

Ghost Story

Novel by

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Literaturverlag Droschl

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ISBN 978-3-99059-0025-8

Literaturverlag Droschl Stenggstraße 33 A-8043 Graz
www.droschl.com

In the dark, Anne listens to sounds in the wall next to which her head lay. Something was going on in there, as if the bricks were being rearranged, slowly and doggedly. Anne sits up and swings her legs over the side of the bed. She is wide awake. First, she feels the wood floor with her toes, followed by the balls of her feet, then her heels. Anne goes into the living room. In the middle of the night none of the streetcars are running and no cars drive past. When someone walks along the wall of the building, his footsteps make no sound. Thomas sits in the kitchen. Don't turn on the light, he says when Anne steps on the door sill, which cracks with the sound of something breaking apart. She sits, facing Thomas, on a chair that has been pushed away from the table. She lays her hands on her lap, the left holding the right, palms facing the ceiling. A shadowy movement passes in front of Thomas' face. She knows he is placing a hand over his mouth and chin and breathing in. How long have we been in this apartment? Thomas asks. Fifteen years, Anne says, and knows that's wrong. Twenty, Thomas says. Twenty years. You were thirty, he says. Yes, Anne says, so were you. Twenty years, Thomas says, going out the same door every day, always onto the same street. We've been using the same bathroom for twenty years. Some people move every two years, Thomas says. I'm not sure that would help, Anne replies. What would change if you went out onto a different

same street every day? Thomas remains silent. You're right, of course, he says, nothing. Anne moves the fingers of her right hand, balls them into a fist and lets them fall open again. The darkness where Thomas is sitting has grown more transparent. He has turned his face toward the window. The truth is, we're boring and bourgeois. Bourgeois, Anne repeats, who says things like that? She looks at Thomas' shape in the darkness. He straightens up and shakes one of his arms toward the window, but Anne saw it, a face, a young woman, mocking and curious. A girl. Do you want to move out? Anne asks. Thomas is standing. It's late, he says. It's the middle of the night, Anne says. Thomas stands in front of her, but maybe she's mistaken. In this darkness it's impossible to tell what is a body and what a shadow. Tell me what you want, Anne says. She doesn't hear the door sill crack. He must have stepped over it. When Anne stands up and leaves the kitchen, he's gone.

On the bus to the swimming pool, Anne looks out the window. She is waiting for the station where she has to get off. The neighborhood looks vaguely familiar, but these are no longer the same streets and shops she passes once a week. The final stop is announced. Goodbye. Anne gets off the bus and looks around. She decides to walk back to the swimming pool. The broad street does not lead to the expected crossing, but along a wall. Anne wants to walk around the building along the wall. School of Medicine is written on a sign. The street she's looking for must be behind it. After she has walked around the medical school building, she finds herself in a different part of town than she had thought. But she thinks there's a large square nearby from which she can find her way again. She comes on a square with a name she has never heard before and has the feeling she's in a city on the Atlantic, probably Nantes. No one else seems to be freezing. The sky is neutral, as are people's faces. Hip-high blocks of cement are arranged around the square. Anne leaves Nantes with hurried steps and unexpectedly comes upon a multi-lane road that circles the city and she feels her way back until she is in a neighborhood she actually knows. She sits down in the nearest café to warm up. Only after a while does she notice the music, playing at a tolerable volume. Anne orders tea and a slice of cake. The weakness she feels makes her worry she is going to faint. Back in her apartment, Anne hangs her dry bathing suit in her closet and puts the unused towel on the shelf. She places her swim cap in the box with Thomas' goggles. She stands in the hot shower for a long time. She dries her hair in front of the mir-

