

Anna Katharina Hahn
Kürzere Tage

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Anna Katharina Hahn: *Shorter Days*
(Opening chapter of the novel)

JUDITH

Judith smokes in a hurry, her back against the door of their apartment. She inhales the smoke deep into her chest and exhales through her nostrils. Wanting a cigarette - worse than a full bladder - has taken over her entire day. In the morning, the children had slipped into bed beside her before she'd been able to nip out to smoke on the kitchen balcony. She'd to wait far too long for the right moment. The stony face with which she'd made tea, poured muesli into bowls, cut fruit, and just sipped at her own cup of tea, her family knows too well. 'My mum's grumpy sometimes in the mornings,' five-year-old Uli remarked. Judith takes a really serious puff, imagines the bluey clouds mixing with her blood, moving towards her heart, enveloping it, causing it to beat more gently. The craving gradually fades, she has eyes and ears for her surroundings again, and begins to feel ashamed. Klaus is cursing in the stairwell, he's forgotten something probably, the recorder, or Uli's cap. The lesson starts at four. She prays in no particular direction that the two don't come back up. Then she hears Uli's voice, bright, reproachful: '*Pa-pa*, there it's there!', a sigh from Klaus, thudding down the stairs, the door to the building closing. She rushes the last puff, can feel the heat in her fingertips as she stubs the butt out in the tiny ashtray. She pushes the lid shut and closes her slender hand round the little tin that, with its silver gleam, and warmed from within by the dying ashes, seems like the utensils for some especially refined vice to her – like the needles of a dandy, the coke spoon of a bohemienne.

She goes through the long hall into the dining-room, opens the window wide, and lets the smoke escape. It has been a long time since she last let herself go like that. Normally, she smokes on the balcony, or down in the courtyard. That's why she insists on taking the rubbish out herself. Constantinstrasse, the street below, is quiet in the afternoon light. The buildings - brownish-yellow sandstone, elaborate facades – seem to swell into the street, like fresh loaves and cakes

spilling out of their tins. The sun is above the grey slate roofs, causing smells to rise that, even in the middle of town, are typical of autumn: the nutty aroma of trodden leaves, on the pavements and in the surrounding courtyards; the fruits of the elder bush, the rowan, apple and plum trees, in part overripe on the branches still, in part rotten windfall on the grass of the small garden behind the house. Add to that the fumes of the cars that rarely go past, and smoke from heating-pipes – the sign the first night frost is on its way.

Judith hides the ashtray, lighter, and her packet of *Rothände* in the hall cupboard, in the depths of her ugliest handbag, and pops a strong peppermint in her mouth. She then returns to the window and shakes the tablecloth out. A girl Uli's age bobs up and down on the pavement opposite, restless as a bird. Her face is painted white, a loud scarf is concealing her hair, in one of her hands she holds a small broom. She turns her head towards the open door of the neighbouring building and roars, 'Mama, Feli, faster!' Halloween is still a week away, but Judith has seen children dressed-up today already. Should one of them ring the doorbell, she won't go to the door. She always, after all, guides her sons *past* shops with grinning pumpkins, skeletons and vampires.

The silver Skoda is already away. She didn't wave to Uli and Klaus. No doubt the boy looked up, all disappointed. Klaus knows why she didn't appear at the window. He probably lied for her. 'Mum's in the kitchen, no doubt. Or she has to look after Kilian.' In the course of the evening, though, he'll still raise the subject again: 'Just unnecessary sadness again, all because of your Hackstrasse rubbish.'

Hackstrasse rubbish is Klaus's code word for various bad habits Judith brought with her from her years in the dark one-room flat in Stuttgart East. From the window you could see the gas tank and the grounds of the abattoirs; the stadium, too, the sweeping curves of its roof; and the tower of a church, the name of which she still doesn't know.

