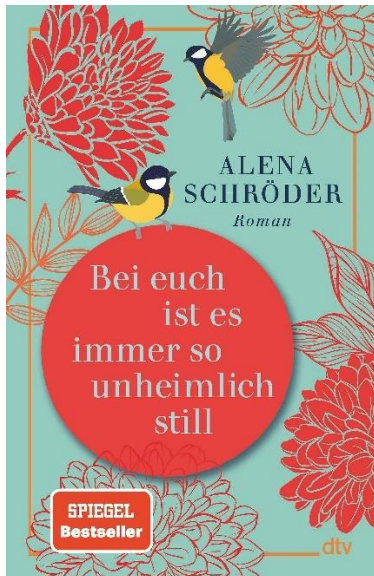




Alena Schröder It's Always So Uncannily Quiet At Your Place

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A great mother-daughter tale of reconciliation and homecoming

1989. 33-year-old Silvia is driving south from West Berlin in a stolen Polo. Her newborn daughter Hannah is lying on the passenger seat next to her. Silvia has had enough of her squatter's life in Kreuzberg. Her child's father wants nothing to do with her or his daughter. So she decides to return home to her mother. But will she or the newly born granddaughter manage to thaw the seemingly icy heart of Evelyn, a retired doctor with quite a few family secrets to hide?

- Alena Schröder turns to the things she left unexplained in her hit debut, 'Young Woman, Standing by the Window, Evening Light, Blue Dress'
- For readers of Susanne Abel and Bonnie Garmus



Alena Schröder is a freelance journalist and author, living in Berlin. She studied History, Political Science and Latin American Studies in Berlin and San Diego and attended the renowned Henri Nannen School for journalism.

» Schröder describes places, sights, and conversations with great precision. We are transported, feeling the depths of the inner turmoil, the conflicts, the heavy burdens of these complex female characters. A wonderfully forgiving and intricately constructed book. «

NDR Kultur about 'Young Woman, Standing by the Window'

Sample Translation by Catherine Venner

(p. 7-17)

Transit

1989

Silvia had already stolen plenty in her life but a car was new. Another one to tick off the list, she thought.

Although...

Was it really stealing if you had the spare key? She hadn’t hot-wired Dirk’s red Polo or smashed a window, she’d simply borrowed it for an unspecified period of time. She hadn’t asked for nor did she have any intention of retrospectively asking for Dirk’s permission. That asshole could continue thinking his ride was gone. Anyway, he was high most of the time, sitting on the brown corduroy sofa in their dingy Kreuzberg flatshare and didn’t have the foggiest what was going on. If the worst came to the worst, she could always claim Dirk had freely lent it or possibly even given it to her. And who were they going to believe, a stoned squatter or her, a new mother? Well then. And anyway, who gives a crap about Dirk? She was so angry at him, and Iris and Zecki. They could bang on all day about solidarity but showing a little consideration for a newborn was just too much to ask. Simply opening the window instead of smoking out the kitchen. Or keeping it down during sex when the baby had just gone to sleep. Or even cooking proper food once in a while, although that had always been Silvia’s thing; she was allowed to bring home the no longer fully fresh vegetables from the cooperative shop where she worked during the day, so she’d make a huge one-pot

meal for everyone from which they’d eat for a whole week. Since she’d returned from hospital with a broken heart and painful breasts, she’d only eaten cheese sandwiches and the dirty dishes were going mouldy in the sink of the shared kitchen.

