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Over and Gone

Novel

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1 Ostendstraße

The pancake is sticking to the ceiling, right next to the hanging light that shines a circle of yellow light onto the kitchen table. Elisabeth is too bewildered to get upset. At least she manages to put the pan on the stove. She plumps down on one of the scratched wooden chairs and stares into space.

Cornelia's coffee mug is still standing on the weekly paper, opened to the crossword puzzle. The grid is empty except for a few brown stains and a single word. *Destruction by fire*: BURNING. Elisabeth screws up her nose, pushes the mug over it. There is a lipstick stain on edge of the Greek flag. Cornelia doesn't want to get rid of the ugly mug nor the small brass moka pot. Dimitrios and Cornelia have been divorced for a while. »We manage better than we did before,« her daughter claims. No wonder, if all you have to do is talk on Skype once a week. Elisabeth sighs without noticing. She gets up and puts the mug in the sink. A swarm of fruit flies rises from the fruit bowl when Elisabeth pushes it aside to pull out a few pieces of paper from under it. Cornelia's restless handwriting slants hastily across the paper. She has folded the paper and thus divided it into two columns. One is headed ›Bruno‹, the other ›Stella‹. Elisabeth deciphers the name and telephone number of the paediatrician. A few lines in block letters jump out in Bruno's column: ›No tins, no ready meals, no packet sauces‹. Cornelia has underlined these requests twice. ›Recipes in the red binder. Sweets, ice cream and lemonade absolutely taboo.‹

The mess on the ceiling is Bruno's. He had screamed at her: »I don't want your shitty pancakes! I hate pancakes! And I hate you too!« Before Elisabeth grasped what was happening

her grandson's small hand had reached past her. The fat was sizzling, he must have burned himself. Out of nowhere, she thinks that she can smell singed flesh. She is going to go into his room right now. Unbelievable that he is allowed to lock it at his age. She wonders where Cornelia keeps the spare keys. She didn't write that down. Everything is chaotic through and through, badly organised. Normally, Elisabeth would have approached this task in a completely different way. But at the moment she is very confused, even though her daughter takes no notice of that. Cornelia is far too busy with her own problems.

Elisabeth jumps up now, runs along the hallway, trips over something hard, a pair of sneakers, yells out quietly and catches a hold of the open wardrobe door. She holds onto it, groaning. A mountain of dirty laundry bulges from the wardrobe. For a few moments Elisabeth breathes in the familiar smell of her daughter: a mixture of men's deodorant, which she has been using since she was a teenager, the mustiness of badly dried clothes and the typical smell of Cornelia – like freshly mown grass, a little sweaty, because she's always just getting back from a workout or from her work as a physiotherapist, which, essentially, is a kind of sport as well.

Elisabeth stays with Cornelia's fragrance only briefly but that is enough to conjure up an image she can't withdraw from even though she fights it. She also fights the tears that she wipes away so forcefully it seems like she wanted to punish the eyes from which they fall. When she was five years old, Cornelia had secretly left the garden in Alosenweg, where she and her older sister Sabina were playing under the neighbour's supervision, in socks, sandals and a summer dress she had run straight along the street that led from the village of vine dressers and commuters at the Neckar to the last stop of the tram, got on the Number 9, on which she cruised along all the way to the main train station unchecked. In the Klettpassage, which seemed like a labyrinth tiled in orange with its countless exits, she had to cry a bit.

Elisabeth paid the neighbour to look after the children two afternoons per week. That's why seeing the police uniform through the shop window of the travel agency hadn't troubled her. After all, the officers on duty sometimes booked their package holidays here. The policeman had barged inside with such force that the cluster of Spanish copper bells above the door wouldn't stop jingling. The way he looked at Elisabeth, who, the phone between ear and raised shoulder, was negotiating with an airline while making small semicircles with her swivel chair, was anything but friendly. He didn't get the chance to open his mouth, because Cornelia had already wrested herself free from his hand, slipped underneath the desk and snuggled up to her mother. Elisabeth felt the warmth of the small body, smelt the fragrance of her fine hair. Only she could hear the little girl whisper: »Mummy, I had to run away because I missed you

so much.« Even now, decades later, in Cornelia's hallway, Elisabeth can feel the ferocious hug and her own overwhelming love for this creature that just could not do any wrong in her eyes.

She had already anticipated the dangerous seas her ship had stumbled into before she even held Cornelia in her arms. Pregnancy should have prepared her for an overwhelming event, but Elisabeth had ignored all signs: Her complete lack of fear, even though the first birth had been horrific. On top of that her sudden beauty, which she could notice from the farthest corner of the mirror. She couldn't look at and enjoy this state, she had never learnt how to do that, but she noticed the changes on her and admired them as though they belonged to a stranger. From the first moment that the light in the delivery room fell onto this sturdy baby with a surprising amount of hair and whose skin was a golden shade of brown, which suited her green-grey eyes, she had been in love. More in love than she had ever been with her other baby: of course, Sabina was a darling, but she had inherited the thin Geiger hair and the Ebinger nose. Cornelia, on the other hand, looked like the Christ Child leaning timidly and lovely on the shoulder of Raphael's Madonna. She had never gotten that carried away with her older daughter to make these kinds of comparisons. Together with her husband Hinz she ran a travel agency in the city centre of Stuttgart and she liked working in her own business. She was often bored with the baby and she felt more excitement for the new blue neon sign of ›Travel Agency Geiger‹ than for Sabina's first coherent words or steps. She hadn't lost the enjoyment for her work after Cornelia was born, but the second child held her love and her attention to a completely different extent.

The women from Fellbach had pounced on Elisabeth as soon as she started to notice this difference in emotion. Even though she had long since left the place of her childhood, the devout village near Stuttgart, behind her, Elisabeth can't rid herself of her home of Fellbach and much of what she learnt there. Her internal admonishers are two old, yellow-faced deaconesses whose hairstyles are already so flimsy that you could see their scalp if not for the bonnets sitting grey and stiff on their heads. Their eyes, as bright as water, look straight into her heart, the unmistakable manner of speaking of the area can be heard in their voices. Back in the day, Sister Mary and Sister Sophie liked to drop in on Elisabeth's deeply religious parents for a cup of coffee. They were distant relatives of her father's and drove an old Renault, whose boot sported a sticker with the slogan ›God's ground crew‹. They had filled out Elisabeth's friendship book together and of course they hadn't added a glossy sticker – the phrase, the word alone had to be sufficient: ›Man, think on eternity and do not mock the time of grace, for judgement day is near.‹ Like many Pietists Mary and Sophie were expecting the end of all days in the near future. Only those who gave as little room as possible to worldly distractions, even innocent things like colourful clothes or a visit to the movie theatre, could pass the Last

Judgement. All of this would only lead one astray from the narrow, onerous path the pious wandered while the others marched on a broad street comfortably, albeit straight into damnation.

Elisabeth can't turn off the voices of the two women from Fellbach inside herself. They interfere when she least expects them. And the fact that Elisabeth herself is an elderly lady by now is of no use either. The two deaconesses are unrelenting. It seems like they take pleasure in putting Elisabeth through the mangle. Her infatuation with Cornelia had been a thorn in the strict sisters' sides from the beginning. While Elisabeth leaned down towards the doll-like body of her youngest, they just prompted her with a few names and she knew what they were getting at: Cain and Abel. Isaac and daddy's boy Esau. Rebecca and mummy's boy Jacob. And, of course, the king of all favourites: Joseph in his coat of many colours.

Elisabeth's decision was made when she was still in the hospital bed and she whispered into sleeping Cornelia's ear: »Sabina won't notice. I will be stricter with you than with her. I won't pamper and prefer you. You have all of me. That is never going to change, but I won't let you know. Not too much.«

With that resolution Elisabeth left the hospital. She ordered Hinz to carry the bag with Cornelia and dedicated herself exclusively to Sabina, who looked pale and a little distraught. Her breasts overflowed with milk for the younger child. With Sabina, she hadn't managed to produce even a drop. Her elder daughter had taken the bottle dutifully. What else could she do? Today, the relationship to her oldest daughter is friendly but distanced. Sabina veritably entrenches herself behind her own big family – she is married to a doctor and a mother of four sons – and she hardly ever accepts Elisabeth's help. Elisabeth has broken her secret promise much too often by now and she has to bear Sabina's desire for distance.