In Hackstrasse, she'd always lit the first one of the morning in bed already, her eyes half-closed still, her hands warm from sleep, the muscles still so asleep she'd barely the strength to get the lighter to work. When she then slowly forced herself out of bed, to go to the loo, the coffee machine, and later to the department or one of her practical posts, the breakfast cigarette followed the morning cigarette, and so on. Here in Constantinstrasse, far away from the dirty east, and even during her pregnancies, she'd got up sometimes at night and smoked, inhaling with relish while at the same time tortured by the image of the embryo twitching helplessly in the amniotic fluid, its pulse increasing tremendously in response to the vascular constrictions. Klaus, fortunately, had never realised, nor had her gynaecologist or the midwife. But Hackstrasse rubbish was also the wish to be like a mummy, rigid, motionless, her limbs tightly wrapped in bandages soaked in resin, surrounded by darkness, and with a bunch of dried herbs in her mouth, and her heart,

racing, tormented, against all the rules of this form of burial, billeted out to an alabaster jug, with hieroglyphics on it, in the backmost chamber of the underground dwelling. The brain, with its incessant chatter, its constant 'I can't, I can't, I'm afraid I won't manage,' would be leached, what remained of it expelled via the nostrils, snot-like, and just as useless and revolting. The dome of bone, now stuffed with straw, would house perfect peace. The ears would hear nothing but silence. No-one could tempt this deaf Lazarus back to a life full of torment. Judith, who, in Hackstrasse, had despaired over her dissertation on Otto Dix's triptychs in the manner of the old masters, had, in her wish to get as close as possible to the state of being buried, simply not got up at all some days. She'd pulled the cover up over her head and turned her back to the desk so as not to have to see the illustrated books she'd borrowed from the Landesbibliothek, the piles of photocopies stapled together, and her laptop, its gob firmly shut, sulking. Only towards evening would she rise, if Sören, her long-term affair, called and suggested they meet in some bar or other. In that case, she'd do her make-up carefully, put her leather trousers on, and spray herself with 'Opium'.

Right from the beginning of her History of Art degree, Judith had been a keen, ambitious student who'd never had to waitress, had rather always got jobs as a junior research assistant. She often sat in the departmental library in Keplerstrasse until it closed, beneath a flickering neon strip, writing pearls of wisdom out on index cards, by Panofsky through to Aby Warburg. She visited the *Staatgalerie* in Stuttgart weekend after weekend, took cheap buses to Berlin, Düsseldorf and Hamburg to see important exhibitions. In the final years of her course, she laced her slender ankles up in cool red strap-shoes. Her black hair she put up, doing her make-up like Frida Kahlo, with large shining earrings to match. That her name was actually Jutta, that her parents owned a kitchen design studio in Kirchheim unter Teck, and that her two married sisters already had five children between them, no-one could have known by looking at her. She didn't say much, but when she did speak, what she said was irrefutable. 'This is an example of someone really thinking about something. Well done, Ms Seysollf.' None of her fellow students, all female, could begin to know that for nights before each presentation Judith couldn't sleep, that she'd sit, crying, beneath her desk and wouldn't eat anything, that anything she had to say before a largish group she'd have to write down and learn by heart before she'd dare to open her mouth. Handing in homework triggered panic attacks, too. Her constant hesitating, her need to correct her work time and time again, caused her to fall behind by several semesters. At university, this kind of behaviour was possible since nobody stopped her from doing it, no-one was there to advise her. No-one at home was in a position to understand. The occasional laments of 'Daughter dear, what good is it goin to do ye, it's time ye got married an' all' Judith sidestepped by restricting her visits

to high feast days though she was very fond of her family, and missed the Teck, its rounded top, her nephews and nieces, and even the island units and wall cabinets in her parents' shop.

Due to his good reputation, her dissertation supervisor was often abroad. On those rare occasions when he was available for students, you had to seek an appointment months in advance. When Judith was his assistant, she set eyes on him maybe three times a semester. She came upon Professor Baumeister, who, to top things off, looked incredibly like Elias Canetti, in the way a female masochist might respond to the ad of a strict taskmaster. He'd a reputation for being unpredictable. His quarrels with his colleagues were legendary. It was whispered that he'd told his own assistant professor in no uncertain terms to *keep* his Ph.D. Judith's whole body trembled when she spoke to Baumeister by phone, and with a cool voice outlined her hypotheses. Written statements, she avoided. It seemed too dangerous to give him something into his hand that he could tear to shreds or cover in red.

