sky shone through the very small window in the almost meter-thick wall, onto the spot on the floor where the masonry arch over the cellar steps sprang. She looked once more into the pot. No, there were fewer than yesterday. Liss stood there silently, before noiselessly placing the lid back on the pot. Most people no longer worked with the earth, from which everything came. Most people had forgotten that even in the fall, things could grow. And that you had to handle them more carefully than you did the things that shot vigorously out of the ground in the spring.

What is your story? she thought up through the ceiling to the next floor where the girl lay. What is your story? It hadn't been quite a week since the girl had thrown her backpack onto the cart floor and climbed over the tire. It seemed longer to her. To someone who was always in one place, six days are hardly anything. One day is like another, and they flow into each other. For someone running away, six days are a lot. The girl was making her days longer, and they no longer flowed into each other so unobtrusively.

Liss looked at the knives. Sharp. Thin. Some of them were only used for one single purpose in the butchering process, otherwise they were never touched.

Some people were like that, too.

She was like that.