Silvia was driving west down Kantstraße to turn off towards AVUS at the International Congress Center, which lounged like a giant silver-grey spaceship in West Berlin. She’d use her last money to fill the tank at the Spinner bridge, before joining the transit route. Petrol was cheaper in the East but she didn’t really want to have to stop there. She just hoped a full tank would take her all the way to Ildingen. That the border guards wouldn’t cause a fuss at Dreilinden. That she wouldn’t have to wait too long. And that Hannah wouldn’t wake up and get hungry until they were in West Germany. The Free World. On the passenger seat beside Silvia, Hannah lay asleep in a grey plastic washing basket padded with towels and muslin nappies. Next to her head, her tiny left hand, scrunched into a fist, peeked out from under the baby blanket Silvia had swiped from the hospital. The border guards would like that: twelve weeks old and already raising her fist in the socialist greeting. Maybe they’d make an exception and allow them to pass without having to get out, open the boot and the whole tyrannical rigmarole. Someone honked behind Silvia. The light had turned green and she hadn’t noticed, unable to take her eyes off her daughter. She was perfect. Utterly incomparable and pure in all her tininess: the small serious face, the brown fluff of hair, the droplet of drool collecting in the corner of her mouth while she slept. I made her, Silvia thought, and felt a warm wave of pride, love and worry wash over her, causing tears to well in her eyes once again.

I’ve made this creature, all on my own.

She intended to ignore Martin’s contribution, simply scratch out any memory of him from her brain. So thoroughly and irreversibly until it had all gone and no longer hurt. Starting with their first meeting at the *Rote Hirsch*, where he’d sat at the bar during her shift. Returning again and again. As chance would have it always when she was at work, on Thursdays and Fridays. Her colleagues had already been making fun of this guy with the look of money, who really didn’t fit in. His hair a tad too short, his clothes a tad too new. Leather loafers. Most likely he was bored of his missus in their Charlottenburg or Dahlem home and seeking the thrill of the Kreuzberger nightlife. He’d watched Silvia clean glasses and pull pints but never attempted to speak to her. Until the evening Thorsten, her ex, came in. Drunk and aggressive, he’d yelled and insulted her over the bar. Then without uttering a word, Martin twisted his arm behind his back with a matter-of-fact movement and placed his other hand on his neck to escort him out of the pub. Through the window pane, Silvia had seen Martin saying something to Thorsten outside, which clearly made such an impression on Thorsten that he toddled off and didn’t return to the *Rote Hirsch* for several weeks.

Not that Silvia would just jump into bed with anyone who kept overbearing men off her back, but somehow it’d happened with Martin. He was so polite and attentive, the very definition of chivalrous. Silvia had found it touching and unusual. When he stood naked in her room for the first time and undressed her, and then gazed at her as if he’d never seen anything like her... As if Silvia were a Greek statue, perfect and valuable. How exciting he thought her life was: the former squat, the flatshare, her jobs at the fruit and vegetable cooperative and in the pub, and the political initiatives she was involved in. Thirstily, he drank it all in, being the opposite of his life: Grunewald, sailing club, law

degree, junior partnership in his father’s law firm and married to his student sweetheart. Her flatmates weren’t very enthusiastic about the new guest, who was occasionally found sitting in their kitchen like a fish out of water. “He looks like an informer, Silvi,” said Dirk, “some kind of undercover cop.”

“Nah, he’s far too conspicuous for that,” Iris had said. “He just wants a distraction from his dull, middle-class existence. Don’t fall for him.”

But that horse had already bolted. Silvia should have known she was just a brief diversion from Martin’s life plan, but somehow she’d fallen into the honey pot of his affection and couldn’t get back out. Silvia wasn’t used to being so ardently courted, in the old-fashioned way. Martin made her feel so enchantingly beautiful and attractive when they lay together in her bed, an old, hard futon balanced on a couple of wooden pallets. He wanted to travel with her, first away from Berlin and then to see the world. To finally escape and be free, no longer needing to fulfil any expectations. Silvia didn’t want to admit it at first but the more she knew about his life, the more she started imagining being part of it herself. Maybe she was ready to leave the flatshare and start another kind of life. Maybe they could rescue each other, Silvia preventing Martin from fully joining the ranks of the middle classes with a pre-fabricated life mapped out with a woman who he’d not desired in a long time, and Martin delivering Silvia from an existence among cast-off furniture.

When Silvia realised she was pregnant, she didn’t tell Martin at first. Looking back, it felt as if she’d had a premonition. She knew she wanted this child, and she wanted to let herself believe for a while that Martin also wanted it. But then he didn’t. Not the child, and suddenly he didn’t want Silvia anymore. How hard his face had become when

she’d told him. He’d looked at her as if she’d removed a mask and was now showing him her true, ugly grotesque face.

