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Summer Lies

Written by Bernhard Schlink

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Summer Lies

Bernhard Schlink

W&N

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The House in the Forest

1

Sometimes it felt as if this had always been his life. That he'd always lived in this house in the forest, by the meadow with its apple trees and lilacs, and the pond with its weeping willows. That he'd always had his wife and daughter around him. And always received their farewells, when he went away, and their happy greetings when he came back.

Once a week they stood in front of the house and waved goodbye to him until his car was out of sight. He drove to the little town, collected the mail, took things to be repaired, collected whatever had been repaired or ordered, visited the physical therapist to do exercises for his back, and shopped at the general store. Once there he would stand for a while at the counter before the drive home, drinking a coffee, talking to a neighbor, or reading the *New York Times*. He was never away for more than five hours. He missed the company of his wife. And he missed the company of his daughter, whom he didn't take along, because she got carsick.

They heard him from a long way away. No other car took the narrow, rutted road that led to their house through a long, forested valley. They would stand in front of the house again, hand in hand, until he made the turn toward the meadow, Rita tore herself free of Kate and began to run, and flew into his arms almost before he had time to switch off the engine and

get out of the car. "Papa, Papa!" He held her, overwhelmed by her tenderness as she wrapped her arms around his neck and nestled her face against his.

On those days Kate belonged to him and Rita. Together they unloaded whatever he had brought from town, did things in the house or the garden, collected wood in the forest, caught fish in the pond, pickled cucumbers or onions, baked bread. Rita, full of family happiness and exuberance, ran from her father to her mother and from her mother to her father and just talked and talked. After supper the three of them would play, or he and Kate together would tell Rita a story that they'd worked out while they were cooking.

On other days Kate disappeared in the morning from the bedroom to her study. When he brought her coffee and fruit for breakfast, she would look up from her computer with a friendly smile, and if he had a problem to discuss with her she made an effort to understand it. But her thoughts were elsewhere, as they were when the three of them sat around the table at lunch or supper. Even after Rita's good-night story and good-night kiss, when she came to sit with him and they listened to music or watched a movie or read books, her thoughts were with the characters she was writing about.

He didn't let it weigh on him. He was happy—just knowing she was in the house, seeing her head at the window while he was working in the garden, then hearing her fingers typing on the computer keyboard while he was standing at the door, having her opposite him at supper and beside him in the evening. Feeling her, smelling her, hearing her breathing in the night. And he could not expect any more of her. She had told him she could only live if she was writing, and he had told her he accepted that.

Just as he accepted that he was alone with Rita day in, day

out. He woke her, washed and dressed her, had breakfast with her, and let her watch and help with the cooking, the washing and cleaning, the gardening, the repairing of the roof and the heating and the car. He answered her questions. He taught her to read, far too soon. He romped around with her even though his back hurt, because he knew she ought to romp around.

He accepted the way things were. But he wished they were together more as a family. He wished the days with Kate and Rita were not a part of life only once a week, but yesterday, today, and tomorrow too.

Does all happiness yearn to be eternal? Like all desire? No, he thought, what it yearns for is continuity. It yearns to endure in the future, having already been happiness in the past. Don't lovers fantasize that they already met as children and were drawn to each other? That they played in the same playground or went to the same school or spent their holidays in the same place with their parents? He didn't fantasize about any early encounters. He dreamed that Kate and Rita and he had put down roots here in defiance of every wind and every storm. Forever and ever.

2

They had moved here six months ago. He had started his search for a house in the country in the spring of the previous year and had looked all summer long. Kate was too busy even to look at pictures of houses on the Internet. She said she wanted a house somewhere near New York. But didn't she want to get away from the demands that were made on her in New York? That kept her from her writing and her family? That she would love to have declined, but could not, because part of life as a famous writer in New York required being reachable and available?

He found the house with its meadows and its pond in fall: five hours from New York, on the border with Vermont, away from large towns, away from large roads, sitting enchanted in the forest. He went up there alone a couple of times to deal with the broker and the owner. Then Kate came with him.

