

NEW BOOKS IN GERMAN

A Clean Sweep by Angelika Waldis. Translated by Sharon Howe.

1. *INCOGNITO*

Luisa has resolved to have a clear-out. And Alfred will be first to go.

She has been married to Alfred for nearly forty years. Alfred is an egosaurus. Always putting himself first, always did. The fact that he shared a home with Luisa and their two daughters had about as much impact on his life as the rubbish collection schedule. "I'm an artist" he would say. "He's an artist, you see", Luisa would say. She said it for years, knowing all the while that he was no such thing.

She is on the train to Vienna, leafing through her travel guide. It's way out of date, but that doesn't matter. She has never been to Vienna. "I'm seventy years of age and I've never been to Vienna", she said to the hairstylist. "It's about time I treated myself – why not? Go on, make me pretty." "Are you sure you want it cropped to an inch, Frau Gallmann?" the stylist asked. "Positive. Off with it!" And the stylist started cutting, snipping away the clumps of curls that had remained unchanged for decades.

Now Luisa can see her new look reflected in the train window. She looks younger with her short grey hair. Almost like a man. Behind her head, fields and woods flash through the summer evening, illuminated with streaks of red sunset. Beautiful.

Before long, the ticket collector appears. He registers her electronic ticket. One return to Vienna. "Have a nice evening, madam." She puts the ticket away carefully; that will serve as evidence of her journey.

It's going better than I hoped, thinks Luisa. She only needs to go as far as Sargans, then she can catch the train back to Zurich in time for the early sleeper to Milan. Going from Buchs, Feldkirch or Innsbruck would have been more complicated. She has studied the timetables closely. But she is in no great hurry. She has arranged to be away for a full ten days. Plenty of time to get the job done.

The hardest part of it will be to escape notice. No-one must remember her, including the man opposite. He looks a decent enough old stick, reading his copy of *Steppenwolf*. Luisa clocked that straight away; she has good peripheral vision, like a rabbit, indeed she looks a bit like a rabbit with her wide-set eyes. Another time, she might have started up a conversation with him. But for now she wants to avoid drawing attention to herself, to remain silent and inconspicuous in her disguise: the grey anorak, the deliberately dowdy lavender-blue shirt, the grey, old woman's trousers, the hideous mustard-brown scarf with the horseshoe pattern. The sort of clothes she imagines a nun might wear on holiday. All her nice things are in her suitcase. Bright blue, eggshell, silk gloss. The hat with the tropical birds. The lizard-skin shoes.

Alfred, Arsefred. It was a good job she had qualified by the time she met him, so she could provide for the family all these years: Luisa Gallmann, née Racher, domestic science teacher, nursing college lecturer. Never will she forget the fatigue she had to wrench herself out of every morning. That crushing fatigue.

On the platform at Sargans, she is greeted boisterously by a puppy, wagging every part of its body. Pulling on the other end of the lead is a young man who appears to sway in sympathy. How can anyone be so young, Luisa thinks, with a sense almost of wonder, as she fondles the little dog's ears. Forget you've seen me, scamp – OK? I don't want to be spotted here. I'm going to Milan, and no-one knows. I'm spending the night in a hotel I've never been to before. And tomorrow I'm going on to Genoa, where Alfred is engaged in his master work. As he calls it.

On the train to Zurich, Luisa finds an empty compartment. She is hungry, and craves a ham sandwich, an unhealthy white-bread one. The Walensee gleams blackly, like wet asphalt. She knows it's incredibly deep; it would make an ideal grave for the three people she intends to dispose of. Alfred, Roman and Dr. Hausammann. The fact that they are all male is a coincidence. They just happen to be the three individuals responsible for ruining her life. They have to go. Only then will she find peace.

She helped her neighbour Magi to clear out her house before moving to the residential home. Magi was impossible: she wouldn't part with anything. Whatever Luisa put in the bags for the second-hand shop, Magi would take out again. A bird song clock that chimed at the wrong times, walking boots, flip-flops, tap shoes, travel guides to Lapland and Namibia. "I'm going to a retirement home, not to the grave!" Magi snapped. She spent hours sorting through her books, nearly all of which ended up back on the shelf. "It's no good", Luisa said, "You've got to be able to let go of things. Surely you don't think you're going to be doing any more tap dancing with your puffy feet?" "And surely you don't think I'm going to let you make my life a misery with your puffed-up preaching?" Magi retorted. "Take a look at your

own life. Haven't you got a bit of clearing out to do yourself?" It was then that Luisa decided to do just that.

