Sample Translation *The Incident* (by Julia Schoch)
Translated by Catherine Venner & Mandy Wight

Chapter 1

That day, a Tuesday in December, I was giving a reading from my latest novel in the arts centre of a northern German town. After the event, a lady approached the table where I had remained to sign a book or two. She pushed her copy towards me. As I leaned over it and began scribbling my name, she said, “By the way, we have the same father”.

In my mind’s eye, I lose control of my pen. The nib departs from its intended course, allowing a long, deep line to run over the page. A fault line. As if I had been hit by a bullet in mid-signature.

In reality, I jumped up without hesitation and hugged this complete stranger with tears in my eyes. Something that I often wondered about and to all intents and purposes still do today.

The rest of the small audience was already leaving. The manager of the arts centre had put away the PA system and was waiting at the door holding a bunch of keys in his hand. We’d arranged to go for something to eat after the reading. On the way to the restaurant, I told him about the woman from the audience who’d spoken to me. I did so in passing as a funny anecdote of the kind you sometimes tell, like when somebody asks a strange question at a reading or when afterwards they try to present you with a folder of self-penned love poetry. The arts centre manager laughed briefly; his thoughts appeared to be otherwise engaged.

A little later during the meal, I struggled to concentrate on the conversation and left early under some pretext or other, which the manager accepted with visible relief.

Chapter 2

I spent the following morning wandering around the town’s high streets, which were strewn with lights and Christmas trees. In a large Niederegger shop, I bought marzipan chocolates for the upcoming Christmas celebrations. (Neither my husband nor my eldest child liked marzipan, but I liked the shiny red-gold wrappers which looked like gift-wrapping.) Later, hidden among the usual chemists and commodity stores I discovered a store run by a Playmobil collector where I bought an assortment of fire engine accessories, including a red rescue net, a hydraulic spreader and a tiny rescue saw; my eldest child was fascinated by these toys at the time. Then I got on the train and continued my journey to another town, to the next reading.

As I travelled, I leafed through a book about the USA. I mainly read the pages about Northern Ohio, where I would soon be spending a couple of months.

After arriving, I wrote a couple of emails, gave an interview to the local newspaper and held my reading. I repeated this daily routine several times. After my reading on the final evening of the seven or eight day tour, I headed to a pub serving traditional German food with a university professor, his wife and a handful of students.

I mention these everyday things because most of the surprising incidents in our lives appear to happen en passant. Life doesn't stop. Life doesn't pause. (I have always found pausing rather peculiar and something which in truth is almost impossible.) We incorporate whatever surprised us into our everyday lives. We do our work. We function. Maybe it is better like that. This is how we attempt to evade the destructive power of unexpected change. Avoiding shock and those innumerable small and large tremors throughout life may well turn out to be the cement that holds together the other, harmless and routine events.

Chapter 3

I pondered this incident for years. Occasionally, I would try to write about it. I warned myself that I shouldn't waste even more time if I wanted to put it into words, for I may forget my memories. But then I realised that I had already forgotten so much; even the day after, I could barely remember certain things. For example, what were the exact words the woman and I exchanged? What did we say and how long had the conversation at my table lasted?

However, today I still have a precise memory of other seemingly unimportant things. The colour of her coat (a green-black all-weather jacket with a logo of a showjumping rider embroidered on its left sleeve). Teamed with flat, practical shoes (which I could maybe only guess at from the way she was standing). Perhaps it was down to the shock that I remembered *that* more than her appearance: she approached me politely, almost timidly. Her friendly voice did not splutter forth. And although she was neither a delicate nor dainty person, and was much bigger than me, she momentarily flinched as I hugged her. She hadn't reckoned with so much enthusiasm.

Only now after the passage of years can I see with greater clarity how the things that happened in the following months and years are interconnected. Only now can I allow myself to reflect on that time; on that winter in Ohio that was the start of a long period in which I was incapable of feeling

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anything, of thinking and of living a care-free life. Even language deserted me so that I was only able to describe my suffering to a neurologist with the words that I was in a *black hole*, using the most banal images to explain a hopeless situation. (In fact, I was more ashamed of the hackneyed expression than of my condition.) They were months and years in which everything appeared changed: how I looked at the world, at love, at my husband and at my children.

Whereby the word “my” in this sense now appears presumptuous.

Chapter 4

On that evening in December, I didn’t think about writing, not even for a second. I did not feel the need to jot down anything about meeting the stranger. Once I’d taken my leave from the arts centre manager and left the restaurant, I walked through the deserted town centre and past the closed shops. As I walked, I grabbed my phone. Without hesitation, I punched in my sister’s number. My *real* sister, as I told myself. At that moment, a strange feeling came over me. Was it guilt? Shame? I called her without thinking about it. I did it automatically, or rather I was following an absolute conviction that there was only one person who needed to know what had occurred that night: my sister.

Upset, I described what had happened. I didn’t have to talk for long. Without hesitation, my sister said I was right. How absurd! What a brazen attack! My sister and I agreed. We even cracked a couple of jokes to diffuse the immensity of the situation. I was reassured.

As I put the telephone away, it started snowing and I realised that I hadn’t called my sister in a very long time. I was almost grateful to this stranger. Her unexpected appearance had given us a chance to come together. The months-long silence and her anger; all of it appeared to have been forgotten in an instant. Thanks to this woman, my sister and I had suddenly become close again.

Back in my hotel room, I switched on the TV and headed into the bathroom where I started crying. When I thought about this whole story later on, I never cried as much as on that evening. Afterwards I would think about things, weigh things up, search for reasons and engage in rational considerations. But on that evening, I stood under the shower with my forehead pressed against the tiles, the shower head in my hand, and I cried.

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Maybe, as I tell myself now, my tears also had a different cause and were not just down to the surprising appearance of the woman. Maybe several emotional states combined and sought an outlet in this way. I had used the short reading tour to stop producing breast milk after having fed my youngest child for almost seven months. Until then, I had found it cathartic to be so far away from my child. It meant I wasn't tempted. Without feeling any regret I'd watched the white trickle disappear down the drain of a sink or bath. However, on this night the sight of the milk washing away stung me. I knew that it was the last time; my job had been done. In a few days I would be as I was before, as if nothing had happened. The mother-child bubble had been split forever, and from here on it would float through the world as two separate bubbles.

