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My Translation

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My Translation

One Person's Journey from 1980s Germany to the U.S.

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Sandra Capellaro

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

December 2022

For my daughter Lio

Acknowledgements

With enormous gratitude to all the professors at Bard who supported me during my time here.

I like to think of this senior project in terms of a seafaring vessel.

The metaphor itself is inspired by Susan Fox Rogers, kayaker, birder, writer, warmest of mentors and all-around *Mensch*. Thank you for helping me assemble all the nuts and bolts to put this boat together.

Thank you to Joe O'Neill for stepping in at midpoint and plumbing the depths with me before any journey could really get underway. You helped me navigate my memories with honesty; your enthusiasm spurred me on. The intense work of the last three months was pure joy. There's nothing like seeing your stories take shape. Thank you for the name and for helping me steer this boat out into open water.

I couldn't have asked for better harbormasters. *Vielen, vielen Dank!*

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Introduction

The stories in this autobiographical collection don't make up a whole. Among the fugitive pieces that constitute my memories, these are the ones that have risen to the top, with many still fermenting below.

I was born in Hannover, Germany, in the 1970s. Pronounced Hannóver in German, a writer once unkindly called the capital of Lower Saxony a city without any particular qualities, by which he meant that it's not hip like Berlin, chic and nonchalant like Hamburg, or expensive like Munich. It has no face to outsiders. The upshot is that Hannover has no reputation to live down or to live up to. For centuries the city has quietly produced cookies and fountain pens. Every Christmas, Bahlsen gingerbread makes an appearance in American supermarkets, as the ur-taste of Germany. Bahlsen is still headquartered just around the corner from where I grew up, and Pelikan sits a few tram stops further down that same street.

While my hometown required me to discover it, to make it my own, the German nation was an idea that I was born into. The idea included the specter of World War II, and the Holocaust was forever present. From when I was quite young, I took these distant events very personally, felt them inextricably tied to who I was as a German—even if, as far as I knew, my own grandfathers had been simple laborers at the time and my parents mere infants. By the time I was in my early twenties, I'd read dozens of books about World War II, studied antisemitism in college, watched the film *Shoah* and the horrifying newsreels of the concentration camps. One summer, when I was twenty, I volunteered with an international crew at Buchenwald, where we excavated foundations that had been overgrown with vegetation. In the process, I finally met Jews for the first time in my life.

My intense sense of outrage and responsibility for the horrors committed by the Nazis wasn't shared by my family of origin. Far from condoning Fascism, they simply didn't understand why I was so focused on it. This heightened a broader discomfort I already felt. As an only child—all my cousins (and friends) had another sibling—I was left somewhere in the middle between my mom and dad, couldn't seem to get rooted under the umbrella of our family.

Here is a memory: in the fourth grade, I stitch a sampler that spells our last name, Gebbeken. My parents hang it outside the apartment door. I don't like the name. It doesn't even mean anything.

My immigration to the United States begins as a college exchange year. I'm twenty-two. I feel comfortable here, a bit freer to explore who I want to be. And there's something about the language that feels physically right. When I switch from German to American English my voice drops a register, from head voice to chest voice.

The irony of being an immigrant is that I'm now even more aware of Germany's legacy than those who still live there. I'm measured against stereotypes (punctuality, obedience, Sauerkraut, good workmanship, the list goes on) whether I like it or not. As a result, I try hard not to be on time, cross the street despite the light being red, and generally circumvent rules. I try to be a little less direct with people. Still, some German traits stick like burrs. Others I'm unwilling to shed. I don't like flags or any overt display of patriotism. When my daughter has to recite the pledge of allegiance in school before she can even read, I bristle. It makes me uneasy to see people rise when the national anthem is played. I feel like I know where it can lead, feel the potential for danger, also in this country.

As I gradually work through the responsibilities and identifications I've taken on, I come to understand my mother's own war trauma as a young child. I grow more and more interested in

her story, the possible roots of her depression in later years. In these attempts at rendering episodes of my own and my mother's life, I've noticed how memories request our ongoing participation. Like dreams, the more we pay attention to them, the more we remember. Over time, as memories shift, so does meaning. Our interpretations shape who we are, they can make and unmake our very sense of self, of home.

Biologists say that a spiral, abundant throughout nature, is the most efficient symbol of growth. A human life, much like a spiral, folds in on itself before it expands. Familiar and familial events may replay, yet we've become different. Parenting seems to me one of those spiral examples. As I'm looking at my mother's life, I'm tracing the limitations of one generation and how they play out in the next. We can't help but repeat some of what has been handed down, even if we put thousands of miles between those who birthed us and ourselves. Patterns remain—and perhaps we aren't meant to escape them fully. Hopefully, we widen the circle, create just a little bit more room for our children to flourish.

In addition, we emigrants also have to come to terms with the lack of simplicity at the center of our lives. The cultural gap that opens. My life will forever be split between before and after, between German and English, between my family over there and my friends and daughter over here. It isn't simple. There are gains and losses.

In the summer of 2014, weeks after I bury my father, the German soccer team reaches the World Cup final. They're playing against Argentina. I watch the game with friends, Spanish teachers who are rooting for the other team. Today, to my own surprise, I have put the colors of the German flag on my cheeks. In a dramatic game, Germany wins in overtime.

I continue to root for the German team. They haven't played nearly as well since.

PART I

Hannover I

I feel comfortable in English right from the start.

It's the fifth grade. We're all new to this school after just having transferred from elementary school to the *Orientierungsstufe*, a form of middle school called orientation stage. The Edenschule is just across the yard from our old one. English, a new subject, is taught by Frau Lose. When Frau Lose walks into our classroom that first morning she doesn't say, "*Guten Morgen*" like other teachers. Instead she says "Good morning, class!" She follows it up with a stream of words, then writes her name on the board. We look at each other, raising eyebrows, suppressing giggles. The teacher motions for us to repeat after her, "Gud Moor-ning." Our voices stumble into a unison rendition. More words rain down on us. Frau Lose stands and smiles, dark, wavy hair framing her face, while I sit stockstill, trying to understand what is expected of us. She rummages through her handbag and pulls out a set of index cards. Cards in hand she begins to slowly walk through the classroom, her brown eyes looking at each of us quizzically before she stops in front of Thorsten, folds one of the index cards in half and places it in front of him. "You're going to be Peter," she says. We all repeat out loud, "Pe-ter." She's standing to my right now, and I can tell she's looking at me. Goosebumps creep up my neck. "Susan", she exclaims and places my name card on the desk in front of me. I smile back at her. My friend Christiane is transformed into Hatty a few minutes later, a name she hates, and sassy Claudia becomes Sheila. It's uncanny how the names all fit us.

We try to wrap our mouths around the strange sounds. Frau Lose teaches British English—I never find out if she's British or in fact German—her consonants are sharp, the vowels round, centered and a bit nasally. "Squirrel," we discover, is almost impossible to pronounce and comes out as "squerl" no matter how hard we try, but then *Eichhörnchen* is just as

unreasonable for non-German speakers. We have the cutest *Eichörnchens* in the local forest not far from my home, they're maroon and petite with a bushy tail and cackling chatter. On Sunday walks with my parents I fill my pockets with hazelnuts and clack them together until one jumps out of the bushes. A few times one even takes a nut straight out of my hands.

I like my new name. Susan strikes me as well-mannered, a good student, mature. I feel I can fill that role, and this makes me happy. I feel as if I'm stepping into someone else's shoes and to my surprise they fit. Words stick in my mind easily and I become an A student. Later, when Frau Lose teaches us "What shall we do with the drunken sailor," I belt out "put him in the long boat 'til he's sober" before we all exuberantly join in the chorus "Hooray and up she rises!" and clamor to sing it all over again. For now, I go home and get out the textbook even if there's no homework due. I turn the pages and read the words next to the pictures, "house," "chair," then skip ahead to phrases, "This is Bill. He goes to school with his friend Tom. This is his family." In class, I'm as alert as a spaniel on the scent. *Deutsch*, *Rechnen* (arithmetic) and *Sachunterricht* ("the study of things") are alright, but this new language on the timetable—*Englisch*—is something else.

My parents and I live in a corner apartment building in a bustling area of Hannover called List. Its chocolate-colored facade is set off with sinuous decorations in white. Like most of the other buildings here, it was built around the turn-of-the-century though the neighborhood is a bit of a hodgepodge with the occasional modern concrete building filling in a row or making up entire blocks. I'm getting used to seeing graffiti tags appear on the ground floor wall. At first, a couple of men in work coats appeared and scrubbed them off, but now the scribbles just stay and get covered with new ones.

There are three things I like about living in Hannover.

Number One, it's green. There's a large forest in walking distance to my home, the Eilenriede. My friends and I criss-cross it on foot, hang out at the playgrounds, meadows and kiosk-cafes, or bike through to get to the zoo. Further from home, behind city hall, there's the Maschsee with its specks of boats, ducks and lush weeping willows on the far shore. I also like the Georgengarten, which is wilder, less landscaped than the Royal Gardens. There's no royalty I'm aware of in Hannover, and I've looked for the palace in the palace garden many times. It's all a bit confounding. There's a giant fountain, a sundial, myriad mazes of ornamental box hedges, white statues, endless flowerbeds, even a dark grotto, but instead of a fancy building at the helm of it all, there's nothing but graveled, empty space. The historic museum tucked into a stone wall in the *Altstadt* has a room full of gilded carriages. They impress me immensely.

And then there's our allotment garden, which holds no such mysteries. We bike there most weekends to barbecue, eat plum cake, play boccia, sometimes badminton. I feed the goldfish, while my mom tans on a lounge and my father prunes his shrubs.

Number Two, the pedestrian mall that connects my neighborhood to the city center. Via the mile-long Lister Meile my friends and I can walk all the way to the central shopping district, past gelato parlors, florists, used book stores, a Woolworth's, and that new glass cube in which a lively man sells thick squares of pizza.

Number Three, *der Rote Faden*. A Red Thread winds through Hannover like the river Leine.¹ If you follow its snaking path on the pavement, you're led to all the sights in the city. I like to think of it as a sort of treasure map. More like a string of numbered advent calendar doors, than a particular location you have to find. Though I've never walked the whole length of it—I'm not a tourist—every time the faded red paint pops up beneath my feet I feel giddy. The thread lends importance to my excursions. It anchors me to home.

¹ *Leine* can be translated as leash, cord.

I'm six years old. After the first day of school, our parents give us decorated *Schultüten*, cone-shaped gift bags which are heavy and half as tall as we are. We hold them up proudly as we stand on the school steps for a class picture, accidentally whacking each other in the head because we're all antsy to get home and open the bags filled with candy and school supplies. For the next few days the neighbor's boy, Sören, walks me to school. He's in the grade above me, and sometimes we play together at his apartment just across the landing from ours on the fourth floor. He likes playing with matchbox cars, I prefer board games. I can never produce the loud bbrmmmmhh sound effects. After that first week I'm fine walking on my own from 21 Ferdinand Wallbrecht Street to school. I skip down the steps two at a time, past the stained-glass window on the first floor, and take the turn through the large lobby tiled in dim gray out onto the street. I pass the tiny grocer at the corner of our building where we never shop—it's what we call a *Tante Emma Laden*, an Aunt Emma shop which has assorted groceries—then walk down Kollenrodt Street. After one block, at the intersection, I look left, then right and left again, as we've been drilled, before crossing the zebra stripes. Then it's across a cobblestoned side street and there I am in front of the tall white school building of my elementary school, the Comeniusschule.

