

Heike Geißler

### **Alive in the Air**

Now the change from the high to the low season was complete. The seaweed was no longer removed from the beach and only the hardiest people dared to go into the water. The tourists who were still around sat in cafés and restaurants or browsed the galleries and souvenir shops.

He had already breathed out, been happy that he would only have one group of tourists a day to guide round the village and that until next season he could feel he had an eternity to relax.

He had also used the first day of the new season to prepare his house for the winter. He had sealed the windows, burnt leaves and branches in the garden. Standing on the ladder he had taken in the view, from the beach and the area around the campsite at one end to a neighbouring resort's pier at the other, before turning his attention to the thatched roof, to make a few repairs. Because he was concentrating on his work and not yet used to having such a plentiful supply of free time, he put no obstacles in the way of his thoughts and so was startled when one of them sounded a plaintive note: that he had not been active enough this year, and that was why there was no woman at his side. He stopped, in thought, came down the ladder, walked through his garden, thinking that he really was longing for a female companion and needed to remedy the situation.

He wanted greedily to coax a woman from his memory, who could then have flashed like a bright thought into his mind, and better still, into his heart, but none of his former loves appeared to him in a convincing way. There was not a single woman with whom he had survived a change of season, none that he had wanted to have near him long-term. There had been just one who had made an effort with him for a while, who had been too young for him and had innocently spent late summer with him before moving to a bigger town.

Early in the evening he shrugged his shoulders and thought, things are how they are.

In other words he was ready to end the year with this regret when he finally began to hope that something might yet come of a tentative mutual approach that had faltered. For after he had waved hello to the owner of a boutique through her shop windows and felt a certain flush come to his cheeks, she had stepped outside and called after him. She would, she had said, now like to accept his invitation to come for a meal.

They set the date for that evening and he immediately thought that the year was going to look on him benevolently, thought exuberantly that even his life was looking on him benevolently, and

thought far into the future. When he met the holiday-makers in front of the tourist information office, in his thoughts he was already shopping, wondering which dish would impress this woman. While he explained the sights to the tourists, pointing to the village's oldest thatched house, he was planning to tidy his house up and what he could talk to her about. Without anyone noticing, he was sitting opposite her, he was sitting next to her, and happy to see something come to completion that had started that spring when the woman had opened a boutique in the village. He led the tourists to the huddle of artists' houses, let them look around the studios and gathered them together more quickly than usual, bringing them to a gallery, the last stop.

By now, he said, the village's flowering has been over for almost a century. The painters who live here now are not as famous as the ones who had such an impact on this place. But, he said, what you can buy here is not anything that you would not want to see after a while. The gallery owner came over to him and the group, and nodded in agreement. As he praised the landscape painters and then later helped the gallery owner to wrap up the pictures he had sold, he reached the end of a wonderful evening and the question of whether the evening should lead on into the night and beyond it, or whether it would be more appropriate to take things more slowly and to first invite the woman for another meal.

He led the holiday-makers, now carrying their coastal panoramas, back to the tourist information office and decided that his years of arranging dates were over. Something, he thought, that started as slowly as this had, can and should be continued. It is high time, he thought, for he believed that he would only be in his prime when there was a love in his life that seemed happily right to him.

When the woman was standing at his door, he was embarrassed by his thoughts, by the haste that had sent him so far on ahead. He stood to the side to let her in, took her coat from her and had already spent years with her, had already gone through difficult times with her and decided for her once more. But he called himself to order, asked her to come to the table and served the food. He spoke to her about what it was like with the tourists, that is, living in a place that was full of people every summer and barely visited in the winter. He noticed as he spoke that nothing new was occurring to him, that everything that he could have said and asked was already worn, from his ponderings that afternoon. He stopped in the middle of a sentence, put his cutlery down and re-arranged a few fish-bones on the edge of his plate with his finger until the woman's gaze turned to his again.

