



**Judith Hermann**

**We'd Have Told Each Other Everything**

Wir hätten uns alles gesagt

192 pages

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**"I write about my own life. I don't know any other form of writing."**

**- Judith Hermann**

A childhood spent in unconventional circumstances, the divided Berlin, family ties and affinities, long, happy summers at the seaside. Judith Hermann discusses her writing and her life, about what holds her writing and life together and connects them. Truth, invention, and secrets - where does a story begin, and where does it end? How dependable is our memory, how closely do our dreams resemble reality?

As in her novels and stories, Judith Hermann captures an entire attitude towards life: with a clear, poetic voice, she talks about the sensitive core of life, friendship, departure, and freedom.

"Judith Hermann's books are unswerving explorations of human situations",  
Roman Bucheli, Neue Zürcher Zeitung

**Judith Hermann**, was born in Berlin in 1970. Her debut story collection *Sommerhaus, später* (1998) was a critically acclaimed national and international bestseller. It was then followed in 2003 by the story collection *Nichts als Gespenster*, and several of the stories contained in the latter were adapted for film in 2007. In 2009, she published *Alice*, five short stories that received international acclaim. Her first novel, *Aller Liebe Anfang*, came out in 2014. It was followed in 2016 by the short story collection *Lettipark*, which was awarded the Danish Blixen Prize for Short Stories. Hermann has received numerous awards for her work, including the Kleist Prize and the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize. Her novel *Daheim* was published in spring 2021. It was nominated for the Leipziger Book Fair Prize and received the Bremen Literature Prize in 2022. The author lives and writes in Berlin.

## **We'd Have Told Each Other Everything**

**Translation: Katy Derbyshire**

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I

Some time ago, in a 24-hour minimart on Berlin's Kastanienallee in the middle of the night, I happened to run into my psychoanalyst – two years after the end of my analysis and for the very first time outside the room where I'd lain on his couch for years.

I was out that evening with G., my only writer friend. We'd eaten at an Italian place on Eberswalder Strasse, drunk a few glasses of wine together outside a bar, then G. had meant to walk me to my tram and on the way to the tram we'd started talking about our mothers. It was that mother conversation, our slight drunkenness and the fact that we were retracing old paths – Arkona, Rheinsberger, Wolliner, streets where we'd spent our youth an actual quarter-century ago, that is, in the days when snow still fell and the world around us was black and white and pure poetry – that led me to skip one tram after another and to sit down with G. on the steps in a doorway on Kastanienallee, both of us immediately craving a cigarette, even though we'd given up smoking aeons ago.

A girl walked past us, smoking. I asked her for a cigarette and she apologised for not having any, but over there – she pointed at the late-night shop across the road – you could buy single cigarettes: like in the old days. We crossed the street, went into the minimart; the Arab shopkeeper was behind the counter and in front of the counter was my psychoanalyst Dr Dreehuï, paying for a nice yellow soft-pack of American Spirit Lights.

Many times in my life, I have not recognised people when I've met them outside their usual settings. I had never encountered Dr Dreehuï outside his office; nor inside his office, strictly speaking. He would open the door to me three times a week, I would walk past him down the hall, enter the room, take off my jacket and hang it over the chair provided for that purpose; then I would lie down on the couch and he would take a seat behind me. At the session's end, the same procedure backwards – I would get up, put my jacket back on while gazing out of the window, embarrassed, he would walk down the hall in front of me and open the door, we'd shake hands, he'd close the door behind me; it was a miracle that his face, his figure and appearance had made any mark on my memory at all. In the late-night minimart, I was faster than him – I recognised him first, or: I

realised first, and I was alert enough to find the situation remarkable and not to give any sign that I found it remarkable. I said a polite and surprised hello to Dr Dreehüs and introduced him and G., which was amusing because they both knew about each other; G. had come up in stories during my analysis sessions and had, in turn, been forced to listen to a good deal of stories about the sessions.

This is G. So this is G.

G., at the end of the night and after all these years, this is in actual fact Dr Dreehüs, my analyst.