“Driving licence, vehicle documents, ID!”

Silvia passed her papers through the car window to the border official in the first hut at the Dreilinden border crossing. Fortunately, she’d found the vehicle registration in the glove compartment, and also disposed of an empty beer can and some left-over grass at the petrol station. Hannah didn’t make a peep in her washing basket cot.

“Gun, munition, radio?”

Silvia said no and tried to look as harmless as possible. The East German border guard placed her documents on the small conveyor belt, which carried them to the next hut. His colleague listlessly held a mirror on a stick under her car, glanced in the boot, then nodded his head to indicate she could drive on.

Silvia wasn’t on any wanted lists and her passport photo still resembled her well enough. Long reddish-brown hair, which was always a little unruly and uncombed, the green eyes of her father, three small silver rings in each earlobe and a couple of freckles letting her appear younger than her 33 years. The border guard at the second hut held her ID in his hand and looked her in the face, hard and slightly dismissively, then at the photo, and at her again. Silvia withstood his gaze, unlike Martin’s gaze. She’d never been able to bear that.

He simply didn’t show up for a few weeks. Then Silvia looked up his law firm in the telephone book, rang the number, told the woman at the other end of the line her name and asked to speak to Martin van der Kampen. “Just a moment please,” the woman said. There were two clicks on the line, then Silvia was told Mr van der Kampen wasn’t

in the office unfortunately; he and his wife had an important appointment with the Mayor of Berlin. A lie, far too specific to be the truth. And what kind of secretary would make a point of mentioning his wife, if her boss hadn’t expressly asked her to?

“Wife” – how lovely that sounded.

Silvia’s documents plus the slip with the transit visa were returned to her. She was permitted to continue. No faster than 100 km per hour, not that Dirk’s Polo could manage more anyway. She liked the rhythmic sound of the tyres on the concrete autobahn and it didn’t appear to bother Hannah, who just kept on sleeping.

Oh, how she’d felt ashamed of her broken heart. How she’d walked around Kreuzberg with her ever-growing stomach, just wanting to disappear and wishing the ground would open up and swallow her into an underground cave where she could give birth to her child in peace. How weak she’d been, dreaming of a middle-class existence, which was already an enormous betrayal of everything that she actually believed in. And to boot crying over this bloke was the biggest possible humiliation.

“Be thankful you’re rid of that arsehole. We’ll help bring up the nipper,” Zecki had said to her, as Iris and Dirk nodded. But when the contractions started, she’d cycled to the hospital on her own. At least there she could scream it all out, all her sadness and all her anger with every contraction. And she’d noticed how she’d felt stronger as each phase of this force of nature seized her body, throwing herself into the pain and diving through it. “You’re doing really well, Ms Borowski. Shout as much as you like. It won’t be much longer,” the young midwife told her and Silvia’d thought, *yes I’m doing this well, I’m doing this really bloody well, I’ve never done anything really well in my life, but this, this I can do.*

Hannah stirred next to her on the passenger seat, wriggled, quietly smacked her lips and immediately, Silvia’s breasts started to ache. It’d been inevitable: now she would have to drive to a car park and breastfeed her child under the watch of some Stasi type. From the outset, it’d been unrealistic to think she could manage the transit route without any stops. In the next car park, she pulled the Polo up at the far end underneath a tree. She’d only just picked up the wailing Hannah out of the wash basket and lifted her sweatshirt when two cops appeared outside the car and knocked on the window.

Yes, she was going to drive straight on.

Yes, she knew she was only allowed to stop in emergencies but her baby was hungry.

Ten minutes, no longer, promise.

And then the pair of them posted themselves in front of her car and stared at her breasts through the windscreen while Hannah sucked intently.

