

Judith Zander

**Things We Said Today**

480 Pages

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## JOHN & PAUL

Someday when I'm lonely,  
Wishing you weren't so far away,  
Then I will remember,

Things we said today.

## ROMY

They stare at me from the shelf: all shrivelled and dried up, sitting at an odd angle, jaws and pincers splayed out, both of them. Shady. John and Paul. Is there anything else to say? Oh right, Paul is missing an eye. No big deal, after all *Paul is dead*. There's no mystery there, it's obvious. Anyway. *However*. What a word that is. It's a sumptuous word, no-one round here knows it, but it sounds like the waves as they gently surrender themselves to the beach, the whole Baltic Sea is constantly singing *however, however*. It almost sounds like a name.

What does the village know about it anyway, that little backwater hole of a place in the middle of nowhere. Mum's gormless homeland, "collection point for loonies" as dad used to call it, before we came here a year ago from out of town, well if you can call it that. And six kilometres don't really make a whole lot of difference. Except that now there's actual acreage lying outside our front door, the shorn field with its rough yellow stubble, muddy and sullen, tarred with the same brush. Backhanded, watching and waiting, the so-called community, gossiping and tattling and bickering and toiling and hanging about the same as always. And watching telly, mostly. Above, the glowering sky, a curdling bell jar. The village stinks. "It's all the incest," says dad.

At the centre is the entrance to hell. It's not a pub, where, as we all know, "the devil alcohol" lives. There is no pub in Bresekow. There is absolutely nothing. It is the centre of the nothingness that opens up just after Berlin and doesn't end till Rostock. Here are the secret, silent places, carelessly spilled out over a landscape that is easily missed, flat. An ugly little end of the world that is best left unmentioned. The village knows no excitement, it just likes to get worked up. About a secret that isn't kept secret. It's not guarded, it is carefully left to its own devices: it is called the Elpe. It's not a river or anything like that, not some dodderly old relative of the Elbe. You've got to see it to believe it. Though you'd rather not.

The Elpe is where they meet, every single evening. The Elpe is where they fuck about, the Elpe is where they get up to whatever. The Elpe is where they get pissed. The Elpe is where they get stoned. The Elpe is where they hang around mildewed corners and show off their sunbed bellies and unswervingly adhere to the belief that their tongues are there for sticking down each others' throats. On the Elpe the girls squeal, the boys like to throw punches at each other. On the Elpe, you get sour apple schnapps and a beating. I don't go to the Elpe. No, like Kaspar, I will not eat my soup. It's not my problem, what happens on the Elpe, not my beer that is spilled there. The bomber jackets that get greasier by the week. The raucous jokes that seem to get even dirtier. The rank excesses, the weedy creepers, the girls' faces trowelled in make-up, what do I care about them. The roots of hell.

## INGRID

Home, so what.

“So we’re going to your *heimat*,” Michael says in German, grinning.

You say: “It’s not my home”, and he just laughs at you. “*It’s not my heimat, you know*, and be glad that you haven’t got a word like that in your simple language!”

And then he tries to take you in his arms, you think it’s mostly for her sake, but you’re not having any of it, and you run out into the garden. Sometimes you can hear the sea from there, like tonight. The fact that here it’s still called ‘the Channel’ doesn’t bother you, and you don’t know anyone by the name of George, not from before, at least not one who is a saint. The air tastes cold and salty, and you think to yourself, that’s autumn, early this year, and you’ll miss its entrance. Then you remember that it’ll be autumn over there too. Just different. Yes, autumn as well, but different, you insist on that, obstinate child, even though you don’t even know what you mean by it. Contaminated, inside and out, hopelessly so. Well, well. You have the new tights you got for the beginning of school in your head and the smell of sugar beets in your nose, and the back of your neck is burning as if it’s had rosehip rubbed on it, the bloody irritating louts.