With great effort she walks to the door at the end of the hallway, with her grandson's name written in colourful wooden letters in the middle. A bear sits next to the B, a rabbit squats underneath the R, the U is watched over by a unicorn. She presses her ear against the door hastily. The yellowed varnish feels sticky. It's silent in the room.

»Bruno, Bruno, please, let me in, I just want to take a look at your hand. You burnt yourself on the pan, I saw that. Please, open the door.«

»No, nothing's wrong with it, go away.«

»Bruno, please. I promised your mother that I'd look after you. If she knew that you have hurt yourself!«

»It's alright. Just go away.«

Elisabeth can't think of anything else. She can feel the boy's resolution to not make a move for the time being through the closed door. She tries to appear calm: »I'm going to clean up the kitchen now. Please come out soon, the pancakes are waiting for you.«

Bruno's screech makes her flinch: »I won't eat any shitty pancakes, never again!«

The arthrosis makes itself felt in her left knee, burning and persistent, a busy little worker of pain. An octopus gapes at her from inside the O. Elisabeth looks around for somewhere to sit from where she can get up again without sciatica getting her. Just what she needs now, a lot of pain. But you can never be too sure with the old rack. That's how Elisabeth has been talking about her body for a long time, if she pays it any attention at all. Maybe it's taking revenge for the fact that she didn't appreciate it when it was still working, that she didn't praise the Lord who had made her so artfully and delicately.

She looks down the dark hallway. The kitchen door at the other end is still open. Through it, the windowless corridor receives its only bit of light. Elisabeth limps towards it and enters the broad golden rectangle the sun creates on the floor. Things are strewn everywhere: lone sneakers in various sizes, dried-up chestnuts, wrinkled work sheets, a lunchbox with apple slices peeping out through milky side window and an empty packet of marshmallow-filled waffles. Sun dust floats above it. It rises and falls in the warm air densely and reminds Elisabeth of a fairy tale. Bread from sun dust for an evil fairy. She considers telling Bruno about it later and goes back into the kitchen.

By now, the pancake is starting to flake off the ceiling a little. Elisabeth can see its imprint like a greasy shadow. Not that as well! Only then does she notice the trembling. Her fingers are shaking, her knees are banging together. The tears are coming again, she can't stop them.

Hinz wouldn't even have to get on his tiptoes to pluck the thing. His long arms. No place in the world where she has felt more secure than in his hug. Elisabeth tenses her hands, feels the pressure of the wedding ring whose gold cuts into the finger firmly. She hears her own moan when she tilts her head back, purses her lips. Don't think about Hinz! Don't cry! The cinnamon-coloured edge of the pancake keeps furling quietly. Soon it will fall down, then she won't have to get up on a chair.

Quick, concentrate on something else, you have to stay calm, you're going to need your strength, after all. You're responsible now. But you are all alone.

Thinking of Hinz is like touching the frying pan. The pain shoots along her arm from the burnt fingertips, captures the whole body and makes Elisabeth stagger. Days later, the

location of the injury is still throbbing. Flesh blisters, weeps, festers, rots. The pain stinks silently, accompanies her, even when the blackened limb has long since fallen off.

Luckily, Cornelia hadn't started up about her father again this morning on the way to the airport. It's easier for Elisabeth to talk about ›her father‹ in front of her daughter than about ›Heinrich‹ or even ›Hinz‹. She just can't get herself to utter the familiar name. The only thing that works is an impersonal description like ›my husband‹ or ›your father‹. She never thought that something like this specific kind of speechlessness was actually possible. Mental states of all types are nonsense. Just like the two women from Fellbach, she feels a quiet contempt for all the intemperate people who obsess over things instead of accepting and bearing them silently.

But even her childhood friend Erdmute, called Erdnuss by everyone, has been going to talk therapy for some time now and talks about that Mrs Thaler like she's the Messiah.

Erdnuss went to a girls' grammar school in Stuttgart together with Elisabeth. She comes from a home even more devout than Elisabeth's, her way to school was farther and she was the only one in the class to wear her hair in a simple bun, the so-called ›hallelujah bulb‹. She took jokes about her name and her hairstyle with docile serenity, nothing could ruffle her feathers. Unlike Elisabeth she seemed to be comfortable in her skin. Shortly after their secondary school leaving exams, she married a man a little older than her, her former tutor for Greek and Latin and moved to Gottsfelde with him, a small town near Göppingen. The King of Württemberg himself had generously supported the foundation of Gottsfeld in order to keep a large number of especially pious subjects from emigrating to the USA, because they would have been able to practice their faith more freely there. Erdnuss is the bravest person Elisabeth knows. After her husband's death a few years ago, she moved back to Stuttgart. She lives in a room with a sofa bed at Marienplatz, she doesn't even have a kitchen and heats up frozen meals in the microwave instead. Two of her four children and numerous grandchildren share her house in Gottsfelde. »I just want to be left in peace. When my people want something from me, they are free to invite me, I have worked all my life for the family.« Erdnuss likes to travel by bus and visit Europe's capitals. Elisabeth is very attached to her friend. She heard the word ›mindfulness‹ for the first time from her. »Mrs Thaler says that I have to accept myself with love. She thinks that mindfulness includes looking at everything like you're seeing it for the first time.«

Elisabeth doesn't want a Mrs Thaler. She can help herself. Just don't think about Hinz. Better to stare at the yellow circle of light on the kitchen table. As if she was seeing it for the first time. Instead, she pictures Cornelia sitting in baggy trousers and white cork slippers at the

kitchen table. Her beautiful dark brows above a girl-version of Hinz' potato nose are furrowed and she quickly fills in a word in the crossword puzzle as the fruit flies dance around her.

But thinking of Cornelia isn't good for her, either. It puts in motion a merry-go-round of worries. Elisabeth knows her way around the maze of thin red lines with which the major airlines spin a cocoon around the globe, across the white continents and the light-blue seas. Cornelia is flying Delta. Over the course of her professional life Elisabeth has booked millions of kilometres for her customers. She is familiar with all the world's major airports, their layouts, the pitfalls of entry requirements and baggage handling, since the mid-nineties even photo galleries of buildings and interiors. Cornelia should be above the Atlantic by now. And she, on whom she is supposed to rely on blindly, sits around and gets nothing done. Even though she had been hell-bent on not just giving Cornelia a hand but on improving everything, on bringing order into this messy flat. But when she had made that plan, there had been two of them. Her world had not been turned upside down yet.

One day last autumn, Cornelia had turned up in Alosenweg, sat down on the couch like a chickadee on the windowsill and said without any preamble: »I have to get out of here or I'll flip my lid. Could you guys help me please?« There was a »But of course we can« from Hinz as soon as the daughter's mouth had shut. He agreed without fuss or quibble, and Elisabeth, who hesitated a second too long, received a reproachful look from Cornelia. Together with Hinz she wouldn't be having any problems now. They had always been a good team, a true tandem, like two oxen in front of a clunky cart who pull tirelessly, come rain, hail, or canes. With »Travel Agency Geiger« Elisabeth and Hinz had fulfilled their dream of owning their own business, with the house on Alosenweg and the two daughters their idea of house and home, a bag full of self-fulfilled wishes that they dragged behind them dutifully, a bag full of trouble, but they always did everything together.

For Cornelia, there was no more second ox, because the ox had escaped, back to Greece where he wasn't even born, that doe-eyed idiot! Of course, they wanted to help her, she had two kids and a full-time job on top of that. How could Elisabeth have guessed that Cornelia, her darling, her beautiful girl, could ever end up at Ostendplatz, divorced and a single mum? The Fellbach Sisters, naturally, learnt about it immediately: »The blind one is supposed to support the lame one, how is that going to work then?« »Well, you were too lax in raising her, always let her get away with everything, didn't you?« »He who loves his son is careful to discipline him, that's the word of the Lord.«

Just let them talk. Get back to the circle of light! Use your five senses! There is a smell in here, like rubbish bin. The sprouted onions are peeking through the basket next to the sink,

cheeky and finger-length, white potato sprouts next to them. She's going to sort all of that out later.

The circle of light has the same shape as the pancake. If that were to fall down and into it now, it would even look good. Like a moon, a full moon. *Der Mond ist aufgegangen, die goldnen Sternlein prangen am Himmel hell und klar.* But instead of the woods all that stands there is Cornelia's waste bucket, black and silent, sulking because no one has emptied it for so long, the refrigerator with the children's timetables. She reads Bruno's sheet: End of core hours: 1:30 p.m. And it's almost four now! Why had the boy come home so late?

