

## **Judith Zander**

extract from the novel manuscript *Things we said today*

translated by Stefan Tobler

When you finally stood up, what most confused you was finding your panties still on. As if it hadn't happened. You felt several things at the same time. One of them was gratitude. Towards the panties that covered you just the same as before, cottony and white and at most a little dirty at the back. For a crazy moment you even wondered if he had put them back on you, with that odd carefulness which always prevailed when he slipped his hand under your T-shirt on the way home, the way to Kossin, and then afterwards immediately pulled the shirt back down again, tugging it into place, as if he always wanted to undo what had happened. A behaviour which only seemed to have been intensified in his not first taking the panties off. But more of that later. Oh yes. Worn elastic.

You could no longer go home that evening. Morning was breaking when you finally reached your house, as if after a long absence and – as it seemed to you – not quite on time. No one was waiting for you to come. Unlike Phileas Fogg, you hadn't done it. You had lost the wager. You might have circumnavigated the known world in a night, but you hadn't gained anything, you'd just arrived back in Bresekow in front of your house, and as a punishment you'd always be late by that amount of time, however long it had been.

You pulled the orange curtains to. Your mum didn't wake you. Had anyone whispered into your dream that there was a school in Schmalditz, you'd have had to laugh out loud.

But then you went back after all, with a sick note from your mum, and that seems the strangest bit of it all now. The fact that you still needed those things, that you obviously still believed that you were just sixteen. You had never thought yourself too young, and so neither did anyone else. Since then you've often thought yourself a little too old instead. Even before the exams you saw yourself as a student who had actually long ago left Schmalditz Comprehensive, and only been ordered back by a bureaucratic mistake. You accepted your rather mediocre leaving certificate as if on someone else's behalf. Of course you didn't show yourself at the leaving party, although you would have been curious to see

if someone would have danced with you. That's the sort of thing you can do at a leaving party, after all. If you don't know too much.

You had never been seriously concerned about that. Whether someone knew something, still knows something. It wouldn't have changed anything. And you would always have been the one who had reported Poor Handsome Roland, dragged him before a court and possibly put him behind bars. Not the one who Roland Möllrich raped. More like: the one who raped Roland Möllrich.

You barely noticed anything all summer. You didn't feel sick, except for when your mum managed to stop you for a minute and ask how far you had got in thinking about a possible apprenticeship. To your relief, you hadn't been recommended for the sixth form. Your mum didn't care, at least she didn't want to try to convince you to stay on at school for two more years. She saw clearly enough that it wouldn't do any good. Nor did she harbour the opinion that it's important to be someone, only that it's important to do something, and she wouldn't have tolerated your loafing around any longer than the summer. You were bored, nothing else, and you doubted that an apprenticeship could have fundamentally changed that.

Your period wasn't always the normal four weeks. That was normal for you. You didn't miss the unnatural illness, probably you hoped in those months that it would leave you in peace for ever. It must have been well into July when you realized what that peace could mean. It wasn't that you didn't know about things. When you had got the curse the first time at thirteen it wasn't as if anyone had had to calm your fears of this unknown with a yet greater fear of something inevitable. Anne Hanske didn't tend to hide things. But you had taken it as something that only affected the others, your mascara-wearing fellow schoolgirls. For you it was just a superfluous function of your body. And nor did you lose this indifference, or whatever you want to call it, a few years later. It was unimaginable to you that you, you, could ever end up in such a position as the one you now – well, feared is too strong a word, the whole idea just wasn't real enough. Even if you were together with Roland, in those short hours, short and to the point, you hadn't given them another thought, in the same way as you hadn't given a thought to the future. It wasn't for you.

Your mum started to take you to companies, to the Retail Organization, to the *Konsum* supermarkets. You drove as far as Pasewalk. You were too late, that's what you kept hearing. You could have just said the word and this whole palaver would have been put on ice for the time being. But you couldn't. You didn't normally see the necessity of furnishing your apathy with motives, but this time you tried to give yourself excuses. You weren't sure. Your mum would have sent you straight to the doctor. That would have shown that it wasn't too late yet. But you knew yourself far too well: you weren't the type who was saved at the last minute. Every 'right now' had always been too much for you, paralyzing you so completely that you regularly managed to screw everything up. You didn't even start to think what there could possibly be to still screw up. And, as ever, nor did you weigh up one demand against another, the clearly foreseeable but passing demand against the other, which you couldn't describe with any adjective. Hadn't you been taught to consider what was invisible as the same as what was impossible?