Still, autumn always felt good. The boredom stopped. You felt useful again. Generally *there* again. In summer, you were not anywhere, not at the lake in your bikini, not in the ice cream parlour in town. Not in the hay with anyone. In the summer, it was constantly someone’s birthday. In the autumn, you hardly had to worry about any of that, except for Republic Day, but only in the most languid way; and as for your own birthday, you did your best to forget it. Everyone else seemed to manage. But now she’s dead, she who was your mother, lo and behold, now there is an anniversary and you have an obligation.

*Frisch weht der Wind/ der Heimat zu/ mein irisch Kind/ wo weilest du?\** Oh come on, stop pretending, this isn’t new to you. It’s been whirring round your head every few weeks, ever since Michael read it to you: “It’s not written down like that,” you’d said, and what you meant was: like that, in German. He handed you the book. It was only a quote.

When you go back inside the house, you tell yourself: no. What still binds you to it: nothing. No. You start crying. Of course Michael misunderstands. He doesn’t know anything, nothing at all. It’ll be good for his work, he says.

*Oed und leer das Meer.\**

\* German text quoted from: T.S. Eliot, “The Wasteland”

## HARTMUT

She was there. Her. She really was there. So Britta told me, who went there with Mother, strange, really, because apparently neither of them wanted to go there at all, Britta was constantly moaning and groaning that she had nothing to wear, and then with all the people there, it would look as if you only want to gawk, and anyway, right, what does she care about old Frau Hanske, and all Mother said was:

“Nay, we mun go.”

When I said: “Well, she was your friend, right, or anyways, she used to be, in the past and all that”, she just looked down her nose at me and said: “Aye, Hartmut, theur allus kna better, aye.” Mardy, she was, I could tell, because she has to go there, and then I have the nerve, me, the prodigal son, to go and remind her of something.

She always speaks in dialect with me when she’s in a bad mood, so that’s pretty much all the time. I figured out that it’s some kind of ‘fuck you’ with her, right, a sort of quirk. Because she thinks that if she speaks in dialect to a teacher, he’ll feel somehow insulted, because dialect is just for the common folk. Which is why it’s okay for her to use it, because she is one of the common folk, “I may be common, but that doesn’t mean I’m stupid”, and that’s why she can speak proper German “reet well”, as she says, but she saves that for the higher-up people, and for herself. I’m not kidding, she speaks proper German to herself; one time I eavesdropped on her, and she was saying weird things like “Why on earth did you do that?”, and at first I wasn’t sure if she was blethering with someone or something like that, but then I noticed that she’s all alone there in her den and pottering about by herself. Well, I call it a den, it used to be just the porch, but we’ve rebuilt everything, the front door is on the other side now, and anyway, who needs a porch these days, and we put in lovely insulation and new windows and wallpaper and everything, I’ll have you know. She really has it good now, old mother Wachlowski.

Monday lunchtime the whole drama started. I’d just got back from school and I still had my head full of these itchies; I could kill ‘em all, I swear. Stick them all in a sack and give them a good whacking. Sometimes I’m all for flogging being reintroduced, you just can’t get anything to stick in their noggins. Eighth grade, damn it, and never heard of multiplication tables! And then they’re supposed to solve an equation, but that’s just asking too much, Mr Teacher. And the moment I set foot in my home, sweet home, and starvin’ ’ungry, too, Britta goes and says, she really says to me: “Hartmut, you’ll have to go out again, get some flowers, we need flowers for the funeral after all.”

“What do you want flowers for,” I say, “it’s not a wedding or anything.” But you know how she is, she won’t stop naggin’, damn, she can really get on your wick, she can. A real nasty piece of work she is, you wouldn’t know it by looking at her, I couldn’t tell by looking at her back then, you just see them from outside, don’t you, and you think, wow, you can hardly believe your luck. That’s what they all think, right, that Hartmut really hit the jackpot, right? Well, I guess it’s true, still looks ten years younger than she is, old Britta, right, they all say that all the time. But sometimes, I can tell you, just sometimes...

But what really cracked me up was that I could tell that Mother couldn’t make up her mind if she should side with her loathsome daughter-in-law or not, but she obviously had it in for me, and so Mother starts going on at me too: “You gonna nip out and gerr some white chrysanthemums from town reet naw!”