She had been through some stressful days, went to sleep as they drove up the highway, and didn't wake up till they exited onto the country road. The sunroof was open, and above her Kate saw blue sky and brightly colored leaves. She smiled at her husband. "Drunk on sleep, drunk on colors, drunk on freedom—I don't know where I am and where we're going. I've forgotten where I've come from." The last hour of their journey took them through the glowing landscape of an Indian summer, first along country roads with a yellow line down the middle, then on rural roads with none, and finally on the dirt road that led to the house. When she got out of the car and looked around, he knew that she liked the house. Her eyes swept over the forest, the meadow, the pond, came to rest on the house, and paused on one detail after the other: the door under the front porch held up by two slender columns, the windows, aligned neither with those above them nor with those beside them, the leaning chimney, the open veranda, the addition. More than two hundred years old, despite the ravages of time the house had not lost its dignity. Kate nudged him and signaled with her eyes at the corner windows on the second floor, two of them facing the pond and one of them facing the meadow. "Is that . . . ?"

"Yes, that's your room."

The cellar was dry, the floors were sound. Before the first snows new shingles were put on and new heating installed so the tiling guy and the electrician, the carpenter, and the painter could work even in the winter. When they moved in in the spring the floors hadn't yet been polished, the open fire-

place not yet bricked in, the kitchen cupboards not yet hung. But the very day after the move he led Kate into her completed study. After all their things had been unloaded and the truck had driven away, he had polished the floorboards that same evening and the next morning had brought her desk and bookshelves upstairs. She sat down at the desk, stroked the top of it, pulled open the drawer and closed it again, looked through the left-hand window at the pond and through the right-hand window at the meadow. "You positioned the desk just right—I don't want to decide between the water and the land. So when I look straight ahead, I'll be looking at the corner. In old houses ghosts come out of the corners, not through the doors."

Kate's study was next to their bedroom and Rita's bedroom; in the rear of the house was the bathroom and a little room that just held a table and chair. On the first floor, the front door opened immediately into the one large space, with its open fireplace and wooden beams, that encompassed both kitchen area, eating area, and living room.

"Shouldn't you and Rita swap? She's only in her room to sleep, and the little room is far too small for you to write in." He told himself Kate meant well. Perhaps she had a guilty conscience because in the time they had known each other, her writing career had soared while his declined. His first novel, a best seller in Germany, had found a publisher in New York and a producer in Hollywood. That was how he had met Kate, as a young German author on a reading tour in America, not a success here but full of promise and already planning his next novel. But with all the waiting for the film, which never got made, with all the traveling with Kate, who was soon being invited everywhere in the world, and with all his concerns for Rita, he'd done no more than make notes for his next novel. When asked what he did, he still said he was a writer. But he

wasn't working on anything, no matter what he said to Kate and what he even pretended to himself sometimes. So what would he do in a bigger room? Feel even more strongly that he was just marking time?

He put off the next novel till later. If it still interested him. What occupied his mind more than anything was whether Rita should start kindergarten. When she did, she'd no longer belong to him.

3

Naturally both parents loved Rita. But Kate could have pictured a life without children; he couldn't. When she got pregnant, she behaved as if it were nothing. He insisted that she go to the doctor and a prenatal gymnastics class. He put the ultrasound pictures up on the bulletin board. He stroked her swollen stomach, talked to it, read it poems, and played music to it, tolerated by an amused Kate.

Kate's love was matter-of-fact. Her father, a professor of history at Harvard, and her mother, a pianist who frequently toured, had raised their four children with the kind of efficiency associated with a business. The children had a good nanny, went to good schools, got good instruction in languages and music, and were supported by their parents in everything that came into their heads. They entered life in the knowledge that they would achieve what they wanted to achieve, their husbands or wives would function well in their jobs, in their homes, and in bed, and their children would of course run just as smoothly as they had run themselves. Love was the grease that lubricated this family machine.