When Hannah had lain on Silvia’s stomach for the first time, it was indescribable. Silvia had never felt so right, so permeable and so full of love. After two nights in hospital, Dirk had picked them up in the car and brought them back to the flat. They’d all sat together on the brown corduroy sofa and marvelled at the little miracle: her tiny fingernails, small nose and puckered miniature ears. The atmosphere in the flat was truly sacred on this first day with everyone whispering. But after just a short time that stopped and everything continued as usual. There were parties, people smoked grass, screwed each other, argued and debated. Just now without Silvia, who lay on her futon, bleeding, with infected breasts and holding Hannah in her arms. She rang the law firm once more and told the secretary to inform Mr van der Kampen his daughter had been born and she was called Hannah. And against all odds, she’d hoped that Martin would

come and want to see Hannah, and then maybe all would be well, or at least different. But Martin didn’t come. Instead one day he returned her call, telling her he wouldn’t acknowledge paternity and wanted no contact with the child but he was prepared to transfer a monthly sum provided she stayed silent about their relationship and away from him in the future.

When Silvia finally passed her transit visa and documents through the window of the car to another GDR border guard at the Marienborn border crossing and entered West Germany at last, she was overcome with doubt whether it really was such a good idea. She’d left her island and was back on the mainland, following an archaic impulse, a feeling she could barely even remember after not feeling it for so long. Most likely, it was the hormones, or the situation, or both. But after Martin’s call she’d barely come out of her room for two weeks and had just lain in bed and cried with Hannah, until Dirk eventually came in to ask if it wasn’t about time to get over it, if it was still about that posho lawyer and if she could lend him five Deutsche Marks for some fags.

At that, Silvia initially just thought and then whispered:

“I want my mother.”

And the words were barely out of her mouth, as this desire grew and got bigger, more urgent and clear. Silvia wanted her mother, whom she’d not seen in years and only seldomly spoken to. She wanted to grab Hannah and just get away from Berlin, away from these people whom she’d believed were her home and away from the makeshift flat. She wanted to sit in the old garden of her childhood under the yellow awning and eat Black Forest gateau, she wanted to sit on Mrs Hagerle’s corner bench and slurp pancake soup, she wanted to go back to the place she’d fled so many years ago, back

to her mother to whom she suddenly felt inexplicably close despite all that had gone between them. Hannah would make it all right again. If anyone could pierce Doctor Evelyn Borowski’s elephant skin then it would be this baby, Silvia was sure of that. In five or six hours she’d be in Ildingen if the Polo held out that long. She’d leave the autobahn just after Stuttgart, then travel for a while on the doubtlessly freshly tarmacked B-roads through the vineyards and along the river. She’d drive right through the village, past the church, the small market place and the *Zum Ochsen* inn, up the small hill, past the new housing estate with the flat-roofed bungalows, the sports ground and the clubhouse, and then at the edge of the village where tall trees shade the older detached houses she’d turn right towards no.14 Buchenweg. The neighbours would wonder about the car with the Berlin plates and put two and two together. In any case, within a single day it’d do the rounds that the prodigal daughter had returned. Silvia would go up the three steps to the front door and press the bell – just thinking about it made her heart hammer so loudly she could hear it. The door would open, and there her mother would stand, strong and silent, her hair in a short perm close to her head and her eyes piercingly clear. Evelyn would look Silvia up and down and understand everything in just a second; she would not be the least bit surprised.

“Hello Mama,” Silvia would say and hopefully her voice wouldn’t falter.

“This is Hannah, your granddaughter.”

(p. 18-27)

Wedding

1950

A story can always be told in many ways but on the eve of a wedding there’s only one that counts: that of the happy couple but mainly that of the bride. Betti knew that. And that’s why she stayed silent and tied bows in white tulle ribbons, carefully and uniformly, one after another. She was good at tying bows, she was good at being a sister and a daughter. She was good at being a best friend. And from tomorrow, she would make an effort to be good at being a sister-in-law, even though right now she felt like her head was going to explode.

