

The Thirteenth Year

Ruth Nestvold

Klaus

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"Grabbe."

"Hello, Klaus." It was his young wife, Sybille. Her voice was clipped and sharp; she was fed up about something.

"Hello, dear."

"Have you by any chance caught the news today?"

"You know I don't have a radio in my office," he replied mildly.

"You might have made the effort to find out what the results were. You did vote, I hope."

"On the way here," he lied. Voting had been his excuse to get out of the apartment and away from her on a Sunday, claiming he needed to go by the office afterwards because of paperwork. Instead he had headed straight to the office and gotten so caught up in the stylistic intricacies of post-modernists that he'd lost track of time.

"At least that's something," she said, her voice bitter. "It's going to be a lot worse than we thought."

"How bad?" he asked obediently. Sybille had a terrible tendency to exaggerate. She didn't belong to the generation that habitually blamed "the Establishment" for everything, but the attitude seemed to inform her thought anyway.

"At last count, the DVP had over thirty percent of the vote."

Klaus sat down abruptly. The DVP--the *Deutsche Volkspartei* or German People's Party--was as far to the right as legally possible. "But according to opinion polls, they were at less than twenty."

"A voting booth is more anonymous than an opinion poll. I told you it would be worse than they predicted. Not even I would have imagined it could be this bad, though." She sounded like she was about to cry.

"Calm down, Sybille. You'll see, they won't be able to form a government."

That sobered her up, but not as he had intended. "You just don't get it, do you, Klaus? Government or no government, this is bad enough. And if they are able to form a government, the nightmare will start all over again." She hung up abruptly.

Klaus stared at the receiver in his hand for a moment before putting it down. The nightmare will start all over again. What a strange word choice. He picked up his briefcase and left the

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their nightmare--he had been born in 1945 and Sybille eighteen years later. The developments were certainly regrettable, but he couldn't understand how his wife could get so worked up over a simple election. She hadn't been the same since she lost her last university job a year ago, in yet another big government cut-back. Klaus left the imposing old stone building on *Unter den Linden*, one of many belonging to Humboldt University scattered through this part of former East Berlin, and headed for the side street where his car was parked. He found himself wishing, as he often had before, that they had campuses here like in the United States. He had been a visiting professor at

Harvard once, and he found the peace of the setting there ideal, an island of intellectual endeavor in the middle of the big city. In Berlin, he was confronted by rush hour traffic heading for the Brandenburger Tor and the smell of exhaust as almost soon as he left his office. It was nearly dusk and the chill of fall was in the air. He hoped Sybille would have calmed down by the time he got home. Politics never made any difference anyway. Despite the promises of the last government elected, university classes were still overfilled and more positions being cut than created. He had *seminars* of 80 people. He should probably be grateful it wasn't 100. The humanist Humboldt would have turned

over in his grave. He got into the white Mercedes, started the engine, and turned on the radio. It was all news of the election results, and the announcer seemed just as excited as Sybille. Not only had the German People's Party gotten over thirty percent of the vote, that silly German Currency Party that wanted to have the mark reinstated had gotten no less than nine percent, and the other right-wing party, the Republikaner, had gotten six. It was unclear whether the Greens would get in at all. The right-wing parties were running neck and neck with the traditional parties.

He tooled the white Mercedes past Alexanderplatz with its big TV tower, the pride and joy of the former

communist rulers, and noticed a huge crowd of skinheads having a victory party. No, it wouldn't be a pleasant four years, but once people saw how incompetent the extremists were as politicians, they would lose their following. History didn't repeat itself. That was when the rock smashed his rear window.

Christian

"Way to go, Lars! Good shot!" Christian pounded his friend on the back triumphantly. He hadn't felt this good in a long time.

Lars guzzled more beer, emptying nearly half the bottle in one swig, and wiped his mouth on his sweatshirt. "Probably some stinking Wessi got rich

off the 'reunification'," Lars said. "But we'll show them. Now it's our turn."