For him love and family were the fulfillment of a dream he

had begun to dream when the marriage of his parents, father an administrative employee, mother a bus driver, sank into a morass of spite, screaming matches, and violence. His parents hit him too sometimes. But when that happened, he accepted it as their reaction to some stupid thing he'd done. When his parents began to scream and then came to blows, he and his sisters felt as if the ice were cracking beneath their feet. His dream of love and family was thick ice, solid enough to walk on, solid enough even to dance on. At the same time the bond of love and family was as tight in his dream as the bond between him and his sisters, holding tight to one another when the storm broke.

Kate was the promise of thick ice. At a dinner at the Monterey book festival, the host had sat them next to each other: the young American author whose first novel had just been sold to Germany and the young German author who'd just arrived in America with his first novel. *If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere*—ever since seeing his book in the bookstores in New York, he felt wonderful and he told his dinner companion enthusiastic stories about his successes and his plans. He was as clumsy as a little puppy. She was amused and moved and gave him a sense of security. He knew and hated that older, successful women felt drawn to him and wanted to look after him. Kate took care of him and was neither quite as old as he was nor quite so successful. People's opinions didn't seem to bother her. When, disconcerting his host, he suddenly stood up and invited her to dance, she laughed and accepted.

He fell in love with her that very evening. She went to sleep confused. When they met again at the book festival in Paso Robles and Kate took him to her room, he wasn't the awkward boy she had imagined, but a man of passionate abandon. No one had ever made love to her like that. Nor had anyone

ever curled against her, holding so tight, when he was asleep. It was an unrestrained, all-consuming kind of love. That was unknown to her, and both frightened and aroused her. When they were back in New York, he stayed and courted her with clumsy determination till she let him move in with her. Her apartment was big enough. Because living together went well, they got married six months later.

Living together changed. At the beginning they worked with their desks together, whether at home or in the library, and they did appearances together. Then came Kate's second book, and it was a best seller. Now she did appearances alone. After her third book she went on a world tour. He often went with her, but no longer enjoyed attending the official events. Admittedly Kate always introduced him as the well-known German writer, but no one knew his name or his book and he hated people's politeness when they met him just because he was Kate's husband. He sensed her anxiety that he was jealous of her success. "I'm not jealous. You've earned your success and I love your books."

Their lives intersected less often. "It can't go on like this," he said, "you're away too much and when you're here you're too exhausted—too exhausted to talk, let alone make love."

"I find all the rushing around hard too. I'm turning almost everything down. What should I do? I can't turn it all down."

"How will it go when there's the baby?"

"Baby?"

"I found the test with the two red strips."

"That doesn't mean anything."

Kate didn't want to believe the first pregnancy test, and did a second one. When she became a mother, she also didn't want to believe at first that she would have to change her life, and lived the way she had before the baby. But when she came

home in the evenings and picked up her daughter, Rita turned in her arms and reached for her father. Then Kate would be overwhelmed with longing for another life, a life with child and husband and writing and nothing else. In the bustle of the following day the longing would dissipate. But as Rita grew older, it returned all the more strongly and each time it did so, Kate was more jolted.

One evening before he went to sleep he said, "I don't want to go on living like this."

Suddenly she was afraid she would lose him and Rita, and life with the two of them seemed to her the most precious thing there was. "Nor I. I'm sick of the traveling and the readings and the lectures and the receptions. I just want to be with you both and write, that's it."

"Is that true?"

"If I can write, all I need is you two. The rest of it I don't need at all."

They tried to live a different way. After a year they knew it would never succeed in New York. "Life here eats you whole. You love meadows and trees and birds—I'll find us a house in the country."

4

After they'd lived in the country for a few months, he said, "It isn't just meadows and trees and birds. Look how everything is coming along and growing—the house is almost finished, Rita is healthier than she was in the city, and the apple trees that Jonathan and I pruned are going to produce a good crop."

They were standing in the garden. He put his arm around Kate and she leaned against him. "The only thing that isn't almost finished is my book. It'll be winter or next spring."

"That's soon! And doesn't your writing go easier than in the city?"

"I'll have a first draft in the fall. Do you want to read it?"

