

Tobias Hülswitt

Angel Pool

Translated from German by Rachel Halverson



Strictly speaking, not a single day has passed without such a story, and Katja did not know exactly why this bothered her so much. She listened, for example, to a Vietnamese war veteran confess that he couldn't fall asleep at night without first emptying an entire bottle of whiskey. Out of the blue. Students said such things out of the blue, right in the middle of class, when Katja just had explained adjective declensions yet again or had introduced Subjunctive II. She heard from a Polish day release prisoner that he was going to take his case to the European Union's Court of Justice, because he considered it outrageous that *seven* years after he had slept with this abducted underage girl only *twice*, that *my God seven* years after this rather harmless incident they still had put him in prison. She had had an old Fatah fighter sitting in class next to an Israeli who had the shrapnel from a Palestinian grenade in his head since his childhood on a Kibbutz. Young Afghans told how they had walked from Afghanistan through Iran and Turkey to Europe: a married couple barely twenty years old, each with a bag, and the husband carrying their young son; another Afghan, sixteen years old, told in class how he had lost his parents and sister two years ago as they were transported from Turkey's Mediterranean coast to Greece in boats owned

by the Turkish mafia and since then had not seen them. When they were discussing love, one of the extremely popular topics in Integration Courses,¹ Katja had heard a Turkish woman tell how the women her husband ran off with would notice after two, three months at the most what an asshole he was and chase him off. He always came back to her, and that's why she didn't worry about it anymore when it happened.

The cultural unit on love had an open discussion topic with the title "Marriage for Love versus Arranged Marriage," and a Turkish-Indian majority always formed in support of arranged marriages. Katja had to confess that the arguments they brought in defense of arranged marriages were not the worst. Somehow these damned arranged marriages built on reason rather than love seemed to last longer. And didn't the romantics on the Internet always ruefully return to arranged marriages?

Despite all the reservations that she herself harbored, Katja felt an obligation to make German culture, or the Western lifestyle, to a certain extent appealing to the participants in the Integration Courses. Ultimately, these people would live here provided they weren't deported again or they already had lived here for decades without being able to speak German. Above all it was necessary to lead them to an *understanding* of Germans, to show them that not everything about these Germans was cold and abrasive and blunt, no, that there also were friendly and cultivated Germans among them, like herself for example. And because she, as she termed it, was grudgingly doing PR for Germany, she found herself on this morning as always defending romantic marriages in the discussion "Marriage for Love versus Arranged Marriage," all the while naturally paying attention not to devalue the cultural conventions of her students. And *there* this story was brought up again, in fact for the second time. The first time must have been several months ago in a different course, but with the same discussion topic. And she wasn't sure whether the two women who told it knew each other or whether the story was simply making the

1 The "Gesetz zur Steuerung und Begrenzung der Zuwanderung und zur Regelung des Aufenthalts und der Integration von Unionsbürgern und Ausländern" [Act to Control and Restrict Immigration and to Regulate the Residence and Integration of EU Citizens and Foreigners] was passed in 2004 and mandated language and culture instruction for those wanting to live and work in the Federal Republic of Germany. As of 2005, most immigrants and refugees seeking permanent residency in Germany are required to take an Integration Course which consists of a language course and a cultural orientation course.

rounds in the school. Anyway, it promptly came up whenever Katja began grudgingly to do PR for Germany. The first time a Russian woman told it, this time a Turkish woman did. The story was short and to the point: In the apartment building where the woman's girlfriend lived, a thirty-five-year-old German man, who lived alone, had died of a heart attack, and several days or even weeks had passed before his body was discovered. No friends, no relatives. In the first version, he had died on Christmas Day, the second on Easter. "Vhhhhy alvvaays alone?" the Russian woman asked, and "Vay always elon?" the Turkish woman asked.² "Yes, why always alone?" joined in the whole Turkish-Russian-Nigerian-Venezuelan-Thai-Spanish-Iranian-Indian class and shook their heads in unison. And among all the stories that she heard daily from these students and that fascinated and moved her, but did not prevent her from sleeping, this one story, barely three sentences in length, knocked her socks off. Of course, she wasn't stupid: it was because this story pertained to her.