Cornelia got into her mother's car at five o'clock this morning without any luggage. The flight to New York left early, but Elisabeth was thankful for that time, had refused the taxi that was suggested emphatically, insisted on driving her daughter. Breaking groggily away from the sleep that would, if at all, only come after midnight, had curtailed Elisabeth's usual morning agonies in her lonely bedroom. That feeling of falling into an abyss. She had opened her eyes and looked at the unused pillow next to her own. A tiny pill underneath her tongue brought her a few hours of absence but no actual rest. Finding herself alone in the double bed had her crying her eyes out.

Luckily, Cornelia didn't notice anything. She was busy with her trip. She didn't want to take a single piece of luggage. Nothing but the inevitable bag made from recycled truck tarpaulins hanging over her shoulder. She was planning on buying everything on the road, because clothes were so cheap in the States. Stella had even given her a list, but she didn't know yet if she would really work through it. Bruno didn't have any wishes. Buying clothes was an eternal battleground. Still, she would bring him a pair of jeans.

No matter what the topic of conversation was, sooner or later Cornelia would mention Bruno. And Elisabeth was astounded time and again at how much she knew about her youngest grandson's weight, body fat percentage and even bathroom habits and how little about the actual Bruno. He had been an uncomplicated baby, who had not, unlike his sister Stella, suffered from perpetual stomach cramps, had to be carried around night after night, even driven around in the car so that she would sleep. Bruno virtually lived in Cornelia, even after his birth, what with the many times she carried him in front of her chest or on her back in that baby sling.

But despite always having to lug around Bruno, her daughter hadn't had bags under her eyes as badly back then. As of late, an unhealthy, pasty white had appeared in her skin's natural shade of brown.

Before take-off Cornelia seemed sleepy but in good spirits. She opened the flap of her bag with a bang. Elisabeth peered into it automatically: chargers, woollen socks, an apple. Her

daughter grabbed a few crinkled printouts, held together by a clothes peg, and flipped through them with provocative slowness, even though she only had another half hour until boarding. »Did you make copies of your passport and your travel documents?« Cornelia didn't reply. Her clear grey eyes could be alert and sparkling, they had an almost light-green shimmer to them in those moments, but right now Elisabeth thought that her daughter simply looked spaced-out. But there was an underlying levity to Cornelia's sluggishness, as though she was happy about leaving all on her own. From the beginning, the way Cornelia had approached this trip to the USA had made Elisabeth veritably mad. A flight there, a flight back. »I don't feel like scheduling anything. I have appointments all day long here.«

Elisabeth resented how little her daughter talked about the journey she had planned. After all, she and Hinz were stepping in to watch Stella and Bruno. It would just have been nice and polite to learn a few details.

Hinz had shrugged his shoulders. He thought that the girl just wanted to be left in peace. Elisabeth was probably the last person not accepting how much more exhausting Cornelia's life had become since her marriage with Dimi had fallen apart. Dimitrios Chatzis, whose great love she had been since the two of them had cut each other's hair in the farthest corner of the playground at Rohacker primary school. The morning of Cornelia's first day at school Elisabeth was sitting in the travel agency and only knew the story Hinz had told her about how he rushed past worry-free parents making small talk looking for his younger daughter with a frozen smile, blinded by the light of the September sun that was reflected by golden, steel-blue and bright red school cones. All around, children were busy turning the enormous magic cones upside down to get to the sweets at the bottom. Conny, as everyone was still calling her at the time, hadn't bothered with that, maybe because the bowl of sweets for customers on the counter of the travel agency was always filled to the brim. A small pair of scissors gleamed in her hand. Hinz had noticed the cherry-red of the handles because it was such a stark contrast to the black hair of the boy who was sitting on his school bag yelling: »If you cut my ear off, I'm going to beat you up sooo bad ...« Conny had given no answer but reached into the shiny shock of hair, grabbed a fistful of hair and pushed the scissors together before Hinz could even say a word. Strands of hair were scattered in a semi-circle all around the pair. Black strands fluttered down onto the golden-brown tufts in which the hair ties with plastic beads to hold his daughter's rattails still shone and mixed with them. Later, they set out on their way home together, with identical pageboy hairstyles curling in their necks. Hinz and Dimitrios' mother walked a few paces behind them. They kept shaking their heads, laden with the school cones and bags that had become uninteresting, like the guard of a rebellious couple of royal children.

A book fell from the tarpaulin bag, landing on the floor with a bang. The sleepy couple next to them jumped, other people around them also flinched and turned their heads. »'Scuse me,« Cornelia said in her piercing office voice. Elisabeth noticed that she was chewing gum. Her jaws were grinding relentlessly. She flipped through the book while chewing her gum, looking at the photos. National Audubon Society. Field Guide to Birds. Eastern Region. »Look, Mummy.« The index finger with the short nail was pointing at a photograph. »The Inca dove. Funny, isn't it? They believe that there were passenger pigeons as well, flocks of millions of birds. Extinct now, unfortunately.« Elisabeth shook her head involuntarily. Cornelia flipped her book shut, produced a huge bubble of sheer pink. Even though it was appropriate to wear comfortable clothes on long-haul flights, Elisabeth thought that her daughter's outfit was particularly improper again today.

»Don't you want to get going soon? It's late.«

»Hold your horses, I'll be fine. What were the names of those people Grandma Gertrud used to live with back in the day? The ones with the hotel? Kepler, wasn't it? And the place, that was Meadville, Pennsylvania, right?«

Elisabeth nodded. Her mother Gertrud had indeed spent some time in the USA when she was a young girl. When money had become scarce at home, in the 1920s. She had worked as a maid in a hotel owned by some relatives. Meadville, Kepler, Pennsylvania – the words sound familiar and yet so far away, as though Cornelia was asking about names from the Migration Period.

On her way to security Cornelia didn't mention her children. Elisabeth was glad about that, because it meant that she trusted her. Usually, Cornelia made a big fuss about Stella and Bruno, especially about him, her baby, her chubby little boy.

The thought of the recipes in the red binder fills Elisabeth with horror. Naturally, she studied a few of them. Wild rice. Steamed pangasius. But after that, he'll go and buy sweets. She had discovered her grandson, her fat grandson, in front of the kiosk as she had entered the roundabout at the Ostendplatz that afternoon. Too bad for him, he just stands out. And maybe he doesn't even want to hide. You can spot him from afar, like a big, bright blob in the landscape. A whopper of a boy. Sometimes Elisabeth gets the impression that her grandson doesn't care at all when he's caught, with a Leberkäse roll in his hand or his cheeks full of chocolate bars. He seems indifferent to the way he looks, no matter what people are whispering behind his back. Ever since he has shed his baby fat and is just obese, the comments are often made in a brutal volume. Fat is the word, fat like a porker.

Cornelia pointed at the queue in front of the checkpoint and kept talking about the bird book, but suddenly Elisabeth couldn't listen to her anymore. She barely saw the gestures with which her daughter's hand accompanied the words, slender and tanned, like a bird that kept fluttering up in front of her face.

When a young man pushed an empty wheelchair past Elisabeth and Cornelia, everything just came back suddenly. Maybe because of the sound of the rubber wheels, maybe because it strongly smelt of disinfectants in the airport this early in the morning.

Elisabeth had found Hinz. Or rather, she had stumbled over his shoes, his gigantic slippers, in the middle of the hallway. »Your husband was very, very lucky that you came home earlier! A lot can be saved in the first four hours. After that, it becomes difficult.« Elisabeth didn't even want to know what the doctor in the stoke unit considered difficult. Just a few days after Hinz had returned from hospital she had already had enough. The mumbling voice, the drool from the left corner of his mouth and his search for the right words were driving her crazy. Elisabeth didn't recognise herself. I don't want to see him like that. I don't want to be his bedside servant. Hinz' condition right after the stroke had been hell for both of them, even though he had spent part of it at a rehab hospital near Lake Constance. When he eventually announced that he had decided to spend some more time there, Elisabeth felt relieved. As she was packing his suitcase, she noticed that she was humming to herself. ›Rejoice, the Lord is king, your Lord and king adore, Mortals, give thanks and sing, and triumph evermore,‹ a catchy, jubilant song that she couldn't get out of her head. Of course, she was ashamed and folded his underwear, his chequered boxer shorts neatly, as though she could atone for her boundless joy and everything she had screwed up over the past few weeks by caressing his clothes. She had not been a good carer.