She takes a newspaper from the next seat, the *Rheintal Messenger*, and begins poring over it in search of a good sentence. It has long been a habit of hers to collect sentences that strike her as somehow offbeat and copy them into a little red notepad. The notepad goes everywhere with her, and today is no exception. Should she fall under the train, and someone take it into their head to search through the handbag of the unfortunate victim, those sentences would stand as an intriguing riddle for posterity – or just the useless legacy of an eccentric old crone. The pad contains sentences such as:

I only go in for Siamese cats, said Frau Füglistaller.

The People's Party is leaving expectant mothers out in the cold.

And then they went on to do the Neckar.

Whenever she reads these sentences, she is seized with an enthusiasm for life in all its random quirkiness. Stroke me, it says, and rolls over at her feet like a quivering puppy with too many legs.

The *Rheintal Messenger* yields nothing of interest.

The peaks of the Churfirten on the other side of the Walensee have turned red in the evening light and look huddled together, as if out of bashfulness. Luisa spots Amden, the only village on the mountainside, and tries hard not to think of Roman. Roman's mother is from Amden, and never lets anyone forget it: "The mountains are in our blood, you know".

Sentimental eyewash, thinks Luisa. It's Roman's mountain blood that is supposed to explain his brooding melancholy, his passionate nature. But Luisa has seen through her son-in-law. Passionate nature indeed! He's a womaniser, that's what he is. And at home he just sits idly in front of the TV without uttering a word to Mirjam. So much for his brooding melancholy. All Luisa can only feel towards him now is a silent, inner hatred. Roman and his wretched mountain blood have crushed all the joy out of Mirjam. Ten years of marriage have changed her completely. In the old days, she used to sing in the bathroom, dance in the kitchen – no matter how chaotic life got, she was always happy. Now she has an anxious, harried look and is forever clearing up. Whenever she calls in on Luisa, she starts picking things up off the floor the moment she arrives – even a pale thread on the dark carpet disturbs her. She can't sit still a minute, but gets up as soon as she's finishing drinking her tea, tidying things, straightening the curtains, neatening the row of shoes. How she used to enjoy a good laugh. It would well up from deep inside her like an almighty burp, bursting forth in all directions. Now it's just a polite noise. It's high time she separated from Roman. But Mirjam won't hear of it. That would be defeat. Mirjam wants victory.

It's up to me to get rid of Roman, thinks Luisa. It's always been my responsibility to deal with the unpleasant things in life. Only I don't know how to go about it this time. Not yet.

She has already made one mistake. She should have bought a ticket to Zurich while she was in Sargans. She didn't think of it – too busy messing around with the puppy. What to do if the ticket collector comes? The whole idea was to avoid attracting attention. She looks round uneasily whenever she hears the door. On the right, Lake Zurich comes into view, vast and calm, just as she likes it, but there's no time now to contemplate the scenery: she has to keep an eye out for the ticket collector. If he sees her picture in the paper in the next few

weeks he'll probably remember her. Wife a suspect in Gallmann murder case. Look, that's that bittersweet old woman without a ticket – bright red in the face, she was. Luisa sits bolt upright clutching her purse, listening for the swish of the door. The ridge of the Pfannenstiel is already visible in the distance; at its foot the villages of the Gold Coast shimmer in the gold evening dust. Just then the ticket collector appears and passes by without even a glance at Luisa.

It is 18:48 when the train pulls into Zurich.

She has twenty minutes. Long enough to buy ticket and newspapers. But just at that moment some idiot trips over her suitcase. He remains sat on the floor, looking up at her in astonishment. A bottle inside his paper bag has broken, and a red liquid is trickling towards her shoes. Oddly, the man doesn't get up. Perhaps his astonished expression means he has hurt himself. That's all she needs. It's not her fault, she was pulling her suitcase along quite normally. Meanwhile three people have already stopped and are looking questioningly at Luisa. What have you done to this man? What's that red liquid on the floor? At last, the man pulls himself to his feet, leaning on Luisa's suitcase, then bends down and rubs his knee and calf. He is young: a clumsy, tattooed oaf. She can't tell if the sour smell comes from his breath or from the puddle on the floor. As he limps away, she makes a dash for the ticket office and realises that she is shaking. She sweats inside her anorak; the station concourse feels like it's heated.