She was in such a tizz, she didn’t know if she should speak proper or in dialect, probably because of Britta, she carps on at her in dialect all the time too, and Britta always says: “Just as well I don’t understand what you’re on about”, but at the same time Mother doesn’t want to look “un-edu-cated” in her eyes. And so Britta has the upper hand again, and she says: “Off you go then, hurry up, we haven’t got forever”, and so off I go, what are you supposed to do.

But then I suddenly think to myself, how come she’s back home so early, it’s Monday after all, and I ask her why, and she goes: “I gave them a test, and young Tetzke, the student teacher, she supervised it, so I could

go home early, because we have to get going pretty soon.”

“And how did you get back without a car then?” I ask, because the car is in the garage, and then she has the nerve to say: “Rolf gave me a lift.”

“Oh, so he was finished as well and all,” I say, and she says: “Yep. Fifth grade had a class outing, so he didn’t have to ‘do the sporty thing’, as he said, and he could leave early.”

“And just run you home while he’s at it, is that it?” ‘Sporty’ indeed!

“Yes, it was convenient.”

“Yeah, very convenient alreet!” I think I’m going bonkers. “Well, that’s nothing new!”

“Give it a rest, Hartmut,” she says, “I think you’re going bonkers, and that really *is* nothing new! Now off you go!”

So off I go to town to buy them friggin’ flowers with my friggin’ money, and when I get back, I see Ella, as she’s getting off the bus, and I honk at her, but she just keeps on walking, so I drive on as well. When she comes in, I say, “Well, how was school, not that great, huh?”, but do you think I get an answer out of her? Fat chance.

Mother and Britta are still sitting around guzzling coffee, for fortification, says Britta, as though they were about to pass out, they’ve gotta be kidding, ‘specially Mother. Perched there in their uncomfortable black togs, like two big fat crows, and Ella has the nerve to say: “What do you think you look like in that get-up and all?”

I almost burst out laughing. She’s one to talk.

“And what do you look like then?” I say, “Just look at yourself, always in the same black jumper, day-in, day-out, I bet it must stink!”

“Hartmut!” goes Britta.

“Feel free to keep away from me then!” says Ella, and for a moment I thought I was going to lash out and slap her again.

“Elisabeth!” goes Britta.

“Can’t you think of anything better than that?” I say. “I think she knows her name, and so do I.”

“We’re off to Frau Hanske’s funeral, want to come?”

“No way!” goes Ella.

And then they come back afterwards, and Britta says: “Good cake,” and then she says: “You’ll never guess who was there.”

I say “Nope, and I don’t care either” and she goes: “Well, the daughter! Ingrid, that’s her name isn’t it? With her whole family in tow as well!”

## ELLA

What’s with this guy? Looks at me and then looks away and then looks back at me again. Was already standing there when I got here, nodded at me. Don’t you dare try and make a move on me, I thought, but I think he’s harmless enough. Sorta pale, sorta come-to-bed eyes, not one of those from the Elpe. Too classy for that, or shall I say: well-groomed. That sort of thing is the exception round here, a real rarity, almost like if Ecki apologised, which he would never ever do. One time he even preferred to choke down horse turds. Didn’t seem to do him any harm. Immediately got him the major respect of all the Elpe guys, a few of the older ones even clapped him on the back like mad, when the news got round the village. Only thing was, the girls wouldn’t snog him anymore, although it seems none of them held out for long. Now he’s the big boss. Arsehole.

“Sorry?” This comes out of the mouth of the slick-looking guy, and then he goes: “I mean, beg your pardon?”