My old analyst. All three of us feigned bows. In my memory of the moment, I have regretfully lost sight of the shopkeeper, his eyes on us, on Dr Dreehüs, who seemed to be a regular customer and might not yet have revealed himself to be an analyst. Whatever the case: I embraced the curious opportunity to ask Dr Dreehüs for two cigarettes. We left the minimart. Exchanged a few words, how are you, fine thanks, how are you, as he elegantly tapped the cigarettes out of the pack, offered them to us and was kind enough not to mention the fact that I'd given up smoking during my analysis years. He seemed nonchalant, whereas I was having trouble maintaining my composure. I wanted to commit everything to memory at once,

gestures and expressions, his slightly extravagant suit, the way he gave us a light, smiled and kept a relaxed distance; I had assumed Dr Dreehüs did not exist, that he was a special kind of moth that materialised into a person for the length of an analysis session and crumbled to dust after the session ended, only to regenerate two days later. I had of course brooded at length on Dr Dreehüs's life outside his office and had come to the conclusion that he didn't have one, which was partly to do with him, as a professional analyst, never having betrayed the slightest detail of his existence other than his presence, his slightly dandyish shirts, ironed trousers, the interior design of his practice room and the occasional book placed as if coincidentally on the desk. For me, Dr Dreehüs lived in that room, with its couch by the window, its scruffy armchair at the end of the couch, its half-empty bookshelf, its empty desk. Outside that room, he didn't exist. But suddenly he was there – I lit my cigarette on the light he gave me. I was aware of his hands, close to my face. I was aware that he was slightly drunk and, like me, had let go, in a sense, as the night progressed. He gave G. a light too. And then he wished us good night, walked down the road, walked three or four yards down the road and vanished into the entrance to a bar, which to my mind opened solely at that instant, out of utter nothingness and only for him, and then closed tight behind him. Outside the minimart was a crooked bench; I had to sit down. G. had to sit down as well; we smoked our forbidden cigarettes in perplexed companionship, G.'s sympathy for my shock

at the encounter consolatory. He said he wasn't at all sure the scene had really just happened, wondered whether it might have taken place, like in a Woody Allen or Jim Jarmusch movie, in a wormhole, a deception prompted by the wine, the mother's conversation, the paths into the past. The situation seemed as surreal to him as it did to me, and he too had never before noticed the bar into which Dr Dreehüs had vanished like Alice into Wonderland, and when I said I absolutely had to go in there on Dr Dreehüs's heels, G. said he'd thought as much.

He said: But I'll walk you to the door, at least.

Trommel – Dr Dreehüs's bar was called Trommel, like the drum. Front window blocked off, dim light emanating through the gap in the door, the Trommel could have been a brothel, a darkroom, which I wouldn't put past Dr Dreehüs, an Irish pub, a club; we stood clueless outside. In the end, G. said: You know what, I think I'll just have a bit more of a sit down here on the bench. Just because. I'll just hang out here for a bit longer. And if you don't come out again in fifteen minutes, I'll assume everything's fine. Then I'll go home.

He said: Is that alright with you.

I said: Yes, that's fine by me. More than fine.

G. nodded, gave me a brief firm touch on the shoulder, returned to the crooked bench and sat down again; he straightened his back, then raised his hand like a boxing referee.

I raised my hand.

Took a deep breath, opened the door to the Trommel – and went in.

In the years after my analysis, I had written my fifth book, *Lettipark*. Seventeen short stories about people between forty and fifty, perhaps at the end of their tethers and on the brink of new insights, a book that had come about after my novel and had come easily to me; there had been something liberating about that return from the long form to short stories; writing it had made me happy. These days, I think that happiness was linked not only to the act of surviving the novel-writing process, but also to the end of my analysis, my willingness to sort things through on my own, to grow up, let go. One of the stories is entitled 'Dreams'; only a few pages long, it describes a narrator's psychoanalysis as she goes to see the same analyst as a friend of hers. During the analysis, the two women's friendship breaks