Elisabeth remembers well how she had taken pains to not look in the mirror as she packed. She couldn't even look herself in the eyes. A few years ago, the country had been shocked to hear about an old-age pensioner who had left his wife, who had collapsed in the living room, lying there and had watched her die for days while he kept going about his business, even watched TV in the same room and ate sandwiches, with the dying woman on the carpet all the while. Elisabeth thought that her own behaviour was similar to that. True, Hinz never had to wait. But the horrible thoughts! She couldn't reprimand him. In the presence of sick people, she always used her quiet voice in extreme agitation. Her quiet voice was gentle and smooth like quark mixed with sugar.

Elisabeth knew everything about sick people from her parents' home. There was a room with a Chinese screen, painted with ladies drinking tea, pagodas and lotus flowers. Behind the

beautiful object the unsavoury utensils of home care, to which her mother had dedicated herself with heart and soul, were lined up: night commode, bedpan, washcloths, the bottle of Lysol. She used all these things as naturally as the neighbours used their kitchen appliances. Still, Elisabeth lacked any hint of sweetened quark, all she felt was the desire to run away.

And Hinz had acted badly. An impatient patient, gruff and exasperated with his handicaps.

Elisabeth had believed the fairy tale of endurance in suffering until she was alone with Hinz. That was also because of her mother, under whose hands even the most petulant old woman had become as meek as a lamb. No wonder, if every wish is read in their eyes! Never had a hairbrush flown across the room with the screen in Fellbach. No one had screamed blue murder, torn the cannula from the back of their hand making the blood splatter everywhere and acted up during all the exercises. How had her mother done it? Her Jesus, who walked ahead of her on her life's path, was probably a motor that hummed in her and drove her to maximum capacity. Of course, she doesn't want to, but Elisabeth can't stop resenting her mother. She had been shrouded in her faith like a in rain jacket that repelled everything that made life miserable. Elisabeth didn't want to keep thinking about that, the wheelchair had long since disappeared through the gate, but her memories kept going back to a few days ago. She hunched her shoulders as though she felt chills thinking about how guilelessly she had sauntered into the living room after packing the suitcase, unsuspecting that her entire life had been turned upside down just then.

»Listen to me, Lisi. I have to tell you something very important.« Hinz was looking up at her from the sofa. She was pleased with her husband. By now he could manage with hardly any help from her. He was showered and shaved, he was able to do that without the use of his right hand. There wasn't a single mark on his glasses. Neatly clipped and filed nails, but that was her doing. A little too much aftershave for her liking. He was wearing a fashionable shirt, blue with slim violet stripes, which she had bought for him at Breuninger's after he had torn the model of his choice from the catalogue like a child. She could see how much he suffered because he was no longer able to buy it himself. Elisabeth's anger about the fact that he didn't trust her taste diluted her sympathy. Hinz was cut off from his tours, on which she had accompanied him only early in their marriage, because they fought every time he bought something that caught his eye instead of shopping around in cheaper stores.

»Lisi, listen.« Hinz' face was red and his eyes were slightly moist, which happened a lot recently. The healthy hand was clasped around the right one, he had gotten into the habit of doing that lately. She could hear his heavy breathing, saw how he was kneading the hand that

was still partially paralysed. She touched him automatically to put an end to the fiddling and was surprised by the vehemence with which he withdrew from her. The heavy body flinched back, the fingers were torn away. »Leave me alone!« »You're treating me like a... uhm, uhm, a... uhm, uhm, someone who isn't right in the head.« Again the pathetic search for the right word, along with that horrible »uhm«, like a sheep with Alzheimer's. Amnestic aphasia, Cornelia had said. Had the doctors said. Certain words were gone, perdu, he simply couldn't remember them anymore and tried hard with descriptions like »that thingy« or he passed the buck to her: »Oh, you know what I mean.«

»Lisi, we need a break.« The next sentence came out so smoothly and completely that it gave her a fright. »I'm going to go away for a while, but not to rehab. My taxi, it will be here soon.«

What had hurt Elisabeth the most was how Hinz' eyes, his whole face, had lit up when he – with great effort and laborious searching – had looked at his phone, read a text, shut it and put it back in his pocket. In the blink of the eye, entire man changed completely. It seemed as though all those years and decades that Elisabeth and Hinz had spent together also became the blink of an eye in that moment. He smiled from ear to ear, across his face that had become bloated with all the medication and the lack of exercise. The young Hinz was in that smile, more clearly recognisable than he had been in a long time, even in his movements, although they were still limited by the paralysis, with which he got up and shuffled to the door. »I'm sorry, Lisi, I am. Please, don't call me for now. I have to think.« But even as he was still talking to her, she had already disappeared from his field of vision. Out of sight, out of mind. Something else, that Elisabeth didn't want to imagine, came to life now, fluttered close and took him with it. He wasn't torn from her side. He left voluntarily.

She didn't accompany him to the door but remained standing by the living room window. The steps with which Hinz pushed his suitcase along the garden path looked pathetic. He couldn't carry it, because of the crutches. Elisabeth wondered if he was thinking about the fact that he was kicking his luggage with the new trainers she had bought for him and in which he had practiced walking on the grass behind the house because he didn't want anyone to see him. »It's so embarrassing, that's not even me!« How the suitcase was rumbling across the old pavers! She saw the taxi driver, who sprinted up the steps and bent down to pick up Hinz' luggage, and her husband from behind, who got into the car slowly while the driver helped him put on his seatbelt and put his crutches onto the backseat. His crutches, which she had bought in at the medical store in Degerloch. Elisabeth sensed the woman in the back of the taxi more

than she actually saw her, a blurry profile, roughly her own age, an arm that reached out to Hinz and received the crutches. Nothing tangible. Maybe she was imagining it all?

»Mummy! Are you dreaming?« Cornelia had a strong grip, she simply turned Elisabeth to face her, as though she was one of her lumbering patients. »Mummy, what is it? Just then you were driving me crazy and now you're just standing there. Are you alright?« At that, she rummaged around in her bag and took out a half-empty water bottle. »Here, take this, I'm going to go through security now. The second rehab is a good idea from Daddy. And he has made such progress already.« Elisabeth would have liked to lean on Cornelia like on a warm wall. She felt weak as though she couldn't take another step further. Still, she threw the plastic bottle into the designated bin, stepped towards her daughter, put her hands around her forehead and quietly spoke the words with which her mother had glossed over goodbyes despite any resistance. They edged themselves out, without her having to think for even a second: »May the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make His face shine upon you and give you peace.« Cornelia's astonished smile hit her, then the kiss, a quick embrace. She turned around once more, after she had put her things into a grey plastic dish for the security check. Elisabeth waved hesitantly as Cornelia stood in the shell of the metal detector with her legs apart and her arms raised above her head. Then she moved on to the end of the conveyor belt, put her bag across her shoulder and disappeared among the other travellers.

[...]

9 Achalmstraße

He's going to fall any second now. The stitches in his side are like needles. No more air. Legs like jelly. Keep going, regardless. The fat patter of his own soles on the pavement. The voices behind him are getting quieter, but he can still hear his name: »Bruno, Bruno!« He wants to shake them off, hide. Suddenly, there are people blocking his way. They come with their shopping trolleys and their bags, out of the supermarket, no one moves aside. He takes a sidestep, is forced to jump onto the road, looks over his shoulder as he does. Jonas' green shirt flashes, Finn's red hair, but the crowd pushes in between them and him. A lot of honking, a piercing screech, yelling: »You little idiot, I almost hit you!« Now he has a head start. Don't stop!

»Bruno, Bruno, big fat pancake, stop, I want to give you a good thrashing!« He runs as fast as he can. His backpack hits his back with every step. If only he was home already! Suddenly, the smell of hot fat, he knows the neon sign. The door to the courtyard is ajar, get in

there quick. Scurrying footsteps on cobblestones, squeezing past a delivery van, then alone, all of a sudden: Gaping wheelie bins overflowing with rubbish, a lopsided tree growing over a wall, wooden pallets piling up everywhere. He crawls behind the bins, his knees are pulled up to his chin. They must be standing outside on the pavement, he can hear them jeering: »He's gone.« »Where can he be?« »Someone probably gobbled him up, the fat pancake!« Eventually, there is nothing but the dull thumping in his own ears. Out of an open kitchen window flows the sound of clattering dishes and a sad song in a language he doesn't understand.