She had always claimed that you mustn't show anyone what you're writing or talk to anyone about it—it brings bad luck. He was pleased that she trusted him. He was pleased by the prospect of the apple crop and the fresh cider he would press. He had ordered a big vat.

Fall came early, and the early frost tinted the maples a flaming scarlet. Rita couldn't get enough of the colors of the trees or of how on cool evenings paper and logs in the fireplace could make a warming fire. He let her scrunch up the paper herself, and stack the kindling and logs, and strike the match and hold it close. But she still said, "Look, Papa, look!" It remained a miracle to her.

When the three of them sat by the fire, he served hot cider with a sprig of green mint for Rita and a shot of Calvados for Kate and him. Maybe it was because of the Calvados that she responded more often to his wooing in bed. Maybe it was because of her relief at having finished the first draft.

He wanted to read a little every day, and explained to Rita that every day she must play by herself for a little while. The first day she knocked proudly on his door after two hours, accepted his praise, and promised to spend even longer alone the next day. But by the next day he had finished. He had got out of bed in the night and read to the end.

Kate's first three novels had depicted the life of a family at the time of the Vietnam War, the eventual return of the son from captivity to the love of his life, who had married and had a daughter, and the fate of this daughter whose father was not the man her mother was married to and with whom she had grown up but the returning soldier. Each novel was self-contained, but taken together they formed the portrait of an era.

Kate's new novel was set in the present. A young couple, both successful professionals who can't have children, wants to adopt and goes searching abroad. They go from one complication to the next, are faced with medical, bureaucratic, and political hurdles, encounter committed helpers and corrupt agencies, and find themselves in comic and dangerous situations. In Bolivia, faced with the choice between adopting an enchanting pair of twins or exposing the criminals behind the arrangement and putting the adoption at risk, the man and the woman quarrel. The images they have of themselves and other people, their love, their marriage—none of it holds true anymore. In the end the adoption founders and the future they imagined for themselves lies shattered. But their lives are open to something new.

It was still dark as he laid the last page on the stack of those he'd read. He switched off the light and opened the window, breathed the cool air, and saw the hoarfrost on the meadow. He liked the book. It was gripping, moving, and written with a lightness that was new for Kate. Readers would love the book; they would share in all the hopes and emotions and enjoy thinking their own thoughts about the open ending.

But had Kate given him the manuscript because she trusted him? The couple whose lives are open to something new—was that meant to be Kate and him? Did she want to warn him? Did she want to say to him that their old life no longer worked and challenge him to embark on a new one? He shook his head and sighed. Please not that. But perhaps it was all quite different. Perhaps she was using the end of the book to celebrate the two of them having started their own new life together. They weren't the couple with their life smashed to pieces. They were the couple whose life had been in pieces and had already embarked on their new one.

He heard the first birds. Then it got light; the dark mass of the forest behind the meadow transformed itself into individual trees. The sky wasn't yet revealing whether it would be a sunny or a cloudy day. Should he talk to Kate? Ask her if the manuscript contained a message for him? She would frown and look at him with irritation. He would have to make his own sense of the end of the young couple's search. Was a conflict smoldering beneath the life he and Kate were leading together? Kate was under stress. But how could she not be! She had wanted to stick to the deadline she had set herself for the first draft, and in the last weeks had been writing far into the night.

No, there was no conflict smoldering under their life. Since the stupid fight over the Paris Book Fair, which Kate had agreed to attend without talking to him first, but had finally canceled, they hadn't quarreled. He wasn't jealous of her success. They loved their daughter. When the three of them were together, they laughed a lot and often sang. They wanted to get a black Labrador and had registered with a breeder for one from the next litter.

He stood up and stretched. He could still sleep for an hour. He undressed and climbed the creaking stairs cautiously. Entering the bedroom on tiptoe, he paused until Kate, who'd been disturbed by the opening and closing of the door, sank back into peaceful sleep. Then he slid under the covers beside her and cuddled up close. No, no conflict.

5

On his next trip to the little town he did shopping for the winter. It really wasn't necessary; last winter it had never taken more than a day for the road to be plowed out. But the potatoes

in their sack, the onions in the crate, the cabbages in the barrel, and the apples on the racks would make the cellar a cozy place for Rita. She would love climbing down there to count potatoes and bring them up.