Now, after all these years, the two events have combined. In the moment that one family member was leaving me, a new one appeared. I severed one connection and at the same time a new connection was created. As if a balance were being created. A type of justice dispensed by a court that, as I occasionally imagine, has the sole jurisdiction over such compensation between the inhabitants of this earth.

Chapter 5

I only became aware of some essential aspects of this story later on.

For example: I hadn't told my sister everything.

When we spoke on the phone, I kept it back that I had hugged the stranger. Or was it that I simply didn't mention it? Is there a difference between keeping something back and not mentioning it?

The fact is I didn't say anything about it. I was ashamed of the hug. I was surprised at myself. Why had I done that? I thought that this gesture might reveal something about me that I wasn't even admitting to myself.

Maybe I worried my sister would be offended if I told her. When was the last time I had just hugged her, spontaneously, following a blind impulse and full of emotion? In fact, I wasn't even sure she expected anything of the sort from me. Both of us have always considered gushing displays of emotion to be excessive.

Anyway ... if I had told her that I'd heartily embraced this woman, this stranger, our sudden alliance would have immediately disintegrated. This short moment in which we, my sister and I, faced a

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mutual enemy together would have been over before it had even begun. She would have regarded me as a traitor. She never said as much but something in her tone indicated that I had to pick a side. Would I trust a stranger more than her?

She demonstrated what she thought of it. Her disinclination towards this interloper, this wannabe family member, could clearly be felt. Her staunch resistance that under no circumstances could we accept this. It left the door open for anybody to try it on. And anyway, it was all founded on a mistake.

My sister, a past master in keeping distance. Her resolve had relieved me, at least momentarily. What she was saying sounded reasonable. While I always verged on being engulfed by life's small and large catastrophes, she didn't allow things to get to her in the first place. You can't let things get to you - that was the only correct approach. At the time, I would have never even considered that her reaction was but a strategy. A strategy to deal with the whole affair.

In the same way as my immersion, which I call "writing", is a strategy.

Chapter 6

"And anyway, it was all founded on a mistake." How I would have loved to see it like this; how I would have loved to believe it was a mistake.

The truth is: I'd always secretly expected it. That someday we would meet, this stranger and I. I knew it in the way that you sense something amorphous but are still just as overwhelmed when it takes on a concrete shape. Like a defenceless creature, immersed in its own animal life, I was assailed by the memories.

As it is the way in such matters there is always prior knowledge, unknown yet known hunches that stem from inconsequential comments from your mother, a distant cousin or someone else entirely. Crumbs of knowledge, these harbingers of the actual revelation, unerringly enter your mind. Would I have otherwise embraced a complete stranger without this awareness? Would I have not doubted it, the enormity of it, when I asked her questions that first time at my reading? Assuming I had misheard, I would have looked at the woman without comprehension instead of rushing to give her a hug.

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I had known that there was another child. A girl, born a year before my sister and six years before me, on a summer's day at the end of the sixties. A girl of whom nobody would have ever heard, if shortly after her first birthday my mother had not discovered a slip of paper informing of this child's existence. To be precise, this slip was an acknowledgement; an official letter regarding paid maintenance that she'd found in her husband's coat pocket.

She carefully read the correspondence several times. Then she refolded the slip and waited for her husband to come home from work (i.e., to the room in which they, all three of them, were living as lodgers). Before she took him to task, she pulled their child out of the cot and held her in her arms, maybe as protection or maybe as a reminder to him. My sister, barely one year old, had silently looked between the two of them, anticipating what would happen next.

As it turned out, the story had already concluded, payment of maintenance was no longer necessary and the excitement had all been for nothing. The child for whom he had assumed paternity had been given up for adoption by the mother a few weeks after birth.

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Chapter 8

Every family can be categorised in terms of a geometric form. Some are by their very nature a triangle, others more of a circle, a square or a star. There are clearly recognisable forms, like two dots snugly embracing, protective, or standing strangely apart, and those where the form looks more like a prison to the family members.

A friend whose oldest son died in a cycling accident in the summer, tells me: Now there's just the three of us. He talks about the family being thrown right off kilter by the death of his son. A support pillar, giving stability to the whole, being violently dashed away. He emphasises how delicate and fragile the family structure has become as a result. He speaks very quietly. He says that the square had a logic to it, whereas the triangle will always seem to him inadequate. An unsatisfactory form for the rest of time.

In my case, I hadn't received news of a death. For me it was about an addition, rather than a terrible loss. Nevertheless, it involved a kind of readjustment. Something about the familiar picture was no longer quite right.

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I remember that my confusion at the very beginning was about that. My discomfort about an additional family member was all about the geometry. Till then, the family I came from had resembled a square. (Even though the dining table in the modest sitting room at home was circular.) Quite a big square, the corners far apart, but still within sight of one another.

At a stroke, this image was no longer there. An image that had stayed with me, despite my knowing it was rooted in the limited and hazy memories of my childhood. Neither the fact that my sister had left home young, and had then moved far away with her husband and children, nor that I'd gone to boarding school, and soon after moved out of my parents' house, could in any way tarnish this image. No, not even the fact that my parents had separated, that it all was all torn apart in a silent explosion, the individual pieces carried off in different directions. All this had happened, yet the picture in my mind remained intact.

Only when she arrived, the stranger, did the image of a stable square vanish. It was in that moment, when she stepped towards my desk, that the clean geometric form turned into a tangled growth.

It's typical in a way that it would be the thing that lay furthest back in time, the thing that happened before I was even born, that had the power to rattle this image. You look it up in psychology books and you know that's how it is. It's clear that certain themes concerning the family persist, that they remain constant through time. That it's exactly those prehistoric things—and isn't the life journey of every human being a history? —that have a long reach. But this knowledge doesn't change the fact that it's only much later, at a different point in time, that they play a really meaningful role in your life.

Chapter 9

People say until you know your parents' story, you don't know yourself. Two or three weeks after the encounter with the woman, around Christmas time, when our father was describing the sequence of events in this matter of our sister, some things I'd once known came back to me. I recalled fragments of the story—had I ever known more than fragments?—and wondered how I could have forgotten them. How is that we lose hold of things which are so essential and why?

My father described what had happened. Something that took place over 40 years ago.