up, whereas the narrator's relationship to the psychoanalyst has a distanced constancy to it. Naturally enough, the story is closely linked to my analysis with Dr Dreehüs – that's what I write: I write about myself. I write along the lines of my own life; I don't know any other way to write. The character of Dr Gupka is narrated along Dr Dreehüs's lines, Dr Gupka's clothing is Dr Dreehüs's clothing, the furnishings in the office are the furnishings in real life. There is one point when Dr Gupka opens the door with a black eye, to the narrator's surprise, and that black eye too really existed. And naturally enough, that first-person narrator is me, I am her – the woman named Teresa, who dreams of slugs and elevator shafts, cries continuously, can't move for grief, can't speak in the first months of the analysis, can't possibly say what is making her sad. And naturally enough, that first-person narrator is precisely not me and nor is Dr Gupka Dr Dreehüs; on the contrary, the two characters are dreams, wishes on paper, and what I imagine as I put down those words is hard to grasp. Despite the characters' fragility, it is something unhurt, undamaged. Something I don't possess at the moment, but that I know I once did possess and may possess again, something I yearn for, a strain I can choose to make, a lacuna. The story is a protective space for the narrator, housing her like the shell of a nut. The narrator is the smallest doll in a Russian matryoshka, the story the cocoon around her. I don't write what she talks about, what she talks to herself about in the analysis sessions; the protective space grows out

of that deliberate silence. It is up to empathetic readers to imagine it, trauma, loss, abuse, grief, absence, death and fear, life at its most normal, or to remain on the outside; it suffices for me to know what the narrator is grieving, and I'd like to keep it to myself. The story is – tidy. The narrator's apartment, her everyday life, the books she reads, the paths she takes, all that has an orderly, presentable structure – in contrast to the apartment I live in, the books I read, the paths I take – none of all that would I ever depict in a story without making alterations. The story distracts the readers from the heart of the matter; it distracts them from me. A magic trick – the readers see the magician's hocus pocus and miss the trick. I tell the story of my psychoanalysis and hand it over to a character who is the way I've always wanted to be, never was nor ever will be; never in all my life have I dreamed of slugs. And finally, the story is of course also a love story; the narrator falls in love at some point with Dr Gupka, and remains in love, and nothing changes – like I too, after perhaps five or six years of three 45-minute sessions a week, at some point fell in love with Dr Dreehüs and at some point fell out of love. And then it was over. And then I left him.

It came as no surprise, on Kastanienallee that night, that I walked into the Trommel with my heart thudding.

When *Lettipark* came out, I had taken a copy to the practice. I wanted Dr Dreehuÿs to know he'd become part of a story in a book, that a story existed that was dedicated to him. I knew hardly anything about him, but I did know he was a reader, he loved books. I had gathered as much from the tiny sounds of agreement or disapproval he had sometimes uttered when I'd talked about books; and I had given him the other two books I'd written during my analysis, he had read them and made restrained comments about them. I had put *Lettipark* in his letterbox on the ground floor of his practice building – addressed to him. He shared the practice with a woman with his surname, though I was unable to the end to establish whether she was his sister or his wife; I preferred the former. I had delivered *Lettipark* in person, hoping to run into him, to put the book into his hands – a brief, highly charged contact. Perhaps I wanted to show him I was alive. Had written a fifth book. Was doing well, was capable of going on without him; I was certain he'd have been glad of it. I didn't run into him. I had put the book in an envelope with a note, three polite lines, put the envelope into his letterbox and gone back home, and up to our encounter in the minimart he had responded neither to the book nor to the note.

He had simply not reacted.

The story 'Dreams' has a third character: Effi, who suggests the narrator could go and see her analyst in an emergency – *if you're ever in a really bad place, a really shitty place, I mean* – and that character too is based on a woman I was friends with for a long time, or rather: a woman I used to know.

Ada.

These days, I wonder why I didn't dedicate the story to Ada as well, why I didn't put a copy of *Lettipark* in Ada's letterbox in the hope of running into her. Why did I not think in the same way of Ada, without whom, in reality as in the story, I wouldn't have started my analysis. Without Ada, I wouldn't have met Dr Dreehüs, I wouldn't have written *Alice* or *Where Love Begins*; like in 'Dreams', it was Ada who'd recommended her analyst to me. Every decision in favour of a sentence is a decision against countless other sentences. Every decision in favour of a story passes up countless other stories. One word destroys another word. Writing means obliterating. I decided in favour of Dr Dreehüs and against Ada.