"No kidding." Christian tipped his head back, emptying his own dark bottle. The West Germans deserved a few broken windows after the way they'd bought the East and then trashed its industry. Tomorrow he had to spend the day at the unemployment office, so he might as well enjoy himself tonight. He chose a bright red sports car that looked foreign, aimed, and threw. *Sybille*

Sybille gazed out the window of the streetcar at the bustling, dirty streets of Berlin, cloaked now in twilight. She loved this city, even the grungy, run-down parts. It was a city in constant transition, a sprawling metropolis with

multiple personality disorder and insomnia. She had come of age in Berlin, with its Love Parades and all-night bars; it was part of her. But the thought of staying here with a government that was a throwback to the Nazis made her stomach turn. Soon the right-wing parties would complete their negotiations and take over power. Knowing that made her feel as if she had cotton wool in her head. She stood up as the streetcar neared her stop, pressed the button and got off. She was meeting Klaus for dinner in the theater district which had sprouted up around the old Friedrichspalast after the fall of the wall.

The fall of the wall. She had been so

thrilled then, they all had; she danced in the streets with the best of them, drank beer with newly liberated neighbors and clambered over the gray monolith to sing victory songs until she was hoarse. She had been twenty-six then, still a student, and had not yet met Klaus. Now she was nearing forty, with little to show for it other than a Ph.D. and a husband who was what she had wanted to be, an English professor. Klaus was waiting for her when she got off the streetcar and gave her a short peck on the cheek.

"What is it?" she asked. "You look preoccupied."

"I still don't believe it," Klaus said.

"What don't you believe --that it looks like the DVU will be able to put together

a coalition with the DWP and the Republikaner or that someone dared to damage your Mercedes?" *Klaus*

Klaus gave her a dirty look and she shrugged. He really had been thinking about his Mercedes, but he wasn't about to admit that to her.

"What do you think we should do when the so-called 'People's Party' takes over?" she asked, stepping around a bag of soggy rags some bum had left on the sidewalk.

"Do?" Klaus peered at her over the top rim of his glasses. "I don't know what there is to 'do.'"

"So you just want to sit it out."

"I don't see any other options."

"How about a sabbatical?"

He shook his shaggy gray head at her. "You know I took my sabbatical two years ago."

"Well, unpaid then."

"Unpaid? How would we live? Besides, I'm hosting the annual conference of the International Association of American Studies this year."

"That's what you think."

"What do you mean by that?"

"How many people do you think are going to come to Berlin with a bunch of Nazis running things? Even if we haven't learned our lessons, that doesn't mean other people are just as dense."

"People attending *literature* conferences don't care which political

party is running things, Sybille."

"Just wait."

"I will. The fools will probably flounder and be out of office as fast as they got in it, just like the Greens."

Sybille shook her head. The lines in her forehead were puckered in worry. Those lines hadn't been there when they were married four years ago. "Not fast enough."

"They can't do that much damage," he insisted. "There are controls in the government system, you know."

"There are supposedly controls in the European Union too. Now look at us." A drunken skinhead reeling past them with his friends caught her last sentence and whistled loudly, embellishing the

appreciation with a few rude comments. The expression on Sybille's face made Klaus feel like a fool. It was not a feeling he liked. *Christian*

Christian and his buddies sang a loud drinking song as they headed for the S-Bahn at Friedrichstrasse and the concrete bunkers they called home after being thrown out of the bar early. The moon was high, reflecting on the water of the Spree River surrounding the Museuminsel.

"Damn Turks," Lars yelled, right in the middle of the song, and threw his beer bottle on the pavement. It gave a satisfactory smash, and brown shards and the rest of the beer splattered their shoes and the bottom of their jeans.

Stefan and Heiko jumped back, laughing drunkenly.

"Wait," Christian said. "We don't have to put up with this shit, not any more." Damn Turks was right. They were probably laughing at them right now, after kicking them out. His buddies agreed loudly. They weren't the ones who should be thrown out. They were born here. This was their city, and they should be able to get a beer wherever they wanted to. Planning it was easy enough. No stores were open, but gas stations were. Once they'd had a few more beers and deemed it late enough, they returned to the building, forced the lock on the back door, and slipped into the hallway, barely suppressing giggles.

Damn Turks wouldn't laugh long.

As Christian's eyes adjusted to the dark, he noticed a baby buggy behind the mailboxes. He nudged Lars and pointed, whispering, "It's perfect. Who has the gasoline?" *Sybille*

Sybille looked out over the Spree, slow and wide and gray, feeling as sluggish herself, swimming through gray days cloaked in unreality. At her side, Klaus was silent, probably resenting the outing, even though it was he who had suggested it to get her mind off the recent developments--the successful negotiations between the right-wing parties; the increasing attacks on foreigners; the arson incidents, one with fifteen dead, including three children.

"Klaus," she said.

"Yes?"

"I don't want to stay here."