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We met up to have this conversation at my sister's flat, where she'd moved after her divorce. I remember thinking that day, this is a woman's apartment, modest and tasteful, an apartment for after the marriage, after the hurly burly of family life, when the children have left home, the toys and hamster cages thrown away and the long, gleaming row of kitchen cupboards has been exchanged for the small, functional, cooking corner. An apartment that one day would be just right for me, too. I don't know if that thought on that day was a relief or a cause for anxiety.

While our father was talking, my sister sat there looking sceptical, her arms folded, her red hair, usually worn loose, scraped back into a pony tail. She glanced over at me, a penetrating and, at the same time, enigmatic look, as so often with her. She'd said she was happy to host us, she'd made the decision to listen, really, please, do go ahead, but she wasn't about to open any Pandora's Box here, that was for sure.

And didn't she have a point? What did this story actually have to do with us, this tale of a very young man, recently promoted to an N.C.O, who now and then stopped by the house of a divorced woman, clearly older than him? Now and then amounting to once or twice a month, given the rules for young officers' leave at that time. It wasn't far from the division to her house on a motorbike. He knew he wasn't the only one. The woman was known to the men on the base, perhaps also to those in the town. There was a bathtub in her kitchen. While her visitors took a bath, she stood at the cooker and made them a meal. Men came round, took a bath and ate their fill. They relaxed. Maybe in those moments they thought of their childhood, of home comforts. The visits were limited to just a few hours, at most half a night.

To my amazement, you can actually find the word he used, Bratkartoffelverhältnis, a fried potato relationship, in the Internet. According to Wikipedia it describes a phenomenon that belongs to a particular era. An era in which motorbike riders were still dressed like aircraft pilots from the early 20th century (leather helmet and enormous goggles), when bath water was heated by coal-fired boilers, and when landladies ran the risk of criminal charges if they let their female lodgers entertain men in their rooms.

Did that appease us? To hear that the whole thing had taken place at a time that seemed to us like a distant, unknown country?

While the story was being told I'd folded my arms in front of my chest, just like my sister. In an attitude of denial. I felt weary, I'd half closed my eyes. Wasn't there an expiry date for secrets? A

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TOO LATE, in which it would all just die away? Leaving behind nothing but the weariness with which one looks back at the past from half-blinded eyes.

He hadn't heard about the child until the woman was close to her due date. She had to register a father and she'd asked him. It wasn't clear that he was the father. Nevertheless he agreed to do it.

Seven, eight, nine months. Wasn't he surprised that their meetings were suddenly over? That she no longer welcomed him into her home? Had he tried to look in on her at all? Or had she hidden herself away from the locals' eyes, from mens' eyes during her pregnancy? It's not possible to say now who was avoiding whom. Perhaps he had seen her somewhere as he'd driven past, on the street, in a queue in front of a shop, perhaps seeing the curve of her belly he'd accelerated and raced off, as fast as he could, away from all of it.

Because by then he was heading towards another woman, a woman he didn't yet know. A woman in P., the nearby county town. While a child is growing in one woman, he enters a room in the town's arts centre where another woman, a young student, is trying to light the oven. When she sees him standing in the doorway, she stands up, a piece of firewood in her hand. He comes towards her. Is this the place for the political cabaret course? He asks. His voice echoes, echoes because of the room's high ceilings. Whereupon she nods and passes him the piece of wood as well as the lighter, the woman, almost a girl still, who'll become my mother six years later, after first becoming the mother of my sister.

The years, the decades pass quickly by.

You close your eyes, and when you open them again, the problem's solved.

It's very easy not to talk about a particular issue. It's easy to leave something be, not to mention it. To forget it on purpose.

That dawned on me too back then, after hearing my father's report.

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Chapter 16

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During this initial period, those first days in Bowling Green, was I thinking about what had happened to me at home? Did the distance from Europe offer me relief or absolve me of an obligation? The obligation to react?

On arriving at the office in the mornings, I would lean back for a while in my desk chair with my arms crossed behind my neck. I say this because I do not want to give the impression that I was feverishly working or had great motivation. Such an impression would be incorrect. I didn't immediately get down to work. Often after a short while, I would even leave again to sit in the cafe of the Student Union or the main building, where there are coffee shops, food stalls and shops selling clothes bearing the uni's mascot, a falcon. A coffee in front of me, I would sit behind the large glass windows and stare perplexed at the campus's naked trees and paths.

At the time, I didn't see it. Today, I think that my state of mind was linked to the fact that the unknown woman had contacted me again after our meeting. She had written to me. In the brief letter, which must have reached me while I was still in Germany in the excitement of the travel preparations, she had apologised for showing up. In a way, she took it back. This correspondence was almost a sample letter, polite and distanced. I later discovered that there are certain rules for people who are looking for relatives and want to get in touch out of the blue after years or decades, out of the depths of time. In such cases, psychologists advise them to exercise caution when making contact: not to impose themselves; not to make demands; not to make accusations; and only to say that they would be happy to be in touch.

That is exactly what she did. She didn't impose herself. She didn't make any demands. She simply reminded me that she existed.

How are you supposed to answer such a letter? It was clear that I would have to respond. She was waiting for an answer, I was sure of it. In her place, I would have been waiting. And wasn't she entitled to it? Considering her fate, did she not at least deserve an answer? At the thought of the long journey that she must have embarked upon to search for us and the effort of the research that she must have undertaken, I felt indebted to her. I had taken her father from her. Wasn't that the case? She had to go, so that we, my sister and I, could be born. Did we not somehow owe our existence to this woman?

I sat in front of the computer, put my fingers on the keyboard and stared at the empty email. What was the problem? Faced with the task of telling a stranger something about myself (which in my

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mind might as well mean everything), I inwardly froze. The whole thing reminded me of the American dating ritual, when on the first date the man asks, “so, Melissa/Susan/Ashley tell me something about yourself, what do you do?” Even just imagining it gives me the unpleasant feeling of being in an exam. The majority of women appear to always be prepared for these questions. Without blinking, they start to talk and give the inquirer a summary of their life.

But here was a conversation where the questions were missing. What should I tell her? What tone should I use? Should I go into excessive detail? Should I keep it short? Too much intimacy would have meant: I accept our story and I embrace it. Cool distance would be interpreted: in truth, I think this is all a huge mistake. Every alternative appeared to create a certain effect, and none of them felt right to me.

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Chapter 20

At the time, I wished I was writing a novel about it all. A novel can include sentences, such as: the weeks went by, the summer came and X forgot about meeting the woman in December. I yearned for material that I could approach playfully. I wanted to let off a bit of steam, nothing more.