She finds another vacant compartment, bags the three empty seats with her anorak and newspapers and leaves them there until the train passes through Zurich-Enge. She once lived here, but she doesn't want to think about that now. She sinks back into the upholstery

and checks the sweat patches under the arms of her vile lavender shirt for smelliness. Now she can relax for a while; she'll go and have a nice supper in the dining car and a browse through the papers for the odd sentence or two.

Six years she lived with Alfred in Zurich-Enge. A bit of stuccoed ceiling, a bit of a view over the lake, a bit of disappointment soon after the wedding. Alfred, who had charmed Luisa up as they both stood watching the lake police attempt to disentangle a swan from a fish hook – that same Alfred soon became sullen as a husband, without even seeming to notice. Luisa would often stand at the window of their small flat, looking out over the bit of lake and wondering why she had let herself be so captivated by Alfred. “Imagine you were a swan and I the one casting the line” he had said. She laughed, and he began to conjure up suitable compliments with consummate ease: her queenly bearing, the elegant whiteness of her neck and face, the way her hair shone like plumage. She laughed; his words pleased her. What she saw when she looked in the mirror was pallor, not whiteness, and her hair was only shiny the day she washed it – after that, it went back to being dull again.

By the time the swan had regained its freedom, Alfred had ensnared Luisa.

She knows how she's going to do it; she has spent a long time researching on the internet and obtained a copy of the Dutch suicide manual. She has everything she needs in her suitcase. That suitcase is lethal; perhaps that's why the man on the concourse tripped over it. Once in Genoa, she will make a fiendishly hot vindaloo, just as Alfred likes it, by way of celebration. If he wants to know what they are celebrating, she'll say: life. The curry will be so hot Alfred won't be able to taste the added chemical. In the kitchen, she'll set aside a separate portion for herself before mixing in the homemade vindaloo paste. “I mustn't eat

anything too spicy for a while – my gastritis, you know”, she will tell Alfred. Also in the suitcase are all the main ingredients for the curry: chilli, lemongrass, vindaloo paste, a tin of oyster mushrooms. She is well prepared – that's a lesson life has taught her. Especially when the children came along – first Maya, then Mirjam. And especially after what happened to Maya.

She can see the Pfannenstiel again on the far side of the lake, this time from the other direction. The hills, sky and lake are now cut from three different blue fabrics and joined together with dark seams. To life! she'll say to Alfred at the table. To this tear-stained, botched-up, wasted life. She holds her reading glasses with the missing earpiece like a lorgnette to read the dining car flyer. Tonight's menu is pork schnitzel in breadcrumbs with sauté potatoes and cauliflower cheese, or egg salad. She'll have the schnitzel, followed by tiramisu, complete with salmonella if necessary. Since living alone she has developed a taste for unhealthy food. For over thirty years she specialised in nutrition, and fed her family accordingly; now she wants nothing more to do with all that. She eats high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt foods with impunity, devours anything made of pastry, slaps butter or chemically flavoured spreads on everything, stuffs herself uncomfortably full or forgets to eat altogether. When her neighbour Magi anxiously hands her an apple, she laughs and makes a face as she eats it. I'm like a horse, she thinks, I won't get ill, I've survived everything, got through it all for everyone else's sake, and the pain I feel is the sort you can't see.

As the train passes through Horgen, she closes her eyes. She can't bear to look at that village again. Once she set out to find Dr Hausammann's house down by the lake, stopped in front of it and peered through the fence, registered the yellow blinds, the round box trees and

the sun dial on the lawn; she wanted to know what kind of life that man led and where he had buried his guilt. He destroyed my wonderful Maya with his bungling, she thought, and what's he doing now? Living, sleeping and crapping in a house with yellow blinds and round box trees as if nothing ever happened. Despite catching a movement behind one of the windows, she stood her ground and continued staring over the fence; she didn't care if Hausammann or his wife or sons saw her. She knew he had sons, healthy sons. She remained there until she heard someone laugh inside the house, then hurried back up to the station in tears.

That was twenty-eight years ago, Luisa calculates. And Hausammann is twenty-eight years older. I must get rid of him while he's still hale and hearty, she thinks. But one thing at a time.