Beg your pardon? Oh shit, must have been thinking aloud again. Stupid habit, keeps happening to me in school as well, I don’t even really notice it, not until the others look at me all funny or start giggling. I think I get that off Grandma, but she really does talk to herself, which they all find impossible of course, “now her brain is turning to mush”, Mum always says, but Dad says, “Nah, forget it, she’s a tough old turkey, she’ll outlive us all”. And then he gives a short laugh, maybe coz he doesn’t want to seem like he means it serious, or maybe coz he’s imagining his own mother as an old turkey, or whatever, I dunno. Sometimes I can’t help laughing too, because grandma’s neck is all saggy like a turkey, and I really hate it, because dad always makes you laugh when you really don’t feel like laughing, but that’s the only time he does. And that’s why I sometimes think, that probably it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if the ole turkey does outlive him. And anyways, if his mother is a turkey, what does that make him?

“It’s nothing, never mind,” I say to the sorry-guy, lately they all say “sorry” all the time, whether or not there’s anything to be sorry for, no idea what he means by that now, I hear it all the time anyway, even from Mum. Seems pretty daft to me, but apparently it’s cool. That’s another one of these words. Dad gets his knickers in a right twist whenever he hears it. Me too, but he doesn’t have to know that. Mum says it all the time, she says it just slips out, coz her students say it. Don’t believe her though, I mean, that it just slips out. She’s just trying to look cool too.

“Oh,” he says, and holds out his hand, so is this supposed to be some sort of formal introduction or what, you can hardly open your mouth without them breathing down your neck. His hand is all warm and soft, feels incredibly good. Just like when you stick your own hand under the blanket quickly again after getting up.

“I am Paul, Paul Ishley.”

Unreal! And at half past six in the morning at the bus stop as well.

His accent is unmistakably English, well, hardly surprising with a name like that, right! A real Englishman or Yank or something. I notice that I’m staring at him, and, as usual, with my mouth gaping open, living proof of

my village-hickness. I look away quickly, then he says: "I'm from Ireland."

Ireland? Huh. What now? Oh right. He looks at me again, he's proper good at that. "And you?"

Me? Oh lordy. "My name is Ella, well actually Elisabeth – Wachlowski, and I come from – uh, well, from the village here." Great. Just like in the movies. Here's the bus, at last.

## SONJA

"Okay, Renate, yep, will do, right, byyy-eee!"

I'll do it, I will, of course I will, Sonja always takes care of everything, Sonja will bake a cake, Sonja will look after the kids. "You're so good with the kids." Yeah, right. Oh, the children, it's not their fault after all, and if I don't do it then who will... She thinks, after all, I have time, I'm at home, I'd probably die of boredom if she didn't call me up and find little chores for me to do. And as a good Christian, you can hardly refuse, can you. No, Renate, I'm not going to do it, you can go take a running jump. Go find someone else, they don't all have to sit on their fat bums watching telly all day anyway.

Sure, I watch the odd talk show too, now and then. But not the brainless ones that are just about big tits, small tits. They all act like it's the end of the world, just because they haven't got the right cup size, I mean really. After all, I've lived with mine for forty years, or, well, not actually forty, but you know what I mean. Sometimes there's really interesting stuff though, like when people meet after years and years, and some of them are still nagging at each other. Usually I've got it on while I'm making lunch, and then Romy gets back from school and sees me sitting there on the armrest, right when it's getting really interesting, but I never sit down properly, because I always have to keep checking on the food in the kitchen. So she comes clumping into the hall rolling her eyes, Mum, what kind of rubbish are you watching now. I think she's afraid it's turning her mother into a vegetable slowly but surely. Once she asked me how I can stand it, if it doesn't make me feel funny, seeing all these – Friedhelm would call them 'bangers', spouting all their stupid rubbish. Nope, I say, I didn't really know what she meant. Well, if I didn't find it embarrassing or something.

"Why should it be embarrassing," I said, "now don't go exaggerating. It's harmless compared to the stuff some people watch."