In my office in Shatzel Hall, I would run my fingers along the shelves. I remember wanting to keep a lookout for books that could help me in my situation. I wasn’t looking for an explanation or comfort. I wanted proof that I was in a situation that could be described.

I had felt the same after the birth of my first child. I had looked for books by authors who were also mothers. It was almost a gratification to read that Marguerite Duras had sent her small son to a boarding school, far away from Paris, in order to devote herself to literature and her lovers. After fleeing her communist homeland and settling in Iceland, East German author Helga M. Novak had her children looked after on a farm, while Susan Sontag left her son behind in the USA so that she could continue her self-creation in Europe. Only the image of Françoise Sagan sitting at a small table under an apple tree and typing intently while her baby sleeps in a cradle beside her still haunts me today, like mocking laughter.

Regarding my current search, the topic of half-siblings primarily appeared to be consigned to cheap novels. Did the silence of literature mean that I was overreacting? Was I looking for something so

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commonplace that it was not worth talking about? Perhaps it was actually the most normal thing in the world. But love was also normal, and yet literature never ceased to speak of it and would probably continue to do so for the next thousand years.

My search for works of world literature that covered the topic provided slim pickings, as did searches on the internet did. After I had entered the words into the search bar, I was confronted with mainly legal matters. A brother or a sister who suddenly came on the scene appeared above all to be a threat. Inheritances had to be shared, houses forced into compulsory sales and claims asserted.

Almost in passing, as if I was keeping it from myself, I asked the internet about another topic that over the course of the weeks I was becoming increasingly curious about: adoption. I was not indignant. I was not shocked. Maybe I wanted to use my research to normalise the fact that the child had been given up a few weeks after birth. For a while I investigated figures and statistics. How often does a woman give up her child for adoption? How often did it happen back then? In East Germany? I didn't go down this rabbit hole for too long. Of course, I should have reckoned that the search results would exclusively deliver pages concerning forced adoption in communist countries. At the end of the day, it was an incident that occurred in the nineteen sixties in the Eastern part of Germany. I noticed how this automatism annoyed me. I was almost offended. Was I not permitted a normal, private drama?

(I was similarly confused the time a journalist asked me in an interview about the case of a woman who killed each of her nine children shortly after birth and buried them in plant pots. He mentioned it to me because I was born and grew up in East Germany and this case had occurred in an East German village. He wanted me to explain the crime. He quite clearly regarded me as an expert about a nine times baby-killer simply because I had been born in a small village in Brandenburg. For him, we, the murderer and I, shared the same murky background).

No, I did not want to understand this story as a political story. I quite clearly preferred to think that the story was normal.

A normal family drama.

One which, by the way, I no longer needed to worry about.

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Chapter 21

Those were namely my sister's calming words. According to her, I no longer needed to worry about the story. My sister said nothing had been proven yet. Even after our discussion in her apartment, she remained staunch in this regard. She impressed on me that there was no evidence at all that we, this complete stranger and us, were related. All that had been established was that over forty years ago a man had signed some papers or other that named him as the father of a child. Some papers that the child's mother was likely to have tricked him into signing. No, she did not regard the fact that a name appeared in some official book or other as evidence of our shared identity. In her eyes, a name meant nothing. As long as there was nothing scientific, the matter had nothing to do with her.

She kept that door shut. That my father had another child was a matter for him and him alone. It had nothing to do with the present. With our present. It concerned the impenetrable room that was our parents' lives before we were conceived.

Yet still, it had happened.

It. Something.

More and more, I had the impression that in this matter there was no return. No matter what I did, no matter what decisions were made, whether I wrote to her or did not write to her, whether this woman regretted our meeting and took back her claim or not, whether she forgot, or wanted to forget - our stories had long since been entwined in each other. It was not a question of certainty. My father's name was written in a document that had brought the stranger to me. It had happened. A DNA analysis would not change it. I didn't need a hair from her. Her sway over my memory had already begun. She was in the world, in my world of thoughts. And she would always be there from now onwards.

In contrast to my sister, I was satisfied with that.

Chapter 22

Recently, I came across a comment by British author Ian McEwan in a magazine. Regarding his experience of unexpectedly discovering the existence of a brother eleven years older than him (who it turned out had grown up just a few kilometres from him and had no idea of his brother's fame as

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he searched for him), he told the press, “I am not going to write about it; it is his story, my brother’s story”.

It is his story.

I think you can see it like that. This point of view was certainly helpful as he dispelled any expectations among the press. However, I doubt that in such stories there is a main character, a king or advocate, who owns the story and who has the right to tell it, which simply means to interpret it. I do not think that it only concerns one person, when something like this happens.

Rather it appears as if it drags a huge net behind it, drawing in everything surrounding it. Even much further afield, the story still influences the feelings, the thoughts and even the decisions of the people without them necessarily being aware of it. Therefore, who exactly is it that such a story happens to?

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Chapter 25

Three or four weeks after we arrived I had to go to Texas for a reading. I took my swimming costume with me, as, according to the weather map, it was warm there and the hotel where I was staying had a pool.

I was met at the airport in L. by a tall, good-looking man. He was a colleague of the lecturer who’d invited me and taught Spanish literature. We drove to the university so he could show me the venue for the reading. The light, functional building gave me a feeling straightaway of familiarity, an almost comforting feeling, a feeling of security. At first, I didn’t know where it came from, but then I realised that the wide windows and airy staircases reminded me of particular buildings from my childhood, of schools, libraries, cultural centres, Volkspaläste. In my homeland we’re knocking down nearly all of those buildings, I told the Spanish lecturer and he nodded. By contrast in other places, post-war modernism is being celebrated and even given protected heritage status. I sensed how long winded and laboured it would be, if I had to tell him all about my homeland, my past, my cultural life. So I said only that they’re knocking down all the buildings because they’re contaminated with the poison of a particular era. Did he understand what I meant? He laughed out of politeness, which I thought

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was good of him. After all he knew as little about my world as I knew of his. Then he opened the door to the auditorium where next day's reading was to take place.

Later, in the cafeteria, we talked about armadillos, the symbol of Texas. He said, the English word armadillo was loaned from Spanish and meant in Spanish small, armoured horse. When his phone rang, I recognised the music from 'American Beauty'. I made some reference to the film. He shrugged his shoulders. Evidently he only knew it from hearsay.