ror and grabs a pair of tweezers. She has to raise her chin and push it forward to get at the short little hairs. Three of them always grow back in the same spot. In this pose, with her chin jutting forward, she thinks she looks heavy and mean. A thug. The pain from plucking the hairs brings tears to her eyes. The thug becomes blurry and unrecognizable. Thomas and she stood facing each other on a sidewalk, debating which way they should go. The afternoon sun fell at a slant. Anne felt the light on the side on her face. With her eyes half-closed, she still noticed the way a man's gaze lingered on her as he passed them. Thomas looked at her attentively. Have you got a hair there, he asked, stroking her chin with his finger. You've got a hair, he said, and laughed. Anne raised her hand, pushed his away and with her fingertips felt a short, hard hair. Let's go, then. She takes a taxi to see her friend. Her friend tells her that no, she can't help, Anne should sit down with a glass of wine and talk. Anne watches her friend, the way she tastes the sauce, adds some salt. Anne says she's going to quit swimming. Today she sat in a café instead of swimming. Her friend says she can understand that. She's always resolving to be more active, but then is overcome by such an enormous, heavy, profound sense of fatigue. Enormous, heavy, and profound, Anne says. They laugh. When Anne got back today, the flower shop had already closed and she didn't care if there were fresh flowers next to the piano or not. Anne's friend asks about Thomas. It could be that she's just living with a ghost, Anne says.

At lunchtime, Anne went to a bistro and had toast with goat cheese and salad. Since she doesn't want to go back to her apartment, she orders an espresso and watches the other diners. Most of them give off little signals that they are going back to work. A sigh as they stand up, sometimes a contraction of their shoulder blades. A kind of challenging nod to someone, a drier tone, a determination in their movements to overcome tiredness. Anne watches them go. She looks at their hands, which move about naturally in trouser pockets or handbags. Anne recognizes the independence of the movement, she knows it from her own hands. When playing the piano, your hands have to develop an autonomy that is so great you're no longer even aware of them, and yet you constantly have to react to what they do. After leaving the bistro, the people slow their steps and lower their heads to look at the phones their hands have pulled from their pockets or purses. Anne is now the only guest. The waiter stands behind the bar, his head down. Anne looks at the part in his brown hair. His right arm moves, he must have a telephone in front of him, too. She waits a while for him to look up and finally takes out a bill from her wallet and puts on her coat. She puts the bill on the counter and says, keep the change. Wait a moment, the waiter says, but Anne has already turned away and she leaves the bistro. When she gets back to the apartment, Thomas is in the kitchen. A few of his appointments were cancelled, Thomas tells her. Anne nods and asks if she should make coffee. When she places a cup before him and pours some coffee, Thomas thanks her and strokes her upper arm. It's an old gesture that has become unfamiliar. She

sits across from him. Did he not sleep well? Thomas nods. He leans back, holding his phone. I'm sorry, he says, this will be quick. You're just like my students with your phone, Anne says. Smartphone, Thomas corrects her. He smiles faintly without looking up. Anne watches his fingers move across the screen. There are messages in the phone. Photographs, too. Thomas taps the screen a few times. Anne could lean over the table and reach for the phone. In it there are weekends he and the girl spent together, anticipations and recriminations, reassurances, wishes for sweet dreams, nicknames, a telephone number, an address perhaps. The girl is in the phone. Thomas' fingers move quickly. He's typing. Anne raises her eyes from his fingers to his face. The skin under his eyes is dull and has the brownish shade that always sets in when he hasn't slept enough for an extended period of time. With his phone, Thomas brings the girl into the apartment every time he comes. The telephone is a Trojan horse that Thomas has to watch constantly. If he were to fall into a deep sleep, the girl would open the secret door and take over the apartment under cover of darkness. Anne pictures the girl's face, mocking and curious. Thomas can get by without sleep for a long time, but at some point he does have to sleep. Anne stands up and takes his cup to the sink. Wait, he says, there's still some left, but Anne has already poured water in it. Sorry, she says. Thomas waves her apology away. He drinks too much coffee anyway these days.