Its imposing facade has brown, fluted trim around the edges, tall windows over four floors and two entrances from the schoolyard—originally separating boys and girls. I always use the one on the right. My class is the 1b, and our room is up a wide staircase on the second floor. Frau Baestlein, our teacher, has her desk on the far side of the room, the rest of us share tables arranged in two E's facing each other. There are curved wooden pockets beneath the tables which hold our stiff canvas *Ranzen*, satchels, with just enough room for our knees. I sit on the side of the E, toward the front, and later, around the time my friend Claudia beats up Karl-Peter, I make a point to sit in the back. I'm not sure when Karl-Peter appears, I know he doesn't stay with us

for more than a year, whereas the rest of the class stays together as the 1b, 2b, etc. for four years. Whoever has an odd, hyphenated name like that!? Claudia jumps him in the space behind the back desks, not far from the door. As she sits on his belly I stand close-by with others, thrilled at her daring. He has probably taunted her which is silly because Claudia is tough but then she's also a little ahead of the rest of us, the first and only girl to wear miniskirts a couple of years later. Twice Claudia and I have to stand in the corner because we can't stop whispering to each other in class. I think Frau Baestlein and I are equally surprised when she asks me to get up with Claudia and go to the corner since I'm usually a model student. Everyone looks at us, the room falls quiet. As I walk over, unsure which way to face, shame mixes with a new reckless pride.

My best friend Christiane lives on the same block, just around the corner. I call her Chris because it's cooler and can say her phone number in my sleep: 68 39 76. Every time I have to call to ask if she's free, I sit at the edge of the chair in our dining room, twist the rotary phone's spiral cord in my hand and rehearse what I'm going to say if her mom picks up. I don't like speaking on the phone. Luckily, we usually make plans on our way home from school. "See you at the Boni at half four!" we say. Boni is short for Bonifatius Square, the playground across the street from elementary school where we practice our swings on the monkey bars and talk. Sometimes we go to the rustic Wakitu which is set under trees at the edge of the Eilenriede. We build little houses out of wood here. At school, girls can only take *Textilarbeit*, and it's the boys who have Shop. One of the goats they keep in an enclosure at the Wakitu knocks Chris over one day. We go back to the Boni or stroll on the Lister Meile.

On the ground floor of my building is a kiosk which sells candy, beer and magazines. For five Pfennig you can buy a *Salino*, a rhombus-shaped piece of black licorice, a *Colaflasche*, or a

gummy frog. Marshmallow mice cost 10 Pfennig. Licorice is my all time favorite candy, especially *Salinos* with their satisfying stiffer texture, while Chris prefers *Brausetabletten* that bubble in your mouth, and wine gummies. I usually spend 50 Pfennigs at a time but a real splurge of one Mark nets me a white paper bag filled with candy which lasts me two days, three if I really scrimp. The salesman, a quiet, burly man who often wears a leather vest, retrieves the candy with his hands from the many plastic containers that are set in the window. Right beneath the counter where we pay is a metal grate in the ground. What nobody else knows is that it leads right to the cellar of my building!

Every family at 21 Ferdi has both an attic and a basement room for storage. As you come down the stairway opposite the small paved-in courtyard—later some of our neighbors paint a mural of children there and people chip in to buy a ping-pong table—our cellar room is to the left, toward the light that comes in from the bike storage, the *Fahrradkeller*. To the right is a hallway only lit by the overhead bulb that goes out with a click after three minutes. The unit directly below the kiosk is located on this side. No one seems to own it because the wooden door is never locked, unlike others which are secured with padlocks. Once inside, I blindly make my way forward toward the shaft which lets in a little light from the street above. I feel my way along the piled up wooden boards, stored inside there for decades, and duck to get through a narrow section until I reach the light shaft. Sometimes there are voices, and when I look up I can see shoe bottoms standing outside the kiosk window. A bed of thick fluffy dust and debris has accumulated in the well below the grate but if I'm lucky, a few green *Groschen* lie hidden beneath it. Sometimes even a shiny silver piece of fifty Pfennig. Once I let my friend Chris in on the secret, we become regular raiders of lost money.

My favorite subject in elementary school is PE, or *Sport*, as it's called. We sometimes play games, like *Völkerball*, yet most of the time we do gymnastics, boys and girls alike. The teacher has us set up several blue mats in a row so that we can practice combinations of somersaults, backward rolls, handstands and wheels. The grippy mats are heavy and have white fabric handles on the side. It takes two children per mat to carry them. I love dashing into the *Geräteraum*, where the equipment is stored, and getting everything ready. Sometimes with the teacher's help we get out the *Bock* or *Kasten*, or, my favorite, the trampoline. The thrill of running from a distance, jumping into the trampoline and being airborne is the best part of *Sport* for me. We start with simple jumps keeping our legs straight and touching our hands together overhead, then we move on to *Grätsche*, where our legs come forward in a v and we touch our toes. The crowning glory, however, is the *Salto*, a flip in the air. It's a bit scary. Until I master it, I sometimes have so much momentum I fall face-forward onto the squishy mat. I enjoy gymnastics so much that I join a club, the TKH, Turnklub Hannover. We practice every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. It's not competitive, though we participate in the city-wide Turnfest. The meet takes place in the soccer stadium of Hannover 96 who still play in Germany's secondary league at the time. Announcements about where to assemble are made via bullhorns. I don't think my parents ever come and watch, and I doubt that bothers me.

My father has put up pine paneling in a few areas of our apartment. There's a bar in the dining room with several stools around which he has created a blonde wooden nook. At night, he often sits there, looking out onto the street while listening to music or soccer matches on his headphones. The only pet I ever own, a blue budgie, sits in its cage on one of the bar stools. What I really want is a cat, or even better a dog, but my mom is afraid a cat will scratch up the leather sofa and the dog will need walking, so the bird is a compromise. At night we put a tea

towel over the cage so the budgie has it nice and dark. I can't remember its name but we must have determined it's a male. The bird's most memorable escapades involve getting tangled up in the top of the lace curtains. My dad has to borrow a ladder and cut him out of the fabric which, of course, displeases my mother. He's thanked for his efforts by the bird sinking its beak into his thumb but somehow he delivers it back to its cage. Sometimes my father whistles to the budgie. He's pretty good at whistling, at least compared to me. Sören and some other boys can even put an index and middle finger in their mouth and let out a piercing one-note whistle but all I can produce is a breathy sound. The bird replies to my dad in a fluty chirp, they go back and forth for a bit, then the bird falls silent. Other times I hear it talking to itself, a gurgly drone with high pitched accents, but when I get close to the cage to investigate it stops and sucks in its stomach. I know this is its wary pose. I can never get over how different it looks with its feathers all fluffed up and airy. Eventually the budgie develops an abscess on its anus and dies. In hindsight, we should have given him a companion but I'm an only child myself so nobody thinks twice about it. Other kids have birds they can pet, even do tricks with, while ours edges away as soon as we approach. Not that Chris' family is more successful at pet-raising. Her mother steps on the goldfish one morning when opening the blinds—did it jump out of the bowl?—their miniature turtles disappear down the rain pipe during a free range hour on the balcony, and one of their budgies is killed when her brother slams the cage door shut during an argument. At which point their mother gives away the remaining bird and says, "That's it with pets." I do enjoy filling the little food compartment with grains from the bag and keeping our bird's water clean. My mom never tires of complaining about the feathers flying out of the cage.

Every summer we pick out a package trip from the Neckermann catalog and fly to one of the Spanish islands for two weeks. We also drive to the coast of Italy, or visit Ulf and Birgit, our

neighbors, who have bought a house in Tenerife. They know how to speak Spanish with an impressively rolling r. My mom has a bit of an interest in languages herself. She has gone to evening school for Spanish and I've seen her books around the apartment; they're wine-red with black lettering. I can sense the pride in her, even if she only goes for a semester or two. Sometimes I ask her to hold the English vocab list and quiz me on words, but beyond that I never consult my parents for homework help. I don't think my friends do either.

In my building there's also a *Nähstube* on the street level, a tiny tailor shop run by a thin, older woman. One day my mother asks me to go inside and ask how much it costs to have a zipper fixed. My mom is good at sewing but zippers are labor-intensive. I'm nervous and don't want to go inside. Buying rolls at the bakery down the street, surrounded by other customers, is one thing. On my walk over I'll do the math in my head of four regular rolls times 22 Pfennig plus one full grain roll at 24 Pfennig, then skip back clutching my crisp white paper bag in one hand and the change in the other. Once the rolls are on the breakfast table, I twist the opening of the bag, blow it up and smack it hard, the way my dad showed me. Pow! But opening the door to a tiny store we never set foot in feels very different from the bakery. Any time my mother needs thread or buttons she goes to the *Kaufhalle* on the Lister Meile which has everything and is cheaper too. Convenience never trumps frugality in my mother's eyes.

When I'm fourteen, my mom goes away for six weeks to Lüneburg. In the small town of Lüneburg there is what's called a *Heilanstalt*, a sanatorium. The closest equivalent may be "mental health rehab center" yet the German word is vague and puts the emphasis on the word "cure." Now my dad leaves lunch for me to heat up, or I cook ravioli, scrambled eggs and mashed potatoes by myself. On the weekends my mom calls. She speaks about what she has

done in occupational therapy and seems eager for stories about my life, but I'm not sure what to tell her. When my dad is on the phone with her, he mostly listens, occasionally offering a "schön!", nice, or just says "jo," which is the German way of summing things up and moving on. My mother also sends me a few letters, which I like.

After she comes home, things resume their normal course. In some ways she seems to have a greater sense of agency and purpose as she does the housework or proposes Sunday outings, yet at the same time she has never been a patient woman. Her favorite word for my father remains "stur." "You're so stolid!" she accuses him, when she expects a reply and he either takes too long or doesn't realize her remark is intended as a question. It takes a lot for him to get openly flustered, usually he says nothing, just continues with what he's doing. I tend to agree with my mother and don't seek out my dad. With his even-tempered mood and regular routines he fades into the woodwork. Much later do I become aware of the gifts of his character, but by then I live far away.

The Eighties are full of smells.

The smoke of cigarette swirls through the living-room whenever my parents get together with friends. Often it's Ulf and Birgit from downstairs. I like talking to Ulf, who's an architect, and sometimes we all play *Kniffel* together. While I wait for my turn to roll the dice, I watch the loose clouds drift up toward the ceiling. Birgit's perfume fills my nose. It's a cloying and musky fragrance that makes my head feel heavy. Once Birgit comes into my room at night when I'm about to fall asleep—it's not clear to me why, perhaps she's been sent to say good night?—and I kick her. She reminds my mom and me from time to time. Around this time, the *Tante Emma* shop downstairs becomes a health food store, something my family has never heard of. The new name painted over the window in orange says *Bittersüss*, Bittersweet. It doesn't encourage

exploration. Every time the door opens as I'm walking by, an unfamiliar smell drifts outside; something healthy, like an herb, or sesame.

Hannover's train station always smells of beer and piss. People we call *Penner* (bums, hobos, winos) are slumped against pillars, or the sides of ticket vending machines. We have learned to ignore them. Still, I can't shake the apprehension that one of them might ask me for money, or, if they're young people, that they'll challenge me with a sassy remark. The underground passage that leads from the Lister Meile, past the station, to the city center has kiosks and small stores. From somewhere, the pungent smell of salmiak reminds me pleasantly of licorice. A busker's music drifts through the tunnel. Closer to the center, there are smells of patchouli coming out of a hippie store, which gives way to roasted nuts from a stand right by the steps leading up to the main shopping area. One of the things my girlfriends and I love to do is buy tea in bulk. We expectantly sniff the large black tin containers the salesperson proffers. After we make our choices, we watch them dig into the crunchy leaves, speckled with dried fruit or herbs, and fill shiny bags. Once the package is folded over and tied, a label gets made out with the tea's name—usually a romantic compound word such as *Winternacht* or *Himbeerparadies*. When Chris, Iris, or Vivien and I get together, we have “tea time.”

I have an enduring fascination with four city models that are displayed in the new *Rathaus*, Hannover's city hall. They are from 1689, 1939, 1945 and 1980 respectively and show the development of the city over time. Hannover was just a collection of villages in the 1600's before the city began to take on the cohesive character I am used to. When the city fathers had the models developed they were also intended as a showcase for how well and swiftly the city was reconstructed after the war. British bombing raids had obliterated 80% of all the buildings in the city, a transport hub where train lines from Berlin and points north and south connected, I've

read. Every time I come here I stare at the model from 1945. It's all in brown crumbles, like a mud landscape in early spring, whereas the model depicting the present time is built in aqua and white. Modern colors. Too modern for my liking, I prefer the beige style of the 1689 model. It's also jarring in comparison to the war-time model. But all that debris. Where has all the rubble gone, I wonder. Where have they put those mountains of heaped ruins?