On the way to the hotel, where he was dropping me off, I wondered whether I'd manage to seduce him. The language barrier didn't seem a problem to me, quite the opposite. I looked at him from the side. He was really fit. But instead of flirting, to my own amazement I asked him if he was married and if he had children. (He had one daughter). I was checking him out, but not with a view to a possible love affair, as I occasionally did with men. I was trying to judge what kind of father he was. I was suspicious. In Chekhov's story The Lady with the Lapdog he says that everyone lives their real life, the life that is really interesting, beneath a cover of secrets and the protection of the night. Previously, I'd seen this certainty as an attractive possibility. Now, it felt to me like a threat. But as soon as I'd said goodbye to him, and got out of the car, I found myself despising him, as if he'd actually gone along with any advances I might have made. Well, he was easily won over, wasn't he?

Next morning, when I pushed aside the curtains in my hotel room, the houses and streets were white. Opposite, at the entrance to a business park, some teenagers were building a snowman. I turned on the television. In the night a blizzard had blown over Texas, the first time in twenty-five years. For a moment I was again convinced that I had brought about this cold snap, this time in the form of a snowstorm over Texas. At that moment in time I found it logical, or at least not completely off the wall, that my presence could be the reason for any event that was unexpected and unnatural.

Chaos reigned in the town, it began to thaw, and most of the streets were impassable. The reading was postponed to the next day and I passed the time in the National Ranching Heritage Centre, an open air museum, displaying the life of the cowboy. I walked round on my own between the fake Wild West houses. Patches of snow were still lying on the ground here and there. In the gift shop I bought my older child a small leather purse with a rodeo rider embroidered onto the front.

The next day all the snow had melted. I delivered my reading and left, without seeing the Spanish lecturer again. Maybe he'd fled to avoid me, he'd slunk away. That seemed to prove something to me, only I didn't know quite know what.

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There was heavy snowfall in the north of the country too, so my flight from Chicago was delayed. The plane didn't leave till early evening. I remember on the descent to Toledo, the lights scattered over the area looked to me like a network of connections, a map of all the secret family relationships binding people together. For just a moment, the runway signals lit up the unspoken ties, before the miracle suddenly vanished, and normal lights resumed, as if the secret reveal had lasted for just the brief blinking of an eye.

Chapter 27

Since forever I've thought of myself as someone prepared for catastrophes. I imagine all possible scenarios the whole time. I think about existence from one end to the other. Armed in this way, I imagine it to be hugely difficult for life to take me by surprise. Nevertheless, that's what it comes to, it's there, the news, sudden, pregnant, and I have to admit I'm in no way prepared. Like someone trying to concentrate on one particular object, in the end not able to see for looking.

On the evening of my return from Texas, I didn't only discover that the baby could walk. My mother also greeted me with the news that my father had been taken to hospital. She hadn't wanted to bother me with this while I was on my trip. The doctors had told my sister his condition was more than worrying. His entire rib cage had as good as collapsed and it had already spread—there were metastases. I remember thinking the usual diagnosis. While my mother was talking I was sitting on the sofa. I suddenly had the feeling I wasn't alone. Like in a fairy tale, there were three sisters sitting next to one another, the oldest, the middle one and the youngest, three daughters being told their father was at death's door.

Although it was already late, I went out again. I crossed the railway tracks and ran for a bit through the town as far as the little town hall, where the American flag was waving in the dark and rabbits were crouching, scattered across the frozen lawn. I wondered whether I should inform the stranger, the other daughter, about the condition of my and her father. (It wasn't conceivable that my sister had done it.) Had she a right to be informed? Did it even concern her? Did she belong to our family, now and forever more? At the junction of Enterprise and Ridge Street I stopped at a building site and tried to cry. Then I lost any feeling and went numb. I froze. Freezing cold, I walked on to my studio flat, where I lay down and went straight to sleep.

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The next day I phoned my sister. She explained the treatment plan to me, the therapy, what would happen next. The doctors had said there was no hope of recovery. I picked up the resentment in her voice. While she'd been made to look after him and become his carer, I was cruising round all over the world. Wasn't that just typical? In her eyes, I was the one on the move. It had always been that way. In my sister's eyes, my life was one big party. (When in reality it had been the other way round. In reality? As a child I'd looked up to her. I'd painted her picture, red curls, a cigarette in her hand—the symbol to me back then of a fun life—and I'd stuck the picture to my bedroom door so I could see it from my bed at all times. I'd only ever be an observer, I would paint and write, I'd thought then, whereas she, she was made for living.)

When she'd finished her report on my father, she asked if I was planning to come back.
I said nothing. I said nothing for quite a while. Then I said let's wait and see. The situation could change. At the moment there was nothing we could do, she'd said so herself.

Hadn't she?

I asked her to call me as soon as there was any news.

I shut the door. I held it shut, with all my might.

Just like my sister had held the door shut against the other sister.

Chapter 28

Today I wonder whether I really saw this—the shutting of a door—as an image in my mind back then. Or was it more of a feeling? As clearly as I felt it in the years that followed, as I still feel it today?
I don't know when exactly the image began to bother me. What's clear is that my focus shifted. I was suddenly thinking less often about the stranger. Instead my thoughts wandered more in the direction of her mother, the woman who'd been my father's lover and who'd given away their child. I pictured her in different situations. The moment she was filling the bathtub with water. The moment she sat on the edge of the tub, watching the men soaping themselves in the bath. There must have been something inviting about her. Maybe even something maternal, letting the men climb into her bathtub and serving them up a hot meal, though maternal was not exactly the right word, if you think about how things turned out.

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But most often I saw her in my mind's eye, peering round her front door which she'd opened just a fraction, almost hidden by the door itself. (Later I'd find out more details. The story I'd be told would be superimposed onto the story I'd imagined. But at that time it was only this image that kept coming into my mind, an image I couldn't shake off, after my father had casually remarked that she wouldn't open her door to an unknown woman, claiming to be her daughter, and standing right there, just outside.)

Perhaps the stranger had only looked for her—for my—father, because the search for her mother had ended in disappointment. Disappointment, is that the right word for it? After the death of her adoptive parents, she'd found the name and address of her birth mother via a note in her adoption files. She'd gone to the house where the woman's name could still be seen next to the doorbell. She rang the bell. The door opened just a couple of inches and then shut almost immediately. The woman, her mother, didn't let her in.