That's one way I could look at it.

I met Ada in the early 90s. She was the same age as me, the uncrowned queen of a far-reaching urban tribe in which most, like Ada, came from Frankfurt-Oder on the border to Poland. This origin, according to Ada, from a city taken by storm by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War, fully explained why Frankfurt's children's children were so incapable and auto-aggressive, so excessively unstable: Frankfurt was a traumatised city, and the people born there bore the war trauma inside them in the third generation and to this day. Ada lived out her trauma in a large, shady apartment on Helmholtzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg, which someone had occupied on her behalf in the chaotic months after the Berlin Wall came down and which couldn't be taken away from her – for a while. A huge asymmetric kitchen-living room, wicker armchair with lambskin at the rear window, where Ada often sat and breastfed her baby. She was the first young mother I met, and she occupied her role with the air of an ur-mother; that wicker chair was her throne. The room full of shadows in motion, always pebbles and marbles on the long, scratched table, bouquets of branches and wild wasteland flowers in carafes, black-and-white photos pinned to the bare wall next to Shiva with all his golden arms next to newspaper clippings crackling in the draught. Candles and incense sticks, someone constantly tinkling away on the piano. The baby born in that room was delicate, rarely cried, big dark eyes fixed unwaveringly on the visitors who came and went, the front door unlocked, no distinction

made between day and night, the light always chalky as if underwater, no rules, barely a line to be crossed. It was evidently possible to be a reliable mother and to lose oneself at the same time, to give oneself up; I remember Ada at the counter of the bar we often went to at the time, I remember the dispassion with which she unbuttoned her shirt, took it off, sat before us with her upper body bared, upright and attentive; she wanted us to admire her bare breasts at two in the morning, she said they were the most beautiful out of all the breasts in the world – and we did, and we presumably assumed she was right. Where was the baby on those long nights, I think these days; at the time, I never wondered about it. Ada had a husband who amazed us by managing to study law, graduate, go about a regular job, earn money and still be with us when we set out to climb down into the nights like into deep dark wells. It was Ada who pointed out to me that the family I came from, had grown up in, didn't necessarily have to stay my family, that it was possible to leave them, cut them off and look for another, a better one; she herself had cut herself loose from her Frankfurt origins and gathered a chosen family around her, made up of her husband, her child and a close circle of other women and men. That family was good and affirming, in contrast to her biological family, its only purpose having been bringing Ada into the world, she said. Strangely, Ada never gave the impression while deliberating on such things that she needed any affirmation or consolation. She was invariably very composed,

distanced, ironically cheerful and possessed of an interested and defiant aloofness, she seemed always to know something I didn't know. Her deliberations on the family amazed and unsettled me; as harmless as they seem to me these days, they were very important to me then. My family was a gossamer in which I was pupated, bound up and safe. Ada's views tugged a thread loose from that cocoon, pulled it apart, loosened it; it was other things that then led to its dissolution, but Ada, with the baby at her beautiful breast and her husband behind her and the others behind her husband, made the first cut.

I assume she didn't know that.

When I had my baby, five years after her, we began to spend the holidays together in my family's summerhouse on the North Sea. Tides and dykes, the treeless coast, the eternal triste rain were new to these people from Frankfurt, Brandenburg, East Berlin, and absolutely alien to begin with. The house, once my grandmother's home, made up for it. Old, decrepit, provisionally furnished, no curtains at the windows, light perforated by a tangle of climbing plants, in one room a fantastic uncle who took part in the nightly parties and could quote Heine, albeit rather patchily; an overgrown garden with trees for hammocks and lanterns, and friends came and went over the weeks,

extended and chosen family, taking it ever more for granted. It was that house where Ada explained her family principle to me, and she did so with a gentle gesture at all the things surrounding us there. Furniture, framed certificates, turn-of-the-century photographs, stopped clocks with bent hands, chipped crockery and the name of the house, which someone had hammered in golden letters beneath the gable, a hundred years ago:

Daheim: home.