At the farm along his route, he ordered potatoes, and onions, and cabbages. The farmer asked, "Can you take my daughter to town with you and drop her off again on the way back? When you collect your order?" So he took the sixteen-year-old daughter along who wanted to pick up some books at the library and peppered this new neighbor with curious questions. Had he and his wife had enough of the city? Were they looking for peace in the country? What had they been doing in the city? She didn't let up until she found out that he and his wife were writers, and she thought that was exciting. "What's your wife's name? Can I read something she's written?" He evaded the question.

Then he got angry. Why hadn't he said his wife was a translator or a Web designer? They hadn't fled New York in order to land up in the country in the middle of the next fuss about Kate. Then in the *New York Times* he learned that the American Book Prize was due to be awarded in the next few days. Each of Kate's books had been under consideration. This year she didn't have got a new one out. But it was only this year that the critics had recognized and hailed the three novels as the portrait of an era. He couldn't imagine Kate not being in the running. If she won, the whole thing would start up again.

He drove to the library and honked. The daughter was standing in front of the entrance with some other girls; she waved, and the others looked. On the way back she told him how exciting her friends thought it was that his wife and he were writers and lived close by. Would he or his wife come to their school sometime and talk to them about writing? They'd

already had a doctor and an architect and an actress come visit. "No," he said, more brusquely than was called for, "we don't do that kind of thing."

When he'd delivered her and loaded up his stuff and was alone in the car again, he drove to the scenic outlook that he'd always driven past before and stopped in the empty parking lot. In front of him the forest in all its flaming colors dipped down to a broad valley, climbed again on the far side, and glowed all the way to the first range of mountains. On the second range the colors were already faded and far in the distance from the forest, and the mountains blurred into the pale blue sky. A hawk was circling above the valley.

The farmer, who had an interest in local history, had once told him about the surprise onset of winter in 1876 and the snow that fell in the midst of Indian summer, light at first and the delight of the children, then thicker and thicker until it blanketed everything and the roads were impassable and the houses cut off. Travelers caught by the snow had no chance, but even some of those trapped inside their houses froze to death. There were some houses far from the roads from which the inhabitants didn't make it back to the villages until spring.

He looked up at the sky. Oh, if only it would snow now! Lightly at first so that whoever was out in it would get home, then so heavily that driving would be impossible for days. So that a branch would break under it and tear down the new phone line. So that no one could tell Kate she'd won and invite her to the awards ceremony, and no one could pull her into the city to burden her with interviews, talk shows, and receptions. When the thaw came, the prize would find its way to Kate, and she would be no less delighted than she would now. But hubbub would have come and gone, and her world would remain unchanged.

When the sun had gone down he drove on, from the main road to the local road and then the dirt road up the long valley, until he stopped and got out. New, pale, unseasoned poles ran along the roadside carrying the phone line ten feet in the air. Some trees had been felled to make room and some branches cut back. But others stood close to the line.

He found a pine with bare branches, tall, leaning, dead. He threw the work rope around the tree and hitched it to the tow bar, put the car into four-wheel drive, and then into gear. The engine howled and died. He put it into gear again, and again the engine howled and died. On the third try the wheels lost traction. He got out, took the folding spade from the emergency kit, and dug into the cracks in a rock in which the roots had taken hold. He tried to loosen them, grubbed at them, shook them, and pulled. His shirt, his sweater, his pants—everything was soaked with sweat. If only he could see better! It was getting dark.

He got back in the car, put it in gear, and eased forward until the rope was taut, let the car roll back, then accelerated again. Forward, backward, forward, backward—sweat poured down into his eyes to join the tears of rage at the tree that wouldn't fall and the world that refused to leave him and Kate in peace. He drove forward, back, forward, back. He hoped Kate and Rita couldn't hear him. He hoped Kate didn't call the farmer or the general store. He had never come home this late. He hoped she didn't call anyone else.