My Favorite Teacher and the Royals

It's the ninth grade. In the middle of history class, while Frau Kutscher is trying to elicit from us possible connections between the cost of flour and the French Revolution, there's a knock on the door. Our heads swivel to the corner of the room where a woman appears now, a little out of breath. I've never seen her before. She says something about the principal, so sorry about the interruption. Across the room, I notice one of the boys flipping back his hair. A stream of light from the window tilts across his body. Then I hear the woman saying my name. The classroom fades and only the shiny desk in front of me exists, like a screen on which my mind is trying, without success, to project the image that I am to come to the principal's office. I look over to the teacher, who looks back at me from a great distance and nods. I get up and follow the woman into the deserted hallway. Upstairs in the principal's office I see my former English teacher, Herr Hickmann, just inside the door. On the far side of the room, two students from another grade are standing at right angles from each other. They look as confused as I am. From behind his desk, the principal begins to speak.

The school, he informs us, has been contacted on the occasion of the Prince and Princess of England's upcoming visit to Hannover. We—the students in the principal's office—are invited to be part of the greeting committee. It takes me a moment to understand which royalty he's talking about. Charles and Lady Diana? Herr Hickmann is now beaming at us. It was he, I realize, who suggested our names. This is puzzling. He hasn't been my teacher in a year.

Herr Hickmann wears his signature brown tweed jacket. The top of his head is as bald as it was when he taught my class and shared with us the things he loved: Shakespeare, *Fawlty Towers*, the economy and beauty of the English language. When something amused Herr

Hickmann, an impish sort of grin would spread over his face from one corner of his mouth. He showed us Monty Python clips in class and giggled at every one of them. A few times, after exams, he read bits of my essays out loud to the class. We could tell he liked us. At first unprompted, but soon very much enlisted by one student or another in an effort to kill time, he told us stories about his house. He had recently moved into a new place in the country (somewhere in the boonies, we surmised) which for a while didn't have a door. When he finally did have a door there was a problem with it. Herr Hickmann patiently lived in some sort of construction zone unimaginable to me, as someone who had always lived in fourth floor walk-ups that came with all requisite fixtures and closures.

A snow-white card inside a large envelope arrives in the mail. In curlicue script the *Ministerpräsident* of Lower Saxony is inviting me to the honor of welcoming their Highnesses. "But why you exactly?" my mother asks. A few days later the selected students are excused from school and instead stand along a tree-lined path in the Royal Garden Herrenhausen. We're huddled close together, shivering in our good outfits on this brisk spring morning. I'm wearing my confirmation pants which have silver threads and my mother's blazer. Prince Charles and Lady Di are expected to make their way down the path, shaking hands with dignitaries and school children from all over Hannover. People have started to line up along a white rope. The girl from the principal's office says she's practiced her curtsy. I have no idea how to curtsy and decide it's not necessary. What am I supposed to say to them again? "How are you?" No. "Hello?" Too casual. "How do you do?" Suddenly I can't remember a word of English.

They have arrived. The chatter around me grows quiet. I hold my right arm at my side, ready to extend it should the time come. I really want it to be Diana. It's 1987, and everybody is in love with her. Once there's a picture of her in a Prussian blue outfit shaking hands with an

AIDS patient. Someone tells us they can't possibly shake everyone's hands today. As the couple come down the path I sneak a look to the left—he's ahead of her. One moment he's talking to someone three people over, and then Prince Charles is in front of me, takes my hand, and I smile. Perhaps I mumble "How do you do," and perhaps I don't. I might even answer a question that's being asked. All I recall is Lady's Di's gentle smile as she walks by and the fact that my former teacher had remembered me.

Hannover II

At Easter and Christmas we get in the car and visit my grandparents. One year it's my father's side of the family, the next we go to my mom's. My father drives our small, brown Opel, and I look out the window at the passing landscape. We take the city highway past Herrenhausen and then travel mostly on state routes that lead through small towns. I can tell every time we approach a town because my father has to slow the car down from one hundred to fifty km/h. Rectangular yellow signs, the same color as postal service cars and public mailboxes, announce what town we're about to enter. Bueckeburg, Nienstedt, Diepholz. Many of the houses have small front yards enclosed by wooden fences with slats that crisscross to make an X. This type of low fence is called a *Jägerzaun*, hunter's fence. I have no idea why. I've never seen a hunter. The fences are often green with moss and moisture. Who lives inside these homes? Sometimes there are old people slowly riding bicycles in the street, or men on tiny mopeds, their open bomber jackets flapping in the wind. The streets are clean under a sky filled with clouds. To me it all looks gray, as gray and oppressive as a Sunday afternoon. When we drive past the bright yellow rapeseed fields near Dassel, I perk up. The grass looks lush here. I see white and black cows grazing and try to imagine what it would be like to have so much grass to eat.

When we visit my dad's mother, Oma Hermine, we stay at my aunt Ulla's house because she has the most room. My grandfather's death is the first one in the family. He dies when I'm six years old. During that visit we stand around a lot, and the adults are much quieter than they usually are. Their held-in dismay is palpable, like a wind which makes my belly feel cold. Nobody dies for a long while after that. My dad's much younger brother Siggi ends up in intensive care after one too many drinking bouts. My mother, who gets the news on the phone,

tells me that his liver is so yellow he nearly died. I don't understand why alcohol would make his liver yellow, it's not like it's rapeseed or potatoes or butter. But then I have also heard that cigarettes can stain people's fingers yellow. Why is everything turning yellow? My dad's teeth have a yellow tint from the gum line down the edges. Could that be from the beer he drinks, or the Camels he smokes? Those have a yellow giraffe on the package. But then he also smokes Marlboro. After a summer trip to Spain, we all show up tanned at my aunt's house. She looks at me and makes a comment about my "tendency toward a more yellow tone," whereas other family members get red or really dark like my dad. I'm afraid the yellow disease has nabbed me.

Uncle Siggi still lives with my Oma. He has a room upstairs with a single bed and small desk. The blue and white fan regalia of his favorite soccer club, Schalke 04, covers the walls. A handful of Smurfs look out from atop a shelf, posing there with their jaunty smirks. I want to touch them but they don't strike me as toys. I know Siggi doesn't like people coming into his room. My grandma's room is not *verboten* but perhaps because it's dim and the dark wooden furniture fills the entire space it feels somewhat forbidding. Or maybe it's the crucifix on the wall beside the bed on which a twisted Jesus suffers. When my parents go on a short vacation without me, I sleep here in the big bed with my Oma. She opens the armoire, the old key squeaking in the lock, and pulls out an ironed pillowcase for me. Her hand smooths the pile of white linen. At home, we don't own anything that white.

Downstairs, in the green-tiled bathroom off the kitchen, my grandma sponge bathes me while I sit in the tub. I wish there was a shower curtain to break up the sour-green tiles that surround me like a bog. I feel a lot more comfortable in the dining room with its brown chaise lounge on which I sit at meals, my face just hovering above the tablecloth, and the kitchen by the sink, where my aunts stand side by side and do the dishes after holiday meals. I don't help out at

home but when we're here I sometimes take one of the red-checked cotton towels off the radiator and help them dry plates. They're always joking around, nudging each other with their hips, so that when their third sister walks in to deliver more dirty coffee cups, she says to us, "You look like three chickens on a hen-roost." Sometimes, after we have had homemade cake and sit around in the dining room, one of the sisters starts laughing—I never quite know why, some remark that has escaped me—and then they all start. The men look on and smile. My grandmother is missing a tooth and covers her mouth, but when she gets going I see the darkness between her bottom incisors. Tears stream down her face, and her hands, usually cradling her elbows, reach up to touch the bun, which is similarly undone. "*Oh neh,*" she laughs, which means, I later find out, that she's peed herself.

Oma calls the narrow sofa we children sit on the "chaisahlong," whereas the sofa in the living room is called just a sofa. The foreign word seems out of place here where everything is homely, but it befits the fact that Oma has something other than chairs hugging one side of the dining table. There's another odd thing about her house. The narrow set of stairs in the hallway leads to three bedrooms and an unfinished, messy, always freezing attic on the same floor. The attic is next to my grandma's bedroom. It has in it an old baby carriage, boxes of glassware, wooden boards, and bric-a-brac. I expect to see owls roosting on the exposed ceiling beams above me. The house also has a front door which is really on the side, and a metal and glass kitchen door, which is in the front. No one uses the prettier side door. Sometimes I turn the key from the inside and open the door just to see what it's like. I look out to the box hedge and the small lane beyond and feel as if I've done something untoward.

Dark-green stairs lead from the hallway into the basement. I'm torn between wanting to climb down there and feeling hesitant about descending into the unknown depths. I wait to

accompany my Oma when she goes down to pick out a jar of canned plums for dessert. A musty odor hits my nose. Fruit and veggies from the garden line several shelves atop strands of colored kitchen paper. When I'm a few years older, I go further, turn the corner into the *Waschküche* where laundry used to be mangled. To this day, few people in Germany own a dryer and instead hang their laundry on square "spiders" in the yard or over plastic-coated clotheslines in basements such as this one. I look for signs of bygone times but the white-washed walls are clean and disappointing. All I find is a cloth bag of clothespins, an enamel oven, and an old iron. I want something more personal—letters, clothing, growth marks on the wall. It's as if I'm looking for clues left by my ancestors. Crumbs on a trail that would explain things to me, for example, why I feel so out of place in my family, or why I can't seem to raise my hand at school anymore because I'm fearful I'll say the wrong thing.

My favorite time of each trip to see our family comes about five minutes into our drive back. I lean forward in the space between my dad and my mom, and for a moment I feel closer to them while we gossip a bit. My mom has to let off steam about who said what and how she was overlooked. We share the relief of going back to Hannover and our familiar worlds—my father to his garden, my mother to her sofa and the newspaper, and I to my room. On the seat next to me I've laid out all the candy I've received. I feel rich and safe and taken care of. Once it gets dark outside I lie down, my feet curled against the backrest, almost asleep. The lights of other cars move across the ceiling of the car. I can sense my father's expert movements at the steering wheel and gearbox as we drive home.

At age eleven I ask for a stamp kit for Christmas and start collecting them. I keep the stamps in two small albums. I don't use the tweezers I'm given because I like the feel of the

serrated edges when I insert them into the taut rows of cellophane. The kit also contains a starter pack of pristine international stamps from Ecuador, India, Spain and a country called Böhmen und Mähren. I've never heard of this place even though the name is German. These stamps are pretty. They come in various bright colors and have castles, crests and ears of wheat on them. I open my school atlas but can't find any trace of Böhmen und Mähren in it. Nobody explains to me that the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia existed from 1939-1945 in the part of Czechoslovakia occupied by Germany.

My collection grows. Through a school initiative I become penpals with girls from Japan, Denmark, and England. My parents tell their friends about my hobby and they begin to tear out the corners of picture postcards they receive from abroad. We get postcards ourselves from the bed and breakfast guests who stay with us twice a year during local computer and technology fairs. Hannover has become a *Messestadt*, a leading trade fair venue. As a result, the city, swamped with visitors, puts out a call for private beds when hotels are quickly at capacity. My mother is one of many women—*Messemuttis*—who open their homes to guests. When I ask her about it years later my mom says she did it out of civic pride; curiosity too, yes, and there was a financial benefit as well. Elsewhere, other hosts sleep in the bathtub to accommodate their guests but we have a spare room. Each April and November, my parents clear out of their bedroom and camp out on the couch and Murphy bed in the bedroom connected to mine. My mom boils an egg every morning and uses what English and French she knows to find out from the visitors whether they prefer it soft or hard. This doesn't always yield a clear reply—as with the businessman from Osaka—but with the help of smiles and gestures she directs them to breakfast served in the dining room. She toasts slices of white bread, adds some *Graubrot* and spoons jam into two small porcelain bowls. Cheese and cold cuts are spread out on a plate. While they eat, I

zip past the dining room into the bathroom to get ready for school. The man from Osaka gives us gifts when he first arrives. He bows and presents my mother with a small female statue made from two pieces of rounded wood, as well as a red box covered in soft, decorated fabric. I get a trio of delicate origami bookmarks that look like women wrapped in bright kimonos. These gifts stay around with us for many years. Postcards also arrive from Sweden. Our former *Messe-gast* invites us to pay him a return visit in Sweden; in fact, he lets us stay in his red summer cottage on Lake Vänern, where I learn to row a boat and fish. I also befriend some ducks. For a long time, and wherever I encounter them, I feel a kinship with the brown-feathered females which I cannot explain to anyone.