After work she rode her bike from Moritzplatz³ to the Angel Pool,⁴ in order to sit at the edge of the pond and turn the whole thing over in her mind. The Angel Pool looked as though it just had finished a round of chemo: bald in its new concrete border, sparse tufts of seedlings where previously a thick wall of reeds had shielded the café from the pond. Small, naked metal heads like those from a sprinkler system protruded from the water in equal distance from each other. And after Katja had looked at the small, silver-gray, somehow also bald waves awhile, one of the two turtles, who lived in the pond during the summer, suddenly stuck its likewise gray, bald head out of the water between the sprinkler heads and paused a few minutes.

She thought about Mr. Schaaß. And about the young Afghanis in her second course, who had discarded their

2 In the original German, Hülswitt tailors the orthography of these two questions and their subsequent occurrence in the short story to emulate the distinctive Russian and Turkish accents of the two women learning German. The translator consulted with a native speaker of Russian and a native speaker of Turkish to capture the same effect in the English translation.

3 Moritzplatz, located in Kreuzberg at the end of the Oranienstraße, has emerged as a creative hub in recent years with the Princesses' Gardens, numerous clubs and cafés, and the opening of the Aufbau Haus Development Center.

4 Angel Pool (*Engelbecken*) is a square pond located in a park in Kreuzberg in Berlin. On one end, there is a café directly on the water. Grassy banks with bushes form the other three sides.

headscarves and reveled in their new free lives in Germany, and how she, Katja, had seen the lives of these three intelligent young girls pass before her eyes in fast motion: the heartfelt, cohesive family unit that the three sisters and their parents formed would gradually dissolve. Because they wanted to leave Afghanistan behind them at any price, in the near future they would get to know the first in a series of German men, a series which only death someday would end. They would begin to feel like their parents were a burden, in the beginning because they never really gained their footing in Germany and later because they had grown old and were no longer able to care for themselves. Then the sisters would begin fighting about who should care for their aging parents. One of them would be married with three children, but with very little money and an apartment that was far too small for her parents to live with her. The other would be a single mother going to school with more than enough on her plate. And the third would be a single doctor, who would be too busy with work, recreation, and attempting to have a relationship to take care of her aging parents. At the end of their own lives, they would not have seen each other for months and years. They had jumped from the frying pan into the fire, where they would be slowly roasted, so to speak. And Katja thought about how she had wanted cautiously to prepare them for everything that life in the West entails, and then had left it at that.

And on the other hand, she thought of Mr. Schaaß. It all went hand in hand. Mr. Schaaß, the last German in a small Transylvanian village, one of the last representatives of the Germans who had been settling in Romania for 800 years, one of the last of his kind. After Hans-Dietrich Genscher⁵ had declared in 1990 that all Transylvanian Saxons were welcome in Germany, Mr. Schaaß belonged to the five or ten percent who did not leave their land and their villages in the Carpathian highlands among the hills of Burzenland, of Unterwald, of Nösnerland and all the other regions with their Transylvanian Saxon names; those who didn't want to leave this land that, as Christian said, always looked like it had been painted with diluted watercolors, this land with its herds of sheep, its unfenced expanses, wolves, forests, smoked bacon and enormous fortresses. While the other ninety percent stuffed

5 Hans-Dietrich Genscher was Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany between 1982 and 1992.

their suitcases into their Romanian Dacias and set out for the West over the pothole-riddled sandy roads, leaving behind their farms and stalls filled with animals and their houses filled with furniture, just as they had been. And with starry eyes this Mr. Schaaß told her and Christian in the small house in the village, in which he was born and which he essentially had never left, of the time when the village was a community with century-old customs. There were dances and schnapps and everything but prudery, with bawdy jokes and horrible punishments. It was a village with communitarian neighborliness, where everyone had everyone's back and no one let anyone fall through the cracks; where from one's first breath to one's last, whether one wanted to or not, personal freedom was sacrificed for solidarity and community. And naturally Katja also thought of Christian, who had been her boyfriend and whom she had accompanied to his ethnographical interviews in Transylvania, and whom she had envied because of this project, mainly because she never would have trusted herself to begin something like this in a foreign country—although it was in Europe! —, and whom she had left, when he returned to Germany after two years in Romania and she once again was working at the language school. After ten years in a relationship and thorough consideration. Sitting at the kitchen table in Moabit.⁶ With words she could hardly believe were coming out of her own mouth. “I think it's better that you move out.” — “And what is that supposed to mean?” — “Well, it means that ... that each of us just goes our separate way.” A meter-thick curtain of fog descended between them, that's what it seemed like to her. And once those words had been said, reality picked up these sentences like new DNA and began consistently and relentlessly to construct itself according to them. Katja could only watch. She had waited for years to say these sentences, and perhaps she had only said them now, so that the years of waiting would not have been for naught.