All this, Ada said, is yours but it doesn't have to be. You can accept it – or let it go. You can be here but you don't have to feel responsible for anything. Anything at all. And then she stood up, walked away and left me alone with her suggestion.

I remember a dress made of tatty indigo-blue silk that she often wore, bought for ten euros at the market on Kollwitzplatz; of all the dresses I know, that was the most beautiful. She took it off the one time just the two of us (it must have been deliberate, not coincidence) went out to the mud flats, as far out as possible, up to the North Sea's edge. Evening. We'd cycled to the wild beach, to the spot where the promenade ended, the dunes began. We had leaned our bikes against each other, taken off our shoes and walked out towards the open sea, and once we reached the place where we could go no further, Ada had taken off her dress and stood naked



next to me. Dusk, the sky above the land far behind us now night, the sky above the water still bright, the water mother-of-pearl, Ada's body pale and slow against the dark seam of the sea. I didn't take my dress off. She had put hers back on at some point; then we'd walked back, cycled back to the house. On another, later afternoon, she once embraced me fiercely and unexpectedly, in the hall by the rack of rain-soaked coats, between the children's countless wellington boots, Ada's scent suddenly so perceptible, dark, sandy, almost masculine. In every one of those summers back then, she gave me flowers on my son's birthday, an August bouquet picked on the edges of the fields the night before; she was the only person who considered that tradition important. The summers were exhausting. Nerve-wracking, making us happy in an exorbitant way that was painful for everyone, our goals all variable and moveable, life one long lyrical transit. Once Ada's child was old enough to go to school alone in Berlin, she sometimes let her husband and child go back without her, and stayed on. One summer, her husband called me after getting back home to thank me for his stay and sum up how important it had all been for him, and then he asked me to get Ada on the phone, only to tell her the washing machine was broken and the fridge was mouldy. After that conversation, she sat down on the bench by the front door and cried. I'd never seen her cry before, and never did again. I'd like to say she left her husband shortly afterwards, met another man and had a second child; in real life, years passed between that crying on

the bench and the second child, years that feel only in retrospect like a single step from one room to another. With her second child and that child's father, Ada still spent her summers at the house; we stayed close. The second child's father got the place at the head of the table, a renewer; he left that spot after every meal as if he were the youngest of all the children. There was a walk on which he and Ada set out, and when they got back his glasses were broken, his shirt ripped, and his nose was bleeding. Things didn't seem to get easier. And yet – unforgettable how Ada retired at noon with her second child, still toothless and chubby-cheeked, for a nap. How she drank a big glass of milk before the nap, the baby perched on her hip, snuggled into the curve of her arm, round cheek laid on Ada's shoulder, how she held the glass with her free right hand, downed it in one, head tipped all the way back, in deep, earnest gulps. Ritually, as if it were not milk but something far more exquisite, essential, not a drink but a colour, a material she was ingesting before she escaped with her child into the in-between world of sleep, which I knew would be deep, heavy with dreams and genuinely delicious; nothing compares to a nap shared with a child. She put the empty glass back on the table, ran the back of her hand, her wrist, over her mouth, gave me a mysterious and tender smile, went to her room and closed the door gently behind her. In the years of her separation from her first husband, her dissolution of her chosen family, her love for the father of the second child and the birth of that child, she did her analysis

with Dr Dreehuï, something I didn't know at the time; she only told me about it once the analysis, the restructuring, was over. She disbanded her family. Or her family disbanded itself. The father of her first child had a baby with a woman from Tierra del Fuego, the father of the second left Berlin. The building on Helmholtzplatz was sold and its tenants were turfed out. Ada moved into a small apartment a few streets away, in a building with a camera hooked up to the doorbells, which was the beginning of the end, sealing the end, domesticating us all.

My child got older.

