



Nadja Dietrich

Murder in the German Parliament!

Investigations of a Cleaning Lady

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About this book: What a shock for Lidia Afanasyevna! While cleaning the toilets in the German parliament, she finds a dead politician. Who was the man? And why does the news claim that he died in his office? Is there perhaps a cover-up going on?

Curious, Lidia Afanasyevna begins to investigate the circumstances of the death. Not a completely harmless plan! Fortunately, she is not alone: Lutz, a former intelligence officer, the mysterious Leona, a beauty from the red-light district, and last but not least her family give her active support. And not to forget: Alyosha, the man of her dreams ...

About the author: Nadja Dietrich lived and worked in Russia for a long time. The present novel, first published in German in 2017, is her second publication with LiteraturPlanet after *Das russische Labyrinth* (*The Russian Labyrinth*, 2008). An interview with the author can be found on LiteraturPlanet. A third novel is in preparation and will be published soon.

Cover picture: Pop Art Picture of the *Reichstag* (= building in which the sessions of the first chamber of the German parliament, the Bundestag, are held); LP

After a half-awake night, the new working week begins far too early in the morning for Lidia Afanasyevna. Discontented, she takes refuge in the arms of Alyosha – the man of her dreams, who unfortunately indeed only exists in her dreams.

I. The Seed of Evil

Breakout from the TV

One could certainly not say that this week had started well for Lidia Afanasyevna. Actually, her streak of bad luck had already begun the previous evening, when the mantra of interrogations in a late-night thriller had lulled her to sleep. Promptly, the evildoer had taken advantage of her lack of vigilance to break free from his television cage and invade her snuggery. Now he stood there and, in keeping with his nature, conceived evil.

He was just as black as in the night alley where the good guys had confronted him. Only his eyes shone zombie-like from his dark face. Lidia Afanasyevna wanted to call for help and run away, to seek shelter from this fiend who was polluting the surroundings by his mere presence. But sleep had shackled and gagged her, she could not utter a sound and remained glued to her television armchair.

Insidiously, the evildoer looked around, searching for an object for his sinister intentions. At last he seemed to have found something suitable to satisfy his lust for murder. "Just you wait – I'll wring your neck," Lidia Afanasyevna heard him hiss between his teeth.

Her breath was caught in her throat, but to her relief, the evildoer did not approach her, but walked towards the small fish tank that stood on a chest of drawers in a corner of the room. Before Lidia Afanasyevna could wonder about the fish tank – for she was sure she had never had one –, the evildoer had already grabbed the fish swimming in it by the throat and held a knife to it.

Lidia Afanasyevna wondered: Did fish have throats at all? However, she did not have the chance to consider this question further, because at the same moment she realised that she herself was the fish that the evildoer was about to stab. A hoarse scream escaped from her throat, which

sounded horrible enough not only to send the evildoer running, but also to make her jump up from her armchair.

Stolen Time

On waking up, Lidia Afanasyevna at first looked suspiciously into the corner where the fish tank had stood a moment ago. Even when she finally dared to get up from her armchair, she moved through the room with extreme caution, as if the evildoer had only hidden in the next room to attack her again at a suitable moment. Yet the changed television mantra alone, which now praised the components of an incredibly cheap coffee service, indicated that the evildoer had been driven away.

In the bathroom, the mirror showed her a pasty face with bulging eyes, over which a blond perm imitated the trident of Poseidon. A remark by Igor – the man who had once been her sweetheart – flashed through her mind: "You look like a carp that has swallowed a shark! Why don't you finally get your thyroid checked?"

She poured water on her face to extinguish the fire of thoughts. Snoozing on the TV armchair, her head had slipped to one side. Now a persistent pain throbbed in her neck, sending electric shocks through her veins. She simply had no strength to face the churned mud at the bottom of her life now.

Lidia Afanasyevna prescribed herself a painkiller and then felt her way through the dark corridor to the bedroom. The lamp had been out of order for weeks; she had long since had enough of reminding Igor about it. However, the sawing sound into which his evening drunkenness usually ended would have led the way even for the deaf and dumb.

She was about to sink into the pillows when her eyes fell on the radio alarm clock. "4.55 a.m.!" the luminous digits called out to her. 4.55? Lidia Afanasyevna had the feeling of being lied to, in fact, of having been robbed. So this was the crime the evildoer had committed! Although he had only been in her flat for five minutes at the most, the whole night was suddenly over. He had literally "stolen her time"!