Every Saturday night I sit at my stereo and listen to the *Hitparade* on NDR 2. The countdown goes from twenty to one. New hits usually enter at the upper teens, which leaves me time to get the cassette tape ready and do other stuff while listening with one ear. But once the announcer gets to ten I press the record and start buttons with my left fingers and pause with my right, so I can be ready for any new favorites. The announcer's patter grows more excited when a song has made a jump up several spots. As soon as he says the last word of a song title I release the pause button, then dance in my chair and sing along to the refrain. As the song winds down I sit alert again to the critical moment. I know he's about to talk over the last notes, they always do this. Now I quickly press stop which resets everything, hit start to gain a few seconds of silence on the tape, and get ready for the next song I want to add. These mix tapes sometimes get tangled up in my Walkman creating *Bandsalat* but I learn that you can splice together two ends with scotch tape. Like a sound engineer.

My parents keep a few books on the shelves my father has put up above the telephone table in the dining room, opposite the bar. I look up at them when I'm on the phone with my friends. They're cloth-bound and titles that I don't recognize. The heftier ones draw my gaze. *Exodus* by Leon Uris is the fattest book they own. I'd bet neither of my parents has read it, at least beyond the first few pages. So why did they buy it in the book club? These acquisitions happen before I'm conscious of adult books, long before my parents will give in to a solicitor at the door and sign up for 24 massive purple and gold encyclopedias in the hopeful but misguided belief that they may come in useful for me. My favorite adventure series in middle school is Enid Blyton's *Five Friends*. I've checked out every single title our library owns. George, the siblings' tomboy cousin, is the one I most identify with. Not as brash as Pippi Longstocking, she's nevertheless courageous and moves the action forward with her spunk and candor. The animated TV show *Heidi* is another favorite of mine. Heidi is rebellious yet has a big heart for animals and those in trouble.

Among the picture books my mom and I get at the library is an unusual one that has pictures of ancient times. A horse depicted in broad black strokes gallops across a cave wall. An orange bison flexes his muscles and here and there hands point upward, like fish emerging on the surface of a lake. I stare at the paintings from Lascaux and Altamira. What it must have felt like to leave one's home on a fine morning to go spelunking and then discover these. Deep inside the earth. A little later I find a book about pioneer archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann who discovered Troy. When I try to imagine what that would be like, I feel suspended, time slows, a light brightens in the distance, while a tinge of fear hovers right around the edges of the scene, there among the ancient stones. Schliemann has a giant basement at his disposal.

In fourth grade, we read a book called *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*. It's about Anna, a young Jewish girl in Berlin, and her non-Jewish friends. They do their homework together, go tobogganing after school and make fun of a mustached man glaring down at them from a poster. Until one day Anna's pink stuffed rabbit disappears, as does her father. Then Anna and her family have to leave Germany in a hurry. They eventually settle in England, a country entirely new to them. I've heard about Hitler, know of the two world wars Germany started. The book stays with me for a long time. I can't stop puzzling over the pink rabbit.

About forty-five minutes north of Hannover is Bergen-Belsen, the former concentration camp. It is here that Anne Frank perished. We read her diary in school, I'm sure, though I can't remember, and one day my class goes on a field trip to Bergen-Belsen. The bus drives us through small towns and lots of beautiful countryside. There are birch trees and pink heather. Lots of wild heather.

The grounds of the memorial site are extensive, but there's not much to see. The camp buildings were destroyed after liberation, so beyond a few stone ruins there is nothing to help our imagination. The vacancy that serves as a commemorative marker, like the absence of Jews that we are growing up with.

The small exhibit in the visitor's center, though, is at once graphic and academically detached. I am drawn in as much as I am overwhelmed. I wish I could understand where I am, but I don't. I look at the trees, the sand and the heather—and I see beauty, quiet, peace. I look at the photos on the wall and I see the most frightening thing I can imagine. Yet it's not a monster out of a horror movie that you would run away from. No, it's a human thing that I haven't yet met. Horror perpetrated by German men and women. For what reason?

The contrast between our trip to the peaceful countryside and the glimpse down the abyss

in the exhibit room has me confused, almost angry. I am too young to understand. How could this have been possible? How could people go this far and no one stop them?

PART 2

Penpals

Ice cream snaked in pink rivulets down her forearms. Sandy's tongue darted out to catch the liquid before it dropped onto the asphalt when another stream broke loose and ran along the outside of her arm. She held the cone away from her body while Joshua watched her. Josh & Sandy— it sounded like a folk duo, she thought. Maybe from the 1960's, like The Mamas & The Papas or The Beach Boys, bands they both loved. Back home, she wore a jean jacket, proudly spray-painted with the words "California Dreamin'," but there'd been no point in bringing it on the trip from Germany: it never rained in Southern California.

They were sitting on a dusty curb in Los Angeles, their feet sweaty as the heat emanated off the ground and cars whizzed past on the avenue. It was July, 1988. She licked the ice cream as fast as she could but the three scoops they'd piled on her cone in a tall heap were getting the better of her, melting before she could even finish the first flavor, chocolate.

They had been in line inside the narrow parlor, she, Josh, his brother Reuben, sister Bethany and their mom. Behind the counter, a girl with braces, her long blond hair in a ponytail, was swiftly helping customers. The board above her head announced prices and flavors in handwritten script. Ordering in the US always flustered Sandy because it took her so much longer than the average customer to understand what was on offer, make her choice, and then muster the right words in English. She'd just settled on two scoops in a cone, chocolate and strawberry, when 11-year-old Reuben chimed in, "You get three for just fifty cents more, you should get another one! We always do," he added. Sandy hesitated. The kids ahead of them were holding what looked to be giant scoops, much bigger than what she was used to from the gelato sellers in Germany. Those were like ornamental snowballs that fit perfectly on top of a cone.

Three made a balanced snowman, though she often only got two. Here, three scoops seemed a little excessive. But she gave in to Reuben's excitement.

After they filed outside, she looked around for a place to sit. There wasn't one, only an expanse of asphalt with a few cars parked on the perimeter of the lot. Beyond that, the sidewalk and then the busy avenue. Josh sat down on a parking paver, looking up at her, while the others stood with their mother. This didn't feel right, ice cream was a treat, why was he sitting on the dirty ground? But the taste of chocolate in her mouth convinced her that she didn't really want to worry about a lack of seating, so she settled down beside him. She could tell he'd done this before. It was nice to be next to someone who didn't have to think twice about what they were doing.

Joshua was wearing one of his printed T-Shirts. A surfer stretched out his arms inside a giant rip curl. She liked them. Their print and images were loud and bold, very American, very cheerful. The other day they had browsed the racks inside a big clothing store, but it was hard to find something in her size that didn't look girly. She finally picked a shirt with a dog wearing shades on a skateboard and the words Bud Light above it. Some brand or TV character, she suspected.

There she sat next to Joshua, licking her ice cream. They were quiet. It was often like that with them. After arriving in California, she realized just how little practical English she knew after six years of taking it in high school. She could analyze a poem and get an A on a test but she didn't know what to say when her ball hit the net during games of Ping-Pong. The brothers had winced when she exclaimed "Shit," so what did one say? Words wanted to rush out but they were German so she pushed them back down sounding like a parrot choking on consonants.

Joshua had already finished his ice cream and was looking over to his mom who was starting to herd the younger kids toward the car. Sandy still had a scoop to go but her appetite was gone. He took in the drenched cone, her sticky arms, and smiled.

“Let’s go. Do you want to throw it out?”

She nodded in defeat and eased the remainder into the garbage can. Throwing ice cream into the trash, *getta a load of that*, she thought, slurring the words together in her mind. On the way home, his mother asked whether she’d enjoyed the ice cream. Their eyes met in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, thank you,” Sandy mumbled. Reuben smirked at her.

Joshua and Sandy had become penpals earlier that year. They were both sixteen and shy. He had spotted her ad when browsing through classifieds in search of a used camera. There among the items for sale and apartments to rent were her words. “Sixteen-year-old girl from Germany seeks pen-friend. Perhaps for mutual visits? I like reading, listening to music, dreaming, sunsets and lying in a field looking at the sky.”

In neat script he wrote out her address and enclosed the page he’d written to her.

“Hi Sandra! I saw your ad in the paper tonight and I thought it would be great to have a penpal in Germany. My name is Joshua Huntington. I have never had a penpal before. You probably already received a reply to your ad, but if you haven’t or you want more than one, then I would be happy to write as frequently as you do. I am 16. My birthday is Feb. 5th, and I was born in Munich, Germany, but I only lived there for two months. I like art, writing, and computer programming (I can get \$15 an hour programming). In fact, I was looking for a used Canon (camera) in the paper because I’ve been saving up my money. I hope I’m not too late writing to you. Please write back to me even if I am, so I know that my letter got to you. I haven’t heard

anything about Germany, but I bet you've heard lots about America—if you have I am very curious about what you've heard. I don't know what else to say. I am about 6 feet tall, dark blond hair, blue eyes, three arms, four legs. Just kidding! Hope to hear from you soon. Love, Joshua”

She replied, “Hello Joshua! Thank you for your letter. Sorry it took me so long to write back. I got 3 other replies and I also had TWO exams in math and geography this week (I don't like science!). It's funny that you found my ad because you were looking for a camera. Did you find one? Hey, my birthday was on January 22, so I'm also an Aquarius. Where do you live in the state of California? Close to the beach? I live in Hannover, which is the capital of Lower Saxony. It's very flat here, there are no hills, but that's good for biking. There are about 500,000 inhabitants in my city. What do you mean when you write that you like art? Do you like going to museums and galleries or do you mean you like drawing and painting? We do drawing in school and I like it too although I'm not very good at it. What other hobbies do you have?” She wrote about her habit of watching the sun set behind the tall building opposite theirs which allowed for only a sliver of pink evening light. She talked about music and made a list of her favorite artists to see if they had some matches. Before closing, she added one more thing. “I have a question for you. What are California girls like? How do they act and look?”

His next letter was two pages long. The one after that five. He drew a rainbow on the back of the envelope because she'd said she loved them. Next to it, he placed a red circle like a no parking sign and inside it, behind the red bar, a dark cloud pierced by lightning. He added bubble letters and a joke for good measure. The letters spelled out KIP, which he explained in small script for her: knowledge is power. On both sides of the envelope he had penciled, “Turn this over to find out how to keep an idiot busy for hours!”

They both had idiosyncrasies in their writing. She wrote her m's and n's like w's and u's making it at first difficult for him to decipher her script, and he capitalized every d and b because he used to get them mixed up in elementary school. But she had written early on that she didn't like "normed" people, which he took to mean normal, so he felt comfortable being weird with her.

Josh's family was Mormon. When she asked whether he had any siblings he replied that he had 5.5. Bethany, Zach, Reuben, Havilah, Daniel and a brother who was on the way. They hadn't chosen a name yet but, yes, theirs was an unusually large family compared to the national average. He would sound like that sometimes. Teacherly.