Undoubtedly it was also like this: if the future unfortunately proved not to be invisible enough (and even as a child you had given up on thinking beyond the immediate present, that was a real skill you'd developed because after all everything always happened just as you feared it would), then at least a bit of the future would be just a provisional arrangement, something for later. You could rely on your advancing condition to hold you suspended, perhaps forever. 'Put off' sounded much like 'put aside' to you. All sorts of things could happen, couldn't they.

When you heard that only the Collective Farm was prepared to take you on and train you as an agrochemical technician, it didn't particularly affect you one way or another. If you had let yourself be persuaded earlier to, more or less voluntarily, take the socialist line of 'agriculture as a pillar of our society', then you would have been publicly praised in front of the class, like Christa Pohley, who did business studies and became the only trainee in your mum's Collective Farm office, behind each of whose five windows a perm blossomed. You could still start in the gardens, next year. When you had to move the buttons on your trousers, you started to guess the price you'd paid for taking it easy. Next year! Where on earth did you get the idea of making out, now of all times, that you

believed in rubbish like the passing of time. Next year you wouldn't exist. A child might exist, Roland Möllrich's child. Roland who you'd been with in the meadows and in the park, one of the two would be taken as the cause, which one didn't matter. It was your stupidity and your fault, and both of those ate you up inside so much that you harboured a justifiable hope that they would take you apart completely. Roland Möllrich's child would be there. So how could you be there. Where there's one body, there can't be another, not long-term. You didn't dream of those wasps that lay their eggs in hosts. They were buzzing round your head all day. You remembered two things about them – on the one hand: what they did, on the other hand: that they were useful. A word that left its taste on your tongue. It went together wonderfully well with the words 'Möllrich', 'mayors' sons', the ones that in the sixth form, in spite of their select education, wouldn't take much convincing to sign a piece of paper. Any paper. Everyone found something for them, something Useful. You wouldn't have imagined you could be so waspish. You couldn't. Not even angry. Things remained numb.

You found yourself in an eight-bed dorm in the apprentices' hall of residence in Kiessow. All the other beds were already taken. The bottom one next to the door was left, a pillow, an ex-People's Army blanket. It was September; whoever didn't want to see anything, didn't have to. You didn't quite manage to do up your trousers, the press studs popped open as soon as you sat down, but you had a belt and a baggy jumper. In the shower-room you would bend low over the basin, take the shower at the back and turn to face the wall. No one showed a particular interest in you. As always you spoke little. People almost jumped when you did open your mouth. They weren't used to it, those loud girls. They always called each other by their surnames. You were sure that none of them knew your surname; you got theirs muddled up. Only in Kathi's case were you certain she was called Kathi Breitsprecher. She slept above you and would strike up conversation with a 'Hey, Ingrid'. You knew that you would tell her first. You were going to have to tell, better than letting someone else. At the same time you were worried about telling her. You felt real fear that she might start to cry. She often cried, half way through her sentences. When you saw Kathi, you saw that she could be hurt. Her skin looked almost transparent to you. Not the thick skin you had. She was much shorter than you, rounder too, all of her. Her brown hair

would naturally curl into generous locks after every wash; her mouth was constantly forming a little O. She addressed her surroundings exclusively with laughter or tears, but it was difficult to predict which of the two. The two of you couldn't decide what was more to be hated: the empty hours in the low building in Kiessow that smelt of black pudding and sawdust, or the country air of the placement weeks, on the turnip fields and in the cowsheds in the Anklam area. You dreamt of udders. Of the eyes of the tractor drivers. Both of you said it couldn't go on like that forever. That gave you a bond. But Kathi trusted things would work out.

Before the end of the first month you could have filled your head with all Kathi's domestic details and affairs. She was completely reliable in supplying you with constantly new – or perhaps constantly the same – filler. You seldom listened. The hole in your head got bigger and bigger. You forgot the simplest things. You went to bed earlier and earlier. Once as you were getting undressed the door flew open and the others, who normally came crashing in when you were already pretending to be asleep, were suddenly standing around you. Elfi or Barbara or Liebmann said, 'Wait a minute, you pregnant or what?' and poked you in the stomach with her index finger. You might almost have laughed. You had forgotten. To tell people. But that sounded like one of your excuses, the ones only you would tolerate. You couldn't ever remember someone else making one up for you. 'Yes,' you said. They were shocked, they overdid it, they carried on laughing for a bit in your corner, but it wasn't all that funny, and they only came up with two or three jokes. You could sense their disappointment. Kathi said, 'Hey, Ingrid, really?' and started to cry.