Smiling, he tapped his forehead, as if there were a work-shy person in there, and lifted his wine glass, to clink glasses with her. He started talking away, hoping to suggest that a little mistake had

happened, a mishap of some sort. He felt sure he was speaking discreetly, yet clearly, of his best intentions and at the same time of his surprise at the fact that he no longer expected anything of this evening, no longer had a plan for himself and this woman. He placed his hand on hers, felt her hand spread out under his, smiled again. We could, he said, his tongue thick with the, just stop now.

The woman looked at him, questioningly at first, then in annoyance. She opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it immediately. When she took her napkin from her lap and stood up, he got up too. He was too tired for a suitable goodbye, but was wide awake and relieved when the woman had left, closing the door behind her.

Who knows, he started his thoughts the next morning, without wanting to finish them. He stirred his coffee and from the kitchen surveyed the plates and remains of last night's meal on his dining room table. In this moment he was already hearing a quiet whispering, without thinking too much of it. He went back to bed, fell into another deep sleep and when he awoke he knew, although it seemed strange to him, who was whispering and the name of the whisperer.

Where, he asked. Yes, he said, welcome. Of course, he thought, you know when you come across an angel, how should you not know, you know and don't question it. He only found it odd that he couldn't see the angel, that no special light fell into his house, just for this friendship, that there was no unexpected and joyous sound from somewhere.

But, he said, I'm a bad host, forgive me. He put the dirty dishes in the sink, aired the rooms until the smell of the food and the woman's perfume had gone, arranged the curtains and walked through the house with his arms outspread, to present everything to the angel. He felt how wonderfully his house had been moved into, how it had come alive again.

Although he could not have said what the angel whispered, he thought he understood something of it. Something for example that he found funny. And something that cared for him and coaxed him to do the same too. He noticed on the first evening with the angel that bliss had returned to his life and a commitment. Next to his bed he arranged another bed by pushing two armchairs together.

If someone had come to him and had said: but there's nothing there, you can't see anything, you are falling in love with air!, he would have brushed the comment aside and said that this Nothing whispers loudly enough and clearly enough gives him the feeling it belongs here.

All the time in the world, he called through the rooms of the house and after a week he became more curious to find out what exactly was going on with the angel, how and when it would show itself, how things would be then. Perhaps marriage, he said to the angel, so that we are not too finite. But he immediately clapped a hand to his mouth. What do I know of you, he said, I've barely found out that when the onshore wind whistles through the thatched roof, it is similar to your whispering.

He thought it brought joy to everyone to see him walking through the village. It must be wonderful to look at him, to see him so enriched, he thought, and assumed it was a time of joy for everyone. That is why he interrupted his walk to work and went into the boutique. Excuse me, he called into the back of the shop, where the woman was sorting shirts on a shelf. I'm sorry, he continued, I was a little confused. Aha, she said and turned away. I'm sorry, he repeated, waiting for a reaction and to be able to say how much he was looking forward to getting to know her again, as a friend, but she didn't turn towards him again.

In any case, he thought in front of the shop, she has her own house. How would we have decided who gives up which house. And she has, he stressed, a much newer and more elegant house and would probably soon have looked around for someone who does something more exciting than guiding around tourists and showing them the houses where landscape painters lived or live. Yes, he said to the angel, it's a pity that our story has been preceded by a little disappointment.

Yet he would still sit at the breakfast table in the morning with the impression that that they were contented together and he didn't let go of his joy when impatience made its presence felt in the second week. How wonderful it would be, he often thought, if we would be more obviously close to each other. He took long walks after work, sometimes looking, because nothing better occurred to him, up to the heavens. He practiced a gentle gaze and a flowing way of walking. Secretly, though, he wanted to pluck the angel out of its hideaway, wanted to demand that it didn't put on airs, that it finally showed itself.

For while he was still celebrating his luck and playing it coy whenever his colleagues asked him why he was smiling like that, he had realized that the whispering had become rarer and more quiet. So that he could not mistake one sound for another, he had examined the noises in his house thoroughly. He had paced slowly and quickly over his floorboards, had impressed on his memory every creak, had rustled his bedclothes and finally came up with a niggling possibility: that jealousy might be a problem for angels too.