'Otto Dix's work in the manner of the old masters, that's a topic about which not much has been written. You'll come up with something, I'm sure, Ms Seysolff, conscientious as you are. You know that, with me, you won't be treated like at nursery school. You are capable of working independently, no-one has to take you by the hand. No more than 70 pages, say. Start off in the *Kunstgebäude*, here in town. Then take a short trip to the Höri peninsula, to Hemmenhofen. And, in the evening, go up the Schiener Berg and eat at the *Hirsch*. I can recommend the whitefish done in almond butter. And order a nice rosé to accompany it.'

Judith didn't like Otto Dix. When she was shopping, or on the tram, the spiteful grimaces of his city-dwellers appeared like masks on the faces of passers-by. She saw babies in prams suddenly turn all bluey-red, like aborted foetuses. The mutilated faces of the beggars in the Keplerstrasse underpass grinned at her, and when she got to Breuninger, the moneybags who shopped there had the obscene doughy complexions, suddenly, of Berlin whores. Beneath the clear winter skies, too, of landscapes in the manner of the old masters, she always had to shiver.

At the *Staatgalerie*, having dutifully visited the Expressionists, Judith would sneak along to Corinth, Liebermann and Thoma. She looked at forest glades, large families, people working with their hands, and sat down on one of the benches covered in dark green velvet. Resting her head in her hands, she looked at a world that no longer existed, that – despite all her knowledge of the socio-economic context – she'd have flung herself into, without hesitation.

The one Dix painting that Judith liked was that of the dancer Anita Berber. A poster of Anita had hung on Judith's wardrobe, back in Hackstrasse. Through the tight, bright-red dress, her breasts and pubic triangle thumped you, almost. One of her hands was on her hip, her painted

talons gleaming. Anita had an arrogant look on her face, was cool as anything, clearly. 'I'd be too shit-scared to screw that one,' Sören, shaking his head, said.

In her Dix period, the anxiety symptoms started to become unbearable. The feeling of failure, of her backside completely falling out of her, as Sören put it, took hold of her and gave her a good shaking, making even a single thought impossible. Fear, a passing guest normally, began to take up residence in her chest. It made her lie awake at night, accompanied her every step, her resting pulse-rate went away up, her eyes would dart everywhere.

Feeling unable, one summer afternoon, to enter the library, she went straight to the doctor from the uni. While together with other people, she'd said something about sleeplessness. The name of a neurologist came up. 'He's dead easy-going, that one, he'll help you if you need something for the exams even, or even just a test.' Judith described her anxieties to the doctor, and left the surgery with a prescription for Tavor tabs, and the instruction to come back a week later. And so her blue tin period began.

The blue tin was a souvenir from London. 'General Biscuits' was written on the lid. Two naked angels with a net in their hands were impressed beneath the name. A fat fish was wriggling in the net, a smile about its big mouth despite its precarious position. In Constantinstrasse, the tin is right at the back of the kitchen cupboard and contains the cutters for Christmas cookies. In Hackstrasse, it had its place on the cistern of the toilet – visible to everyone. Judith kept her medication in it, initially just something for headaches and a packet of Tavor. The medication would cause a shifting fog to envelop Canetti/Baumeister, Dix's paintings, and Judith's future prospects in the local art scene, it would chase her anxiety away for a while, and help her put up with the daily wait for Sören's call, a wait which wore her down; it helped her put up with his behaviour otherwise, too. The prescribed dosage, sadly, was not enough to give her relief more permanently.