'Stop it,' you said. 'It's not all that bad.'

'But Ingrid – I'm so happy for you!'

You had underestimated Kathi. You began to reconsider everything. To take crying for laughter, and the other way round. Sometimes you felt like laughing now.

When your mum looked at you for a long time that weekend with a face that she normally only put on for the news on the radio of how the Plans had been fulfilled and even exceeded, and then said, 'I thought as much,' you had to laugh. She didn't tell you what should happen next. That was obvious. To your surprise,

not the other thing. 'And who did you – ' she cleared her throat, you didn't recognize any of her usual gestures in it. 'I mean, along with you, who did it?' 'No one,' you said immediately and almost happily, because you didn't need to think about it.

'Ingrid, stop it. I'm not that stupid, and nor are you.' She tried to sound like a mother. 'You'll tell me now who the father is.'

You wanted to say that you didn't know. That you'd forgotten. Hmm, someone from Anklam, oh who cares, from Berlin, from the West. From the world beyond, hah. But none of these barricades seemed like a safe defence to you. It was better right from the start to stick to a version that you could repeat easily, for who knows . . . with this head.

'No,' you said.

'Ingrid Hanske!' your mum said. She shrugged her shoulders, gripped the back of her chair tightly and looked determinedly at the crack between the oven and the tiles, as if hoping her eyes could bore even further in. 'Do you want to be a single . . . You don't think you need anyone else, is that it? You . . .' She stopped suddenly, turned around and left. That could be how it was. Maybe she didn't really know who she, Anna Hanske, was talking about.

Just before you had to catch the bus, she pressed a present into your hand. You didn't know where to put it and stowed it in your bag with your clothes. In the dorm you fell asleep straightaway. Your birthday was on Monday. On Monday you had to go to the teachers' room. You went there immediately, in what you had woken up in. 'Miss Hanske. You owe us an explanation.'

'No,' you said and were pleased, because the version had now become your flesh and blood. Flesh and blood. You thought about that for a moment. The teachers tried not to interrupt each other. That much you could hear. They didn't manage. While one was still thundering on, the other would come storming in, and out of it all came a tempest of 'consequences'. If you continue to maintain your silence, there will be consequences. You didn't know what you should say. To such naivety. If you didn't maintain your silence, there would still be consequences. They could see that.

After the lessons your head was empty again. You saw the bag next to your bed and you didn't see it. It seemed pointless to you, to put away your clothes in a

drawer. Why do it? Changing clothes. Doing the laundry. Getting dressed, undressed, dressed. You had the feeling that you were imitating the others. When you trotted along to the shower-room behind them, like them you didn't hide any more. When you undid your bra, passing the cloth over one, then the other, half of your body, it felt to you as if you had learnt the movements from them. You said 'good night' when they said 'good night'.

A few days later you remembered the little package – right in the middle of a Citizenship lesson. You immediately hurtled out of the room. Maybe that would have consequences too, but by now you had an antidote: privileges. The others no longer tormented you with looks or the opposite. They no longer whispered when you were around. Outside the boys did most of your work for you. A few were friendly. You hadn't looked in the mirror for ages, so when you did, you barely recognized yourself. That wasn't the one you always carried around with you. Your hair was still a shining blond, your eyes clearer than the pools of slurry under a summer sky. Oh, stop it. You hadn't seen them there until then. You become like a mascot for your roommates.

You found the present in your bag. No one had stolen it. Unpacking it, you revealed a pair of blue leather gloves, the blue of hundred mark notes. You cried into the musty blanket, for three days, or at least until you needed to go to the toilet again.