She thought about Christian sitting alone in his small new apartment, physically present, but in reality caught in some European intermediary world, thirty-five years old. He had survived Easter, but Christmas was in six months. Katja didn't want to be responsible for his solitary death. And Mr. Schaaß, seventy-five, suffering from cancer and nearing the end of his life, an end that practically was one and the same as the

6 Moabit is a rather sedate district in Berlin, not as trendy as Neukölln or Kreuzberg, where established Berliners as well as newcomers, couples as well as small families, make their home.

end of an entire lineage. He still told of his life with stars in his eyes. Without ever having left his damn village, he seemed to be happy in his damn house with the little windows and the vegetable garden he had put in the yard. And Katja had tossed back all the shots of schnapps Mr. Schaaß had shoved across the table at her, as he told of earlier days, of the neighborhood's strict governance and the very sexy brides in their traditional garb, of the Maypole and of the burial ritual of pleading for the dead to be brought out of the house to be taken to the cemetery.⁷ Katja had drunk all the shots, because she suddenly thought she knew that in the remaining forty years, or whatever, she would not be able to make her own eyes sparkle that way. She thought about what she had that could hold a candle to Mr. Schaaß's life of local magnificence. A few beaches. The one in L.A. with the dolphins, and the one in Lagos with the palm trees, in addition the Bund in Shanghai and the Williamsburg Bridge in New York. The Cape of Good Hope. The cliffs of the West coast of Ireland. The southern tip of Sweden and by sailboat through the archipelago off the Swedish coast, and the Alps, Venice, Rome, Lisbon, even Iran, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Egypt and Mexico. Yes, she had seen all of that! Yes, she would love a fifth shot of schnapps. And Christian carried her to the car.

She continued to look at the gray surface of the Angel Pool in its new concrete border, and the lawn where she was sitting smelled like dog piss. "Vay always elon?" Exactly. What would it be like if things were to change? And if they were to change now? She grabbed her cell phone just as it began to ring, exactly at that moment. It was Anatol.

Anatol was a sweetie. An aristocrat who had worked for the *Bild*⁸ newspaper until his personal burnout. Now, after an extensive treatment at a health spa and a long vacation in Thailand and Indonesia, he actually did nothing more than ride around on his bike. She was happy whenever he touched base, and their relationship could have become so much more,

7 "Ausbitte des Toten" is a Transylvanian Saxon burial tradition that is still practiced in some communities today. A designated member of the community enters the courtyard of the house of mourning to claim the dead. He first expresses condolences to the family and then requests permission to bring the dead to the cemetery for burial. For additional information, see online resource "Ethnographische Sammlung. Siebenbürgisch-Sächsische Bräuche. Begräbnis" (<http://traditionen.evangel.ro/fe/tradition/view/14>).

8 The *Bild-Zeitung* is a German tabloid newspaper published by Axel-Springer AG.

but she feared it would have been such a big deal if they ever got together, and that was simply too much for her. And if it weren't a big deal, it would be a disappointment, because she always had believed that it would become a big deal if they got together. And if it were only a partial thing, she would hurt him, and after having hurt Christian, she wanted to take a break from hurting people.

"Do you know where I am at this very moment, and why I'm calling you?" His voice came over the phone bright and ready for action.

"No?"

"I'm here in Friedrichshain right in front of *Katja's Cake* Kitchen and just wanted to know if you go there sometimes?"

"Because of the name? Nope, never."

"As usual I got lost, I was just in Treptow, and suddenly I was biking right by here and then I thought, man, what a great time just to give you a call."

"Well, that's nice of you, super, it really makes my day."

"Mine too!"

"Sooo ... how are you?"