The cool ground makes him shiver. Only now does Bruno notice the rubbish stench mixed with the smell of hot chips. Carefully he pushes himself out of his hiding spot, takes a deep breath but stays on his knees. He doesn't know what time it is. He isn't allowed a cell phone. Mum thinks that that's too much. His watch is at home, because it's too tight. Mum – when Bruno thinks of her, the dumpling in his throat grows until he can hardly breathe. He bites his tongue. It would probably be smarter to wait a little bit longer. He gets up with an effort, wipes the dirty fingers on his trousers. His legs hurt, the t-shirt is sticking to his armpits. He takes a look around. A pile of empty plastic buckets, colourful like sand moulds, yellow, white, red. Mustard, mayo, ketchup. Boy, they look like they would hold a lot. His stomach growls. A big scoop of chips, sprinkled with coarse salt. The white grains melting on the potato sticks. And two lines of mayo on top. Next to it the ketchup meanders in deep red. He would take a chip and dip it carefully into the white, then into the red. There would be an explosion on his tongue. The first bite is the best. Creamy mayo, sweet tomatoes, underneath the crust of the chips and the soft inside. Bruno shudders. He could eat a portion of chips right now. Maybe two, if he is being honest. Or three. He can keep stuffing until he no longer notices anything. Until he is nothing but a lump that isn't bothered by anything. Motionless and filled with mashed potatoes that slowly makes its way through him, makes him sluggish and indifferent.

That's the best thing about gorging. He knows that he gorges. But once he has had enough, he feels strong. Then everything slides down into his stomach, even his heart. It armours him from the inside. Anger, pain, tears drip off this armour of fat and sugar and sink into an endless bog.

But he couldn't possibly go to the front to get himself something. They would ask why he isn't in school. And he can't go home either, because of Grandma Eli. She's in their flat now, not Mum. Bruno bites his lower lip, as hard as he dares. That is so painful that Mum and Grandma disappear at once. Only the rumbling in his stomach remains. The hole in his belly. He bends down to pick up his backpack. In case he ever finds himself in a quagmire, as Dad

says, he has made provisions. Finn and Jonas have poured sand into his lunchbox before, once they even peed in his water bottle. »Apple juice gives fatty juice, go on, try it!«

Bruno cut a hole into the reinforced back of the backpack from the inside, big enough for his hand. Chocolate bars, a packet of peanuts can fit in there. Whatever he can gather when Stella and Mum aren't looking. Especially Stella, because Mum is like a watch dog. She counts everything she has bought, searches his waste basket or underneath the bed for sweet wrappers. Stella doesn't care about any of that, she often forgets her lunch on the kitchen table. In the afternoon, her friends bring things from the kiosk, bags of chips, gummi snakes. Afterwards, all of it is scattered across her room.

He finds the Peperami right away, feels the edges of the wrapper and can't help his mouth watering. He filled his lunchbox with Grandma Eli this morning. Fruit, rice cakes. Just enough to keep the wolf from the door. Mum says that often, when she hasn't earned enough money in the practice. Rice cakes are also just enough to keep the wolf from the door.

As he tears open the shiny foil, he sees a cat. She is sitting straight across from him on the bin and sniffs. Bruno too notices the strong smell of smoked meat coming from the wrapper now, fatty and good. He can't wait any longer and squeezes the sausage upwards with a vigorous push of his thumb. It looks brown and wrinkled, not as delicious as it does on the packaging, but still he sinks his teeth into it immediately, the bite way too big. Carefully he spreads the pieces with his tongue, chews, swallows. He eats the second bite more slowly. When he is done with the first sausage, he looks up again, to the cat. By now she is pushing her head forward and meows. Before, when he ran into the courtyard, he hadn't noticed her. She looks like she is from an animated film, with her big round belly hanging heavy between the thin legs. Her fur is matted, full of bur. A dark liquid is sticking to the corners of the green eyes that are fixed on Bruno. Her tail, torn to bits, is moving back and forth. The animal sniffs in his direction but remains crouched on the lid of the bin. Bruno carefully squeezes out the next sausage. Slowly he reaches out his arm. The cat draws back. He whispers: »You're really fat. A real fatso. You're probably hungry. Would you like to eat? Come, fatty, come.« The cat meows, but she is too afraid to come forward, she stands up complaining quietly, her tail lashing. Bruno rustles the salami wrapper, the whining gets louder, but she presses herself against the wall behind the row of bins. »Fatty, you're being really stupid. Come here, I won't hurt you, promise.« Bruno takes a step forwards, holding the sausage in his outstretched hand like a sword. With one jump the cat leaps onto the wall, from there she darts into the tree. Which shakes like crazy. Bruno can't help but grin. It's too funny, this fat cat swinging in the branches, clinging to them with all four paws. Hard to believe that she managed a jump like that with her

pot belly. Bruno laughs. The other day, in PE, when climbing the rope, he had probably looked just like that. Everyone started howling with laughter, even the young student teacher, though she tried to hide it with a fake cough. The cat finds a stronger branch, from which she peers down to him. »That's was mean of me. I didn't know that you're so shy. You know what, I'll put the sausage down over there. It's really yum. And I'll go away.« He sits down on the ground far enough away from her. He tries to move as little as possible as he does so. The cat stretches her neck but keeps a safe distance. It has probably gotten quite late by now. He should go to school. But he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to go home, either. It's not even a real home anymore. Now more than ever. Actually, Bruno thinks the new flat is okay. He likes his room and the small garden where he has his own patch. He can barely remember Altenbergstraße, which Stella talks about often. But he remembers Dad. Bruno misses him so much that sometimes it hits him like a punch to the gut, when he wants to tell Dad something and then he remembers that he is in Parga. They won't see each other until the summer holidays. Bruno hid a few things behind his old picture books on the shelf. A plastic razor. A t-shirt that still smells like him. A pen from the petrol station where they used to wash the car together every Saturday. Mum doesn't care if the windscreen is covered in bird poo. Crumpled-up paper bags and empty cans are strewn around the floor of the car, sometimes she even sticks her chewing gums to the inside of the door. With Dad, Bruno used to vacuum the car. They would check the oil and the tyre pressure together and at the end he was allowed to sit in it as it went through the car wash. That was eerily great, all the foam and how the huge brushes would push against the windows as though they were about to burst in.

But now neither Dad nor Mum were home. »Grandma Eli is staying with us,« Bruno quietly says to the cat, who is back standing atop the wall. He hadn't noticed her jump. She stretches, elongates her back, stretches out her forelegs. He can see the claws, long, grey and sharp. »They have probably noticed that I'm not at school. And Grandma Eli will be mad.« The cat cocks her head.

Mum had come out with it during the Easter holidays. On Easter Monday. Bruno knows this so precisely, because there had been cake again at last, proper king's cake with candied cherries, candied lemon peel and raisins. Even though he was having his third piece, Mum hadn't said a word. Stella only nibbled at her cake, picked out the pieces of candied lemon peel and lined them up at the edge of the plate where they lay like the pieces of green glass on the beaches in Greece. After that, she pushed back her chair to go outside, but Mum said that she should sit back down. »Kids, I'm going to go away for a little while on June 5. Alone. I need a break from work, or I'll get sick.«

Bruno remembers how he felt sick from one minute to the next. The pieces of cake were like stones in his belly and he noticed his hands shaking. He felt like he had the day Dad first went to the ice cream parlour with Stella and him and then to Greece with his suitcase. Forever. Up and Away. Stella felt the same, Bruno could see it in the look she gave him and in her face, the red blotches on her cheeks. The dumpling rose in his throat, no more words could pass. He was grateful to his sister for always screaming out everything she didn't like: »What is that supposed to mean – alone? You want to go away without us? Do you want to run off too, like Dad? Are you going to send us to a children's home?« Mum's nostrils flared. But she didn't say anything, instead she wiped the tabletop with her flat hand, even though there were no crumbs. All the while, she was shaking her head. »No, no, I'm not leaving you guys. I just need to take a break. Ever since ...« – she rubbed her arms as though she was cold – »Dad has been in Greece, I haven't been able to catch my breath. If I can't get some rest, I won't be able to work eventually. Please understand that. Children's home, listen to yourself! Grandma Eli is going to live with you while I'm gone. Everything is going to stay the same for you guys. Grandma is going to cook, help you with your homework, take care of you, just like I do.« Stella didn't let it go: »Can't we stay with Dad in Greece?« But Mum just shook her head. »How is that supposed to work? I can only pay for your flights in the summer holidays. And also, you can't not go to school for a month. Dad has his job. He can't take care of you.« She took Bruno's hand and squeezed it tight. »You're going to get along great. Grandma is looking forward to helping me. And Hinz is going to go to a clinic near Lake Constance, because he still can't walk and talk so well, you know that.« Stella kept grumbling, but the red blotches had already started to disappear again. She didn't think it was that bad. She never thought anything was really bad. Only Bruno needed ages until he was able to talk again.