"Don't start on that again," Klaus said angrily. "I thought we agreed we wouldn't talk about it?"

"You agreed. I didn't have much to say in the matter." Klaus didn't answer, and she looked out over the water again. They were nearing the Fischerinsel and its complex of ugly socialist skyscrapers.

"I've been thinking," Sybille said quietly. "I might go visit Aunt Carola for a while."

"Canada."

"Yes."

"Don't you think it would be rather

cowardly to leave?" It was ironic, hearing that from him, but she couldn't deny the truth of it. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. Join one of the other parties, maybe." How could he be so nonchalant? With every day of waiting, waiting to see what kinds of

"reforms" the new government would institute, waiting for the next case of arson in a house inhabited by dark-skinned foreigners, the stone in her stomach grew. Maybe it was cowardly, but she wanted to get out, now.

They turned the corner; there was a cry and a sudden movement ahead. Two skinheads had descended on a man who looked like he might be Indian or

Pakistani. Passers by stopped to stare, but no one made any move to help. She clutched her pack to her shoulder and pelted down the street.

"Someone do something!"

She shouldered past a burly man watching and tried to grab one of the skinheads by the arm.

"Sybille!"

The skinhead she had grabbed shook her off like a pesky child and socked his intended victim in the stomach. He doubled over, and the other skinhead hit him with clenched fists on the back of the head, sending him to the ground.

"Help!"

Sybille pummeled the skinhead's arm and he turned on her. The last thing she

remembered was the look of surprise in his dark gray eyes as his fist swung around towards her temple. *Klaus*

In the first few seconds, he couldn't have moved for the life of him, even though it was the life of his wife.

"Sybille!"

When she fell to the ground, he ran, yelling at a group of bystanders. "Someone get the police, quick!" he said in his best lecturing voice, and a young man took off at a sprint for the nearest phone booth.

Sybille lay in a heap on the pavement, skin white and hair bloody. Klaus pulled her away from the fight, picked her up and carried her to a nearby bench. The skinheads gave her up without a fight--it

wasn't her they were interested in anyway. A mean bruise was forming at her temple. Klaus gathered her into his arms and rocked her. "Sybille, Sybille," he repeated over and over again.

Christian

As soon as they heard the police sirens, they left off the foreigner and ran as fast as they could. It wasn't hard to get away; they were halfway down the street by the time the green and white cars made it to where the man lay on the sidewalk. The cops weren't that big on catching them anyway. There were a couple of cops who came to meetings, and they said there was a lot of sympathy for their ideas in the ranks.

They turned down an alley and leaned

against the wall, laughing and panting.
Klaus

The hospital smell offended him, reminding him of sickness and age and his own fragility. If anyone should be in here, it should be him, and not Sybille. He kept seeing over and over again in his mind how she ran at those two thugs, calling for help, with no thought to her own safety. Idiocy, utter idiocy.

When he entered her room she was awake. She usually wasn't. Severe concussion, the doctor said. Her brain needed to rest and regenerate.

"Klaus."

"Sybille." He took her hand and she let him, unresisting. "Are you feeling better?"

"Not much. I still can't look at anything for long, and if I try to read, the words swim across the page away from me before I can get the meaning. I hate it. What am I supposed to do here if I can't read?"

"Sleep."

"Oh, I do enough of that."

He squeezed her hand and looked at her, her pale skin and the purple circles around her eyes, as if someone had socked her with both fists. Her short dark hair was freshly washed, but his memory superimposed matted blood where her skull had hit the pavement. Despite himself, his grief came out in anger. "Why, Sybille? The police would have come soon enough."

"Why? Don't give me more of a headache than I already have, Klaus." She closed her eyes.

"Why didn't *you* grab his other arm?" she asked without opening them.

"Because it would have been suicidal, that's why." She looked at him again, her brown eyes flat. "Did you happen to notice how many other people were there?"

"No. It all happened so fast."

"At least four or five, I think. Together, we could have put those two skinheads in the hospital ourselves."

"Oh, Sybille." A terrific sigh escaped him. "Don't go heroic on me again, please."

"Heroism had nothing to do with it. I

had no choice." He stared at the freckled hand he held in his own, wondered why he had been running away from her these past few months. He had not wanted to face her discontent, had wanted everything to be effortless, for them and for her, and when it was no longer so, he had failed.

"I can ask the rector if I can get a sabbatical on short notice. Maybe someone in the association will have a guest professorship winter semester. We could get by for a couple of months."