So the next day he went back to the boutique, having expressly asked the angel to come with him so that it could see that its jealousy was ungrounded.

He found the woman talking to a customer and gave her a friendly look when she saw him. But nothing, he whispered to the angel, that means anything, nothing. To not just be standing around, he sat down in a leather armchair, and flicked through a fashion magazine, while keeping one eye on her. But the longer he flicked through the magazine and the longer he watched her talking to the customer, the more worn he felt. He looked more closely at her, picked balls of fluff off his jumper, and in the end he stood up and left the shop without saying goodbye.

You see, he said to the angel, there's nothing there. He carried on walking, waiting for a move on the angel's part. Yes, he said, of course there have been a few women, but they have been, and you are now. No one my age comes along as if for the first time. Although in fact, he thought, I am going around as if it were the first time.

On that day his hello to the holiday-makers was rather gruff. He would have preferred to carry on talking to the angel, to ask the angel nicely to show itself. All right, he said quietly, let's talk later. During the tour, however, this resolve disappeared in the middle of a sentence. It flashed through his mind that the angel might have already left a few days ago. He faltered, and skipped a few sentences because, although he said them almost every day, he had forgotten them. He led the holiday-makers to a souvenir shop and retreated for a moment to the other side of the street. Between the parked cars he felt a lurch inside, he noticed and thought, a lurch like this is always right. With difficulty he continued his tour, not letting anything show, cracking jokes at the usual spots.

Later he interrupted his stroll home and headed for the beach. Then he walked on in the opposite direction. He held his left hand out like a sedan-chair. Please, he said, there's room for you here.

When he reached the edge of the village, although he was already frozen to the bone and tired from being so much awake the last few days, he resisted the temptation to go to his local. He kept close to the water, worrying little about the waves that reached and swirled around his shoes.

He was going around like someone spurned, he knew that when his hunched-up shoulders started to hurt, and he didn't want to believe that he could have been spurned. A beginning, he said, doesn't happen just for fun. He kept an eye out and asked himself if the angel was perhaps hiding in a crack or behind some flotsam and didn't dare to talk to him because it was embarrassed at its silence, at having drawn back. Ridiculous, he said, it would be absolutely ridiculous to lose each

other because of that. He walked until it got dark, until he had passed three neighbouring villages, and he cursed the cloudy sky that didn't let any light through to him on the beach. Yes, he said, I've been given such a piddling ration of what is right for me. But he held his tongue, because he believed he should remain confident and patient. Everything, he thought, might still be possible. So he stretched, he hadn't walked as upright for hours, and rubbed his hands to warm them.

When he reached the next village he climbed the rotten steps, which were damp from the evening, and found himself in front of a field. At the other end of it a village started. He turned to the water, looking back in the direction of his house. He was too exhausted from walking so long to attempt the way home. From here, he thought, just to send a scout who would rush to my house and hear whether the angel was there or not.

Normally he needed very little money for unplanned events. This time, though, he didn't want to be thrifty, he wanted to entice the angel with a little luxury. He went past a few hotels, that all looked too expensive to him, and saw people eating supper in restaurants, until in a side street he found a hotel that looked affordable. Unfortunately, as the lady on reception told him with a smile, there were no double rooms for the price that he had in mind. All right, he said, taking a single room, but scarcely had he unlocked it and put his head round the door before he hurried back to the reception. Only taking a single room was, he thought, tantamount to unfaithfulness.

In his new room he dawdled a while and had the impression that someone had just been in his room. So he bent down, lifted the bedspread and peered under the bed, opened the wardrobe and the bathroom door. There is, he ascertained, no one here. No one is here in the room except for me. He found it easy to imagine laughter flitting through the room, casting itself on him and contradicting him, saying: I'm here, it's me here.

He sat down in the end, stretching out his legs in front of him. He played it cool, gazing at the curtain as if its pattern interested him, until in the end it made him angry. None the wiser as to whether the angel was nearby still, or again, he left the hotel and stepped into the first bar he could find.