But complaining was of no use now. The only thing she could do was to deprive the alarm clock of its sergeant's triumph and prevent it from making its blaring morning call.

Dreaming with Alyosha

While Igor rolled over, grunting, Lidia Afanasyevna went to the kitchen. She switched on the coffee machine, then trotted into the bathroom. Mechanically, she reached for her make-up utensils to transform the ghost she was into a halfway presentable human being.

Back in the kitchen, she poured herself a cup of coffee, which she drank in small sips without sitting down. Absent-mindedly, she looked out of the window. At that early hour, there was hardly anything out there for her gaze to cling to. Most of the windows of the high-rise building on the opposite side were still darkened, only a few were already staring down at the open space between the two blocks of houses. No movement, no life was to be seen.

Lidia Afanasyevna let her gaze wander all the way up, to the top floor, which was only vaguely visible from her position on the third floor. Up there, she thought, must be Alyosha's home. Yes, she said to herself, that is the only place appropriate for him.

She wondered what he would do today. Alyosha was constantly busy with something else, so you could never be sure which side of himself he would turn to you. He was never the person you thought you knew, he was always someone else. But today – Lidia Afanasyevna was quite sure of that – today he would be an artist. Who knows, maybe he had already got up, was looking out of the window like she was, and was poring over the sketches of the works he intended to create that day.

Lidia Afanasyevna closed her eyes for a moment. She saw Alyosha standing in front of his easel, paintbrush in hand, boldly stroking the canvas and thus transforming the house where Lidia Afanasyevna lived into a palace from another world. The windows looked like portholes in his painting, the house glided through the night like a submarine, and if you

looked at the portholes long enough, they widened into star gates through which you could float away into another world.

Senseless Hurry

Lidia Afanasyevna tore her eyes open: 5.25 a.m. already! She had to hurry if she wanted to catch the train. She hastily put on her coat, slipped into her boots, tied her scarf around her neck and then filled the hallway with the echoing click-clack of her heels.

Involuntarily, she backed away as she opened the front door. An icy January wind bit into her skin, tears rose to her eyes and ran as thin rivulets down her cheeks. So she could have done without the make-up masquerade! She would probably have looked even less frightening as the ghost she had been before than as the zombie the runny mascara now made of her.

A display board she passed on her way to the suburban train station showed minus 10 degrees - a temperature at which even railway switches tended to freeze. Did that indicate train delays again? - Unfortunately, that's exactly how it was: all the hustle and bustle had been in vain. "Please note," it creaked from the loudspeaker on the platform, "that there will be delays due to a disruption in the operational process. We apologise for any inconvenience."

Lidia Afanasyevna buried her hands deep in her coat pockets, pulled the scarf even tighter around her head and trudged up and down, shivering under the whipping blows of winter. The wind whizzed across the platform like on a bobsleigh run, like a group of teenagers playing tricks on the waiting people, who had nowhere to hide from this bully.

The only place that would have offered a little shelter - a bench surrounded by partitions at the back and sides - was occupied by smokers. Faced with the choice between suffocation and freezing to death, the latter seemed to Lidia Afanasyevna the more pleasant, somehow more natural option. This changed, however, the longer she had to wait for the train.

Just as she was wondering whether death by suffocation wouldn't be more comfortable after all – because it would be quicker and, above all, warmer –, the relieving rattle of the approaching train could be heard from the distance. Fortunately, it was still so early in the morning that the wagons weren't hopelessly overcrowded, despite the delay. Lidia Afanasyevna even found a place by the window that allowed her to support her head, which suddenly seemed much too heavy, from two sides.

Compared to the draughty platform, the air inside the train felt decidedly stuffy. The windows were fogged up, Lidia Afanasyevna found herself in a glass bell jar. All she could see were the tired mirror images of the other passengers, whose heads bobbed listlessly back and forth to the beat of the suburban train – unless their faces were hypnotised by smartphones or disappeared behind newspaper walls.

Alyosha's Eyes

As soon as she closed her eyelids, Lidia Afanasyevna sank into Alyosha's eyes. Dark and mysterious, his pupils sparkled at her with that slight melancholy typical of sensitive men. Above his eyes, his forehead was lost in the undergrowth of his curls, whose soft splendour had so often absorbed Lidia Afanasyevna's fingers with a mysterious crackle.

Compassionately, his gaze rested on her. "But Lidia Afanasyevna, my dear, my adored lady – what's the matter with you? You're all pale!"