Sybille began to shake her head and stopped, closing her eyes. "Shit. Every little movement makes me dizzy again." He waited, silent. "'We' are not doing anything, Klaus. And I don't know what

I'm going to do. I can't stand it here, but you were right--taking off for Toronto would be irresponsible."

"Good. I can use your help on the conference."

"I didn't say I was going to stay," Sybille said, looking at him steadily. "Maybe I'll go to Luxembourg or France. The European Union will fight the tightened registration laws the government is instituting."

He couldn't argue with her. Her physical condition wouldn't allow it. So instead he went to his office and the comfort of work. His secretary met him with a stack of mail, including two letters from keynote speakers for the IAAS conference. Both of them were

withdrawing their acceptance, citing the new laws turning out foreigners and restricting the movements of anyone not from the European Union. They were terribly sorry, etc., etc., but Professor Grabbe would surely understand that under the present circumstances, Germany was not considered a safe place for non-whites. He crumpled the letters up and threw them in his wastebasket, and his secretary had to fish them out and flatten them as well as possible to file them away.

Sybille

It was a foolish thing to do, she knew. She still wasn't herself--she could only read for ten or fifteen minutes at a time without starting to feel dizzy. At least

now she had a reason for feeling like she had cotton wool in her head.

But it would be even more foolish to stay and let the authorities get her. Her friends from the Green Party were already disappearing, and many others had gone underground. She slipped out of the hospital bed and tip-toed to the closet. Good, her clothes were still there. She pulled on her sweater and jeans to the music of Mrs. Bachmann's gentle snoring behind her.

The going was slow, but she made it out of the darkened hospital without mishap, made it to the S-Bahn and Oranienburger Strasse and into the underground, became a statistic, a missing person, and an enemy of the

State.

Christian

The old synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse didn't mean much to Christian--he would have preferred to attack a mosque. It was like he said to the guys before they threw a bunch of stones around that night in the Jewish cemetery--it wasn't the Jews who were a problem, it was the Turks and the Africans and all the IT "green card" foreigners taking the jobs away from the Germans who deserved them. There weren't many Jews left anyway, since the Nazis had gotten rid of most of them. But the other guys said the synagogue had symbolic value. And hey, he'd be happy to carry a torch any time. It sure beat standing in

the unemployment line.

Klaus

"I saw him on television, I tell you," Klaus said to the policeman at the desk. "He was being rounded up by your men. I swear it's the same one who beat up my wife."

"How can you recognize anyone from a television shot?"

"It was a close-up!"

The policeman typed something into his computer and stared at the screen for a few minutes.

"Looks like those boys are being released again."

"Released? They burned down half the synagogue! The only reason they didn't burn the rest is because it is made

of stone."

"We can't keep anyone longer for only disturbing the peace."

"You can't be serious."

"That's what it says here." The policeman tapped on his screen.

"I don't care what it says there--I need to identify the one who put my wife in the hospital. That is certainly more than 'disturbing the peace.'" Put her in the hospital and caused her to run away. If he had known how, Klaus would have liked to beat the punk to a bloody pulp himself.

"Just a minute." The man in green got up from his desk and went to the back room. While he was waiting, another policeman appeared escorting half-a-

dozen skinheads, the gray-eyed monster at the front of the pack.

"Officer!"

The policeman turned and Klaus hurried up to him. "This man is guilty of assault and battery," Klaus said, pointing at the young man.

"Oh yeah?" the skinhead said before the policeman could answer. "What did I do?"

"You knocked out my wife."

There was a flicker in the young man's eyes and Klaus was even more sure he was right.

"You're Professor Grabbe?" The policeman he had talked to had returned, leafing through a sheaf of papers. Klaus nodded. "We would like to hold you for

questioning in connection with the disappearance of your wife, Sybille Schenk-Grabbe. Come with me please."

"What?"

The policeman looked up from the papers he was holding, his eyes green and hard. "Your wife is suspected of involvement in a terrorist organization. Are you saying you know nothing of this?"

"No!"

The officer shrugged. "We would still like to ask you a few questions. This way." He opened a gate on the side of the desk and nodded his head in direction of the back room. Klaus looked around, and his gaze caught that of the skinhead.

"Just what you deserve," the young man spat out. "You assholes took everything from us, it's all your fault."

Klaus stared into the flat gray eyes, his skin growing cold. Slowly, the skinhead smiled, smiled and laughed as the policeman escorted him out of the office.

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