The landlady of the *Zum Ochsen* inn had pushed three wooden tables together in the bar room, around which Betti and five other women were sitting: Evelyn, red cheeked and embarrassed by the attention, which she wasn’t enjoying despite joyfully anticipating her marriage to Karl tomorrow. Agnes Borowski — her future mother-in-law, the professor’s wife and Betti’s mother — upright, proud and extremely happy about the course of events. And three neighbours who’d offered to help prepare the church decorations and the flower arrangements, and who wanted to hear the moving love story again and again. And Agnes Borowski liked telling it.

She remembered that just when nobody believed it to be possible any more, Karl returned from the war. In the spring of 1947, he suddenly turned up at the university in Stuttgart and asked for his father downstairs at the entrance to the faculty. He wasn’t there. And then the gatekeeper had called quite casually to the professor on his return that his son from Russia had been there and asked for him. And the professor came

home to Ildingen at breakneck speed, hoping that the gatekeeper hadn’t been playing a joke. And she, his wife, had just been sitting with Betti and Evelyn in the garden, taking a break from weeding, when suddenly she saw this lad standing at the garden fence, thin as a rake, *a real weed*, just skin and bones in ragged clothes. She was about to chase him off when Karl said, “don’t you know who I am any more?” and it was his voice she recognised. Such happiness, indescribable even after all these years, isn’t it Elsbeth? They’d fallen into each other’s arms and sobbed. Then the Professor came down the street, he’d had himself driven home quickly, and was reunited with his only son. It brings tears to your eyes again when you think about it.

Straight away the servant fired up the oven to cook the lad something proper, as proper as was possible with food coupons, and Betti just couldn’t stop hugging her brother. And after a while, they all wondered where *Eve/e* was. She’d simply taken herself off to her room because she didn’t want to intrude on the family, even though she was long since part of it.

“But that’s our Evelyn, she’s always holding back. So modest. Isn’t she, Elsbeth?”

Evelyn turned red as her mother-in-law lovingly squeezed her hand, and Betti nodded. Then she took a large gulp of the much too sour wine, which the landlady had put in a jug for them on the table, and cleared the cough that hung in her throat. Moved by the story, the neighbours continued to trim the cornflowers they had collected in the fields and were going to be made into small bouquets together with dahlias and marigolds from Agnes Borowski’s small garden. And Betti thought about how Evelyn had become part of the family. Because she’d saved Evelyn. Her friend, with whom she’d survived the end of the war as Red Cross nurses in a field hospital in Bad Doberan and to whose

stoic discipline she'd clung. Her friend, who'd lost her family and her home, and who didn't know what to do when the field hospital closed and the Russians allowed them to return home. It was Betti who'd suggested she used the Red Cross ID card belonging to her little sister, Margit, to wangle a pass for the American occupied zone. Margit, known as Rita, the little, sensitive one and the problem child of the family had taken her own life in the final year of the war; she'd evidently thought dying was easier than continuing to endure the fear. Betti hadn't been able to save her little sister and she wouldn't put together a bouquet or tie tulle bows for her wedding. She wouldn't plait her long brown hair and pin it up nor sew her a dress.

Evelyn was quite naturally accepted into the Borowski family. You helped friends in need, they had the space and before the authorities lodged a stranger with them ... And how quickly Evelyn turned from house guest to daughter, how easy she made it for everyone to like her. Always friendly, demure and modest. Betti's father, a Stralsunder by birth, was so happy to have a "coastal child", finally someone from Mecklenburg with whom he could occasionally speak the Plattdeutsch of his childhood. It looked like Betti's mother had managed to convert all her grief for Rita into affection for Evelyn. And how Rita died was never mentioned. Or why. Just a silent accusation that sometimes wafted over Betti like a cold draft.

"Was it love at first sight?" asked Heide, the neighbour's daughter, who'd worshipped Evelyn since she had sewn up a cut on her head.

Evelyn laughed embarrassed without answering the question. It didn't take long for everyone to notice what was going on, she and Karl hadn't been able to keep it a secret at all.