Without the tree giving any signal by beginning to tip, it fell. It struck the line right next to one of the poles, and both tree and pole bowed forward until the lines tore loose. Then they crashed to the ground.

He switched off the engine. Everything was silent. He was exhausted, drained, empty. But then he began to be filled with

a sense of triumph. He'd done it. He would do the rest of it too. What strength he had! What strength!

He got out of the car, untied the rope, loaded it and the spade, and drove home. From far off he could see the lighted windows—his house. His wife and daughter were standing out in front as they always did, and as always Rita flew into his arms. Everything was good.

6

It was the following evening before Kate asked him why the phone and the Internet weren't working. In the mornings and early afternoons she allowed nothing to interfere with her writing, and didn't pay attention to her e-mails until late afternoon.

"I'll take a look." He stood up, went to check the boxes and wires for the phone and computer, and found nothing. "I can drive into town tomorrow and arrange for the technician to come."

"Then I'll lose another half a day—why don't you wait? Sometimes the technical stuff straightens out by itself."

After the technical stuff still hadn't straightened itself out several days later, Kate pressed him: "And if you go tomorrow, ask if there's a cell phone network we can access here. We can't cope without a cell phone."

They had both been delighted to find that there was no cell phone reception either in the house or on the property. That they weren't reachable and available at all times. That from time to time they didn't pick up the landline either, and had no answering machine. That they didn't have the mail delivered, but went to collect it. And now Kate wanted a cell phone?

They lay in bed together and Kate switched off the light. He

switched it on. "Do you really want it to be like it was in New York again?" When she said nothing, he didn't know whether she hadn't understood his question or didn't want to answer it. "I mean . . ."

"Sex was better in New York than here. We were hungrier for each other. Here . . . we're like an old couple, we're tender but not passionate. As if we'd lost what passion was."

He got angry. Yes, sex was more peaceful now, more peaceful and more profound. In New York they'd often fallen onto each other in their haste and their appetite, which had had its own charm, just as life in the city was full of haste and appetite. Their sex resembled their lives, both here and back there, and if Kate was longing for haste and appetite, then it wasn't just about sex. Had she only needed peace to get her book written? Now that the book was done, was she done with life in the country too? He was no longer angry, he was afraid. "I would love to sleep with you more often. I would love to burst into your room and take you in my arms, and you'd put your arms round my neck and I'd carry you to bed. I . . ."

"I know. I didn't mean what I said. When the book's finished, it'll get better again. Don't worry."

Kate came into his arms and they made love. When he woke up next morning she was already awake and she was looking at him. She said nothing, and he turned on his side too and looked at her silently. He couldn't tell from her eyes what she was feeling or thinking, and tried not to let his look betray his anxiety. He hadn't believed her yesterday when she'd said she didn't mean it, and he didn't believe it today either. His anxiety was filled with longing and need. Her face with its high forehead, the proud arch of its eyebrows over the dark eyes, long nose, generous mouth and chin, that smooth, or clenched, or furrowed, declared the mood Kate was in—it was the landscape

inhabited by his love. That love was happily at home when her face was open and turned toward him, worried when it was closed and turned away. A face, he thought, nothing more, yet it encompasses the entire range of what I need and what I can bear. He smiled. She kept looking at him silently and seriously, but then put her arm around his back and pulled him to her.

7

On the trip to town he stopped by the fallen tree and pole and the ripped wires. As they spun, his tires had left marks on the road. He wiped them away.

It all looked as if something had simply happened. He could drive to town and alert the phone company. There was nothing yet to reproach him for. But even if he didn't report it to the phone company, there was nothing to reproach him for. He hadn't seen the fallen tree and pole and the torn wires. Why should he have seen them? It was up to the technician who had laid the wires in their house and installed the computer, and whom he had promised to notify, to notice what had happened on his way to them. Or not.

The technician wasn't in his workshop. On the door was a piece of paper saying he was visiting a customer and would be back soon. But the paper was yellowed and the filthy windows made it impossible to see whether the workshop was in use, or closed for a vacation or for the winter. Phones and computers stood on the tables, along with cables, plugs, and screwdrivers.