"Oh, Alyosha," she sighed, "I'm just tired of it all ..."

"Tired of what, Lidia Afanasyevna?" Alyosha cautiously inquired. "What are you weary of?"

"Well, of this whole life," yawned Lidia Afanasyevna. "I just can't stand it anymore. If this train were my life, I'd just get off at the next station and take the train in the opposite direction."

"I wouldn't say your life is that bad," Alyosha objected. His gently rippling voice was balm for her soul, even if she didn't like what he said.

"You're not alone", he continued, "your daughters have made, as they say, 'a good match', you have a cosy flat that can be heated at will, plus a steady job - so you actually lead what is called a 'settled life'."

"But that's exactly what the problem is!" grumbled Lidia Afanasyevna. She was a little disappointed that Alyosha didn't understand what she meant. Or was it just politeness that made him defend her life against herself?

"It is precisely because my life is so settled that it feels like a squeezed lemon", she clarified. "One day is like the other, nothing new, surprising ever happens ... Whether I move to the cemetery today or in 20 years is basically all the same."

"But there are many people who would be grateful if they could live like you," Alyosha insisted, bringing out his Christian side - the only facet of his person that Lidia Afanasyevna did not find particularly appealing.

"All right," she conceded, "it may be that this life seems quite comfortable from the outside. But that doesn't make me any happier! Not being alone is not a value in itself - when I think of my Igor, it rather seems to me that the opposite is true. And having a permanent job may give you security. But if it's a cleaning job, the steady job is also a firm chain on your feet, a barbed wire that separates you from your dreams."

Lidia Afanasyevna grimaced contemptuously. "Cleaning lady! Why did I struggle through my translator's studies then? Am I supposed to work as a simultaneous interpreter for dust mites?"

"After all, you have the honour of doing your work in the German Bundestag," Alyosha remarked with a fine, ambiguous smile.

Lidia Afanasyevna sighed again. "That doesn't make any difference. The work doesn't pay better just because the dust is cleared away in such an honourable place."

"But a little more pleasant than if you had to do your duty in, say, a football stadium," Alyosha pointed out.

Now it was Lidia Afanasyevna's turn to smile ambiguously. If you only knew ..., she thought. But she preferred to remain silent so as not to deprive Alyosha of his childlike belief in

the irreproachable conduct of the people's representatives. As if he could read her thoughts, Alyosha added: "Well, of course, working as a cleaning lady always has something to do with removing other people's dirt. But compare that with your former life in your Russian home village, with all the dust in summer, the mud it turned into in spring and autumn, with the cold that crept through the cracks of your wooden house in winter. Against this backdrop, doesn't it seem like a privilege to work in a fully air-conditioned building with the most modern machines and the most effective cleaning agents, removing the barely existing dirt from the day before?"

Sorrowful Memories

Lidia Afanasyevna felt tears gathering under her closed eyelids. How amazingly insensitive it was of Alyosha to allude to her former homeland!

Of course, he was not wrong in what he said. They had really felt very uncomfortable in the little wooden house that had always adapted to the seasons instead of providing a counterbalance to them. That was precisely why they had all suddenly discovered the German roots in themselves, so that they could move to the land of their husband's ancestors with a clear conscience.

Igor, who at that time could not even spell the word "German", had suddenly remembered his father of German origin, although the latter had abandoned his son's mother – not exactly a model of German virtue in this respect – before he was born. And she herself had taken the bus into town week after week to bring her poor school German up to a level that was more or less suitable for everyday life. At the same time, she had always tried to be particularly punctual. Before she got to know the German trains better, she had seen this as a typical German virtue.

Of course, it was clear to her that in retrospect some of the things that had prompted her to leave back then seemed transfigured. On the other hand, the distance of almost twenty years that she had now lived in Germany also made

the positive aspects of her previous life stand out more clearly. These included precisely the thin wooden walls of her former house, the fact that the boundaries between inside and outside had been more fluid than they were in Germany.

In her former homeland, inside and outside had been connected as if by an osmotic process. This applied both to the relationship to nature and to that between private and public space. Although one's own living space had been a shelter there, too, the doors had been open in summer, and even in winter it had been possible to visit others casually.

It was one of the things she had found most difficult to get used to: that the Germans even organise their private lives down to the smallest detail, like the procedures in a company, and that you have to make appointments for everything. She would never forget the piqued face of her neighbour when, freshly arrived from Russia, she had simply rung her doorbell to introduce herself.