“Without Evele, our Karl would never have got back to strength,” said Betti’s mother. Evelyn had placed herself totally in the service of Karl’s convalescence, caring for him and knowing exactly what nutrition to give his body, emaciated from his time in the Russian camps. She’d treated his chafed feet and the poorly healing wounds on his back, at least during the first few weeks before she started her clinical semester in Würzburg. Betti’s father had used his contacts and found a room and a university place for her. So that Evele could become a real doctor. She’d done her preliminary medical examinations in Rostock just before the university had to close because of the war. Anyway, there was no longer any chance of Betti becoming a doctor. It had once been her ambition, her joint childhood dream with her one-year-younger brother, that they’d both become doctors in starched white coats and each with a mysterious leather case full of instruments, plasters, bandages and tubs. At first they’d practised on Betti’s dolls and then on other children in the street, listening to their lungs with twigs and prescribing them “*bed rest and cold compresses*”. And when Betti passed her school leaving certificate, it was Karl who’d convinced their father. The biggest ambition of Theodor Borowski, professor of mathematics, for his daughter was to train as a nurse and to marry his assistant, and Karl was to have a career as an engineer, if it absolutely had to be something practical. It would be an eternal source of sorrow for him that his son didn’t want to work in academia but wanted to be a surgeon. Barely better than a butcher. But he’d let Karl’s dogged and passionate pleading for himself and his sister convince him. Both of them started studying medicine. For Betti it ended after four semesters with failed preliminary medical examinations. For Karl it was a little later when he was called up to the Wehrmacht.

Betti knotted her final tulle ribbon bow, she felt sick from the scent of the flowers mixed with the inn’s smell of beer, cold smoke and fried onions. Or could it be from the Trollinger wine? Or the secret swig of Spirit of Melissa, straight out of the bottle decorated with the blue nun that stood in her mother’s bathroom cabinet? She felt Evelyn’s unsure gaze on her but she couldn’t look at her. She couldn’t be angry with her friend for being so lovable, so hard working and so determined. And at the same time, so modest. Betti wasn’t even granted that: a real reason for her simmering anger and disappointment. How could she be angry with this perfect addition to her family? With enchanting Evelyn, who’d integrated herself in the Borowski family like the last missing jigsaw piece, closing a hole that couldn’t actually be closed.

“And how did Karl propose? Did he do it properly? On one knee?”

Heide’s adolescent cheeks glowed. Betti knew her parents didn’t allow her to go to the cinema so she didn’t get “strange ideas”. Her neighbour’s love story would have to do so she could at least have “strange ideas” as she fell asleep.

“No,” said Evelyn, “but it wasn’t necessary. He asked me and I said yes. My future husband doesn’t need to kneel in front of me.”

Moved sighs among the women, a slight disappointment for Heide. Betti forced herself to smile. She could well remember skidding about on her knees in front of her brother as she changed the bandages on his feet, which still hadn’t healed weeks after his return. She could do it at least as good as Evelyn, but she was in Würzburg studying. Betti had hoped for the return of the same feeling of sibling conspiracy between her and Karl that had bound them together as children. Betti and Karl, always together. And if the neighbourhood kids picked on Rita, which they liked to do because Rita was far too

nice, far too quiet and let herself be pushed around far too easily, then they were there to protect their little sister, with the odd blow if required.

But there wasn’t much left of this feeling after Karl’s return, and maybe Betti also expected too much: too much affection and interest from her physically and mentally scarred brother, who suffered nightmares, was close-lipped and didn’t want to tell her what he’d done and experienced. Neither in the war nor in captivity. Likewise he didn’t want Betti to tell her stories. Sometimes she would sit next to Karl and try to talk to him about Rita. “Don’t you want to know how she died? She was so brave, she was such a good nurse at the military hospital, but she just couldn’t stand it, she couldn’t go on, she just diminished, got sadder and sadder, and I couldn’t do anything for her. She simply disappeared one night from the barracks, in her nightie, most likely in the direction of the sea and then ...We only found her shoes on the beach.”

Karl had simply turned his head away and looked into the distance without saying a word, and when Betti had finished changing the bandages, he said he wished Evelyn would come back.