"Super! Absolutely excellent! If I were to die now, everything would be fine, since the last two months of my life were simply the most awesome two months of my life, and even if everything goes down the tubes again, I always will know, it was the most awesome time in my life. I share the coolest apartment with the coolest people, I bike all over the place, the sun is awesome, the city is awesome, nature is awesome, everything is awesome!"

Katja was suddenly filled with rage. Although she actually liked Anatol, and regardless of the fact that she currently didn't have a particularly large group of social contacts, she decided to ban him from her inner circle for the time being. Impossible to be friends with someone who is doing so awesomely well. Even though she knew he had earned it, had had difficult times and been really down. Underneath the surface of his euphoria, he was most certainly the saddest person in Europe, and that really spoke in his favor. Whatever! She hung up before he noticed anything. "Vay always elon?" She couldn't take care of everyone. She leaned back on the grass and then sat immediately bolt upright. Dog piss must be in the grass right

behind her. She jumped up and put her hair to her nose. Now even her hair smelled like it. “Fuck. Damn. Why was everything always such a shitty pile of crap?” She was talking to herself. She saw other people who were lying on the short piece of lawn in front of the water. Who were they? What did they all want? How did they explain the reasons for their existence on the face of the earth? Did they ever even think about it? What did she herself even want? Why had she even taken her cell phone with her again? Exactly! What if everything would change due to her own initiative? A message to Christian, unaltered, direct, without indecision and hesitation, simply throw everything into the ring, completely expose herself? She decided to send him the ultimate text message, now: “Christian” or “*Dear Christian*”? A difficult decision since they had broken up so many years ago—, “Christian, you are the only person I wasn’t lonely with.” Lonely. She considered it a bit. A big word. But the truth. Okay. Or should it be: “*With whom* I wasn’t lonely?” Of course she didn’t actually send the text, but she had never really expected that she would. She didn’t even type it into her cell phone. And she didn’t write it down anywhere either. She got on her bicycle and rode home, to Moabit. The sun was shining, and she could understand Anatol a tiny bit now, since it all actually was a bit awesome.

For German writer Tobias Hülswitt, it is the very ephemeral nature of human existence that relegates storytelling to a unique position in society, and the way in which stories are told reveals as much as the stories themselves. His short story “Angel Pool” (2011) is set in contemporary Berlin, the capital of unified Germany and home to a broad spectrum of humanity. In fact, the city’s international diversity, with residents from around the world, furnishes the multicultural context in which Katja, the main character, works as a language instructor tasked with teaching German to the city’s ever increasing immigrant population. Exchanges with her students from a variety of different countries and their difficulties comprehending the recurrent story they hear of Germans dying alone force Katja to contemplate her decision to end a ten-year relationship with Christian and her current single status. The short story’s omniscient narrator artfully interweaves the life stories of Katja’s students and of Herr Schaaß, one of

the subjects of Christian's ethnographic research project in Transylvania, to establish a narrative frame to which Katja's reflections on her own life stand in stark contrast.

In many respects, "Angel Pool" is representative of Hülswitt's growing body of work. In his four novels (*Saga* [2000], *Ich kann dir eine Wunde schminken* [2004], *Der kleine Herr Mister* [2006], and *Dinge bei Licht* [2008]), a co-edited volume of interviews *Werden wir ewig leben? Gespräche über die Zukunft von Mensch und Technologie* (2010), and numerous essays and short stories, Hülswitt, a 2001 graduate of the German Literature Institute at the University of Leipzig, explores the human condition, and the characters in his works grapple with all dimensions of life, ranging from love and loss to life and death. Central to each text are explorations of how stories are told, whether it be through direct comments by the protagonist on the narrative itself or the introduction of nonlinearity into the text reminding readers with each page they turn that they have entered a constructed world. Characteristic of Hülswitt's approach to narration, the open ending of "Angel Pool" leaves readers with the sense that Katja has discovered happiness in that one moment on the banks of Angel Pool, but it offers no conclusive indication of the course she will choose to take in life. Her story, like those of the readers themselves, is one of a life in progress.⁹

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9 See Hülswitt's personal website for examples of his past, present, and future projects: <http://www.tobiashuelswitt.com/>.

Note from *De/los*: The photograph of the Angel Pool in Berlin is the work of Rachel Halverson, and is reproduced with her kind permission.