



**Hiltrud Baier**

## **Bright Days, Bright Nights**

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**Two very different women, a decision that changes everything forever, and the vastness of nature.**

Spring. Cherry blossoms in full bloom. It could be so idyllic. But Anna Albinger, who lives in a small town at the foot of the Swabian Alps, becomes gravely ill. Suddenly she's overcome by the sense that it may be too late for some things. Because she's harbouring a big secret. With a heavy heart, she writes a long letter that she wants her niece, Frederike, to take to Lapland. Frederike, recently divorced and looking for a fresh start, is less than enthusiastic. Very reluctantly, she leaves her sick aunt behind, and sets off for the desolate North in search of the addressee of Anna's letter. But Petter Svakko seems to have disappeared. Alone in the alpine world of Lapland, Frederike realises that you can sometimes be in the wrong place and yet find just what you need.

**Hiltrud Baier's** German-Swedish family saga derives its authenticity from the fact that the author, a native of Southern Germany, later emigrated to Lapland. What Baier particularly loves about Northern Sweden is its spectacular landscape, and the fact that you can wander for hours without meeting another living soul. She's not so fond of the sub-zero temperatures and the long periods of darkness in winter. But she has developed a good antidote: a crackling log fire, Samian music, and lots of hot tea.

The author lives with her husband in Jokkmokk in Swedish Lapland, and has two daughters.

*"Bright Days, Bright Nights is a moving novel about the art of slowness and the things that really make us happy."*

*"A wonderful book about the beauty of life and mustering the courage to re-discover yourself."*

Für Sie

Translated by Anne Stokes

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The End of April - *Anna*

This day suits my plans, Anna thought to herself as she opened the balcony door. It was dawn. She stepped out onto the covered terrace and felt the cool wind, then heard a gentle pattering. Spring rain dripping onto the leaves of the faded cherry and apple trees. In the distance, sheep were bleating on the steep escarpment of the Swabian Alps. Anna was cold, and tried to pull the V-neck on her cardigan together with one hand. But the chill penetrated the tiny stitches relentlessly.

Slowly the day brightened, and the silhouette of Hohenneuffen Castle came into view. Majestic. That was always her first thought upon seeing this mighty, centuries-old ruin on the edge of the foothills. Majestic and familiar. She smiled, and closed her eyes.

Several times a year their parents had taken them on a hike up to the castle. How long the ascent had seemed to her back then. At the start it was easy-going through the orchards, but then it became arduous. The path through the woods was steep and seemed endless to her. The thick oaks and quirky beech trees, which sometimes looked like figurines with numerous arms, were tall. Not even at the height of the summer had the rays of the sun touched the forest floor. It was dark and shaded. These hikes had always been eerie and exciting at the same time.

At the outset, Marie and she had always stayed close to their parents, but as soon as they caught sight of the castle, they ran on ahead. Only once they reached the top, just in front of the castle, did their parents let them disappear out of their sight.

‘Don’t go too far ahead!’ Papa would nevertheless call after them. ‘Up there at the front it drops off steeply!’



But they were already heading for the castle gate, and no longer cared what their father had to say. Their white Sunday knee-length socks had slipped down off their calves, and they unbuttoned their cardigans as they ran.

‘Come, quickly!’ Marie had beckoned to her, running at least a metre ahead.

Marie was always faster even though Anna was a year older than her sister. And so Marie had always been the first to reach the high stone wall on either side of the approach. This high wall, which they had only been able to peek over years later, initially on tiptoe, looked down toward Neuffen, the little medieval town where they would shortly go to school.

‘Hide, Anna!’ Marie would shout, although that wasn’t necessary. They always played hide and seek at the castle, and she was always the one who had to hide, and Marie would look for her.

Her sister would then stop and turn around, so she couldn’t see where Anna ran off to. But Anna mostly hid in the same place, in one of the large arrow slits, through which you could look down toward Neuffen. There she had squished herself into one corner, closed her eyes, and covered her face with her hands.

And immediately afterwards she’d hear: ‘Got you!’ Marie then stood in front of her, laughing loudly, and she herself would burst out laughing, deeply relieved that Marie had found her.