»My mother only sinks when Dad is around.« That's what Mum said once when she was talking on the phone with her friend Simone. And Bruno thought that that was illogical, because Grandma wasn't a ship. How was she supposed to sink? But still, it was true, because when Grandpa Hinz was there as well it felt like Grandma had actually disappeared, just like a ship that has been swallowed by the waves. When Grandpa Hinz was there, Grandma could no longer say anything, because he was talking the whole time, joked around or grabbed Bruno by the ankles and let him hang upside down. »Ding dong, ding dong, like the bells in Mainz Cathedral. But this here is only a small bell! Can you hear the bells, the bells in Mainz Cathedral ringing? This small bell has a delicate voice, it's really light and it swings back and forth!« Grandpa Hinz swung Bruno until he really did feel as light as a feather.

The cat yawns, her pink tongue curves into a semi-circle, she has small vampire teeth. From atop the wall she sniffs over to the piece of sausage. »Just come,« Bruno whispers.

Grandma Eli is going to interrogate him immediately. »Why aren't you at school?« He won't be able to say anything, with his tongue that lies in his mouth like boiled meat. He doesn't want to tell her what happened under any circumstance.

Grandma Eli is different. She attracts attention when you're out with her, because she is tall and thin, talks loudly, almost always wears long trousers and suit jackets and has grey hair styled like a helmet. And she wears colourful necklaces that are so heavy that Bruno wonders if it hurts to carry those things around all day long. Her eyes are large and brown, like a dog's whose gaze is constantly begging. If Grandma Eli were a dog, she would probably follow Bruno around all the time and pull his trouser leg.

Mum often asks him if he didn't like Grandma Eli. Bruno can never answer that question. Grandma Eli has always been there, she doesn't throw around all the pieces when she loses at Ludo and she wears leather gloves with holes in them when she drives.

A muffled sound makes Bruno look up. The cat managed to land on the bin safely. She sniffs the sausage warily, then she can't stand it any longer and takes a bite, she chews the piece a few times and scoffs it down. »You see, it's good.« When the sausage wrapper rustles, the cat pricks up both ears. He breaks off another, smaller piece and puts it on the ground in front of the backpack. She follows his movements with her bright eyes, but she remains sitting. »Look, there's a treat. Come and get it.« The cat's head turns, she cocks it, her eyes are wide and she meows. Bruno nods, carefully, so she won't get another fright. »Come on. I won't hurt you!«

It's not like he hates Grandma Eli like he hates Jonas, Finn and Marie. With them, he sometimes imagines that he was a giant and could squash them with his heavy boots or stuff them in the garbage truck where they would be shredded and compressed. No, it's different with Grandma Eli. It's totally okay to go visit her in Alosenweg for an afternoon. But he doesn't like to stay overnight or for longer during the school holidays when Grandpa Hinz isn't there. »I can stay home alone, really, I can do it, for sure.« Mum always looks like she is pleased when he says that. Grandma Eli is exhausting. Although, yesterday she was quite alright, really.

The cat is sitting in front of the bin looking at the piece of sausage. She lets out a drawn-out sound as though she was asking him something. »Man, you're really dirty. I could brush you a bit tomorrow. With Stella's new Tangle Teezer, it doesn't hurt, she says. I'll just take it from her, just like the Peperami, she deserves it. I'll be able to get all the dirt out of your fur with it.« The left ear is torn. Probably from a fight. That must have been a while ago, because he can't see any blood anywhere. »You know, Jonas and Finn kicked a ball into my face the

other day. I had such a bad nosebleed that the front of my shirt was covered in blood. Mum called their parents. It wasn't on purpose. Your fat boy was just in the way, bloody stupid. That's what Jonas' Dad said.«

The cat takes two careful steps, all the while she keeps her tail sticking up straight, only the tip twitches incessantly. Bruno can see her bony back. The grey-black zigzag pattern stops at her tail, which is jet black.

Yesterday they read the fairy tale of the big, fat pancake at school. The entire class was giggling, Hanna, Marie and Paula kept turning around to look at him and puffed out their cheeks, but Miss Baitinger didn't seem to notice. She didn't say a word when Anton wrote a note, folded it and passed it around. On it, he had drawn a circle on two legs who had big, fearful eyes and a mouth twisted as though it was about to cry. Small dots were flying around it, an arrow labelled »sweat« pointed at them, »shit« was written above a lump scrawled behind the circle and above that Jonas had written in ink: »Bruno is supar grose and no one wants to et him.«

Eventually, the note got to Bruno. Finn pushed it into his pencil case. Bruno handed it back immediately but Finn unfolded it and put it down in front of him so that he couldn't see it: It seemed as though everyone in the class had added something, painted the circle yellow, shaded the turd brown, wrote »fatty«. Miss Baitinger called him up and became annoyed because he couldn't answer her question. He hadn't even realised that she had been talking to him. Because of the dumpling, he couldn't say anything. And so he kept silent and was sent outside. When she called him back in ten minutes later, everyone was drawing. Miss Baitinger put him in a group with Paula and Marie, who were supposed to tell him about the homework. Because Miss Baitinger was standing nearby, they pretended to be really nice. When she had left the classroom, Marie took a step back from Bruno and screwed up her face: »I have to throw away my pencil, fatty touched it.« Then the bell rang and he went back to his seat.

Finally, the cat musters some courage, takes the piece and chomps down. She startles when Bruno takes the last piece from the wrapper. Only the end is left and he puts it on his outstretched palm. It's quite exhausting, staying in a squatting position, but if he moved she would run away. »They waited for me outside.« The tip of her tail curls like an index finger. »I always go outside last, so I don't have to walk with them.« The cat's nose feels cool, a tongue, scratchy like sandpaper, licks his palm, picks up the bite of sausage. Now she eats, right next to his feet. »But today they waited for me outside the school. I really hate them, you know. Luckily, I got away.« He stops talking, because she is climbing onto his lap. A deep purr comes from the cat's scrubby throat when Bruno strokes her carefully in between her ears. The quiet

buzz of the cat-motor passes through each of his stroking fingers with a tremble. He closes his eyes and feels the warmth of the animal on his thighs.

[...]

18 22 North Main Street, Meadville

The two-storey house on North Main Street is looking worse for wear, many winters have eaten the white paint off the timber. Steps lead up to the front porch in between the pair of shabby wooden columns. Two Stars and Stripes swing tiredly in the warmth of the calm afternoon. A massive rock maple has burst through the pavement. The treetop arches over half the building, casts its shadow onto the roof patched up with roofing felt and the front garden. The tree isn't entirely healthy. Some of the branches have barely spouted, their twigs carry only few leaves or are completely barren. I want to calm myself down by looking at the garden, but the sight of it irritates me. Rose bushes grow at the bottom of the stairs. Their strong smell wafts over to me. »Whiskey«, a famous variety, deep yellow with dark orange on the inside of the flowers. Somebody seems to tend to these bushes, as well as the lawn, because they are blooming opulently, are well-cut. Other than that, there is stuff everywhere, children's clothes, tricycles, sand toys, balls, a trampoline with a torn frame. But I also discover a sofa, stuffing oozing from its moss-grown cover. Car tyres overrun with grass. Worn outdoor furniture. I try to make out individual objects, like looking at a wimmelpicture. A window at the same height as the front door has been boarded-up, above it hangs a hand-written sign: »Rooms. Cheap and clean. WiFi.«

From looking at the map I know that the venerable Allegheny College built in 1815 sits enthroned on top of the hill at the end of the street. I had planned on walking across the campus before my visit, but all my small gifts kept me from doing it. I sit them down on the bottom step and brace myself for the visit. The name »Kepler« is written clearly visible on the rusty mailbox in the front garden. In vain I look for a bell, but a broad brass rings sits in the middle of the scratched dark-blue door. Should I knock? Nobody is forcing me to spend the afternoon here.