Soon, in addition to the neurologist at the uni, she'd found three other doctors in different parts of town, to whom she went regularly. It was quite simple: she turned up without any make-up on and not having had a shower, dropped the words 'exam nerves' and 'no sleep' into the conversation, and cried a little, which wasn't difficult. She soon worked out at which after-hours pharmacy the sentence 'Dr So-and-so always prescribes me this' worked, where overburdened assistants handed hastily-signed prescriptions over the counter. If desperate, she could also look up a guy in a black tracksuit, and with a woollen hat with flames embroidered in it, at the north entrance to the main station. He had every kind of medication possible, and would rhyme off the names like a psalm: 'Valium, Librium, Tranxilium, Adumbran, Halcion, Rohypnol, Tramal, Fortal, Lepinal, Repocal...'

Judith takes the coffee things into the kitchen and puts the stopper in the sink. She empties some washing-up liquid in and runs the hot water. From the children's bedroom come bits of songs and the sound of a child babbling quietly: Kilian is keeping himself occupied, and Judith doesn't disturb him. She wipes the table, pushes the chairs back, and slowly starts to sweep the floor. She concentrates totally on the regular motions with which she works the brush across the parquet. The physical effort, the bending down and sweeping things up with the hand-brush, the moving-the-furniture, soon has her sweating. She hears nothing but her wheezing and breathing, and the rhythm of the bristles scraping gently over the wood. A blissful emptiness fills her skull. She drifts through the room as though deep beneath the sea, oblivious to any objections from her cerebral cortex. These actions enable her to come the closest she can to relaxing.

The therapeutic aspect of cleaning she only discovered when, following the birth of Uli, she removed all technology from the household – got rid of the dishwasher, the electric mixer, and the Hoover, even. 'If children, at home, get to know nothing but the drones of a machine park, with the machines creating cleanliness and order, how – if they don't see people at work ever – are they to learn to join in, to help, to develop in their own right?' the gentle man in the lecture theatre up at Uhlandshöhe had asked them to consider. And Judith, who, guided by a pastel-coloured folded leaflet on the counter at the gynaecologist's, had stumbled more by chance than anything else upon the germ cell of Waldorf pedagogy, took a liberating pleasure in the strictness of the guidelines contained therein. Her decision to embrace the world of Waldorf was like a sudden revelation, like entering a spiritual order. A book, a massive manual on health and education, was enough to convince her. Judith acquired a cradle with a pink canopy, cloth nappies, and a sheepskin, put Raffael's Madonna up on the wall, and started knitting. Some things would be difficult - of course, they would. But if she observed all the promising restrictions, she couldn't do any wrong. It all seemed so easy and very tempting: her children would never fall ill, they'd grow up to be upright, imaginative, and happy individuals, free of addictions and doubts. Her Hackstrasse rubbish, like the biting cold at the summits of despair, would be completely alien to them. She swapped Otto Dix for Hans Thoma. And now, when she sees Ulrich and Kilian playing in their plastic-free bedroom, or eagerly imitating her own housewifely activities in the kitchen and the garden, she has the impression she's never been so successful at anything ever before.

In the kitchen, an orangey-red pumpkin is beside a bunch of carrots on the worktop: the ingredients for the soup this evening. She takes pleasure in the colours, has to brush over the warts on the pumpkin's skin, to rub with her thumb at the dried-in earth on the carrot, for the colours of their skins to shine through. She intends to sow carrots with the children in the spring.

They'll find a place in their little garden where the bushy green tops will have space to grow. She imagines the two boys grabbing the shocks of feathery leaves and pulling the vegetables from the ground, wiping the earth off against their trousers, and immediately biting in, both completely at one with nature – nature which provides them with food. Planting potatoes would be a nice experience too, watching how from a seed potato many little chits grow, with pretty white and purple blossoms at the top, and edible roots beneath. At one of the final information evenings at the kindergarten, though, Judith learned how Rudolf Steiner rejected the potato on account of its starch content. The speaker, an anthroposophist lady doctor, was unambiguous: 'The potato has an unbalanced effect on the central nerve organs. It weakens that form of thinking which is meditative and spiritual, in favour of that which is rational and reflective - thus promoting an imagination reduced to the materialistic. You'll find that already four weeks after switching from potatoes to cereals, roots, and other vegetables, fresher and more flexible thinking will kick in – to the benefit of everyone, both the children and the parents.'