The summers were limited; sometimes school started back in early August and we had to go back to Berlin, dog days in the city, days which always made me melancholy and sad, full of yearning for the water, the garden, the bed in the attic room with the sandy sheets, listening to my child's breathing in the night. On one of those dog days, I was sitting in a café with Ada and as she went to leave, she said in passing that she had to go to her analysis session, one of the last, her analysis was over. She gestured down the street, towards where the practice must be. She said: A good analyst, if you ever need one.

And that was all.

That tiny scene – the café, the remark, the gesture in the direction – crops up in my story ‘Dreams’. Two or three sentences that deliberately silence all else – the indigo dress, the light on the mud flats and the water, the glass of milk and the nap, the chosen families, the children, mine and hers – ultimately negating them. Those two or three sentences sum up something that’s impossible to grasp. They decide in favour of a single moment, a snow-globe instant. They cast all the rest overboard.

Omission.

Writing imitates life, things disappearing, images constantly left behind, going out of focus, sputtering out. But the autonomous decision in favour of that omission – not the glass of milk, not the dress, but yes to the café scene, although the milk and the dress are more sensual – makes it easier, balances out anguish and grief over loss and time elapsed. The father of Ada’s second child once said he fell in love above all with her hands, her gestures; a remark I could instantly relate to. I always found Ada’s hands even more beautiful than her breasts: their distinctive knuckles, slim fingernails, the explicitness with which she stretched out those hands, spread her fingers when she made her decisive, capricious observations, the elegant nonchalance with which she touched things, moved them, dropped them. She was a beautiful and quite cold woman with an upright, always rather defiant posture, her gait bouncy, light-hearted.

I never trusted her; perhaps that's why it's hard for me to say I was friends with her. I'd rather say I used to know her. It would be easier to say I used to love Ada. After that occasion in the café we lost touch, I broke off contact. It may have been because I took her comment seriously, made an appointment with Dr Dreehuÿs, began my analysis. Perhaps too much closeness, Ada's sessions on the couch, my own sessions on the same couch. Dr Dreehuÿs, I thought, knows something about me that I'd never tell him of my own accord, he knows things about me that Ada told him. I must have felt the need to regain control, to place the other at a safe distance. In the first years of my analysis I crashed, and I didn't want to expose myself to Ada in that state, have her observe me. We lost one another; I can't remember missing her. I was busy leaving my own family, and I didn't intend to start a new one.

I wanted, I think these days, to be alone.

The story 'Dreams' describes a realisation – the late classification of a relationship, the insight that we delude ourselves, fool ourselves, how glad we are to be fooled. Ada may have felt a vague sense of endearment towards me, but she never let me out of her sight; I would never have become a member of her family. In the summers with the children, she always wanted us all to do a reading of

Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* together. A scene she dreamed of – the circle of friends around the long garden table by night, with white wine, cigarettes, candlelight and the classic yellow Reclam paperbacks, reading roles she'd already allotted, but it had never gone further. Those paperbacks are still on the bookshelf in the house by the sea. What would have happened if we'd agreed to Ada's suggestion? No one wanted to read *The Cherry Orchard*. Everyone wanted to drink to excess, smoke, tell stories, let themselves go, take different roles, and perhaps that was the only sign of Ada's vulnerability – that she wished we wanted to act together. We didn't act together. Our children have left home. The story focuses on the separation, a futility. Putting a copy of *Lettipark* in Ada's letterbox would have been a superfluous gesture – and beyond that, I assume Ada would prefer to leave me in the dark about her possible reading of my view of our years.

In the Trommel, Dr Dreehu's was sitting alone at the bar, with his back to the door. The barkeeper saw me coming in and Dr Dreehu's followed his eyes, turned around to me over his shoulder and gave an unwitting smile – he hadn't expected me, but he wasn't surprised at my appearance. He promptly patted the barstool next to him and rid me of my embarrassment; to an outsider, it might have looked like we'd arranged to meet. Dr Dreehu's seemed to like being alone in a

bar, we were the only guests. He smoked. The light was dim, the bar not clearly of any particular persuasion, the barkeeper with a touch of the heavyweight to him, seeming to sense that the encounter between Dr Dreehuïs and me was – let's say, somewhat shady. A little illegitimate.