In the general store he was the only customer. The owner started talking to him and told him about the town fair on the upcoming Saturday. Would he like to come? And bring his wife and daughter? He had never been in the general store with Kate

and Rita, nor in any shop or restaurant. They had sometimes driven through town, that was all. What else did the owner know about them?

Then he saw Kate's photo in the *New York Times*. She had won the Book Prize. She hadn't appeared for the ceremony, her agent had accepted it on her behalf, and Kate hadn't been reachable for a quote.

Didn't the owner read the paper? Had he not recognized Kate in the photo? Hadn't he seen her properly as they drove through town? Had other people seen Kate more clearly as they drove through town and recognized her in the photo? Would they call the *New York Times* and tell them where Kate could be reached? Or would they tell the *Weekly Herald,* which carried little news items alongside the ads on crimes and accidents, openings and baptisms, jubilees, weddings, births and deaths?

Three copies of the *New York Times* were still lying next to the counter. He would have liked to buy all three, so that nobody else could buy them and read them. But that would have attracted the attention of the owner. So he only bought one. Along with it he bought a small bottle of whiskey, which the owner put in a brown paper bag for him. On the way to the car he went past stacks of blue sawhorses and police barricades that would be used to block off the main street for the fair. He drove back to the technician's workshop and again found no one there. He could say he'd tried.

He didn't even look at the mail when he took it out of the mailbox. He stuck it in the torn cover of the sun visor. He drove to the scenic viewpoint again, parked, and drank. The whiskey burned in his mouth and throat, he swallowed the wrong way and belched. He looked at the brown paper bag with the bottle in his hand and thought of the tramps sitting on the benches in Central Park with their brown paper bags, drinking. Because they hadn't been able to hold their worlds together.

The last time he had sat here, the forest had still been a blaze of color. Today the colors had dulled, consumed by the fall and dampened by the haze. He rolled down the window and inhaled the cool fresh air. He had been so looking forward to winter, the first winter in the new house, to evenings by the fire, doing handcrafts and baking together, making Advent wreaths, the Christmas tree, roasting apples, mulling wine. To Kate, who would have more time for Rita and him.

And also to their New York friends, whom they finally wanted to invite once winter came. Their real friends, Peter and Liz and Steve and Susan, not the rabble of agents and publishing and media people. Peter and Liz wrote, Steve was a teacher, and Susan made jewelry—they were the only ones he and Kate had talked to seriously about the reasons for their moving to the country. They were also the only ones to whom they had given their new address.

Yes, they had their new address. What if they came? Because they'd read the *New York Times* and concluded that the good news hadn't yet reached Kate and because they wanted to be the bearers of it?

He took another swallow. He mustn't get drunk. He must keep a clear head and think about what he should do. Call their friends? Tell them that Kate knew about the award but hadn't wanted to get involved in all the fuss? Their friends knew Kate, knew how much she loved being celebrated, wouldn't believe him, and would really come.

Panic rose in him. If their friends were outside their door tomorrow, Kate would be in New York the day after, and it would all begin again. If he didn't want that, he had to think of something. What lies did he need to keep their friends at bay?

He got out of the car, drank the last of the bottle, and threw it in a high arc into the forest. This was the way his life had always been: when he had to choose, it was always between

two bad alternatives. Between life with his mother or his father when they finally separated. Between attending university, which cost him more money than he had and all his free time, or taking a job he hated, which would, however, give him time to write. Between Germany, where he had always felt a stranger, and America, where he remained just as much so. He wanted once and for all to have things be good, the way they were for other people. He wanted to be able to choose between good alternatives.

He didn't call their friends. He drove home, recounted his fruitless visit to the technician, said he wanted to try again tomorrow, if necessary with another technician in the next town over and with the phone company. Kate was irritated, not at him, but at life in the country, where the infrastructure couldn't hold a candle to New York. When she noticed this was upsetting him, she yielded. "Let's invest in our own infrastructure and put up a mast on the hill behind the house. We can afford it. Then we'll really be less dependent on technicians and phone companies."