At Christmas, she came on Karl’s express invitation. At first Evelyn had played coy or in other words she modestly declined. She didn’t want to intrude or force herself on the family for their first Christmas after Karl’s return. But then everyone had insisted, especially as Evelyn didn’t have anyone whom she could visit. On Christmas Eve, Betti set the table. And just like every previous Sunday, she set an additional place for Rita. Her mother silently tidied it back into the cupboard. Betti felt the spirit of her little sister hiding behind the curtains, floating over the table, rustling through the dry needles of the Christmas tree and appearing in the gentle flickering of the candles. But she was alone

in these perceptions; only Betti could sense Rita on this evening. Repeatedly, she tried to meet her brother’s eye but he only had eyes for Evelyn. And when she and Evelyn lay in Betti’s room that night and Betti cried silently because she missed her little sister so much, Evelyn held her hand and said, “I think I really like your brother. Would you be cross with me if he liked me back? Would we still be friends?”

In the meantime all bouquets and bows were tied, the women had swept up the left-over stalks and leaves, the landlady had collected the glasses and assured Betti’s mother everything would be set out on time for tomorrow’s celebrations after the wedding, and no, the groom’s mother didn’t need to worry; the tablecloths had already been stiffened and mangled.

Heide, the neighbour’s daughter, still hadn’t had enough. There hadn’t been a wedding in the village for such a long time.

“Evelyn, tell me, what’s your dress like? Do you have a veil? Did you sew it yourself?”

“Betti sewed it, it’s beautiful!”

“Yes, our Elsbeth is a very talented dressmaker,” said Betti’s mother in a tone that was both gracious and condescending at the same time, and made Betti wish the landlady hadn’t already cleared away the glasses. It was Betti’s wedding present for her best friend, a simple white dress with lace trimming and a bow at the back, tailor-made for Evelyn. Betti had searched a long time for the material; it was in scarce supply and sinfully expensive. But of course, Evelyn looked beautiful in it and she’d cried with gratitude and affection as she’d tried the dress on for the first time in Betti’s room. It was the dress that Betti had once designed for herself, when she’d believed for a

while that one day she may also be a bride. A ridiculous thought brought about by a brief infatuation that was quickly over. Betti was no longer able to catch that train, which had departed years ago without her. Karl followed Evelyn to university to finish his studies. And Betti stayed at home. She would never return to the university; she’d failed just as her father had predicted. And if she was honest with herself, she had predicted it too. She’d known she wouldn’t pass the preliminary medical examinations. Becoming a doctor had never been her secret dream. More than anything else, she just never wanted to be without her brother. She wanted to be like him, to do and achieve what he did and achieved.

And now Betti was the one left behind. No husband, no career. She wished she could have gone to art college. Painting, drawing and fashion design. She’d put together a small portfolio but her father had just snorted in disdain. That was the last thing he needed! An apprenticeship to be a seamstress maybe? And even that wouldn’t be befitting of her rank but in the end there was nothing to be found far and wide, and Betti was already far too old. In a few weeks, she would turn 28. The marriage of her brother would be the last marriage in her family, at least until Evelyn’s and Karl’s children got married. Betti would stay living at home, at least there was no lack of money and you had to be grateful for that these days. At some point, she would take care of her parents, and until then occasionally tailor a few dresses and watch her friend Evelyn lead a real life, by her brother’s side. She’d keep Rita’s ghost company, wave to her when she sensed her behind the curtains and always set an additional plate at the table, even though her mother would put it back into the cupboard each time.

“You’re so quiet today Betti. Aren’t you excited about the celebrations tomorrow?”

One of the neighbours had spoken during a brief moment of silence that had developed as all the women once again assessed their finished work. Together they had moved the heavy wooden table back into its place, stored the bows into a box and distributed the small bunches of flowers into various buckets.

Betti had been calm today, she’d refrained from saying everything that there actually was to say. Normally, it was always, “Betti not so loud,” “Betti don’t talk so much”, “Betti, we don’t talk about that. Silence is golden”, “Betti, you don’t say that”. And now they didn’t like her silence.

“I wish Rita was here.”

Well.

There you go.

Now she’d said something.