"Oh Mum, you don't get what I mean," she says then, she's saying that constantly, lately she says it all the time, and I don't know if it's a matter of principle or if she thinks I'm a bit dim or she's just too lazy to explain things to me. Sometimes I worry that she's getting a bit snot-nosed, anyways people probably think what an arrogant daughter I've got, because she acts like the cat got her tongue, she won't even say hello. I know I get on her wick when I'm constantly telling her to say hello to people in the village, and then she refuses to do it all the more. She says: "Why should I say hello, when I don't even know them." I don't know what to say to that. That they all know *me*, and that's just the way it is in a village? Friedhelm can't stand that sort of 'why should I' reasoning. "Romy," he tells her, "you really can't..." or "sometimes you just have to..."

He always takes everything to heart, somehow it shakes his faith in the world, he just can't handle it. He loves Romy to bits, sometimes I think, far more than me, but he doesn't want her to behave that way, and I think I know why as well, but it's hard to put into words. Romy could explain it better. Put it this way: because she

reminds him too much of himself. He also only greets people because that's what you're meant to do. Basically, he's even more shit-scared of people than me and Romy put together. Just in another way. On the surface, Friedhelm is the nicest, sweetest, most polite man you can imagine, and I only wish he'd show that sugar-coated side at home more often. I'm – well what am I like, actually?

Well I am polite, obliging, friendly as well, even at school they always put that in my report card, and it says the same on Romy's twenty years later, even using the exact-same platitudes, it's not as if they could be bothered to think of anything new. As a teacher you probably go soft in the head too. But in fact I could be pretty pig-headed as well, **even though** I was always scared to death and with my heart thumping like mad, especially in civics class, they could really catch you out there, but I did speak up if something really got my back up. Romy would probably laugh now if she heard me say that. If only you would do that now and again, Mum, yeah right Mum, you wish.

But she does know her mother will make a stand. That she'd always throw herself into the breach to defend her. Like that time way back, with that old dragon of a swimming teacher, that old Spleißbrieter. Had the nerve to walk into my shop and claim that my daughter faked an excuse letter. "You tell me if that isn't a child's writing!" she said to me. And anyway, Romy had her swimming stuff with her. It was daft of me of course, and to this day Romy still goes on about it, why I gave her the swimming stuff to take at all, "that's just typical of you," she says, "always so overcautious: 'in case you have to go swimming after all.'" But it really *was* my writing, I happen to have writing like a first-grader, the swimming teacher wouldn't buy that of course. So I gave her a piece of my mind I can tell you, I almost threw her out, well nearly. But then I started worrying that she'd be picking on Romy even more now. After all they could do what they liked, there was nothing you could do. And Romy was always shy, that's why she'd prefer to keep her head down if she could help it. The fuss she kicked up if you just asked her to go round the corner and get a loaf of bread! Sometimes I wonder if I did something wrong with her somewhere along the line. Probably siblings would have been a good thing, but me of all people, I only have one child, well that's just the way it worked out. The things they did to you back then – I'd rather not know what my insides look like. "Frau Plötz," they said to me afterwards, "we'd more or less given up on you."

## ROMY

It's just as well Dad gives me a lift in the mornings, though it's not really ideal. He starts work at 7am, but I don't have to be at school till 7.05, that's when the first bell goes, for going in, and being there any earlier than that is excessive. No-one in their right mind would stand around in the school yard before seven, especially not a twelfth-grader, except perhaps Anita, and the poor sods known as the non-locals, who have to get up in the middle of the night to catch the bus that takes an eternity to get them here, and then spits them out another eternity before classes start. If it's raining, or exceedingly cold, they get to sit in the cafeteria, and I defy you to imagine anything more grim than just waiting around just after half-past six in the morning in a cellar glaringly illuminated by fluorescent strip lights and not particularly appealing in olfactory terms, and into the bargain you're confronted with the life-crushing question of what you're actually waiting for. A maths test in the first class. And anyway, what genius came up with that idea, ours is the only school for miles around where the socialist-proletarian dictatorship of time still prevails, even though its long been scientifically proven that nobody under the sun is capable of higher-level achievements worth mentioning

before half-past eight.