You did what your mum asked, almost everything. Not that the doctor told you anything new. You were given a document, it said Mother's Certificate. You put it with your ID card and your Free German Youth organization card. In all three you found your name and details hammered out in typewritten letters. You often wondered who this person was, whom they were trying so hard to nail down here, whose documents you had to carry around with you for some unknown reason. Did she really exist, somewhere? Sometimes you wanted to meet her, to finally be able to give her the IDs. It was getting too much. But then again they were like paper money, and you didn't want to look silly. You had to go to Anklam regularly now. You could skip half the morning for that. Now and then you'd go to the Chick Stop afterwards, at ten in the morning, and use your apprenticeship money to treat yourself to half a chicken. The arrogant waitresses already knew you, but you gave them a generous tip and they gave you a seat by

the window. They probably thought you'd been stood up. You looked the part. The funny thing about it was that it seemed like a mistaken assumption which should be taken half as an insult and half as something to laugh about. In English: *amused*. Is that right?

When you came back from the tests, Kathi always greeted you with the same question: 'Hey, Ingrid, everything ok?' You always looked at her blankly. You remembered the story of Jonah in the belly of the whale. As if someone would ask him the same question.

She started to touch your stomach. Her hands were nice and warm; she laughed. 'Can you feel anything yet?' You didn't want to reply, and Kathi looked at you tenderly. 'That'll come.' You didn't want to know *what*. She had a boyfriend, who picked her up every Friday. He was magnetic, in every way. He stuck to Kathi, as she stuck to him, the other women close behind. He was half a metre taller than she was. You liked him. But he was always smiling. She had introduced you to him on his first visit: 'This is my friend Ingrid'. Again you had the feeling that it was about the other Ingrid. She paraded you before him each time, like something that she had good reason to be proud of. Every time your stomach had grown, like a sign of your good work. You were nice to him. When Kathi asked, one Friday afternoon, 'Can Helmut touch too?' you said, 'Yes, but not me'. Kathi broke out into tears almost immediately, and kept saying sorry for three days, or. Perhaps Helmut only took his hand away, but not his smile.

In December the others started to creep into each other's beds. Kathi suggested the same to you. Your legs were like ice, they never warmed up. If she hadn't begged so much, you'd have climbed up into her bed. From the others you heard, 'well, there's two of you already', or 'not quite alone', and then some of them giggled. No, you certainly weren't mad. You didn't want to imagine it, *it*. You often woke up at night, or you couldn't get to sleep in the first place. You listened to the zinc bucket filling up. Irene, that was her name, had 'trouble passing water'. They had let her have the bucket. After a while everyone used it, except for Kathi and you. You accompanied each other on the long and frosty trip to the toilet. But you would have preferred to go on your own, to just have the tapping of your own footsteps, to have no one there except you.



No one except you was in the village. They'd sent you home a whole week before Christmas, saying that you weren't to go back to Kiessow in the New Year, but were to stay in your village, rest and prepare yourself. They also said what you were preparing yourself for, but by then you were no longer listening again. You were allowed to take the books with you. Kathi promised to drop by with everything you missed. You didn't wait for her. You watched the thermometer. When it had stuck under zero for five whole days, pushing people to hole up in their houses, you went out without hesitating. You hadn't forgotten. It got dark, as you had planned, church had been over for ages, you had heard the bell and then nothing more. You had found Peter's ice skates in the loft. You realized you'd have to loosen the screws a little, your feet were now bigger than his as a fourteen or fifteen year old. You sat down on the cushion of snow on the wobbly bench by the pond, just like the young girls did. At first you thought that it wouldn't work, that you couldn't bend over far enough to tighten the screws. Your fingers got numb, although you were sweating. You heaved one foot across the other knee, somehow you'd do it. It seemed like those times in sports lessons when what would normally be an easy exercise was complicated unnecessarily, by a medicine ball, for example, acting as a handicap. Cautiously you pushed off from the blurred edge of the pond. You had trouble balancing straightaway, an overly big, clumsy step almost stopped you there. The ice on the pond carried your weight without difficulty. It didn't even creak once, as if you weren't there or were very light. Once in your stride, your body barely tottered at all. You put one foot in front of the other and only had to make sure you didn't take the curves too quickly. You had never learnt to cross legs in the turns. The ice was new and invisible and tomorrow, when the children would be turfed out of the living room into the fresh air along with fug of the celebrations, they would wonder, baffled, who had taken away what was theirs – untouched snow. A plump bird, about which nothing was known except that it couldn't fly.

The year 1970 arrived. It began in February. Then the year 1971 arrived, and the year 1972 must have followed it, but you don't know when it started. At least you know when the year 1973 ended. It was really short, and was already over one February day. Probably that was all one single time, without months, seasons or transitions, an anomaly. They tried to make you believe something else, they

measured a child in centimetres and grams and thought that proved to you how time passed, as if it passed the same for everyone, as if they had measured you. Rubbish.