In the past, Judith would always have smiled at such assertions. While she was a student, doubt left its mark on everything she read, every painting she looked at. There seemed to be an organ that constantly secreted this subversive substance. If someone failed to be critical, that person's mind wasn't working properly. Accept trustingly, do not analyse, join in, and absorb things by *feeling* them, these maxims of Steiner's philosophy – recommended for children as well as adults – seem like a warm bath to her, a bath in which her worn-out brain can recover.

Judith reads Steiner's works, mind you, only reluctantly, even if the kindergarten likes to see parents beginning to engage with the master's thinking. 'The Philosophy of Thought' is on her bedside table, its spine still unbroken. She flicks through it when she thinks she might fall asleep more easily by following the endless circles of muddled, badly-formulated trains of thought. Trusting in an *Überbau* is good enough for her. She knows little about the akasha chronicle, Atlantis, about karma, elementary beings, and the four temperaments. She prefers the helpful booklets produced by anthroposophists - that tell you what children should play with, what they should get to eat, how you can create nature tables to mark each season, knit gnomes, and rediscover forgotten ball games, and games with marbles. When she reads such things and keeps to them, she feels she's in a safe place – like the woollen mitten the mouse in the picture-book always slips into.

For a while Judith is busy, cleaning the vegetables. The pumpkin resists a lot, its skin is hard and cracked. She levers piece after piece off. She likes being in the kitchen. She likes seeing the filled shelves, the glass jars with screw-on lids with spelt, wheat meal, and rolled oats in them, the coloured herbal-tea tins, the earthenware crockery, the ironed drying cloths on their hooks. It's a

place where she can feel relaxed. She thinks, with repulsion, of the tiny, dark kitchenette in Hackstrasse. There wasn't a proper cooker, just two electric rings, the previous tenant's dirt encrusted on them. She herself had only ever boiled water for coffee and heated up ready-made meals on them. As she ate, she would read the newspaper, phone, smoke, and type up her papers sometimes, spilling things over the keyboard as she did, her stomach in cramps at the thought of how Baumeister might assess her attempts to interpret Dix. The image of her filthy cooking facilities doesn't remain alone for long, others follow and unfold before her, so starkly and painfully that she winces: her trip each morning by tram to the uni, across Stuttgart East, along by the gas tank that sits there, in the valley basin, like a huge Michelin man that someone constructed from black discs, surrounded by the various constructions of the industrial estates. Judith travelled every morning from the abattoir to Keplerstrasse, past dodgy saunas, Turkish vegetable shops and jewellers, the Karl Olga Hospital. She passed the *Bergfriedhof* cemetery, protected by its grey roughcast walls, behind which dark trees rose high into the sky, like in a Böcklin painting, passed Croatian, Greek and Serbian restaurants, disco joints, discount supermarkets, and up Werastrasse, the long slope leading up to the judicial district from below.

Then she sees herself, her mascara all smudged, one of her huge silver ear-rings caught in her tossed hair, coughing heavily. The cough she got from trying to take all of Sören's penis in her mouth. She choked, turned her head to one side, didn't say anything. 'Hey! Not on my jacket!' he roared, positively tearing the garment she'd been sitting on, an old airman's jacket from the U.S. army, away from under her. Sören was studying Medicine in Tübingen and only came to Stuttgart at weekends. He was big, pale and blond. His face, with its hooked nose, full mouth, and the cold blue eyes behind his steel-rimmed glasses, had a disparaging look which didn't fade in his sleep, even. Normally, Judith knocked back a few shorts before going out partying in the evening, to reach that level of indifference that, in her opinion, was needed for speaking to men she didn't know. 'You look like a Nazi officer,' she'd said to Sören. She took him back to Hackstrasse, and was shocked to realise how much she wanted to hear something definite from him as he got back into his jeans the next morning. But Sören wasn't for committing himself to anything. He came when it suited him, called when he was in town, or summoned Judith to his student residence in Tübingen. He spoke openly of his other relationships, there had to be at least two. Judith ruled out hearing the detail. Of course she'd have liked to ask about every single aspect, but she didn't want to forget herself. Once, he rang her doorbell in the middle of the night, covered in blood and stinking of beer, and – without explanation – went into her windowless bathroom that always smelt of drains to put stitches in the long cut above his forehead himself. He was writing his PhD on penicillin and was always raving about the miraculous powers of antibiotics. But Sören also