I am nervous, almost fearful. But I can't chicken out. The time has come: Mummy's stories become alive and I can be there. Suddenly it seems to me as though this meeting wasn't just my personal business but a service to the whole family. Sure, there are more relatives in Mainz and in the broader Münchingen area. But this is clearly where the more exciting faction lives. The half- or never-told things. But instead of cheerfully approaching the American part

of the tribe, the immediate descendants of Mummy's emigrated second cousin Hermann Kepler, I'm standing here looking stupid and chewing my thumbnail. Hesitantly, I reach for the doorknocker.

At that very moment, a young man steps out of the house. He is twenty, at most, and is wearing a dark-blue t-shirt with the slogan ›Allegheny College‹. He is holding a tied-up plastic bag in his fist, looks at me mistrustfully, nods curtly when I greet him and walks off accompanied by quiet rattling. On the pavement, he turns around one more time. I hadn't noticed that someone had appeared on the veranda by now. A woman who casts a wide shadow. Now she walks towards me and says without the hit of a smile: »And you are?« I stutter, in German at first, because I hadn't expected such a brusque question what with the local rituals of politeness. She keeps a straight face. Eventually, all I can get out is a speculation. »Joy?« »Who wants to know?« she counters in a strong accent as a broad smile appears on her round face. »It's Cornelia, isn't it?«

She opens her arms and presses me against her bosom, which hangs heavy underneath a flower-patterned tunic. She is wearing stretch jeans, so tight that they seem like dark-blue body painting. The entire person is heavy, but underneath the fat that surrounds her body in soft bulges I feel strong muscles. She grabs my hands, a warm, dry touch, pushes me away from her a little bit and peers into my face. Rosacea is flowering on her cheeks and on the wings of her nose, a network of minuscule burst blood vessels in red and purple. Her grey eyes are deep-set and her lashes a sporting a lot of mascara, she is wearing no other make-up. I smell coffee and tobacco on her breath.

She is showing uneven white teeth when she laughs. Other than the thin, slightly protruding upper lip I can't detect any family resemblance. »Come in, German girl!« She opens the door wide. From the hallway, I can see another open door that leads through several rooms to the backyard. »How old are you, twenty-one?« I barely manage to give her the bag of presents and the flowers, then she pulls me along the hallway. The smell of cold drippings and cigarettes lingers in the air. »This is such a great home. Gladly bought it, after the Kepler-Hotel was sold.« She stops and scratches her grey-blond thatch. »This was in 1925, about a year after your Grandma Gert went back to Germany.« I have to think. Gert, Gertrud, Trudele, this must have been my grandmother's American nickname. I can't remember who Gladly is. Joy tells me that she has spent all her life exclusively in this house. All her children were born here and even a grandson. Whether I had been looking for Kepler's hotel in vain? Because it was torn down 40 years ago. That's a disappointment to me, as I would really have liked to see the creepy hotel, the setting of so many nightmares.

In Joy's living room a wooden enclosure takes up an entire wall. It's open at the top. Guinea pigs are scuttling through gnawed cardboard rolls, sitting underneath mountains of hay and sleeping in bamboo huts. Black, white, cinnamon-brown and tabby, long-haired and short-haired. They whistle and rustle in the straw, a nursing sow is lying in a corner offering up her milk like to her fluffy young, who are sucking eagerly. Joy points at an enormous leather couch. »Wait a sec, hon!« She returns a moment later with a plastic tray full of crackling cellophane bags and soda cans. The sofa groans when she sits down next to me. Skilfully she rips open all the packets, rolls down the bag openings like sleeves that are too long, sets them all up in a row and gestures invitingly: »Tuck in, German cousin!« Onion rings, crackers, pretzels with and without chocolate. Yuengling, root beer, Heineken. I open a can of root beer, thank her for her hospitality. Joy has a sip of Coke and stresses how happy she was that I arrived today of all days. Because this was her day off, otherwise the house would be full of children, she was looking after her grandchildren throughout the week and you couldn't even hear yourself think. I tell her about how long I've been wanting to come to the States, about my job, take out my phone, show her photos of Bruno and Stella, about my parents, even about Dimi, whom I introduce as my husband to simplify matters.

She also wants to see picture of Stuttgart. I don't have many, a few of Ostendstraße, a few of Alosenweg. I make do with Google for the rest. She admires the old houses, the castles. After the war the Keplers sent care packets to bombed-out Stuttgart. All the neighbours were been jealous. In them, though, there was nothing but old-fashioned clothes, a bunch of hotel serviette rings and a chromed toast stand. No cigarettes, no coffee, neither chocolate nor corned beef. Mummy liked to tell that story, even though she was at most five years old at the time. Over there they didn't know what hunger was.

»Only two kids?« Joy asks me. The stiff semi-circles of eye lashes open wide, her narrow eyes become bigger as though she couldn't believe it. I laugh, Bruno and Stella were more than enough for me. »Wanna guess how many we are?« She reaches out her hands, wiggles all ten fingers. »My mother Klara, the twin, the last twin, she never married. But she had ten children.« Her mother had made ends meet for them, even though she never had money again after selling the hotel. She, Joy, was the only girl. Her brothers had all moved away, to Oil City, Edinboro, Titusville, even to Erie. But they had never understood what her calling was, after that family history. Children were a sign of hope, after all. »To have only one or no kids at all! Unbelievable!« Joy puts her hand on my thigh, her eyes glisten, her whole face lights up. She looks as though she was about to profess her love to me. »My mom always said: Raising

a kid is the easiest thing in the world. I was never hungry, not one minute in my entire life. You know what? There's always pasta. My daughters call it jail food.«

Pasta cooked in tomato juice and butter that would feed many mouths and was cheap. Joy picks up a framed photo off the mantelpiece, under which an artificial fire flickers. The picture was taken in front of their house. Seven women between the ages of thirty and fifty form a circle around Joy. All of them are standing on the veranda, wearing pink tops with a golden print: ›Greatest Mom in the universe – 70 years‹. All of them have light blonde hair like Joy. Their hairstyles may vary slightly, but I'm amazed by the similarity that continues in the children. Children on the steps, on the lawn. While I move my lips counting, I hear Joy's voice: »Seven daughters. Twenty-eight grandchildren.« »*Wahnsinn!*« She laughs loudly and repeats my exclamation in her American sound. Then she says »*Mudder und Vadder*«. She says »*Bretzel*« und »*Du Saukerle*«. »*Pfätschekindle*«. »*Schatzele*«.

Still giggling, she reaches beside her and picks up a battered black photo album with gold embossing on its spine from a side table. She watches me expectantly. »You came for this, didn't you?« Each of us is balancing one half of the book on her thigh.

Tissue paper page protectors hide the pictures, but Joy is already licking her index finger and turns over the first page. Familiar landscapes. I lean forwards. It is indeed Stuttgart sitting in its tree-covered valley, black and white and without any highrises, its expansion smaller, but unmistakable – the towers of the Collegiate Church, the Jupiter Column. Underneath that a photo of the old Cannstatt including the bridge over the Neckar and the parish church. The photo's caption reads »Dear homeland, we shall never forget you!«. I struggle to make out the ornate writing. Joy asks me for an accurate translation. What follows are images of an inn: timber framing, chestnut trees, above that the inn sign. The servants in their Sunday best have lined up around a respectable couple, slender and quite young still. »Hermann and Wilhelmina Kepler in front of the ›Goldener Bär‹ in Cannstatt, spring 1909.« The woman is pregnant, she is holding the hand of a slim boy dressed in a sailor suit, maybe six years old. Joy tells me that these were her grandparents and I nod, because I know them too. Mummy's relatives, the brave emigrants. »They wanted to have their own business, so they came here.« I learn that Hermann Kepler, a baker by trade, was only the tenant of the ›Bär‹ and ventured to New York with the whole family to make a fresh start in 1911. So far, it's all rather straightforward.