As she would find out later, after she'd gotten on a plane during summer vacation to visit Josh, they had bible lesson every Sunday night with their father. Sandy didn't think anyone except old ladies, who wore dark brown coats and horn-rimmed glasses, read the bible anymore. She was not allowed to sit on the bed with Josh, and the door to his room always had to remain open. The tension around this rule confused her. She'd never gone with a boy, not even kissed one, but she'd never had to sit in the living room with her friends, whether they were male or female. At Josh's house it was made clear that it was best they spend their time downstairs or with the other kids. Beth and Havilah, the two girls, shared a room, and while Sandy was visiting eight-year-old Havi gave up her bed and went to sleep on a cot in her parents' room. During the daytime she came in to play with her horses and dolls, and sometimes all three of them would sit on her bed and do each other's hair. When Havi first asked if she could braid Sandy's hair, Sandy was so surprised she didn't know what to say. As Havi pleaded gently, Beth, who was fourteen and quick-witted like her brothers, smiled, picking up on the German girl's hesitation. "Come on, it'll be fun," she said firmly. They sat on either side of Sandy, combing through her permed

blond hair and holding it up for different styles. Beth made silly faces, then got up to look for a mirror while Havi concentrated on fastening butterfly barrettes and scrunching elastics into place. Sandy sat as still as she could, feeling Havi's hands part the hair, listening to her breathing which washed warm against her face, until her scalp tingled with pleasure.

One day Josh took her on a walk through the neighborhood.

"I want to show you something," he said.

She was nervous. This could involve meeting his friends—boys who might tease her or at the very least expect an answer to their questions in English. And funny ones preferably. But Joshua continued walking up the block, only gesturing at some of the houses his friends lived in. They walked on through the quiet neighborhood of one-family-homes, the narrow sidewalk barely shaded by the small oaks that lined it.

After a few blocks he stopped, turned to her and said, "Do you trust me?"

This was all rather strange, she thought. "Yes," she replied slowly.

"OK, great. Then close your eyes."

"What? Right now?"

"Yes. Trust me. I'll guide you."

He pulled out a bandana, and she allowed him to blindfold her. Then he put his hand on her arm and gently moved her along. Their hands had brushed against each other a few times on the walk, but he did not grab it now. The world outside disappeared. He wasn't joking when he'd asked whether she trusted him because she was keenly struck by how much she needed him this moment. It was a test, Joshua had said when they began their walk. He would take her to a place he went to often by himself. Now, she heard the excitement in his voice as he gave her directions. "Careful, there's a crack in the walkway." Then, "We're coming to a curb, OK, step

down now.” Gradually she relaxed a little. His touch was warm, his guidance reassuring. She actually had less to worry about than without the blindfold.

Three years later, at night, in the middle of France, she will go for a walk in the countryside with a boy. There will be no light to see by except for the stars, and the boy and girl will get completely lost. They will walk back and forth without finding the intersection at which they remember they had turned left. Yet she will not be afraid then. She will trust the boy completely, and a few hours later they will appear back at the farm where they started.

Joshua stopped walking and said they were about to enter some uneven ground. There was soft dirt under her feet now as they climbed a low incline. Crickets chirped around them.

“OK, you can take the blindfold off now,” he said.

Sunlight flooded her eyes. They were standing in a scruffy field, alone. Twenty feet ahead of them was the gaping hole of a giant pipe that ran underground. At the far end of what looked to be an unused building lot, there was a bump in the land.

“There’s the end of the pipe,” Joshua said as he pointed toward it.

This was the test. Would she trust him enough to climb into the pitch-black pipe opening—he would be right ahead of her—and crawl all the way to the other end with him?

Sandy swallowed. She didn’t like cramped spaces. This was a whole different story from walking blindfolded. But he had prepared her well.

“OK. But you will be right there, in front of me?!”

“Yes,” he promised.

She fought the flutter in her stomach, got down on her knees and followed him into the narrow tunnel.

Then the lights go out and it's just the three of us
You, me and all that stuff we're so scared of
Gotta ride down, baby, into this tunnel of love.

- Bruce Springsteen

How can they not fall in love? They are innocent and awkward. Their first and only kiss is a hard peck outside his house. Sandy has never kissed anyone before, and practicing on her arm, as someone suggested in a teen magazine, hasn't made her any better at it. Yet it doesn't matter. They're serious about romance. The night before she flies back to Germany they sit on the couch together, their sadness pinning them to it, when he has an idea.

"I know what we'll do. We'll think of each other every day at the same time!"

The time difference between Germany and California is nine hours but he's thought it all through. She gets up at 7, right? Yes, she confirms. So, it's perfect, he decides. He'll think of her right before bed at 10 PM and she'll think of him at 7AM her time. They'll be together across ten thousand miles! It's a great plan, she agrees, and they go to sleep a little easier.

During the almost three weeks they spent together they visited Disneyland, the Walk of Fame, and Universal Studios, which to her delight had Marty McFly's car from *Back to the Future*. They went to the beach in Ventura County where she watched his brothers boogie board. On the Fourth of July they attended church and stood in the pew singing "America, the Beautiful," followed by KFC out of big red and white buckets on the windy beach. They also walked around Griffith Observatory, the white building she remembered from *Rebel without a Cause* that sat opposite the Hollywood sign, right above the layer of L.A. smog.

But the highlight of it all was perhaps the day on which they drove north for hours, creeping along a boring highway through dry valleys and back that same night. Joshua knew how

much Sandy had dreamt about the place. As a token of his devoted love, he upturned his jar of long-saved pennies and persuaded his father to drive them to San Francisco. And though she didn't wear flowers in her hair, though the Golden Gate remained completely covered in fog, she was smitten. When they drove over the bridge she couldn't make out, Sandy promised herself that one day she would return.

If she's honest, there is a second highlight of the trip. It's Reuben who delivers proof that this love affair is as much if not more about a place than it is about a person. Joshua's little brother pays her the ultimate compliment after they all return from a water park one evening. Reuben, taking in Sandy's new tan, beams at her and says, "Now you look like a real California girl!" She blushes, thrilled. Her molecules are already in motion, morphing into a new being, a California version 1.0.

Their time together is over but they vow to see each other again as soon as they have saved up enough money. Their love will last forever. She has cassette tapes of the music he loves, a photograph, the giant teddy bear he won for her at a fair, and his Mormon faith in her. He has her letters, pictures, and promises.

It is in an American temple of sorts, a Hallmark store, that Sandy finds the thing that will carry her through the end of her adolescence, the relationships to come, her time at university where she will feel inadequate and the lonely nights in her dorm room. She is idly spinning a display stand of books while waiting for Josh's mom to finish browsing for sympathy cards. Slim paperbacks with uplifting titles fill the metal pockets. She looks at the pastel covers when one, the color of the sun, catches her eye. "I'm On the Way To a Brighter Day," it proclaims. She buys it.

Back home, she starts 11th grade. Her English teacher looks at Sandy bemused when she replies to his questions in an American drawl. Not only has her English improved, her self-confidence, like a caterpillar, is bound up in it. She has reached for a dream and made it come true. There's someone who thinks of her every day, and she has a new language. American phrases fill her mouth with novel and exciting flavors. *Oh yeah. You got it! No way!*

She decides to go a step further, do something radical. After class, she walks down the hallway and begins to openly smile at people. It works! A teacher climbing the stairs smiles back, a boy she doesn't know seems confused for a second then returns her smile. And she feels different. More powerful somehow, so unlike her old gray self with a tendency toward gloom. It was like a spell, she thought, you only had to know the secret ingredient, and suddenly you could be someone else. Happiness and unhappiness lived side by side. Like neighbors, unaware of each other. Until now.

As a result, her promise to Josh only lasts two months. In October she starts to go out with a German boy in her class and has to tell Joshua about it. He will still come to visit her at Christmas but it's a painful, embarrassing experience because she's not as good a host as he and his family have been. The background against which she sees Joshua has changed. They drive to her grandparents' house and she expects him to fit in, to drink the coffee he's offered, to smile politely, but he asks for soda instead and makes no effort to learn German. Her mother quickly becomes critical of his manners. At the table, he doesn't use a knife, chews with his mouth half open and doesn't bother to finish his food. His clothes lie bunched up on the floor in the guestroom. Sandy wants to feel proud of her visitor from America but it's only in school, where he tells jokes during English lesson and all her friends want to talk to him, that she looks at him the way she did over the summer. When Joshua asks her mom to launder his clothes, a color runs

and his favorite T-Shirt comes out pink. He is too polite to express the full volume of his anger but Sandy sees the tears in his eyes. It's just a shirt, she thinks. To him, it's the Christmas with strangers, the cold rainy weather, the unfamiliar sounds around him, the shifting ground. Yet Sandy has joined her mother in needing things to be the way they should be and resenting Josh's "careless", even "patriarchal" ways. Their culture shock is mutual.

The paradox in her thinking doesn't strike her until many years later when, perhaps predictably, it turns into guilt over the miserable Christmas he'd spent away from his own family, the quick breakup. She will google him and find nothing but a long string of addresses from California to North Carolina. There's a chronological gap, making her remember faintly that she had seen mention of him being a missionary in the Philippines at some point, though she can't be sure. And then, as she stares at the White Pages listing, another thing dawns on Sandy. The reason why she has always loved the name Michael is because it's Joshua's middle name.

She can be a patient sleuth, so finally she finds his mother's Facebook account, now under her maiden name, and there is Joshua, along with his brothers, their spouses and kids, in a family photograph. His father is not in the picture. Joshua looks bloated, his hair is growing gray already at forty, which was several years ago, and there's no one by his side. Are the fingertips missing on his left hand, she wonders as she squints at the photo, or are they simply curled in tight? Digging around some more she notices that the same woman's name appears as a shared resident for a few of the homes Joshua has lived in and finds her on Facebook. There are a couple of pictures with Joshua in them. In one he's posing in front of some human size Marvel characters, in another, taken at a restaurant, he's smiling in a goofy way.

Sandy is relieved. While Reuben had replied to her message saying he remembered her, Joshua never got in touch. His letters are still in the decoupage shoe box that has survived dozens of her moves over thirty years

Lucky

On a sunny Monday morning in New York City, I'm sitting at my desk in the lobby of the Hotel Lexington where I work as a concierge. It's 1995. Bill Clinton is president, Bill Gates now the richest man on earth, and the OJ Simpson trial is all over the news. Mumbai has its original name restored from Bombay, Yitzhak Rabin has been murdered, and Cristo is wrapping the Reichstag in billowy white fabric that makes it look like a giant's toy.

I catch my reflection in the long mirrors and don't quite recognize the person sitting there at the desk in her blue wool suit from Filene's Basement. It hugs my body in a way that makes me feel carved out, more visible than is comfortable. A big brass button cinches the jacket just below my ribs, the bright white collar of the shirt I'm wearing beneath folds over its lapels perfectly, and the short skirt forces me to take smaller steps than usual. It doesn't occur to me that it may have been partly my looks that made the two Indian brothers hire me for the job.

The Lexington's spacious lobby has an interior second floor balcony wrapping around three sides from which guests can look down on its marble floors. Marilyn Monroe is said to have lived here in her early days with Joe DiMaggio. At this early hour, tourists huddle in small groups discussing their itinerary for the day. A few men in suits stride past them, briefcases in hand. To the side, out of the way of the main traffic, stands my gray, nondescript desk. As the hotel concierge, I'm in charge of booking city tours in red double-deckers buses or on the new Circle Line cruise that takes you around the tip of Manhattan. Tourists from all over the world ask me for stretch limos, airport transfers, postage stamps and Broadway tickets. I've never been to a Broadway show, haven't sat atop a tour bus or sailed on the Hudson at sunset. Still, I tout experiences the way I've been instructed to do. "Oh, yes, I'd definitely eat at Windows on the

World,” I agree with a young couple. “Their steak is out of this....well, you know.” They smile. “And what a view! Especially if you go up there right after a romantic boat ride, see it all from a different perspective.”

Selling Broadway tickets is a precise science that involves phone calls to agents, box offices or other hotels, relevant service charges and promotion prices to memorize, receipts to manage. There are discounts that apply only to certain days, and shows which are sold out for months, like *Sunset Boulevard*. The only musical I *have* seen is *Les Misérables*. I’m surprised it’s still running. After high school, a penpal I met up with in London took me to a stirring performance of Hugo’s story about people fighting for the right to a new life. I loved their songs atop the barricades, bristled at Javert’s dogged search for prisoner 24601, and fell in love a bit with the courageous Marius. I’m happy to send customers to see *Les Miz*.