Anna rubbed her upper arms, as though this would hold back the wind that was blowing relentlessly through her loose-knit cardigan. Her white curls tumbled into her eyes. She closed the balcony door carefully behind her, and slowly made her way to the kitchen. The coffee was ready, but the smell she always enjoyed struck her as unpleasant today. She had completely forgotten that her stomach could no longer tolerate coffee. She had turned the machine on earlier out of sheer habit. Anna shook her head at herself as she turned on the electric kettle. Peppermint tea would definitely do her some good. Perhaps it would even settle her stomach.

The kitchen clock ticked. 7.15 a.m. It had grown light outside, but through the thick rain clouds, which the wind was blowing toward the escarpment, the morning was milky-grey. On the radio, they had forecast that it would remain dull the entire day. A good day, then. Today she would write letters, and then call Frederike.

*The Middle of May - Frederike*

Although the sun shone from a radiant blue sky on this early May morning, it was brisk on the upper deck of the Nils Holgersson. Frederike considered going back down into the hold to fetch a down jacket from her VW campervan. The ferry crossing from Rostock to Trelleborg would take more than six hours. Nonetheless, she decided against fetching her jacket.

With her arms closed, she placed herself in the slipstream of one of the white walls of the ship, and inhaled deeply. She imagined she could smell the salt of the Baltic amidst the stink of diesel from the ship's engine and the emissions of Rostock's gigantic coal-fired power station. She closed her eyes. The wind twirled her curly blond shoulder-length hair, which already had a few strands of grey running through it. She looked in her jacket pocket for her headband, but she'd left that down in the campervan, too. Her hood wasn't much good to her, since the wind ripped it off her head within seconds. She tried in vain to wipe the twirling curls out of her face with her forearm.

A young man with the clear beginnings of a paunch beneath his jeans jacket was struggling to light a cigarette two metres away from her, over at the railing. He turned into the slipstream, lowered his head, and tried his luck over and over. Frederike could hear the hectic clicking of his lighter. Finally, he gave up, and, with long strides, ran toward the entrance to the upper deck. The metal door slammed loudly behind him.

A grey-haired woman was walking up and down the deck with a puppy. The nose of the little dog, whose white fluffy coat shone in the sun, ranged inquisitively over the floor. Then he lifted his leg, and Frederike saw the woman scold him out of embarrassment, then tug him along quickly.

Frederike looked around, then she pulled one of the blue plastic chairs that were standing around every which way on the deck to a sheltered spot. As she sat down, the last of the Rostock harbour buildings disappeared from sight. Finally she could see open sea.

Yesterday it had taken her more than ten hours to drive from southern Germany to Rostock. She'd opted for the autobahn via Berlin, assuming that the traffic on the easternmost autobahn wouldn't be as heavy as on the one that went through Hamburg.



But she'd been mistaken. After sitting in a traffic jam for two hours just outside of Berlin, she'd turned off in annoyance onto the B-road. She hadn't reached the campsite outside of Rostock until just before 8 p.m., so she'd had enough for the time being of queuing cars, noxious exhausts, and stressed-out drivers, and was now enjoying the solitude of the upper deck. While most of the passengers stayed in the heated rooms inside the belly of the large ship, she was glad of the brisk breeze that was blowing in her face.

Frederike exhaled deeply. Why had she gone along with Anna's crazy wish?

Perhaps because her aunt had appeared so calm and resolved when she pressed the letter into her hand a couple of days ago, and asked her repeatedly to deliver it in person. Frederike shook her head. When she visualised the scene, it seemed unreal to her.

'What? Why should I go to Lapland?' she'd asked Anna, holding the letter incomprehendingly in her hand. 'Just pop it in the post!'

But her aunt had given her a serious look, and said, 'Please. It's important. A couple of things need to be sorted out.'

'What things?'

'It's something that has to be notarised. I'd like everything resolved before I...'

Frederike hadn't wanted to hear the rest, so after a short hesitation, she nodded briefly.

Later on Anna mentioned that something had to be signed over, a cabin in Lapland that belonged to her mother's family.

So, because of some cabin she had to go all the way to Lapland! But Anna had never asked anything of her before, at least not as far as she could remember. Certainly, earlier, when she'd stayed at Anna's as a child. But those were only mundane things, like 'Could you take out the rubbish, tidy your room, turn down the radio.' Then, later, 'You'll be back here by midnight!' But that wasn't a request, it was an order. But a real request – no, never before. And now, because Anna was ill, and the cancer had metastasised throughout her body... Frederike swallowed. That's why she had agreed to it. Her chair wobbled, she adjusted it, and tried to get into a more comfortable position.