He ordered a schnapps, a beer, and looking at the mirror behind the bottles, saw himself getting drunk and talking to the barman. How much people need an angel like that, he said. All the time, you understand. He kept an eye on himself as he asked – already realizing that this was a drunk question that couldn't be answered – where the best place was for an affair to happen. In the mirror he saw the barman serve him one last schnapps for the road, to calm him down. He rested his head

on the bar to cool it and staggered the long way back to his hotel. It really is, he said to the angel, time that you got in touch.

The next morning he only had a few little ideas left, called them hopes, wiped his forehead a moment later to ease the after-effects of last night. Now his solitude drove him from the hotel, into the street. He wished for felicitous reflections that put the angel at his side with any visage or size it might have. When he saw the bus stop he quickened his step. He decided to ride back. It's all right, he said, too much schnapps, not enough sleep. Everything, he said, will work out, I just have to get back to the beginning. Repeat the beginning and be on the look-out. He felt dizzy walking. How, he wondered, would it be possible to entice the angel to my side?

He stood there in the morning twilight at the bus stop, next to a great number of schoolchildren, turned away from them. The bus was late and the children imagined how it had been involved in a collision. They asked who from the neighbouring village would have copped it, who not. All this time his chin was trembling. He was afraid to return home. It won't, he thought, get better. It's too hard already. It's all got too hard too quickly.

He watched the bus approach with narrowed eyes. The children jostled around him, stood right by the road, threatened to throw each other in front of the bus. It can't be, he said, lowering his head straight away and staring at the water marks that had soaked into his shoes during his walks. Somehow, he decided, everything will turn out well.

He punched his ticket, breathed in the children's smell of milk starting to curdle, of fabric conditioner and fruit-flavoured chewing gum and passed down the full bus through loud shouts and giggles until right at the back he found a seat with only a schoolbag on it.

The girl next to the bag made it clear, as he sat down and pushed her bag towards her with his hip, that she begrudged his intrusion. He was half in the aisle, although he wasn't fat. He was all too keen to push the girl and her bag further towards the window or to lift her over himself and plonk her in the aisle, so that he would have a free place to his left that he could guard and point out. Look, he would have said, I'm still not ready for an end, so there is no end. How could it end so quickly, when it still hadn't really started.

Instead the girl reached over him, tugging on the coat of another girl who was sitting to the right of the aisle, and shouted something. Stop, he said, this noise. Sort it out later, now's not the time. The girl turned away, pressing her hip against the bag to defend her space. He pressed from his side. He listened out, perhaps the angel was there already, looking for a seat but caught in the crush.

It has to be, he thought, put off for later. At least a break. This slow bus journey back was much too fast for him. He sat tensely, noticed he felt a little sick and that he was also very tired. He looked out past the girl and imagined a happy future: where the whispering would reach him again, and the angel would chide him for all the trouble. Or where the whispering would not reach him, but his sadness would teach him to be strong and as a reward the whispering would return. He tried to see the landscape through the reflection of his face, until the girl pushed and asked him to let her out.

The children poured out of the bus, crowding around the bus stop in front of the school as if they wanted to stay right there until the afternoon, until it was late enough to ride home again. What a lot of effort, he thought, and concentrated on listening closely to the sudden quiet, that was underlaid with radio music and the conversations of some arriving holiday-makers.

He could finally see the woman's boutique from the bus, the display in the lit up shop window. As the bus approached the stop he wondered whether he had made a mistake: perhaps he had only thought the angel up and started to enjoy his creation too readily, and too much. He closed his eyes and made himself stop thinking too vividly about the angel, out of fear that he might come up with a convincing image of it.

After getting off the bus, he slowly followed the tourists, who filled the whole width of the path with their luggage, but he took the opportunity to stand in front of them at the lights. An elderly man tugged on his sleeve and pointed out that he was partly on the street. He shook off the man's hand, said he knew, he knows the place, very well in fact. Plus, at this hour cars don't often come by. He looked straight at the man, to provoke him, but then stepped back and, feeling someone else's feet under his own, apologized quietly. When he was near his house he crossed the road and felt everything weightless inside him begin to turn.

- Translated by Stefan Tobler