A middle-aged couple stands conferring in a corner of the lobby. Both of them wear neat, sensible clothes. They glance my way. The man straightens his spine and walks over to me. Unfolding a map, he asks in halting English how to get to Central Park. I can tell after a few words where they’re from, which confirms what I’d already suspected watching them stand there, shyly, in their functional jackets. When I reply to him in German, he looks up from his map as relief spreads over his face. Their friends back home will be impressed by the slides he and his wife will return with. For now they need to navigate the public transport system and find out whether the bus runs north or south on Fifth Avenue. We chat for a while. She laughs when I say I’m from Hannover. “Where they speak the best German, unlike Karlsruhe where we’re from.” Out of the corner of my eye I see a burly man in a sports coat approaching my desk, one of those people used to being catered to. I wish the couple a good time in the Park.

It's strange to be called the concierge, a word that had always made me picture a rude woman past middle-age who lives rent-free on the ground floor of a Parisian apartment building. Someone who has her hair up in a bun, eyeglasses dangling on a chain, and sticks her nose in everybody's business. I found the job through the *Village Voice*. The newspaper's classified section lists the best short-term jobs for someone like me, who has washed up in the city at twenty-three with the beginnings of an education but not much experience. I knew it was imperative to jump on an ad as soon as the paper comes out on Thursday mornings or the job would be gone. The gig pays \$325 bi-weekly, the Indian-looking man—forties, cheap suit that looks like it won't close over his belly—says when we meet for an interview. Cash. Twenty-five hours a week, with the requirement to work weekends. His dark eyes bore into mine, no smile, all business with a hint of intimidation. I say, OK. I get the job the next day.

Since I have no work permit, any sort of employment needs to be *off the books, under the table*—casual idioms I quickly absorb.

My savings account is nearing zero. The room I've found in Brooklyn's Little Pakistan is luckily cheap. I live with Sally, a Jewish woman who loves the Grateful Dead and could use a declutterer. She teaches me to sing *Baruch Ata Adonai* on Friday nights when she celebrates *Shabbes* and I'm in charge of flipping the light switches in our kitchen. On days I'm not giving historic tours at the seaport—my visa allows me to work as an intern at the Seaport Museum—I take the F train to the hotel, on Lexington and 48th Street. Every two weeks, as promised, I get paid in an envelope full of Twenties and Fifties, handed over in back alleys behind the hotel, or carefully slipped to me at my desk. My employers have cautioned me against getting too friendly with anyone I encounter; the goal is to sell tickets. About a month in, Bill, one of the brothers, explodes when at the end of the day the numbers don't add up. I have made a mistake in running

someone's credit card. This procedure always makes me nervous. The customer will hand me their shiny card, then stand in front of me while I call the automated system. "To run a sale press 1, to send a batch press 2, to cancel press 3..." I enter the card number and expiration date, specify the amount and hit confirm, all the while glancing at my instruction notes and trying to look professional. Somehow the wrong button gets pressed. Bill says he has to take the \$70 for the Broadway ticket out of my pay. In the end he takes out \$50, which is still unfair but I only want him to stop being so angry. I nod my head and feel a familiar hollowness spread through the front of my body. It pushes against my insides until there's barely room to breathe.

Why do I have to be so sensitive? I'm eight years old again, in the backseat of our car as my parents drive me to swimming lessons. The pool is on the other side of Hannover. The closer we get, the more I inch forward toward their seats, as if they will protect me from the deep end, the diving exercises of retrieving a rubber ring from the bottom of the pool. I take a deep breath and dive under, only to see the bottom glinting so very far away that I panic and come up for air. "Try again," the instructor says briskly. All I want is to go home.

When the weather is good and I don't have to work at the hotel, I ride my bike through the streets south of Prospect Park, sometimes all the way to the waterfront in Brooklyn Heights. I sit on a bench along the promenade. The office buildings south of the double-arched Brooklyn Bridge seem to sway against the old sailboats in the river, the far Twin Towers sparkle in the sun. I can't believe my luck. Unlike the lostness I sometimes feel amid the spires and valleys of Manhattan, here the scale is right. The buildings' reach is balanced by the horizontal movement of rippling waters, all of it held in the frame of the sky—which seems to be holding me, too, as I sit there for an hour. I was never actually drawn to New York. It was the abundance of museums and cultural institutions that made me stay here after Amherst, the relative ease of landing an

interesting internship. Now I'm becoming part of a myth, a New Yorker who moves between the Empire State Building and Coney Island, Chinatown and the Met.

A couple of months later, on a Sunday in late summer, all the museums and galleries in the boroughs open their doors free of charge as part of a new civic idea, Museum Day. From the list printed in the *New York Times* I pick a small museum in Chinatown, not far from the Tenement House, which I've already been to. I take the 6 to Canal Street, enter the maze of side streets around Mott, and try to find the right address. Few of the awnings here have numbers on them. Eventually I spot a small sign sticking out sideways between an herb monger and a noodle shop. A narrow staircase leads to the exhibit on the second floor. Mounted in a handful of dimmed rooms it depicts the history of the Chinese in America. Traditional outfits and household items cram the glass cases below scroll paintings and photographs, fire extinguishers and narrative displays. I read stories of immigration and new lives in the diaspora, while music of softly plucked instruments plays in the background. The bustle and close quarters of Chinatown feel so different from the rest of the city. Glistening, broiled chickens hang in the shop windows, and greens I can't identify are sold from carts in the street. At the bakery down Mulberry Street, I buy two gooey pieces of Mochi and a moon cake (which I know thanks to having dated a Chinese-American). Short men sit across from each other at small tables, drinking coffee and talking in Chinese. *Kaffeeklatsch*, I think to myself.

Back at the museum I sit down on a wooden bench. A tall man in a short-sleeved plaid shirt and jeans lingers nearby. He's slender with dark hair and looks to be my age, maybe a little older. I notice him half-turning his body, his gaze bouncing from the display to the floor to me. The power of being wanted impels me to stay very still. Finally, he pivots for real and speaks. "How do you like the museum?" "It's interesting," I reply, meaning fascinating, not, well, weird.

“Yes, it is,” he agrees. We smile at each other. “So different,” he offers. We begin to chat, and he asks if it’s OK to sit next to me. Have I been to any other museums today? No, I reply. Would I like to go?

His name is Rich, he lives in Brooklyn too and has a dog with one eye named Lucky. We walk out of the museum together. There’s an old synagogue near here somewhere, I tell him, on Eldridge Street, I’d like to go find it. On the way there we peek inside what looks to be a giant Chinese department store, perhaps a theater, but turns out to be a Buddhist temple in which hundreds of candles flicker. Rich quietly takes in the scene. We keep walking. The synagogue is closed, a placard informing us of its restoration in progress, so we meander north through Little Italy, sit down at a little outside cafe. I tell him about my internship—now at a German-Jewish research institute uptown—about the job at the hotel, and he nods. He wants to know about Germany, what brought me here? Rich is interested without prying. He says he’s from Framingham, Mass, when I ask, and works at Rikers Island. Something in law enforcement.

The next time we meet it’s in Brooklyn, on Seventh Avenue in Park Slope. While we walk, peering into shop windows and newly opened restaurants, he tells me more about his work. What does he mean when he says he’s “stationed” on Riker’s, I want to know. He explains that the buildings he works in are temporary structures and separate from the federal prison there. I’m still unclear about what he does but part of me doesn’t really care. He’s a gentle, handsome man who’s interested in me. Yet at some point during our walk he explains it enough for me to register what he does. Rich works for the INS. Though I can never remember what the IRS initials stand for, I do know this one: Immigration and Naturalization Service (later to become the Department of Homeland Security). Both acronyms potentially spell out danger for someone like me, straddling the line between being documented and working without permission. I learn

that Rikers Island doesn't just house convicts² but is also a place where illegal immigrants are detained, though I'm not sure Rich uses the word "detain," and his exact responsibilities remain vague. We don't talk about it beyond that. I instinctively trust him.

One day we're walking around in Manhattan, one of those vast, deserted streets leading to the Hudson under ongoing construction. Rich looks at the concrete pavement as we walk and, with a fierceness that comes out of nowhere, he says to me, "You have to stay in status!" When I look at him quizzically, he repeats himself. "You know that no matter what, you have to stay in status, right?" I don't really understand what he's saying. Frankly, his words annoy me. I can tell he means well but the expression he uses makes no sense to me. It's like he's talking about inflation, or the last inning of the Mets' game. I'm his date, for God's sake! To hear him apply a label to me by calling me either *in status* or *out of status* is chilling, it makes him sound like yet another authority intent on sorting me into a category, and I refuse to give in to it. Back in Germany, the *Ordnungsamt*, a municipal office concerned with "order," lets my dad know that I've neglected to deregister. He tells me so on the phone. "They just want to know where you live now." "How is it their business where I live?" I flare up. Stateside, I expect things to be more relaxed. With so many foreigners streaming through the gates at JFK with me, I don't take the dated arrival forms seriously that officers staple into my passport every time I enter the country. It never occurs to me that anyone would keep track of those not surrendering on time the white cardboard piece which is stapled into our passports by immigration officers. I respect the requirements for permanent residence in the U.S. and know I'll have to eventually get a Green Card, but the minutiae of entry and departure dates strikes me as silly. When Sting's song about an Englishman in New York plays on the radio, I join his raspy voice on the "O-oh" of the

² While Riker's Island has long had a reputation for abuse and neglect of inmates, in 2021 news stories break about just how shockingly dangerous conditions inside the main jail are.

refrain, drop out for “I’m an alien, I’m a legal alien” and join back in for “I’m an Englishman in New York.” All I can hear is the word *alien*.

Every time we leave Rich’s apartment, Lucky stands with his front paws on the windowsill and, with his good eye, watches us leave. When we return he’s back at his post behind the window, barking until Rich unlocks the door. The one-bedroom Rich rents—a luxury compared to my room at “Sally Garcia’s”—is small but sunny, his strong body lean and amber when we make love. There’s only one problem. Lucky. Who jumps on the bed, making me scream the first time it happens, before he wedges himself between us and settles in for the night. Rich shrugs his shoulders with an embarrassed smile. That first morning, I walk into his living room with a cup of tea waiting for him to wake up. I spot an issue of *Men’s Health* on the side table. A bare-chested dude is flexing his biceps on the cover. When Rich walks in, I tease him about it mercilessly. A lover with a men’s magazine on the coffee table and a dog in his bed! It’s hilarious to me, about as enticing as a cruise on the Rhine. Somehow I feel like the superior one in our budding relationship, which is an irony that strikes me only much later: Rich is an immigration guard who could turn me in.

He has never left the United States and is curious about Europe. He asks me what it was like to grow up over there, what do I miss the most? The bread, I say, as I usually do when people ask me this question. It’s a non sequitur that doesn’t bring us any closer. Lately, I’ve been noticing disjunction between us. I’m puzzled by some of his dry jokes and he doesn’t get my sarcasm. Telling him what a piece of art evokes in me, or how I like his touch, requires a double translation back to the source from which it springs to German, and then to English. It’s a laborious process in which all spontaneity of response is lost. One day, walking past an old Italian bakery in Brooklyn where the sugared cookies tend to disappoint, I burst out, my voice

choking, “You don’t understand! I can’t speak with you!” “You don’t,” “I can’t,” I keep repeating, stuttering, getting more enraged as I hit my head against an imaginary wall. I can’t speak with this American. Rich looks stricken, he has no idea what’s going on with me. And neither do I. I feel as helpless as he does, except for the terrible anger now rising in me. English isn’t the instrument yet with which I can express who I am. I feel a linguistic dispossession that limits me painfully, and as a result I don’t feel seen. A week later I break up with him.

Back at the Hotel Lexington, I continue to spool out the sales script the brothers have taught me. A family with two daughters stops by my desk. They’ve come from Ohio to see a Broadway show, take in the sights. Their youngest, in love with cats, wants to see the eponymous show. What do I think of it, the mother asks, everyone seems to be talking about it. “Oh, it’s fantastic,” I tell them. “The costumes are beautiful, so life-like. It’s very witty too.” I direct this last remark to the husband. “You’ll have a great time.” They ask me to secure four tickets for them. “It’s very popular,” I caution, “but let me see what I can do for you.”