On the other hand at least you have the afternoon to yourself and can usually make your escape by one. Regrettably not in the getaway vehicle of my choice, no, I'm forced to descend into the abysses of the non-local caste. The school bus ferries the accumulated clamour across the countryside. It's nothing but a steel pot sloshing with noisy soup, and every village, every wretched little shithole is apportioned its steaming noise ration, a ladleful right on the roadside. And you get stuck in the middle of the seething broth. Remaining cooking time: one school year. You can't sit, you can't get any peace, you can't think of anything at all to say to Ella Wachlowski.

She's stood herself right next to me, I managed to achieve something resembling a smile. We're both from the same village now, as it were. I never see her there. Odd girl. I mean, I know the others think I'm odd as well, no idea what Ella thinks of me, whether she thinks at all, but anyway she really is, I mean really funny, peculiar. Even if I am *strange* – I don't mind that word, because it also means 'different', and I think I am that round here, definitely – Ella is *weird*. Only opens her mouth when she's asked something directly, for one thing. Often she'll just say "dunno", or "I have no idea". She has this way of shrugging her shoulders, sometimes you just wouldn't believe it, this incredible indifference, or whatever it is. If she were a boy I'd think she was a psychopath in the making. But we've already got one of those anyway. That guy Sven, he sits diagonally in front of me in chemistry, and now and then he'll turn sorta halfway round towards me, really slowly, with this narrow-eyed polecat look, at least that's what he always reminds me of, a polecat, and I have absolutely no idea why he does that. I wonder about it each time it happens, on the one hand it's a bit freaky, on the other it's extremely interesting, because it's so bizarre, I've even asked myself whether it's his twisted way of indicating interest, I mean in me, which would make him the only one to do so by a long shot, and him of all people, too.

Sometimes I think they'd make a pretty couple, I mean Ella and him. She sits in front of him in chemistry, sits there half asleep, and never knows any answers. Frau Pufesiel's torrent of words, teeming with little Saxon-inflected pet names for chemistry equipment and stuff like that, must sound like the murmur of the sea washing against a distant shore, on whose vast expanse she is languishing drowsily. Until, abruptly and with an angry hiss, a wave washes over her in the form of her own name, "Elisabeth!", and she surfaces, taking in gulps of air.

But right now she does seem to know something for once, she moves in on me quite close, and the movement of the bus pushes her even closer. I can smell her lunch-sandwich breath as she whispers: "Have you seen the Irish guy yet?"

"What?" I ask. I'm not even sure I understood her right. For a moment I find myself wondering if there's something else wrong with her, if she suffers from blackouts or something.

"Well," is all she says. And then that stage whisper again: "He's sitting up there in front." She jerks her head. What's this all in aid of? I can't stand it when people whisper, Mum does it all the time too, either you say whatever it is you want to say, or you keep your mouth shut.

"Who are you talking about?" I ask her.



“I dunno,” she goes, almost back to normal, as though she’s noticed that she’s making me sick and I’m just about to put an end to this conversation without further comment. As if that would come easy to me.

“All he said is that he’s from Ireland.”

From Ireland! Round these parts, that sounds like he might as well have dropped out of the sky. My eyes latch onto the back of a dark head, I guess that’s who she means. I hardly dare to ask her anything else. Somehow I don’t really believe her either. I give her a suspicious sideways glance. “What’s his name then?”

“Oh, dunno. Forgotten.” She smiles and looks at me a tad sheepishly.

“Oh well,” I say.

When the bus pulls up at the last stop in Bresekow, the so-called Irishman really does get out with us. Just the three of us, which represents an increase of fifty percent mind you. He makes for Ella and actually says “hello” to her. And I’m totally flabbergasted.

“You live her too?” he asks me.

“Yes,” I answer, I’m all flustered and completely taken aback. Ella looks at me. Probably because I don’t say anything else, she says: “This is Romy. She’s at the school too.”

I find that a bit too familiar, but I have no time to think about it in any more depth. There’s only one thing on my mind. This guy looks exactly like Paul. Paul McCartney. Like Paul McCartney when he was twenty-three, mind you.

He shakes hands with me, he smiles.

“I’m Paul,” he says.

English translation by Ruth Feuchtwanger