This is the picture. A face looking round the door, framed by long hair dyed black, seen at a distance. At a distance, because the house was separated from the street by a front garden. The visitor had stopped at the garden gate. She'd called over to the front door. She'd said her name, the reason she'd come. A few seconds passed, seconds in which the woman in the house seemed to waver, then she'd shut the door again.

She'd not opened the door to her daughter.

Her own child. Flesh of her flesh.

Sometimes I've tried to imagine what happened next. After she'd pushed the door to again. I tried to picture how things were afterwards, inside that house. Every time I thought about it the title of a horror film came to mind: The House of Darkness.

I was clear that for me the inexplicable behaviour was all about the closing of the door. Less, the giving away of a child. At any rate, that event didn't seem so out of the ordinary, as inexplicable as the hasty closing of the door on this child four decades later.

Evidently I'm clinging to the idea that time mellows human relationships rather than hardening them. That the bulwark cracks and the defences crumble.

The truth is people don't get softer or more forgiving. Their strength just diminishes.

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If that is the case, if it is really like that, then what kind of superhuman strength is needed, to keep such a door closed?

Chapter 29

My sister called. She told me things at home were running their course. She was visiting our father in hospital every day. Most of the time she just sat there, at his bedside. She would buy him magazines which he didn't touch, of course he didn't, just like he didn't touch the fruit she brought him. He didn't recognise things any more. He thought the bunch of flowers she'd brought was a birdcage.

There's nothing we can do, she said, only look in on him now and then, and hope.

I said I was thinking of coming back.

You don't need to come, she said. You can't do anything for him here.

I could hear the sneer on her face as she made these remarks. Still, I was relieved. I didn't need to come.

My mother left the decision to me. She didn't seem overly affected by the situation. Not that she didn't realise how serious it was, but since she was no longer responsible for anything or anyone, she'd developed a certain insouciance towards life. Which I didn't begrudge her in the slightest. The time of struggles lay behind her. It was her right to stand outside the hall of residence, take out one of her long menthol cigarettes and ask one of the students to give her a light. They'd often be there before her, waiting. They'd knock on our kitchen window to remind her of the evening ritual, take her rubbish over to the bins, stand around in a circle, freezing in gym shorts, thick jackets thrown over their shoulders, hoping she'd join them for a chat.

One evening someone had brought chalk for my older child, and, my fingers stiff with cold, I tried to draw a hopscotch grid on the icy pavement slabs. Now and again I glanced over to my mother, who was telling the young people about the fall of the Berlin Wall. Laughter. Jokes.

I was surprised. I found it hard to recall the person she'd been in my childhood, that exhausted woman, plagued by varicose veins and migraines.

Like several of her friends, she'd taken a path through life that was in some ways back to front. As a young woman she'd gone without any freedom for herself, and lived purely for others, so that now,

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at her advanced age, she could lead the life of a student. Whenever I'd brought my child round to her house because I had a meeting, she'd often only just got out of bed. I'd come tramping up the stairs to her flat, bag loaded, mobile at my ear, hair half brushed. She'd always be there, still in her nightdress, sock on one foot only, her arms open in greeting as she took him from me.

Unlike me she didn't have the carefree living for the day experience when she was a student. Instead she'd had a strict timetable and spent the evenings in student halls on the edge of Sanssouci Park, five to a room. There was no bus, the young women, constantly hungry, went into the town centre on foot, where they ate cauliflower with liver in a cheap pub. Now and then one of them would secretly cook up some pasta on a paraffin stove in their room, sometimes it would be fried onions and bread. On Wednesdays, when the halls had hot water, there was a rush for the showers. The men they met at dances on the weekend weren't allowed to enter the building. There were strict inspections. The porter searched the beds at night with a pocket torch. Even when she was heavily pregnant, just before her finals, she wasn't allowed to entertain a man in her room—even though by then the man was her husband.

After university it was the lodgings her husband had found for them both in the centre of P., though he often stayed in the barracks, or had to go off on manoeuvres. The old man who owned the flat made her fetch coal up from the cellar for him in the mornings. When my sister was born, she took the child with her to the school where she'd started working. (There was not yet any paid maternity leave, and she'd failed to get a nursery place.) In protest she set the baby down on the head teacher's desk in front of him. Which really didn't help. She had to sort it out herself. Each week she had to devise a new plan for childcare, sometimes the child would stay with her mother, sometimes with an acquaintance, the mother of a pupil.

She'd only just got used to the job when her husband was transferred to a new military base in a village near the Lehnin abbey, forty kilometres away. Out there in the countryside housing, kindergartens and schools were built for the service families. For the first time she moved into her own flat. She was still working in the town, so travel took longer. In the evening she had to hurry to catch the last bus. Every day the same old journey past the co-operative's fields and meadows. She was tired. She'd often hitchhike. With luck she'd get to the village before the butcher shut to pick up a packet of sausage meat. Then, taking the road out of the village, she had to strike out over the fields, climbing up a long hill, to get to the flats. Her child, by now in the nursery just next door, would already be waiting for her on the landing.

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At weekends the three of them would often go for a walk round the nearby abbey ruins. But most of the time she was happy to sit on the narrow balcony in the evenings, where she could look out over a birch wood. She listened to music, or read. And became pregnant for a second time. This time she wanted to stay at home for a year with her child, with me. She was promised a job at the village school, just one minute from the flat. Before she was able to start it, her husband was transferred again. To a town in Mecklenburg, far away, deep in the countryside. Far away from everything.

Her disappointment, when she first arrived in the newly built housing development, there, in the small town in the northeast of the country, by the Oder lagoon, very close to the Polish border. Brown wooden houses, lined up next to one another along the street, surrounded by pine forests. In other circumstances, at other times, it would have been called a holiday village. They are indeed Swedish summer houses, intended to provide temporary accommodation for newcomers to the town until the proper Plattenbau estate with its five storied concrete slab tower blocks is completed. She looks at the wooden house, which her husband had raved about. It turns out it's not insulated. To reach the bathroom, that's also the laundry, and is in the cellar, you have to use the outside stairs.