Some of the tourists at the hotel help dispel my frustration with hollow phrases, my unease at role-playing. We banter, they tell me about their discoveries in the city, sometimes even slip me chocolates. One of them is a former Berliner. I’m not sure if he’s visiting, lives at the hotel, or just stops by to have breakfast there, but when he sees me at my desk he always comes over. He sings a song as he approaches, lyrics I don’t recognize. “*Die Fahne hoch!* Lift high the flag.” He stops and shakes his head. That after all those years he would still remember this song of his childhood. It’s the Horst Wessel Song, he explains, the Nazi party’s anthem. “Too bad, Krüger, that you’re a Jew,” his school teacher told him, “you would have been a great guy for us.” He tells me all this in his thick Berlin accent as he stands there in front of me. We look at each other.

PART 3

The Things We Need

I

I'm on the phone with my mother.

"Why did you stop smoking?" I want to know.

"But you never smoked," she replies.

"No, you!"

"Me? Oh. I stopped because it wasn't good... Actually I stopped on the day of your confirmation."

"What?" I've never heard this before. "Really, that late?"

"Yes, on that day I stopped cigarettes, wine and chocolate."

"But why?"

"As a punishment."

"To punish yourself?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"I don't know."

"But you did start drinking wine again, and there was chocolate too."

"Yes, of course."

I'm still puzzled. Either she doesn't remember, or she doesn't want to tell me.

"What was the name of the old woman who lived above us?"

"What old woman?"

"The one who still heated with coals."

"Did she? Oh, now that you mention it, there may have been someone like that."

We talk about some of our neighbors who used to come over for a chat in the evenings.

“They always came to our apartment,” I say.

“No, we did get together down at their place too. Birgit invited everyone, and she would cook. I wasn’t good at that, of course”

Before we hang up, she wants to ask me something.

“Did you have an affair with your literature teacher?”

None of her business really.

“We talked a lot about books. And, yes, we spent one night next to each other, but nothing happened. And then we went back to talking about literature, exchanged a few letters. He died, as you know.”

“Well, after your graduation ceremony you just handed me your diploma and were off with him,” she says.

That’s her story. This is how my mother remembers me. Always off with other people.

II

I pressed the round button next to our name. Mom buzzed me in. The door opened and I started my climb to the fourth floor, my school backpack bouncing lightly with every step. The hallway and wide stairs were half in shadow. On this overcast day the stained-glass window that had survived bombings during the last war looked dim. I was almost upon her, when I made out Frau Fischer, bent over the stairs. The old woman lived above us, on the fifth floor where all the tenants had padlocked storage units. I rarely went up there. It was like going to a bright place—the window on the last landing let in more light—before plunging into the dark of the attic.

Frau Fischer held her knit grocery bag in one hand and clung to the worn banister with the other. She had stopped climbing the stairs and turned to look at me. I knew what was coming

but didn't have the nerve to offer my help, so I waited for her to ask. She smiled as I answered, Yes, of course, and grabbed the heavy bag. I slowed my step to match hers so we could make our way together to her apartment. We passed the door to my place, which was ajar.

After she had put away the groceries, Frau Fischer offered me a glass jar half-full with sticky malt candies. Frau Fischer's malt candy tasted foreign, not nearly as sweet as the chocolate or licorice I was used to, and the rough piece took a long time dissolving in my mouth. The old woman's obvious pleasure in offering me something in exchange for my efforts made me feel older than I was. I looked around the room as I chewed, her eyes on me. The old, dark wooden table with its faded lace cloth, the shelves with trinkets and tins, in the corner the moss-green tile oven which she heated with coals. A few times I'd seen her coming up from the basement, black lumps in a metal bucket. I shifted on my seat and suddenly remembered my own apartment, guilt now creeping in that my mom was waiting for me with lunch.

When I came back, her voice grew loud: she was looking for me everywhere, she said. I had been right upstairs the whole time. What did she mean, everywhere? I wondered.

For a little while, I was invisible to her. And then I had reappeared into the light of our apartment. My mother wasn't pleased and lunch had gone cold—but there was a new flavor in my mouth. She must have missed me.

III

I'm reading about a childhood spent in Africa. It's for my Bard history class. The Kenyan author, who resides in the US, wrote the book in Gikuyu, his native language, rather than English, which he learned in secondary school. This makes me wonder why I'm not writing in German. English has always been an escape, at some point a life jacket. Today it feels more like a cozy sweater I don't want to take off. It's a nimble language and closer to my skin. After a

college exchange year in Massachusetts, I felt like a stranger back in Freiburg. Out of place and out of language. Unwilling to give up the new me that existed in English, I managed to find a bi-lingual therapist, a German woman who had lived many years in Canada. With her I felt I could talk.

My mom says her own therapist lives too far away, the subway line doesn't go direct, so she can't see him.

The Kenyan author's decision exposes the relationship between language and identity. For me, not wanting to speak German has a lot to do with being from a place that is responsible for the murder of millions of Jews and so many others deemed undesirable. Why did it have to be my country that perpetrated all these crimes? Why not some other country? During my first years in the United States, when people heard the trace of an accent and asked me where I was from, I wanted to say, "Oh, I'm from Sweden." I would have gladly traded my blond hair and blue eyes. When my daughter was little, I tried teaching her German but since talking to an infant is essentially talking to yourself, I gave up. Though I had always loved learning foreign languages, sometimes three or four at a time, as a young mother I needed the comfort of English, I needed to learn it from the beginning, nursery rhymes and all, the way my daughter was learning it. I wanted us to be American together.

I speak English with my daughter and German with my mother.

IV

Our apartment in Hannover was spacious and cheap, a holdover in the increasingly gentrified neighborhood. In our previous apartment, the toilet had been on the landing and shared with the neighbors. The shower and sink were in the kitchen. In the new place, although we still

had a split situation, with the oddly triangular bathroom and tall-ceilinged toilet in separate rooms, at least they were both inside our apartment. I liked that I could use the toilet in the mornings—undisturbed and able to breathe—while my mom smelled up the adjacent bathroom with her hairspray. She wielded the golden can like a magic wand, moving it in circles around her head. "Yes, you're still beautiful," the mirror replied.

In the tiny pantry, on a shelf high above the canned ravioli and fat mason jars of put-up fruit and veggies, my mom kept a stash of chocolate bars. There were often two different kinds, a dark one (which I didn't like but ate as a last resort) and a flavored milk version, usually Ritter-Sport or Schogetten. We didn't buy Milka, with the purple cow on it, the creamy and more expensive kind my grandmothers gave me when we visited. At night, when my parents were in the living room watching TV, I snuck into the kitchen from my room and quietly turned the old metal key. I had to get on my tiptoes to reach blindly for what was up there on the shelf. If there were two bars it meant I was in luck. I squirreled the one I liked best into my room. The next day, I'd use my pocket money to replace it. But if there was only one bar, and my mom suddenly got a hankering for chocolate, I knew I'd be found out. My greed for sweets scared me. It didn't fit with the picture I had of myself as the frugal daughter who, when offered extra pocket money by my dad, quickly replied, No, thanks, I was fine with one Deutschmark a week. Except it only paid for either ten licorice rolls or one chocolate bar. My mom and I didn't discuss our needs. I'd noticed that every time we went out to a restaurant she'd eat not only everything on her plate but also what was left on mine. The bread from the basket was rolled into an opened napkin and put in her pocketbook. She never ordered dessert for herself but if I did she'd watch me eat my ice cream, comment on the size of the portion (either tiny or huge), and then she'd laugh.

V

My mom and I are on the phone again.

“The aides wake me up so early. They come at 6 AM for bathing!”

“I’m sure you could talk to them and ask for a later time.”

“But then breakfast arrives, and there’s no point in getting dressed only to get undressed again. And anyway, they’re busy later. Ugh, it’s so dark in here, there’s never any sunlight.”

“Mom,” I say, “how about you go out into the garden?”

“No, whatever for? And there’s construction right next door, they’ve been working on it for months, a big hole in the ground.”

“Then you could take a walk in the park.”

“Too far. And I don’t have a warm jacket. Do you know, nothing fits me anymore.”

“Really? Before, nothing fit because you wouldn’t eat. Now it’s because you gained weight?”

“Yes.” My mother laughs. “You haven’t seen me in a while,” she adds pointedly.

VI

One day my mom tells me that her sister, Aunt Edith, has had a fall while washing her windows. Of course she didn’t do what most people in their eighties—with Parkinson’s—would do, namely hire someone to wash the windows. This was because no hired help has ever done the job to her satisfaction. Aunt Edith climbed the ladder herself, ready to tackle the work that couldn’t wait. After all, what would the neighbors think? But when she was rubbing down the windows with newsprint, she lost her balance, fell, and broke her wrist. After five days in the hospital, now fitted with a cast from fingertips to elbow, she was transferred to a rehab place in

her village—a small miracle, since Dassel, in the Solling mountains, has only 3,000 inhabitants. Her son, who found her on the floor, reports that for once she's content to be looked after.

The sisters grew up in Dassel. It's a big community compared to the cluster of farms in Poland where they were born. They don't remember anything beyond the name of the place. Mensik became Mezyk after the war, but they had left by then, fleeing the advancing Russians with their grandmother and their Aunt Meta, first to Berlin where many refugees from the Eastern territories lived in tent camps and barracks, before eventually landing in Dassel.

As a child I often spent two weeks in the summer at Aunt Edith's house. My cousin Anke and I slept next to each other under huge eiderdowns and whispered late into the night. We played ping-pong in the basement, picked gooseberries that were still sour and devoured the latest edition of *Bravo*, the teen magazine. My aunt served hot lunch in her kitchen. I sat against the wall, my hands neatly in my lap, taking in the flowery vinyl tablecloth. A lot of things were different here, and meals made me nervous. There had been some delicious new foods—plum fritters, noodle casserole!—and for breakfast they had real Nutella, with the cartoon stencil inside the lid, rather than the cheaper knock-off version my mother bought. But I'd also tasted and swallowed gross things like gruel soup and bacon striped with thick fat. When I didn't know where on my plate to hide the bits I found too revolting, I became really quiet. That's when my aunt would exclaim, "Oh, you don't like it?" My mother's sister's family talked as if they needed to project across miles of space. Except for my grandfather, who rarely said a word. When the extended relatives got together for coffee and cake, everyone's pitched voices crashed around the room. In our compact kitchen at home, it was the radio in the corner that was usually in charge of entertainment, with my mom's occasional attempt at family conversation. We didn't often oblige. My father was deemed "stolid" anyway, and I resented her opinions on my life. Her remarks

were often skeptical—why get in touch with an old friend, they had likely moved on—or they were critical—my essay wasn't *that* good, was it? What may have been hunger for a life of her own came out in ways that retrenched my world.

VII

My mother lives in a studio apartment, but still she has trouble getting around. She is about to have a knee replacement. For several years she has suffered from depression and its limitations, as a result of which she recently moved to assisted living at age 77. Now she is filled with terror at the prospect of having to pack for the extended hospital stay. This is why I'm here. In my mom's mind, no matter what the occasion, she never has the right clothes—whether it's a simple meal in the nursing home, where she looks to the best-dressed women and comes up short, or whether it's the upcoming time in the hospital where other patients may bring several nightgowns. “Ton in ton!” is one of her first comments to me after I show up, *tone on tone*. That the colors of my clothes match well is meant as a compliment but exposes the raw insult she feels.

My mom needs to use a walker. Rather than making a trip to the city center with her and risk being stranded between stores spaced far apart, without benches to sit on, I decide that we take a taxi to Marktkauf, a huge store that sells everything on our list. The taxi driver who has been called, then postponed when my mother claims she isn't ready, couldn't be sweeter. He quickly takes in the situation, explains to us how to collapse the inflexible walker without getting your fingers pinched. As he drives, he listens to my mother complain about her life, how she has nothing, can't even get anywhere and feels afraid, how the food is not that great at the

Albertinum where she lives, they only give you two slices of bread for dinner and you have to be quick to get enough cold cuts. "I'm so afraid," she repeats.