The next photo shows another inn, but this time with more bustle and urban flair: ›Kepler's Bierhalle and German Bakery‹ is written on a sign above the door of the plain brick building, this time the couple is posing at its entrance. The boy, Hermann junior, has had a growth spurt, in front of him stands a pair of blonde twins, chubby toddlers, holding each other's

hands. The caption names them: »Hermann junior, Karl and Klara with their parents in front of our new inn in our new home, the United States of America: New York, East Sixth Street 322, Little Germany.«

On the following page a yellowed newspaper clipping has been pasted onto the page: »Everyone wants German pretzels—Kepler's Butterbrezeln, a perfect start to the day.« More family photos, »the new home«, house and garden behind the bakery, Hermann junior's confirmation, a marksmen's festival, the twin's birthday party, laughing faces in front of accurately braided yeast buns.

When I see the next page, I make a surprised noise – two girls and a grown woman in white muslin dresses, grouped picturesquely around a Greek column in a photographer's studio. I know this picture from Mummy's album. Trudele, her mother, and her older sister Greta, engaged to a musician at the Stuttgart opera. Grandmother, great-grandmother, great aunt. Only Trudele was left to support the family and travel abroad to break ties with everything after the family's wealth had melted down like butter in the sun during the hyperinflation. Greta is wearing her hair pinned-up in a lady-like fashion, while my grandmother's bright eyes peep out from underneath her fringe.

»The Day of Calamity – 15.6.1919«. That's the entire caption of the next image. I know the paddle steamer moored at the dock, white and romantic, and clench my fingers in my lap. It's the »General Slocum«, on which that infamous outing of the parish of St. Mark's in the East Village took place. Onboard that day were mainly German immigrants, mostly women and children. They had planned to take a trip down the East River, to the picnic area of Locust Grove on the Long Island Sound. So the Keplers had been there!

I know about what happened that day from the book I bought in Central Park. Newspaper photos of the burning remains of the ship have been pasted into Joy's album, accompanied by huge headlines: More than 1,000 fatalities. Complete failure on part of the captain, faulty life jackets, a negligent crew. Joy's voice comments my flipping through the pages in the background. I can hardly understand her, I'm that horrified. It feels terrible to learn all this on a sofa in Meadville, surrounded by soft drinks and the smell of guinea pigs.

Joy pauses, flips back to the picture of the three ladies in white. She looks at me, her eyes are a little smudged. She clears her throat as if the next sentence was difficult for her to say. The she says that she didn't want to hurt my feelings, but I was interested in hearing everything about my Granny Gert after all and she wasn't someone to beat around the bush. There was a saying in her family: »You behave like a real Gert.« I raise my eyebrows. Incredulously, I inquire: »Excuse me?« Joy runs her finger along the curly edge of the old

photo, lingers next to the smooth face of my grandmother as a young girl. »This is what we say about a bitchy, lazy person.«

Gert, as Trudele was nicknamed, never wanted to work, a genteel lady in every aspect. Instead of nursing Wilhelmina, who had burned half to death in the disastrous boating excursion, and looking after the twins a bit, the German constantly had her nose buried in a book or tended to her ugly doll. She hated the children. She got blisters on her hands from making the beds. Silky fingers, a little madam. Good for nothing. All she could do was eat. Constantly wrote love letters. Eventually, the groom, with whom she had probably started something on the boat, had appeared, shocking manners! They had returned to Germany together. Shortly after that, Hermann Kepler had drunk soda lye, shortly after that the hotel went bust. I am unable to stop the flow of words. I know most of the names, even have an image of some of them, but the stories don't match or are completely new to me. Joy turns over the next page fiercely.

I don't see my grandmother. Instead, there are the American relatives: hunched Hermann, staring past the camera into the void, and a tall young woman with a determined expression on her face, her arms crossed in front of her chest, as though she was about to give someone a lecture. The overweight, prepubescent twins and an extremely fat person with a white apron over her black dress are standing at the front. To distract myself I read aloud: »Gertrud from Stuttgart, the old homeland, in 1923 with Karl and Klara, Father and Gladys in front of Kepler's Hotel in Meadville, Pennsylvania.«

Joy taps her nail against the picture. »This is Gladys, Hermann's sister.« She had looked after the twins when Wilhelmina was no longer able to, after the accident. In New York, in Little Germany, she had been the right-hand woman in the inn, head waitress, a great woman. She had been on the boat trip as well and since then she had always worn gloves, her fingers were disfigured by the fire. She convinced Hermann to move to Meadville, to make a fresh start with the small hotel. Gertrud had arrived at just the right time to care for the patient. But she was never a help, I could see for myself why that was.

Joy won't stop talking. She seems to have told all of this many times before. I wonder if I should interrupt her, but I don't know what to say. No matter what I could come up with, it would be the wrong thing to say in anyway. The pictures from Mummy's album, the laughing twins, the canned pineapple, did I dream all of that? Joy takes a small breath before she tells me the thing with the snow, to further corroborate Gert's complete uselessness for the Kepler family.

They had taken a day trip one winter, to Lake Conneaut, to go ice skating. I should really go there as well, a wonderful area! Gladly wanted to grant Hermann and the twins at least one nice afternoon. So, she closed down the shop. That Gert, she wasn't a baby anymore, after all! The entire kitchen full of canned goods and she only had herself and Wilhelmina to take care of. In the evening there was more snow, like every winter! She should have expected that the others would stay overnight at Lake Conneaut in this weather and return the next day! When they got home, she was all tears and hysteria. I object: »But at least she looked after sick Wilhelmina.« Joy shrugs and keeps turning the pages. This time I recoil.

Corpses upon corpses, an entire page full of them. Unblinking, Joy puts her index finger with the bright artificial nail on the made-up body, solemnly laid out and then photographed.

To me, the worst is the dead teenager, Hermann junior, with his dark wrists protruding from the sleeves of his dark Sunday suit, spindly and unfinished. He drowned, jumped overboard immediately when the ›General Slocum‹ started to burn. Wilhelmina, his mother, followed her son only a few years later. By that time Gertrud was already back in Germany. A thin lacy veil covers her face. Even in death she is not allowed to show her disfigured face. »She must have looked like a real monster, there's no other picture of her after the ferry disaster.«

The last corpse is Hermann Kepler, already an old man with a haggard face at just fifty. His mouth was burnt by the lye, his hands are folded atop his chest, covered in flowers.

»Why did they never talk about that? They did write letters to each other!« I speak German, but Joy understands me. »Shame and pride,« is all she says in reply. Shame and pride. The Kepler family was wealthy, industrious and with a thriving business. They could neither understand nor put into words that such misfortune should fall upon them of all people, least of all to the relatives in the homeland they had bravely left in order to find something better than death. They had Trudele sent to them without revealing anything about the suffering that had befallen their family. I see the same thing with my patients. Many of them try to hide their afflictions even from their own families, because they believe that they have to function until the end, because they don't want to be a burden. Joy relates the rest, interrupting my thoughts.

After the loss of his eldest and his wife, Hermann holes himself up in the hotel kitchen in Meadville and begins to drink. Gladly is carrying the entire burden, family and business. Hardly anyone looks out for the young girl from Swabia. She looks after Wilhelmina as best she can. Gertrud is taken back to Stuttgart by her fiancé, a German engineer she met on the ship. Soon after Gertrud's departure Wilhelmina dies from the consequences of her injuries and Hermann takes his own life. Gladly stays in Meadville with the twins. She sells the hotel and

buys the house on North Main Street, in which she lives for another fifteen years before she dies of pneumonia. Karl, the male twin, loses his life in a hunting accident in Allegheny State Forest when he is still a young man. Klara, Joy's mother, is the only one left.

There are no more photos in the album of that past. It becomes brighter as Joy's own story begins, the daughters, the grandchildren. The many blonde heads, that exorbitance scare me almost as much as the corpses on the old photos.

With a sudden yank Joy pulls the album over to her side and flips it shut. »That's our story.« She leans backwards, her large breasts rise and fall intensely, as though all this talk was upsetting her. I thank her for her time, for the snacks, and get up, brushing the crumbs of my trousers. The banging of the brass knocker interrupts us. It booms throughout the house. My host gets up with a shrug. »Probably another student.« The college kids need juice for their parties, they get it from her without ID and for a good price. She winks at me. Doing business, that was German. Clean, industrious, succeeding in business, that's what Germans were like.

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