That day, her first in the housing estate, she bursts into tears. The furniture removal men unload the lorry and drive off, but have to turn back on account of a puncture. They're astonished to find the pretty woman, whose heavy chest of drawers they've just dragged into the bedroom, in floods of tears. They insist on a housewarming. Still trembling with despair, my mother drops the wire brushes into the grimy sink, spreads a sheet out over a crate, places the bottle of spirits the men brought, and a few eggcups to use as schnaps glasses, on top and opens the bottle without saying a word.

Knocked out, it's the sleep that saves her that night.

Another image: she's standing one day in May in front of the wooden house, the laundry basket next to her, shielding her eyes against the sun with her hand, looking down the road, when suddenly and unexpectedly her sister appears at the end of the road. (It would be years before people had telephones out there). She's blinking and watching the figure approach, believing first it's a mirage, till she knows that it really is her sister, a hitchhiker, an adventurer, shouldering a kitbag that day, in the picture I have of her at least. Without saying a word, she bursts into tears when her sister is finally there, standing in front of her, she clings to her, the younger woman, carried to her that day like a lifebuoy.

Later, after moving into the modern housing estate, she seldom cried any more. The weeping

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changed to an inner howl of rage, like that of goddesses sworn to vengeance when the time was right. A silent despair, an eternal rancour, a continuous tearing out of hair, whenever she thought how time was running out, especially in the evenings, when she was alone, trapped between the concrete walls while her husband was on manoeuvres, or at his Russian class, at training or long work meetings. Then she sat at a tiny desk in the bedroom, writing letters by the light of a table lamp. Even at New Year she was often alone. We, the children, were mostly asleep before midnight, and she stood with the charred remains of the sparklers on the balcony, watching others as the fireworks banged away.

[…]

Chapter 43

'It's not the sudden appearance of the child in itself that's the shock, but the fact of concealment over many years', I read in a magazine article about the unexpected discovery of half-siblings. People making this kind of discovery suddenly see all around them signs of betrayal, of fakery, or, at the very least, of things left unspoken.

[…]

At the time I was constantly thinking about what could still lay hidden, or had lain hidden in the past. Cracks were even appearing in my relationship with my husband, which till then I'd seen as the greatest love story of the late 20th century—purely by dint of me turning it all over in my mind.

What had brought him and me together was our shared past. We had a shared suitcase of experiences, from which we lived. The contents of the suitcase fitted us both and kept us warm for years. But since the appearance of the stranger, none of this mattered any more. Thousands of things occurred to me that scratched away at the image I'd built up of our relationship. It was like turning over a tablecloth, when the colour and pattern on the other side gives a whole new look to the room. An exchange had taken place. All the details were correct, everything was in the same place, but it was as if the heart had been ripped out of the world.

[…]

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Chapter 61

[…] When did I in fact tell him about the sudden appearance of my sister? Right away, on the phone, while I was on the winter book tour? Or not until I'd returned home? On this point, my memory is suspiciously hazy. As if I'd instinctively decided he wouldn't be any kind of ally in matters of blood relations. But what could I expect from someone who'd told me casually years before about his half sister. A sporty girl, curly haired like him, who'd turned up two or three times in his childhood, and later disappeared from his life altogether.

I've never forgotten how emphatic he was, as he batted away any attempt to talk about it. He'd said: What's the point in dragging these things up. It only makes people unhappy. You can say it's about getting to the truth, but it ends up stirring things up that can never be put back in the box.

Evidently there was no more to be said. Evidently we had completely different views about family, about family relationships.

Just deal with it, he said. Deal with the fact you're nothing to each other. What's more: even if there were any reliable proof of a blood relationship—do you really think that would create a bond? What century are you living in?

[…]

Chapter 63

But did I really grasp it all? In the summer after our return to Germany, I often read our oldest child passages from 'Alice in Wonderland'. There's one part where it says, '.... so many remarkable things had happened to her recently, that Alice began to believe almost nothing was impossible.' In contrast to Alice, I was not aware of my transformation, the remarkable thing happening to me. I only sensed it in roundabout ways. I sensed the traces it left in my life. The imprint of the tentacles wrapping tightly around me.

Behind every sentence uttered by my husband, I caught the scent of something else. The belief that I'd found him out filled me with pride. I referred to everything he did with air quotes. For months on end—do I still do it?—I put those two little finger hooks in the air whenever explaining to a friend or my sister where he was, or why he'd be home from work late today. He's still 'in the office' I'd go.

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He's got to 'chair a meeting'. He's 'meeting a colleague' in order to 'discuss the new book'. I left it at the hints, the knowing tone, to let people around me, and myself, know that I was up to speed.

In the evening I'd watch men on the street, murmuring quietly into their phones. They were standing on the pavement in the dark, as if they'd escaped from home and were now completely absorbed in their secret lovers' conversation.

I wondered about hiring a private detective. Did they still exist? I imagined this person spending his days in the Starbucks opposite the office block where my husband worked. Following him as soon as he walked out of the main entrance and made his way to the U-Bahn. I imagined him finally passing me an envelope with photos, telling me: if I were you, I'd take a seat. For weeks I couldn't get this out of my head. I told myself I'd have to keep control when looking at the photos. I tried to find out what it would cost to have someone followed for two or three weeks. While zapping through the TV channels, I paused at a film scene where a woman was refusing to pay a private detective who'd caught her husband having an affair. I don't owe you anything, she screamed down the phone. Why should I pay you eight hundred dollars just to be told he's fucking someone else?

My behaviour manifested itself in scary ways. I was utterly convinced that sometime or other the doorbell would ring and a curly-haired teenager would be standing at the door of our flat, asking to see his father. The scenario changed daily depending on my mood: sometimes I imagined him grinning shyly, at other times he stood there, provocative and snotty-nosed.

And it seemed ridiculous to me, grotesque even, when a woman in a film broke down, weeping on her bed, and tore up her husband's photo, because he'd left her for another woman. Didn't she know? Didn't she know that this was something completely natural, that happened all the time, all over the world? Sure, it wasn't something to be welcomed, it wasn't exactly nice, that they behaved like that, but weren't we basically better than them, we who could see through them, even though we couldn't in the end stop what they were doing?

I got into the habit of using words like 'happiness' or 'love' purely ironically.
I stopped myself believing there was a better, or even a perfect state of affairs somewhere else. I needed the unhappiness of others. It helped me to see my situation as normal. Whenever I saw a loved up couple, I felt a twinge of schadenfreude as I thought: you'll see.