Sure, this journey didn't fit into her schedule. But when did a request of this kind this ever suit anyone's plans? Who would ever drive 3,000 kilometres these days to deliver

a letter by hand? Completely bonkers! Of course, Anna had offered to pay for a flight, but Frederike had turned that down. She liked slower ways of travelling, and she loved her red VW campervan.

Frederike sighed. She had just begun to recover from all the stress of recent months. The endless, nerve-wracking arguments with Thomas about their relationship, and, finally, the separation and divvying up of the ad agency. She was at her wit's end last autumn, when they finally sold the house they shared. She'd put her furniture into storage, and, with part of the proceeds that Thomas paid to buy her out, bought herself a campervan and headed south. France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, from November to April she'd been on the road. She'd needed this distance from Thomas and from Germany, hadn't wanted to see or hear any more. Not from Agnes, her friend, who was always on her case, and looked at her disapprovingly, because she, as Agnes saw it, had given in too easily, handing Thomas, such a good looking, nice, and intelligent man over to another woman. The fact that this good looking, nice, and intelligent man, to whom she'd been married for over twenty years, had been cheating on her the past two years, didn't interest Agnes. And Frederike didn't want to hear any more either from her old friend Hans, who vehemently advised her not to pull out of the ad agency, giving Thomas full control. At some point she had quite simply had enough of all their well-intentioned advice, and had taken off. And that was the best thing she could have done.

Frederike got up off her chair, and shifted it a couple of metres to the right, into the sun. That felt good. She put her feet up on another chair, and made herself as comfortable as possible. The sun shone directly onto her face. She closed her eyes. [...]

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*Frederike*

It was nine thirty in the evening, and the sun was still shining. It was definitely colder, though. The 20 degrees around noon had seemed oddly warm to Frederike. Now it was maybe still ten degrees. Shouldn't it be a bit colder in May 2,000 kilometres north of southern Germany?

Frederike had now been on the road for four days. She'd passed Stockholm and Uppsala, stopped off at beautiful rest stops with sea views, and driven over the impressive high coastal bridge near Härnösand. She had enjoyed the varying landscapes, ranging from flat to mountainous, and when she'd turned off the motorway and headed for the Baltic Sea this evening, the green rolling meadows and the cows out in the pastures gave her the sense that she was back in the Allgau. If she hadn't occasionally passed little villages with their typical red-and-white striped wooden houses, she wouldn't have believed she was in Sweden. But she liked it here. She could easily have stopped off for a few days in every place along the way, it was so beautiful. Sometimes she asked herself why she was, in fact, in such a rush. But she had to fulfil Anna's wish, and she also wanted to get back to Germany. Katya was waiting for her to go check out a café, and she also wanted to make sure that Anna's treatment was going well.

Frederike had parked near Härnösand, on a large forest campsite on the coast. There didn't seem to be many holidaymakers there. When she was looking for a pitch, she'd only noticed a couple of campervans and two or three tents. The season hadn't started yet, apparently.

She reached for her jacket, locked the van, and ran her hand lovingly across its gleaming red rear hood. The campervan was her pride and joy, and she was glad that she'd finally realised her long-cherished dream of having a vehicle which granted her independence to travel anywhere, and somewhere to stay both day and night.

After doing her A Levels, she and two of her girl friends had spent a month touring through the south of France in a rusty old VW Bulli. She hadn't experienced the



same fantastic sense of freedom in the intervening years. Straight after that holiday, she'd started studying and didn't have any money for travelling. Then she met Thomas. They completed their studies at the same time, and at some point Paula came along, unplanned but very much wanted. That had been twenty years ago.

Frederike first walked through the thick fir forest, then the trees thinned out, and eventually she took a path through groves of medium-high willows and the occasional birch. It was a pity you couldn't camp right here on the sea. Frederike stopped and looked at the horizon. What an expanse and, beyond that, the still luminous blue sky with cirrus clouds dancing across it.

Near the sandy shore, two grey-haired men were enjoying the sauna, which was heated with wood. As a campsite guest, she, too, could use it, the man at the reception desk had told her. The men were standing in front of the sauna, laughing loudly. Then one of them undid his towel, threw it onto one of the chairs in front of the sauna, and ran toward the sea. Surely, he wasn't going to... With a loud roar, he lunged into the waves. The other man was holding onto a bottle tightly, and raised it to his mate, who waved back from the water. Then he ran back toward the sauna, panting loudly.