I took off my jacket, asked him for a second cigarette. Dr Dreehuïs tapped one out of the soft-pack as if it were the most normal thing in the world, and held it out to me.

He said: What are you drinking?

He said: It's on me.

At that point in time, he and I had spent over a thousand hours of our lives together. I had lain on his couch three times a week, with few interruptions, and talked about all sorts of things I usually kept to myself under all circumstances. Dr Dreehuïs knew a good deal about me, I knew nothing about him, and our encounter in the Trommel was an unexpected expansion of our configuration, a small and puzzling mutation. To this day, I'm not sure whether Dr Dreehuïs was a competent analyst. When other people talk about their analyses, I get an impression of lively and heart-warming communication; Dr

Dreehuís, however, almost never spoke to me, I remember perhaps five utterances in ten years. The sessions passed with my talking to myself in a searching motion, pauses between my sentences, my questions remaining posed to myself; it was up to me to find the answers. These days I think that kind of analysis was exactly right for me: it was ideal.

In one of our first sessions, I had told Dr Dreehuís about my fear of no longer being able to write at the end of the analysis, having to sacrifice writing to the analysis. He had replied that that remained to be seen, and submerged after that mysterious remark into a silence from which he did not reappear for ten years. More or less. I'm exaggerating, but that is what I remember, and that is what the narrator in the story remembers: Dr Dreehuís-Gupka never said anything, and in some moments she was certain – as I was – that he'd fallen asleep. He would always sit behind me, at the top end of the couch, I would never turn around to him, having the superstitious impression it would bring bad luck to turn around to him. Sometimes we'd laugh together, he had a sense of humour. Occasionally, he might express sympathy or understanding through half a sigh or a longer exhalation. But whenever I'd ask him a question he would ask me why I was asking him, and refuse to answer. There had been sessions when I'd arrived early, paced up and down the park outside



the building, looked up at his windows and seen him smoking a cigarette on the balcony, and I'd felt great satisfaction that Dr Dreehu's had his own addictions, was dependent on such an unhealthy habit. He played classical guitar, the guitar rested against his desk in an expensive bag every Monday. And that was all I knew about him. The night-time encounter in the Trommel harboured the not inconsiderable risk of gazing at a face that wasn't what I thought I knew. Instead, the face of a stranger, to whom I had entrusted my whole life in the mistaken assumption that he understood me – and now it might prove that he'd understood nothing at all and aside from that was a know-it-all, unlikeable and cold. I felt an irrational and yet justified fear that Dr Dreehu's might simply not be the man I had taken him for, might, to use a preferred phrase from Ada's chosen family, be an utter idiot. *A total and utter idiot*. Ten years would collapse in on themselves, crumble into nothingness:

Cinders.

Realisation in time-lapse – a little more specific than the realisation over years that the person you love is not the person you think, a gradually dawning awareness that you are of course alone in the world after all, your partner a mirror-image of your needs which will turn away willingly the moment you let go. Held by nothing, responsible for no one, least of all for you.

You are, in Turgenev's words, alone like a finger.

I didn't know what to drink, but Dr Dreehu's knew that, and he ordered for me in a manner that had a clear and absurd touch of the paternal: a gin and tonic. The barkeeper mixed the drink placidly as I watched on. And then I took the first sip, lit my second cigarette myself, turned to the side, gathered my courage and looked at Dr Dreehu's. His expression was friendly, rather arrogant in a way that was familiar for no good reason, a little weary, beneath the weariness essentially: earnest.

He was alright.

His gaze was alright, as was his gentle and mockingly interested amusement; he was nothing but a man in the almost late years of his life sitting at a rather disconsolate bar at two in the morning – on a weekday; he'd get up early the next day and go about his specific work – and that fact alone had something deficient about it, and the deficiency had something calming about it, and I had evidently not, at least not at this first glance, been wrong about him.

He said: You braved your way into the Trommel. You were brave enough to come in, I'm glad, and it was clear he meant what he said.

I said: Does this barkeeper here know what your job is?

He said: This barkeeper here thinks I'm an electrician.

I said: There are few jobs I'd think you less capable of than that.