As the train skirts the dark green waters of Lake Uri, Luisa sits up straight and peers out of the window. Somewhere over there is a beach where a sign stood sixty years ago saying "No Bathing". Here's a nice spot, her father had said, going behind a tree to change into his swimming trunks. Then mother went to find a tree too, and father said to Luisa: "Come on, your turn". She shivered at the thought of the forbidden activity and, besides, the water was cold, albeit a beautiful green. The bikes, stacked against the No Bathing sign, glinted in the sunshine. Mother spotted a heron while swimming on her back. And somewhere over there is a chapel; the door was locked that day sixty years ago, but father found a rear entrance and climbed over the grille barring the steps to the gallery. Once at the top, he sat down at the harmonium and played "Nearer My God to Thee", and Luisa shivered again because she didn't like doing what wasn't allowed, even though the music was so beautifully sad and her mother was humming along. Nowadays she no longer has any qualms about doing

forbidden things, and no fear of punishment. If you believe something is right you should do it, she thinks, and there's no harm in it as long as you keep it to yourself.

She hasn't told anyone she's going to Genoa. Mirjam and Magi think she's bound for Vienna.

And Maya knows nothing about it, because she doesn't know what Vienna is, or Genoa.

She overhears a conversation from the compartment in front. The woman's voice is strident and her words annoyingly distinct, while the man's are only audible as a low vibration. She is saying something about clashing tights and conspicuous letterboxes. He responds with a few chords on his double bass. Luisa guesses that neither of them are young. It never ceases to amaze her how men and women who are totally unsuited to one another can stay together, even for the length of a train journey. She tries to picture the two of them embracing, a toy trumpet and a double bass: how can that work? And yet wherever she looks there are couples – strange double beings bonded together for one reason or another by a glue which has long since long dried up or evaporated. If she were inventing the human race, she would dispense with the sexes for a start, and with them the whole ordeal of mutual attraction and the ridiculous act of copulation. It's all very badly planned, reproduction, she thinks, what with the billions of wasted sperm, and the messy business of giving birth. Brisk, baggage-free individuals would make much better mates; their eyes would be fixed straight ahead instead of straying to left and right. Emotions such as love would still be desirable, but their object would be limited – say to one's offspring, which could be simply plucked from the parent after a three-month incubation period.

The toy trumpet from the next compartment appears to have lost her passport. "Why didn't you remind me", she says, and the double bass resonates again. Luisa feels in her handbag to check for her own. Gallmann-Racher, Luisa Frederike, Height: 166 centimetres. The old

passports used to specify eye colour too. Grey-blue in her case. Grey-blue is average, Alfred used to say. She will be in Italy before the day is out, and in Genoa tomorrow. And then it will be time to start cooking.

WITH GRITTED TEETH AND EMOTIONS

Luisa was twenty-nine when she found she was pregnant. She was sick as a dog. She was working in various state schools at the time, giving talks on nutrition to domestic science classes. She got to know one school toilet after the other; they all had a similar, not unpleasant smell of cream cleaner, pine needles and wet cloths. She vomited in washbasins, toilet bowls or cleaning buckets, wiped her mouth and returned to the class with a smile. "You should change your diet," a teacher remarked with heavy irony after hearing her retch in the toilets.

Alfred, too, made a joke of it. Seeing her pale face in the bathroom mirror, he would tease her with the prospect of black pudding and liver sausage for supper. Or cold tripe. Or pickled herrings with fried eggs. It was a long time before she broke the news to him. Although he'd never said anything against having children, she didn't know whether he really loved her, or just found her convenient. They had married quite conventionally in 1968, the revolutionary mood of the time barely registering with either of them. It was only later that Alfred claimed to have been an arch-rebel. Finally, when she could no longer fasten her trousers without a piece of string between button and buttonhole, she had to tell him. "I'm having a baby", she said. "And I've got a boil coming", he said.

Alfred acted as if he couldn't go near anything bourgeois without a face mask. He had abandoned his art history degree after one term, gone travelling and returned to Zurich an

artist. He adopted a sombre style, learned how to make lithographs and burned through his father's money.

When Luisa met him, he had a part-time job with the city council. Two days a week he spent cataloguing the picture collection, filling out index cards for all the graphics and paintings the city had acquired over decades and which now served to decorate administrative offices, police stations or hospitals. Lower-ranking clerical workers were allowed to choose one of the numbered graphics from the stock. Those higher up the scale were entitled to an original work. Whenever anyone migrated up or down, moved away or died, their picture came back to the collection, and Alfred was responsible for on-site inspections. Sometimes he would sneer to Luisa about the quality of the pictures or the artistic tastes of council employees. But he never talked about his job to other people. He wanted to be seen as an artist. All the same, Luisa never believed him when he said he wouldn't be there for much longer, as she noticed he was always in a much better mood on his "council" days.