Just watching this sent a shiver through Frederike. The water must be terribly cold. Never in her life would she be able to brave such cold sea water. How lovely it had been in Barcelona. The air temperature was twenty-two degrees in December, and the water was only slightly cooler. But here! No way! She ran off to the right, down to the beach, and held her hand in the water. It definitely wasn't even ten degrees. Goosebumps appeared on her forearm, the little blond hairs stood up. She stopped short. A scene came back to her.

She was at a lake, or was it the sea? She, a little girl with blond pigtails and in a bright red bathing suit, had run into the water on her short little legs, into ice-cold water, and felt it take her breath away. This coldness, a shock, her sharp screams. But she bravely remained in the water, and swam until goosebumps appeared all over her body. Then, shivering, she ran to the beach, and someone wrapped her in a large towel.

But it wasn't her parents or Anna who had taken care of her. The person rubbed her down until she was warm again and her blue lips had assumed their normal colour. It was a young man with dark curly hair.



She thought for a bit, but couldn't conjure up his face. Her father's hair had been dark blond and straight. She stood up and thought some more, but she couldn't remember anything else about the scene.

When her parents were still alive, they had only ever holidayed at Lake Ammer, and once at Lake Geneva, but the water there had been warm. And she'd never been on holiday with Anna. Or had she?

She got up and looked around. Behind the sandy shore was a narrow track through thousands upon thousands of stones. Frederike took the narrow path, raising her face up to the sun. The wind felt good. She breathed in the fresh breeze and observed the fascinating light of the setting sun. She had the impression that the light shone more strongly here than in Germany, or, for that matter, in Spain or Portugal. It was completely different, somehow lighter, brighter, and other-worldly.

She was enjoying walking. She'd been driving all day. It had gone well. The European trunk road north was wide and clear, and, due to the elk fences on the perimeter, it wasn't dangerous to drive fast. And there hadn't been too much traffic on it either, in contrast to the congested German autobahns, where drivers were constantly speeding and competing with one another.

While driving, Frederike had listened to Swedish radio and noticed that she could understand a lot of what was being said. This completely stumped her. How come she knew this language? When she was still living with Anna, Anna had run Swedish courses at the further education college in Stuttgart two evenings a week. But she herself had never spoken Swedish. Frederike continued along the narrow path, then stopped behind a small cove. She thought hard. All that was ages ago. Had Anna had contact with some Swedish relatives or Swedish friends perhaps? Not that Frederike was aware of. How strange!

But who was this man that Anna had written to? Maybe she had only met him recently. But when? This Petter guy had to be extremely important to her. Had Anna possibly travelled to Sweden to see him in recent years? If she had, she hadn't mentioned it to her. And besides, if Anna went anywhere on holiday, it was always somewhere south, mostly on a city break. Occasionally she had gone on guided walking holidays. And, in recent years, as far as she knew, Anna hadn't gone on any trips at all. Why not, actually? Her brow furrowed. Could it be that she knew very little at all about Anna?



Frederike rummaged around in her jacket pocket for her mobile, then looked for Anna's number. After the second ring she gave up. It was already late, and Anna was possibly sleeping already. She didn't want to wake her.

But she couldn't let the matter rest. There was also that strange question when they spoke on the phone yesterday morning: 'What would Petter know about you anyhow?' Anna's question had struck her as a panic reaction, as though there was a secret concerning her, as though Petter wasn't allowed to, or shouldn't, know anything about her. Frederike stuck her mobile back in her pocket. No, she didn't want to make her aunt anxious or upset with her excessive curiosity. She would, in any case, find out what the story was with Anna and this man. She had almost reached her destination, after all. And she would also discover whether she had only imagined that scene in the ice-cold water.

The sun had set while she was following the path back to the campsite. And, for the first time, she noticed the thousands of brightly coloured stones to the left and right of the path. She bent down and picked up one of the greyish-red ones, which was studded with yellow lichens and black spots. It resembled a map. She had seen a stone like this before. But where? Of course! Anna had a brightly coloured hand-sized stone with sharp edges on the windowsill in her living room in Beuren. And she'd also had it in her flat in Stuttgart and kept a close eye on it. As a child, Frederike had liked to look at it and would run her little fingers over the fine lichens. Once she'd asked Anna if she could have it, but Anna took it from her hastily and said simply: 'No, that's a keepsake. It stays where it is!'