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At some point I let it be known to a friend that I was seeing someone on a regular basis. I dropped vague, mysterious hints in the hope that she'd tell her husband, who would in turn tell my husband, who would then think over his secret machinations and end them.

There are endless examples of my confusion, which permeated my thinking right through to the far reaches of my brain. There'd be no point in listing them all.

But then what did have a point? Back then, nothing I did or thought seemed to express confusion. Quite the contrary. In my outbursts and brooding and secret plans I saw the utmost logic.

[…]

Chapter 70

Several months have passed since I started to write about the incident. Have I lost out on these happy months? In the autumn I didn't kick through the fallen leaves. I didn't ride my bike around the lake. I didn't ramble to the pavilion-like brick building that I can see from our flat although I had planned to do so. Since moving here, every morning I look out through the houses to the opposite side of the water, where it stands. And I think, tomorrow, I will go there, up the hill and visit it, the old court house known as Berliner Gerichtslaube.

Occasionally, I felt homesick for Bowling Green; it is a form of regret. Homesickness for this faraway place where I learned to believe in something without ever knowing exactly what. Although I spent the months there doing activities that you would normally categorise as "experiences"; although I travelled to Toledo, Chicago and Texas; and although my days were filled with hundreds of things which are part of a life that balances family and career; and yes, although I enjoyed happy evenings in the town's restaurants, the jazz club, the sports bar and the waffle house; and although my mother perennially tried to remind me of other incidents, in my memory my time there remains as a strange sort of intensive floating.

Reading the newspapers on a night with my mother.

Visiting a newly-opened casino outside the town where I found a five dollar chip on the patterned carpet.

The glowing red anorak of my eldest child.

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The snow.

The piece by Dürrenmatt, which the student body performed at the end of the semester (my slight disgruntlement that no matter where you go in the world, you always encounter a piece by Dürrenmatt).

The glass cubicle in the sports centre where my husband and eldest child tried to play squash while I watched them from another level.

The night-time illumination of the gas station on Wooster / Enterprise Street.

The giant TV in the foyer of the halls of residence that showed the hunt for the Boston Marathon bomber live over several days.

Even the Bob Dylan concert that I attended that spring, of which I only knew that he got on stage without addressing the audience and then, after a good dozen songs, silently disappeared again.

I even forgot that I had a reading. My mother reminded me of it. A reading that took place in the small auditorium of the institute, a room which I cannot bring to mind no matter how hard I try. At the reading I spoke of disappearing, not just about places that have disappeared but also about how everything that I took for granted as a child, the old world order, was fleeting or at least had been atomised.

After the reading, my mother tells me, a man stood up and said to the assembled audience that he was surprised that I, a European, could speak of disappearing. A couple of people nodded their heads in agreement. For him, Europe was a continent of archives, of preservation and of the protected past. He said that nothing disappears there and that it is the continent of eternity.

I block out such things. I was surprised to hear that the man had asked what this sentence in one of my books means, “when something disappears, then a square appears in the landscape. Sometimes it’s a circle.”

Later, in those dark years, when I remembered Bowling Green, I generally saw the railroad in front of me; the tracks that run in a straight line through the town and cut it in half, so to speak. I would often stand there on an evening. The crossings did not have gates; rather, the trains announced their arrival with long honks - that mythical sound signalling there is a country waiting for you, to which you will one day travel. The trains were very long, often with over a hundred wagons laden with oil,

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milk or grain. Anyway, that's what I imagined. Despite being so far from home, I would feel wanderlust as soon as I heard the honking shortly followed by the train passing me in the dark.

You never know in whose company you are living. Sometimes our thoughts are elsewhere for a long time, on people and incidents from another time and other places. I wonder if longing is therefore like elastic that can be stretched so far that the yonder always stays the same distance away?

Chapter 71

The story about the stranger, my half sister, may have appeared as another dream to me, like something that happened in an unreal time, had I not met her again.

It took me a long time to contact her.

Years.

The thought of sitting opposite her, talking to her, chatting about this and that, appeared tremendous and ludicrous in equal measure. Maybe she felt exactly the same. At any rate, after our initial correspondence she did not bother me any more or beg to meet. Her silence, which was an answer to mine, appeared to me like a polite rustling from afar. There was more at stake for her than for me. Is that why she didn't try to get too close? In order not to corner me but to give me the choice?

I no longer thought of her so often. But when I did, I had the impression something was unfinished.

Much later, when I was again capable of talking to people, of working and of going to the cinema, I wrote to her and suggested a meeting. Once again it was December. I travelled to her, to northern Germany, to the town where we had met for the first time. When I alighted from the regional train, it was snowing like back in that winter when she came to my table after the reading.

I didn't recognise her immediately. (It isn't necessarily always the case that seeing someone again is the best way to jog memories). She was waiting at the entrance to the train station. She saw me first and came towards me. Her hair was different to her style at our first meeting. At least, my memory of it was different. She looked more feminine, and older too.

Later in the cafe where we had gone to eat, I told her that I had to write about our story, her sudden appearance and what it had triggered inside me. She said she understood and that if she were me,

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she would do the same. I asked her questions. It turned out that the majority of what I had dreamt up about her was correct (the dark dyed hair of her mother, the atmosphere in which she had grown up and the silent kitchen with the milky coffee etc.). We talked about our children and our work. Her son was already an adult and lived in another city. She showed me a photo of him and one of her dog, a border collie. On the photo, the dog was lying in the sun in front of her house.

I also told her about my, our, father. I told her that we didn't see each other often. I said that so that she did not have the feeling that I had an advantage over her. I did not want to hurt her or kindle a longing in her. But then she said she was in regular contact with him and that they would occasionally write to each other. I tried to disguise my surprise at that.

When we left each other, we promised to stay in touch. At the same time, I sensed that with this meeting I had drawn closure on something.

On the return journey in the regional train, I watched a woman with two small children. The train was full and many passengers stood with their luggage and bikes in the small passageways between the rows of seats. Suddenly, the woman cried out in shock. Her son had found a few crisp crumbs on the floor and was sticking them in his mouth. The woman shouted, "No!" She did it twice and then in her helplessness she covered her eyes with her hands and laughed. She is like me, I thought with surprise. She wears a mask in public.

Translated by Catherin Venner: Chapter 1-6; 16;20-22; 70-71
Translated by Mandy Wight: Chapter 8-9; 25; 27-29; 43; 61; 63