From one day in February there was something which got continually bigger, which right from the start was far too big for you and caused you unknown pains; a boulder that boiled and bubbled, chafed and chafed. You were rubbed so raw the whole time that you no longer noticed. Sometimes you thought the pain had gone, but it hadn't, it never did, you had to assume it would never go. You had to give it a name, any name. Henry. Maybe you'd read it somewhere. In the hospital they'd asked again. But that happened often enough. They laid a baby at your breast. How were you to know that it was yours? It bit you. You wouldn't have believed that it was possible to bite that hard without any teeth. But lots of things were possible. Right until the end you hadn't believed you'd give birth to a child – your child or Roland Möllrich's. Something came out of you, and not easily, they had to pull it out. It could have been anything. It hurt, as only something that's not part of you can hurt. Your own body wouldn't ever have caused you such pain. You didn't even want to know what it was. Your 'natural' child. You knew what that meant. You shifted to the 'unnatural'. Your body was your ally. After two weeks it no longer let itself be bitten. In your breasts there was a hot and hard beating. You didn't let anything get to them, anything get out. You were given penicillin, but your body was clever, much cleverer than you. The doctor told you off. You should have told us you had an allergy. You were sure that your body had kept the allergy up its sleeve, to play the trump now. 'Would you not grin like that!' he said, if he was even that polite. Your mum stirred the powdered milk, while your stomach had trouble taking the Berlocombin. It felt as if accusations were rocking in her looks. Your body kept everything at a distance. You pulled the old pram apart, after all you no longer fitted inside, let alone anyone else. You couldn't possibly go out. Your mum brought a new one from Anklam. It was yellow like a punishment. There hadn't been anything else. Of course not. There wasn't anything else at all. You pushed him out of the village, past the little woods and back, always the same route. Soon you could walk it with your eyes closed. They were burning from expropriated sleep, from non-sleep, in any case an expropriation, blurry. You didn't see them, and they didn't

see you. Even the screaming diminished for a while. You didn't hear anything, not even a distant moped.

After four months you were given a nursery place. They said that normally you'd have had to wait longer. It didn't sound like a privilege. It sounded as though it were your fault. Bruni Deetz's baby had died, just like that, as they said, 'just like that', said Schröder from the nursery, and raised her eyebrows. Bruni Deetz had five or six other children and you didn't feel particularly sorry for her. 'That's like at the Deetzes,' people said when something domestic didn't fit their sense of how big a floor cloth or table runner should be. You wondered if you were lumped in with them now, and pushed the word 'asocial' around on your tongue like a spicy, exotic dish. Just like that, you thought. For a moment that was so small that you don't know how your mind couldn't have lost it among all the years' junk, you felt something like envy. That happens.

You went back. As far as you could, that little bit. Your bed in the Kiessow dorm hadn't been taken. Your mum hadn't said anything in response. She could do that: raise unknown children. You were there at the weekends. It never felt as if you had been missed. It never felt as if you had missed anything. Sometimes you wished you would. When the child smiled at you, you smiled back. You didn't manage to cry back at him. Kathi worked through everything you'd missed with you. You never invited her over, she often invited you. You never travelled to her place, not even in the holiday that you all had to take in the summer. Where should you go? Rarely did someone in the bus help you when you went to Anklam. Sometimes there wasn't any space for another pushchair, then you turned around and went back home. It didn't make any difference. In Anklam you borrowed books. More and more often you considered hiding between the shelves, letting yourself get locked in, spending at least one night in a strange place. But the yellow pushchair in front of the door would have given you away. You knew that. Nevertheless you were surprised, if you can put it like that, to find it each time you left the library. A few times you almost walked past it. How stupid, to make a story out of it. You're almost stupid enough to believe it too. Let them tell it. Nothing happened to you. Three or four years, what difference does that make. If you're lucky, just a twentieth. No one can imagine a twentieth. So narrow that almost nothing fits in. A little money, you squeezed it

out of that narrow crack of your life, then pressed the crack back together as well as you could, it too wanted to get bigger and bigger. There was only one thing to do. You notched yourself in it like an arrow in a bow, you outsmarted it, so that of its own accord it stretched itself, to the point where no one could bear the tautness any more, and you, a little irritation was enough and already the February wind was carrying you to a place from which no one returned.