Of course, she had by no means forgotten the shortages they had often suffered in the Russian winter. But precisely because they had had to be sparing with everyday things in those days, the potatoes had never again tasted as good to her as they did back then, towards the end of winter, when each one had been a little treasure.

And never again had she enjoyed festivities as much as those of that time, when in the beginning of spring the anticipation of the warmer days had turned into an unbridled joy of life. Everyone had contributed something to these feasts – some a home-caught fish, others the long-saved last jar of compote, and of course there had never been a shortage of samogon, the home-distilled vodka. However, she preferred not to think back to the alcohol poisoning that her brother had once suffered from after such a feast ...

"But Lidia Afanasyevna, dearest! You're crying! Have I possibly hurt you with something?"

Lidia Afanasyevna was so lost in her thoughts that she had completely forgotten Alyosha. She gladly let him stroke her cheeks and dry her tears. "Oh, Alyosha!" she sighed, as his

arms embraced her like a wide, starry steppe night. "Hold me close!"

She knew very well that some people would have found her feelings for Alyosha trashy and would have called her secret whispering with him childish. But she didn't care about that at all. She was convinced that this only testified to the resentment of those who were incapable of feeling such a perfect, comforting harmony as Alyosha provided her.

While cleaning the German Bundestag, Lidia Afanasyevna makes a terrible discovery - a discovery that will change her whole life.

II. Grandfatherly Smells

The Science Fiction Cocoon

Lidia Afanasyevna had a great passion for science fiction stories. Above all, she was fascinated by the idea of a star gate through which one could simply disappear into another part of the cosmos. On grey days like these, such fantasies were like a cocoon for her, in which she could withdraw from the rigours of everyday life.

So now, too, her eyes transformed the dark corridor of the Reichstag she had to clean into an escape tunnel from the world in which she was trapped. Her hands were not pushing a sweeper, but a detector to find the spaceship that was waiting for her behind one of the doors leading off to the left and right.

Lidia Afanasyevna was well aware that this was an absurd thought. But as a science fiction fan, she was naturally also an enthusiastic amateur astronomer. And so she knew that the universe was permeated by all kinds of things that were as invisible as they were incomprehensible: dark matter, black holes, gravitational waves and minute particles that were gliding through her right now, at this very moment, without her noticing.

It seemed that the structure of the universe was so alien to human beings that it slipped away from the mind as soon as they tried to grasp it with their categories. But under these circumstances, was the absurd not the only adequate form to approach the essence of the cosmos?

Wrapped in her science fiction cocoon, Lidia Afanasyevna patiently opened one door after another and performed her cleaning ritual behind them. She wiped the non-existent dirt off the tables with the duster, walked the vacuum cleaner on the dirt-repellent carpets, fished in the half-empty wastepaper baskets with gloved fingers. Extraordinary or even extraterrestrial phenomena were nowhere to be found. The same sterile smell emanated from all the rooms, to

which she added a subtle antiseptic note with her cleaning products.

On the desks, monitors prepared for the glare of the day, while behind the windows the city woke up listlessly. The seating areas in the larger rooms offered a little crumb food for the vacuum cleaner, garnished here and there with expressive stains that pointed to the stimulants of the previous week. Even more productive in this respect were the meeting rooms, where the chairs faced each other reverently and the table circles waited for their ceremonial shell to be filled with life.

Dismay in the Men's Room

However, Lidia Afanasyevna did not mind at all that she was looking in vain for the extraordinary. The mere expectation that it could occur behind the next door helped her through the morning. With precisely this expectation, she also opened the door behind which – judging by her science fiction dreams – she was usually most disappointed: the door to the places of male excretion.

Familiar with the finest olfactory nuances even of this world, Lidia Afanasyevna immediately noticed that something was different this morning. While she was usually surrounded by a cloud of smells that reminded her of her grandmother's pigsty, this time she was greeted by a rather sweet scent, familiar to her from her grandfather's distillery.

More attentively than usual, she sprayed the washbasins in the entrance area. However, they showed no peculiarities apart from the usual loss of shine due to the soap film and the scrubbed-off skin particles. As she wiped across the wide mirrored wall and happened to look into her face with its hair tied up under a bandana, into the absent-minded eyes that seemed to look right through her, she even admonished herself: "You'll end up in the loony bin if you go on like this! A toilet bowl is a toilet bowl, nothing more, it points to nothing but to itself."

Likewise, there was nothing unusual about the row of urinals she turned to next. Some of the strainers had a piece of