In the morning, Anne leaves the apartment. Her purse is on the stool near the front door. The door to Thomas' room, which she once called his office, is closed. Anne heard him leave the apartment when she was still in bed. She puts on her shoes and turns off the light in the entryway. Again and again, she had considered getting a cat. It would get fed in the morning and in the evening and at night it wouldn't know where to sleep. Both bedroom doors are closed at night. The cat would spend the day on the window sill keeping watch for one of them to come home. As Anne walked through the apartment early this morning, the draft from her feet raised flecks of dust from the corners. She decides to come home early today and vacuum. She spends this morning, like every morning, in a café. She drinks an espresso and eats a roll. She likes the first hour or two in the café best. The people who come this early in the morning, come out of habit. Those who come for a particular reason, because they're hungry or have something to discuss or to work on their devices, don't come until later. They don't stay long, and get restless as soon as they've finished eating and drinking. At the moment, there are still only regular guests here, there's still a sense of unanimity, which the waiters also share in. In these moments, Anne writes sentences in her notebook that have nothing to do with the textbook. She orders a second espresso. The café fills and grows louder, the waiters also become louder and faster, while the regular guests remain quiet and soon are no longer to be seen. Anne motions to the waiter for the check. She bends down for her bag, which she had set on the floor and just barely dodges a man passing

her table at that very moment. She straightens up. Her head is at waist height of the people who are moving around the room. The heads of all those who are seated are at waist height of those walking around. If you lean to the side at the wrong time, you run the risk of touching the middle of a stranger's body, of bumping into someone's stomach, hip, or behind. Anne searches through her bag for her wallet and sees her cell-phone light up. Thomas has called several times and sent a message: call me. Anne's first thought is he wants to move out, separation. Then she thinks of an accident, the hospital. Then of cancer. She puts her phone back in her bag and waits for the moment to pass. She places her hands in front of her on the edge of the table. As if the top half of her fingers had been torn off. The tips of her fingers numb, her middle knuckles raging with pain. If he wanted to move out, he wouldn't tell her over the phone or send that kind of a message. If it were about a divorce, he wouldn't be in a rush. And if it were a diagnosis of cancer, she assumes he'd wait in the apartment until evening to talk to her instead of calling. If he'd had an accident, he wouldn't write a message himself, but if he did, then the accident would have been a minor one. Anne's fingernails are long. Her students shouldn't see them like that. Anne keeps having to explain and insist they keep fingernails really short to play the piano. Thomas sounds relieved. He thanks her for calling him back. Anne doesn't know what to say in response. His brother is in town and will be staying with them. Would Anne like to go out to dinner with them? Thomas interrupts himself: where are you actually? Anne looks around the café.

On my way, she says. Thomas doesn't know what to say to that.
He suggests a restaurant.

Anne is early. Thomas is punctual. He sits down, puts his hands over his eyes and sighs. Anne studies the transition from Thomas' jaw to his throat. His skin has started to become slack. As if it has been stretched out. Thomas takes his hands from his eyes and Anne tears her eyes away from his throat. How are things? Thomas asks. How are things, Anne repeats, you mean: how are you? Of course, Thomas says. He takes a loud breath and pulls the salt shaker toward him. Thomas' brother hugs him and tells him he looks good. Anne hasn't seen his brother for a long time. He has gray hair now. Anne, Thomas' brother says, how are you? She laughs. Is her sabbatical agreeing with her, does she feel younger, like a student? As a matter of fact, Anne says, I'm not quite one of the adults anymore, but definitely not one of the young people. She's dissolving in an intermediate space. Anne laughs. She usually laughs a lot with Thomas' brother when they see each other. But then there are long stretches when they don't see him and they're filled with worry and thoughts of his depression. Thomas wants to talk with his brother on the phone once a week, he insists on it. Anne isn't on vacation, Thomas points out, but is working on a textbook. Of course, Anne says, and Thomas' brother gives a friendly squint as if he knew better. The check arrives and Thomas pats his jacket pockets for his wallet. Anne knows he keeps his wallet in his pants pocket. I've got it, his brother says. He wants to treat them. Thomas stops his patting. His brother looks at the check and takes two bills out of his wallet. He had withdrawn the money before coming to the restaurant because he'd planned on inviting them. He, the older brother,