It was Alfred's idea to call their child Maya. He had conceived an admiration for the ancient Mayan culture on a trip to Mexico, and brought back a typical hand-woven blanket. He laid the new-born Maya on the Mayan blanket for a photograph, but couldn't bring himself to press the shutter because her pink babygrow clashed with the black-and-red Native American design. Had Maya been a boy, she would have been called Narvik, because Alfred had spent a night there on his trip to the North Cape. He would rhapsodise about Narvik with an air of wistfulness; Luisa guessed he had had a lover there, and that she had given him the tupilak – the little devil carved from reindeer antlers which sat on the kitchen shelf – as a parting gift.

Maya was a cry-baby; the noise drove Alfred out of the house. He rented a garret in the vicinity so that he could do his drawing in peace. Luisa seldom saw a light on in the garret window; she knew that Alfred spent most of his evenings in the local pub, attempting to "deepen" his life in the company of other men. "You can't prolong life", he would say, "but you can deepen it". He had a talent for turning sentences into aphorisms. When he told Maya to eat up her puree, it sounded like the Wise Words of Solomon. Eat puree, my daughter, for it is good. Or if Luisa asked him to mend the shower curtain, he would make some pronouncement about the freedom of water.

In the early days, Alfred assumed some of the duties of a family man and discharged them tolerably well. He put Maya to bed, cleared the breakfast table, bundled up the newspapers, cleaned the toilet. One activity he performed unasked and on a regular basis was sexual intercourse. This he always practised in the early hours, while it was still dark in wintertime, or at the first twitterings of the dawn chorus. Nothing would deter him from this routine, not even Maya, who would sometimes cry throughout the whole operation. And Luisa did what he wanted, sometimes willingly, sometimes less so. But increasingly with gritted teeth and emotions.

Alfred seemed reasonably fond of Maya, Luisa thought, but no more than that. Perhaps he was secretly disappointed that she hadn't turned out a dark-haired Mayan princess. She had sparse, light brown hair, watery-pale, slightly bulging eyes and fat pink cheeks. When she was two, Alfred produced a drawing of her which made her look like a startled frog in a cardigan. It hung for a long time in the lounge, inscribed with Alfred's breezy signature. During those years, Luisa blossomed. Giving birth to Maya stirred up her hormones and transformed her physically. To her astonishment, her hair became glossy and her skin radiant. She grew slim from all the rushing around, and found she could get into clothes

she'd never dared try before. Best of all, Maya made her laugh, and the laugh lingered on her face like a memory, even when she was in a serious mood.

Sometimes she would catch a searching look from Alfred. I don't know what's got into you, it said.

Other times, he would pour scorn on her, battering her with statements such as:

If you were a book, people would only read the front page.

You think mediocrity is a virtue.

Your heart will never be full enough to overflow.

My spice is the only proper antidote to your blandness.

It wasn't until he began to smell different that she realised he was cheating on her. It wasn't perfume: it clung to his clothes, a washing powder and ironing smell. She didn't have time to spy on him. She'd started working in the city schools again and was always either out and about or busy with Maya. And she could hardly shadow Alfred with Maya on her shoulders, ducking behind cars and hiding in yard entrances. She had already begun to get used to the smell when fate came to her aid in the form of a bird. Towards evening, Alfred had set off to work in his garret, as he called it. Hardly had he closed the door of the flat behind him when a bird smacked against the kitchen window. Luisa flung it open in alarm and peered down. Sure enough, a lifeless little heap lay on the paved area by the street door, a blackbird perhaps, a young one. Any moment now, Alfred would emerge outside, running his hands through his hair, and Luisa would call out to him, pointing to the bird. But nothing happened; no-one came out. Luisa waited for some time; meanwhile, the computing machine in her head began to grind away and quickly spat out a result: Frau Wendt. Frau Wendt from the ground floor. Frau Wendt with the shock of curls, the olive skin, the

sparkling white teeth. Frau Wendt with the pink nightshirts, the padded bras, the patterned tights, the lace panties. Luisa knew Frau Wendt's entire lingerie collection from the washing line in the basement. Frau Wendt did her washing on Tuesdays, Luisa on Wednesdays; today was Thursday, and Alfred had disappeared into Frau Wendt's flat. That must be it. Straight from the staircase into the ample corridor of Frau Wendt's cleavage. That was it.

Luisa swept Maya up in her arms and ran down the stairs, her heart thumping. All was quiet; the bird was dead. It was a thrush, speckled with white, beak open. It was all over.