brought her champagne and kissed her on the balcony of the students' association while various blondes looked on, raging. His hard fingers had clasped hers while the columns of the sandstone balustrade, warmed by the sun, had pressed into her back like the ribs of some giant primeval animal. Sören's face was very close, she could see the reflections in the glasses in front of his eyes. She took them off gently and put them in her pocket. He was short-sighted and had to take her hand for the rest of the evening.

Judith screws up her eyes, and shakes herself to interrupt the movie. She forces herself to think about Kilian's snack, it's a long time till teatime still. Once his father and brother left, the three-year-old went into the children's bedroom. He can occupy himself for ages and, unlike Uli, who is talkative, doesn't always need company.

She puts dried-apple rings and raisins into a small bowl, spoons herbal tea into the porcelain tea-ball with the forget-me-not pattern on it, turns on the tap, holds the kettle beneath it, strikes a match – in Hackstrasse, she'd a lighter, bright pink, with the logo of a pizza delivery outfit. She lights the gas. The water boils quickly. The kettle whistles, the tea-ball sinks down into the water, leaving a trail of silver bubbles behind, there's the scent of mint and melissa in the air,- all this, like every other day. The order of things is determined by her, and by Waldorf pedagogy: no excitement, no television, not too many visitors, a very ritualised daily schedule that follows the cycles of nature. It is a predictable way of living, at home like in the kindergarten: Mondays - muesli, Tuesdays - wheatmeal porridge, Wednesdays - water colours, Thursdays - plastic arts, for weeks on end the same fairytale is told. The mad rush has gone from her life. She often travels out of the city, via Degerloch, up to the villages up on the *Fildern*, now officially part of Stuttgart. There, she looks out for signs: Cut your own flowers. She carts bundles of them home with her: peonies, gladioli and sunflowers; in autumn asters, ivies, branches from fir trees; and, finally, Christmas roses, greenish, pale, with waxen petals full of frost crystals. In the living-room, there is a nature table with small felt figures, representing the Nature spirits, that they all made themselves, astonished again and again that their hands were capable of it. And so she swings with her family to this great rhythm, in a giant bell within which they pass through time, rocking to and fro, from winter into spring, from spring into summer, into autumn, and then through advent, the repetition all the while: constant and comforting.

Quiet humming is coming from the children's room, the song about the fox stealing the goose, interrupted by the child whispering. Kilian is crouching on the bright woollen carpet, his blond head bowed over a basket full of bits of branches, irregularly sawn. 'And now I puttin you in there, you go in there, and you say, you stay out.' For weeks now, it's been Kilian's favourite game, putting his wooden animals into an enclosure, right up against each other, the residents of

the forest and the farmyard together, as in Noah's arc. Today, he's altering things for the first time, the children's song a reason to exclude the fox. Holding her breath, Judith stands at the door, looking at his sturdy little legs in the brown cords, the roundness of the back of his head, the same light-coloured locks that Klaus and Uli have, the strong little hands. He has dirty fingernails. The wooden bowl with the wax colouring blocks is on the table, and the piece of paper beside it is covered with a composition in red, orange and yellow, wild circles with rays coming out of them, flowers perhaps. He'll explain it to her later. 'Look, Mama, that's Papa and Uli, and this is me, and that's you there.' And she'll take a pencil and write her youngest's words down on the reverse, with the date and his name in the top right-hand corner, as carefully as, a few years back, as the general dogsbody in a gallery up on Killesberg, she noted the title of every painting, and its selling price.

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