has always had less money and Thomas has never had to worry about money. Thomas' brother leaves a big tip. The dark water sloshes under the floorboards. As a child, Anne had stretched out on her stomach in a boathouse and had peered through a gap in the floor. She had felt nauseous all day. Thank you, Anne says, it's very generous of you. The brother's gray hair made his deflecting gesture seem even more helpless. Back in the apartment, Anne sits with him in the kitchen while Thomas brings a blanket and pillow from his room into hers and then makes up the couch, which is normally his bed, for his brother. He joins them in the kitchen and they drink a glass of wine, then another. Anne looks at the dark window. She doesn't care what Thomas and his brother are talking about, she just wants to hear these voices that have found their way back to intimacy in statements and contradictions, interjections and exclamations, the sounds of agreement and attention, of interrupting and talking past each other, variations of the same elements. Anne is wistful. She wants to talk about how this situation spans so many years. She hasn't opened her mouth yet and hears a noise from the entryway, a movement, a scurrying. When she looks over, she doesn't see anything. Thomas' brother stands up. Anne doesn't move. Thomas is pale with exhaustion or else it's the shadow of the lampshade that falls on him when he leans back. They let the moment draw out because they know, once it's over, they'll have to withdraw together into the room that used to be the only bedroom. Thomas' brother says that he's going to go to bed and heads towards the bathroom. Anne clears the glasses from the table. She doesn't even know if

Thomas is still there. In his room, Thomas' brother is sitting on the edge of the couch. Anne says goodnight. He has propped his elbows on his thighs with his hands folded between his knees as if in prayer. He doesn't answer. Anne closes the door and sees the girl standing in the kitchen. She has sipped the remains of the wine and is looking at Anne from the semidarkness. She quickly raises her hand to the light switch and turns off the ceiling lamp in the entryway. There are no lights on in the apartment. The girl is still there, an afterimage on the retina, a slowly-fading illusion. Anne feels her way along the wall to the bathroom and brushes her teeth in the dark. She bumps her shoulder on the bedroom door and lies down on her side of the bed, next to the wall. After some time, someone steals into bed next to her, without touching her and without the slightest noise. They lie stretched out next to each other. Anne would like to say something. How are things? She could ask and if he answered she would know it's not a ghost or the girl who is lying next to her. She doesn't dare stretch out her arm. She can't get enough air into her lungs until she hears something, a scraping noise, his breath catching in his throat, and she finally knows it's him, his living flesh and blood, chest and stomach, the warmth between his thighs, his scarred knee.

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Anne closes the apartment door from inside. She sets her purse on the stool, looks at her phone and puts it back in the side pocket. She has gotten used to seeing a scurrying out of the corner of her eye, but it still startles her occasionally when she glimpses something disappearing through the open door to the living room as she hangs up her coat. Or when she turns around and has the impression that the door to Thomas' room had been open and was quickly pulled shut. But the door to Thomas' room hasn't been left open for a long time. In the kitchen, Anne is washing the few dishes that still get used when she hears the sound of scraping wood. She turns off the water and, holding the plate in her wet hands, she looks behind her. She can't remember where the chair stood at the table a moment ago. In the living room, she glances inadvertently at the bottom shelf with the boxes of photographs. One of the boxes is sticking out. Anne walks over and pushes it in with her foot or maybe not. More and more often she simply leaves things as they are. Most times she's not certain how they were before. A newspaper lies on the floor next to the couch. Anne is often surprised to find that she hasn't put her toothbrush back in the cup on the sink but on the washing machine next to the sink, or on the edge of the tub, or another time next to the dirty dishes in the kitchen. In bed in her room, she hears Thomas when he comes into the apartment, uses the bath-

room, and goes quietly to his room. Anne gets up again to go to the bathroom and drink a glass of water in the kitchen. In the entryway, it occurs to Anne that the pockets in Thomas' coat and jackets hanging in the wardrobe will have to be emptied. Thomas won't do it. He never throws any receipts away, even if it's just for a pack of cough drops. Once in a while, after leaving a store or a restaurant, Anne had tried to get him to toss the receipt in the next garbage can. Thomas humored her, but when he held the receipt over the garbage can he couldn't bring himself to drop it, and Anne saw his angry expression before he turned away, shoved the receipt back in his pocket and walked ahead with long strides. Eventually he slowed down and finally stopped, waiting for Anne. Lately they've started giving a receipt for every little thing and Thomas' pockets filled up more and more quickly. Once a week Anne empties his coat and jacket pockets and goes into the kitchen, both hands full of receipts, notes and candy wrappers of all colors. She spreads them out on the table and sorts them into three piles. Notes with appointments that have already taken place to the right, together with the candy wrappers and unimportant receipts. In the middle Anne piles restaurant receipts and to the left, notes that are still important or those she can't classify. She throws the pile with the candy wrappers in the trash and puts the remaining notes back in Thomas' coat pocket. She takes the middle pile of receipts into her room. She goes back to the entryway and gets her notebook from her purse. Evenings, when the girl waits for Thomas near his office or when he picks her up, he asks if she has eaten yet. Of course not, she laughs, and

Thomas says: then let's feed you. Anne orders the slips by date. She last entered records in the notebook on Monday a week ago. There are receipts that were issued at midday or in the afternoon, often not far from Thomas' office. There are receipts that list several coffees, mineral water, tea, a small beer. Those are the afternoons on which Thomas has several meetings, one after the other. There are receipts for two coffees and now and again some from a tea shop for two pots of jasmine tea, but Anne doesn't know if these were drunk by Thomas alone or by two people. The dinners are usually work dinners with several other people. Anne puts these receipts and those from the long afternoons back in Thomas' pocket, so he can write them off on his taxes or offset them as expenses in some other way. Anne enters Thomas' dinners with the girl into the notebook. Late at night, once she has worked through the week, Anne leaves her room again, puts the receipts back into his coat pocket with the notes and throws the rest away.

The girl flutters, she is a little bird with delicate wings and fine feathers, with a bit of childhood down still along her hair-line, and soft, glowing cheeks. You simply can't get enough of watching the girl's inexhaustible vivacity. Thomas is very concerned for the girl's physical well-being, during the day, she only eats a few bites of anything, a half of a cheese sandwich, a container of plain yogurt, a Crown Prince Rudolf apple (those are the smallest). In the evening she answers 'of course not' with a laugh when Thomas asks if she has eaten yet. The girl is delighted when Thomas then rushes to get her something to eat. She likes this urgency at the start of their meetings and the nervousness sparked by the excitement of seeing him. The girl doesn't want to meet Thomas when she feels full. She's afraid the excitement that is perhaps only possible on an empty stomach won't come. She has to pull herself together to keep from fluttering with her hands and arms and breath, and she lets loose a flood of laughter and jokes, which clearly is too much for Thomas. He can't follow her, she's getting him all confused, he says, but the girl knows that her exuberance makes Thomas lively at first and later, after dinner, when she is calmer, slightly exhausted. But then Thomas escapes his own tiredness and chats and looks at the girl, now warmed up from her dinner, who sometimes ends a laugh with a sigh. Like two riders who loosen their reins and finally fall into pace and deep conversation again after a stretch of road on which one of them had been out in front before the other let his own horse run ahead. And did you really go riding often? Thomas asks. The girl makes a face that shows her irritation. Tell me, Thomas

says. Sometimes, the girl replies, I have the feeling that you'd like me to be younger than I am. You have no idea how young you are, Thomas says. The girl looks at the napkin she pushes to the edge of the table. Let's drink some sweet wine to end the evening, Thomas says, to youth. Anne is surprised by the dessert wine on the receipt. It would have made the girl tipsy. Come on, I'll drive you home, Thomas said, I'll put you to bed. When Thomas spends the evening with the girl, he usually doesn't get home until after midnight. The girl is asleep before he leaves her. She sleeps deeply and Thomas envies her for that. He has gotten dressed, gone into the bathroom and washed his face. He straightened his hair with wet hands and dried himself with the girl's hand towel. When he turned around in the small, narrow bathroom, Thomas bumped into the shower stall: noise of metal and plastic. He swore and waited for something to stir. Thomas knows how to close the girl's door without a sound. He also knows how to open his own apartment door with the least amount of noise. Still, Anne wakes up. She hears the key in the lock. It's no help that he locks the door: the girl is already here. Anne listens as Thomas goes into the bathroom, then closes the door to his room and leans against it. Steps, then silence, and then steps again. He looks at his computer and again at his phone. He doesn't realize that the girl has already climbed out and can't find her way back in. He doesn't know much, Anne thinks, and, as she falls asleep again, she thinks she should speak to Thomas about the girl at some point.