The driver offers his responses in a calm, teasing voice. "What is it you're afraid of? Me? Do I look so dangerous?" He adds his own philosophy. "One step at a time, dear."

When we arrive in the parking garage, I'm ready to marry him on the spot. Instead I inquire if we may always ask for him when calling a taxi. He looks embarrassed when he explains that company policy is we get whoever is available when calling Hallo Taxi.

My mom and I take the elevator to store level. While I look for a motorized cart, which doesn't exist, she realizes that in my "rushing her" she has forgotten her pocket mirror at home. Her face falls, and instantly she looks like a child. On the verge of tears, she explains that she can't possibly go shopping now.

"It's a big store. Let's just buy another mirror here," I tell her. According to a frazzled store clerk, toiletries are located in the basement. Ahead of us is a flat escalator on which shoppers and their carts descend to the lower level. Too late do I realize my mistake. Like a scout I have gone ahead with the shopping cart, but my mother is unable to negotiate that first step onto the moving sidewalk with her walker. A line is forming behind her. People crane their necks to see what the holdup is about. I ditch the cart and climb back up toward her as the conveyor keeps moving me in the other direction. In the meantime, a woman has managed to convince my mom to hold onto her cart. "It's not that easy riding the belt with a walker," she says to me as I pass them. I retrieve the walker, jostling it into submission, and ride down to collect Mom.

"You just ran off and left me there," she manages, shaken.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't realize getting on the escalator would be so tricky." The disapproving looks of the other shoppers are burning into my back.

After I locate the mirror section, I bring her three small hand mirrors to choose from. She picks one, hungrily checks her face in it. What does she see? What does she expect to find? I think of my teenage daughter, forever unhappy with her full cheeks. Even she has moments of forgetting to think of her appearance.

My mom puts the mirror in her pocketbook.

“You can’t do that!” I say to her, “we haven’t paid for it.”

“But I need it!”

I let it go, place another mirror in our cart—God forbid we lose this one too. After checking out pajamas, comfort shoes, socks, underwear, hair care products, toothbrush holders and stationery—coming back for another pair of jogging pants that would fit over a swollen knee—we arrive at the checkout. I’m in the middle of placing items on the belt when she stops in her tracks and says, “But I can’t possibly bring my worn bras to the hospital!”

Everything goes back in the cart and we find the only three racks of bras, huge, nude-colored contraptions most of them. I have no idea what size my mother wears. She doesn’t seem to know either. I pick out two that seem reasonable and point her toward the changing room.

“I’m not getting undressed now!” she shakes her head with emphasis.

“Then how are you going to know...” I start.

She repeats that she can’t try anything on. I’ve eyeballed panty sizes, convinced her to take a loose pair of exercise pants but I’m at sea in the bra section.

“OK, forget it. Let’s go!” I say.

“But I don’t have a bra!” she wails.

We're back in line at the cashier. After emptying our cart, I notice a man standing close-by. He has neither groceries nor cart, wears a navy uniform and is swiping doggedly on his phone without looking up.

"Put the mirror on the belt, please!" I say loudly so my Mom pays attention. Much like the six-year-old she resembled earlier, she shakes her head no.

"Take the mirror out," I repeat through clenched teeth, "there's a security officer behind us."

"Where?" she tries to stall. He's in plain sight. I point my finger to the belt.

The cashier pretends not to notice what's going on. Our total comes to 74 Euros.

"God, that's a lot," my mother tells her.

"Yeah," she agrees, friendly but non-committal. I stuff our things into my backpack and the large plastic bag I've brought. All we have to do now is call another taxi and get home.

"I still have nothing I need," my mom says. "Don't I need shoes?"

The Leo Baeck Institute

One day during my first summer in New York, on a whim, I stop by the Leo Baeck Institute. I've come across the LBI as well as YIVO, its Eastern European counterpart, in my historical research at Amherst and just want to see it for myself. The Institute is in a handsome, narrow townhouse on East 73rd Street. It takes up the entire building, from its basement where books and gray archival boxes sit on metal shelves, to the cramped library offices under the roof.

The receptionist leads me up creaking, carpet-covered stairs to a hallway lined with drawings and glass cases which opens into a wide, wood-paneled reception room. A petite woman with curly auburn hair greets me warmly. She's in the middle of helping a researcher, but if I wait a few minutes she'll be happy to talk to me. I sit on a folding chair and take in the old sconces throwing soft light on the oak walls and floor, the ornamental fireplace and corner window revealing a fire escapes above its stained-glass. When the woman returns she asks me about my reason for coming. I tell her about my interest in German-Jewish history and my recent studies at UMass. She talks to me about the institute. Named after Rabbi Leo Baeck, the last leader of the Jewish Community in Nazi Germany, it was founded in 1955 to create a depository for the history of German-speaking Jews.³ The LBI's holdings include countless boxes of personal papers, such as letters by Albert Einstein, photographs, artwork, as well as yellowing Jewish periodicals. Occasionally, there are talks and openings of small exhibits which are attended by board members, Jewish historians, and the German consul.

We have a lovely chat, over the course of which she invites me to apply for an internship with them. This generous welcome makes me immediately regret my recent decision to intern

³ Among the German-Jewish émigré intellectuals who started the LBI were Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt.

with the Museum for Jewish Heritage, a new Holocaust museum slated to be built down by the Battery, yet still in its chaotic planning stage. I'm already floundering and overwhelmed by the task of creating a timeline.

Over the next year and a half, I go back and forth between Germany and New York, volunteering at the Institute as well as finishing up my studies in Freiburg. In 1997 I move in with my American boyfriend and the Institute hires me full-time. They even agree to sponsor me for the relevant paperwork, a specialty worker visa I will need to satisfy immigration requirements. Now when the officer at JFK checks my passport and asks why I'm entering the U.S. I tell him that I'm here to work. "Where?" he wants to know. I point to the visa and say, "At an institute for German Jewry." "German jewelry?!" he asks incredulously. "What's so special about that?" "No, Jewry," I repeat. He looks at me. "Jewish people!" "Oh." He chuckles. I don't want to say Jews, unsure if it comes across as a slur. Words can be mine fields. Why would it be preferable to distinguish a black American as an African American, for example, I wonder to myself. To me they're simply Americans.

I enjoy working at the Leo Baeck Institute. In my role as Public Services Assistant, I help researchers with the collections. They come from Europe, Israel and within the States to write their dissertations—for example, on Joseph Roth, whose original manuscripts we have—or to ascertain their genealogical roots by perusing marriage and community records.

The employees are a mix of Americans (not all of them Jewish), a few Germans, a girl from Puerto Rico, a woman from Trinidad and a bookkeeper who's from Israel. There are also two young Austrian men with whom I get along especially well. They're here as part of their year of social service, an alternative to the military service still mandatory for men in Germany

and Austria at the time. Moritz and Clemens are *Gedenkdiener*, Holocaust memorial servants.⁴ There are also volunteers, emigrants in their seventies and eighties, who come in weekly to help with translations or transcriptions of old script. Many of them made it out of Europe only in the nick of time, have had relatives killed by the Nazis. I know this because of Gaby Glückselig's *Stammtisch*.

Gaby, a short elderly woman from Wiesbaden with a quiet but sharp wit, comes in from time to time. More importantly, she has been hosting the weekly *Stammtisch*—a social gathering which regularly meets at the same table—for many years at her apartment on the Upper East Side. Fifty years ago, German-speaking artists and intellectuals, forced to leave their homes and threatened with persecution, started to get together in a restaurant in Yorkville, New York's Germantown. Eventually Gaby took on hosting the *Stammtisch* in exile, along with her Viennese husband Fritz, since deceased. She's the perfect hostess, attentive, cheerful and interested. The buffet table is laden with *Apfelstrudel* and vanilla sauce, brown bread, *Suelze* from the German grocer still hanging on down the street, pickled fish from Zabar's, and various salads people have brought. It's like a second family, they say, driving in from New Jersey or walking over from a few blocks away with the help of a cane. I've gone a few times myself, spurred on by Clemens, who's my age. He knows how to play the accordion, which many at the table adore. The mood at the *Stammtisch* is jolly, people young and old speak loudly over each other. Someone says a journalist from a leading German newspaper has asked to attend the following meeting. "Tell her to bring enough *Lebkuchen*," Gaby jokes. The man on my right turns to me. He wears a yarmulke. "So where are you from?" he asks in German. "Hannover, *ach so*," he says when I tell him. There are no "northern lights" here, it seems everybody is from more southern parts of

⁴ This concept, originated by a historian in the 1990's and funded by the Austrian government, is an opportunity in which young people take responsibility for atrocities done by perpetrators of their own country. It's an effort to rectify past wrongs and support the culture of those who were once victimized.

Germany or from Austria, which means I feel doubly like an interloper. The fact is that everyone couldn't be more welcoming. Their banter has been honed over decades. I have so many questions but don't quite know where to start, how to make myself heard through the din.

A few weeks after I begin my new job, the long-time director of the institute, Dr. Fred Grubel, falls ill. He's homebound yet very much still in charge. I'm asked if I would be willing to go up to his apartment in Riverdale. Surprised at this sudden responsibility I say yes. A car service takes me up Third Avenue and across the East River the next morning. I lean back on the seat, enjoying the treat of being driven around. Herr Dr. Grubel lives on the fourteenth floor of a large apartment complex built in a semi-circle. His wife ushers me in. Lithographs of German cities hang on the wall besides framed paintings of nature scenes; figurines and bowls made out of Dresden china adorn glass cabinets; and plush carpeting covers the living room floor. It's cozy here, *gemütlich*, if a little old-fashioned. I'm summoned into the bedroom where the director is sitting up in bed.

I've brought my pad and pencil, and after he's cracked a mild joke about my intrepid spirit we get straight to work. I write as fast as I can while he dictates me letters in both English and German. After a while, his wife comes into the room with a plateful of cookies, and we take a break. When we're done for the day, he says, "You'll manage alright taking the bus back, won't you?" At the bus stop there's no bus in sight. An early winter snap has blanketed the streets with a snowy mush. I stand there shivering in my ballet slippers, willing the warm bus to appear. Finally it arrives.

Back at the Institute I go over my scribbled notes with Erika, his secretary. "Wow, what an honor!" Maria pipes up from across the tower of files stacked high on their adjoining desks. Gorgeous and dark-skinned, Maria has a strong code of ethics, like a girl from the Fifties out of

West Side Story, with a sense of spunk to match. Her boyfriend of seven years has been waiting patiently for her to say *yes*. “He’s funny, you know, Dr. Grubel.” I tell her about the bus stop episode and she chuckles. “Tough.”

I go up to Riverdale a few more mornings, each time taking the express bus. Fred Grubel is not returning to work. A new woman takes over the reins of the Institute. “She’s a Jewish Princess,” Maria, who works directly with her, whispers. I’m puzzled. “What’s that?” But once I finally meet her I get an idea of what she means, the steely arrogance below the new director’s friendly veneer, the way she seems to look down her nose at us in her high heels and quality clothes. Ruth, my supervisor from Public Services, can’t stand her. She senses her turf being invaded. She avoids the new boss as much as possible. Ruth and I tag-team well, and I’m fine doing the work of retrieving boxes and books from the basement for our researchers.

Every day I ride my bike through Central Park, a strenuous ride from West 114th Street but I love it. After two of my bikes are stolen in a row I get a two-inch thick chain which, while weighing a ton, is more successful at deterring thieves. The paycheck I receive is enough to cover my room expenses, groceries, and entertainment. I live in a narrow apartment which I share with a dad who works in IT at Columbia and his teenage daughter. The Internet is still new. The two share a desktop computer, as well as a love of *The X-Files*, which I watch with them from time to time. Greg suggests I get my own Yahoo email account. It’s free, he says. I’m welcome to use their computer to check it.

Sometimes I go through the wrought-iron gate across the street and slip into a campus dorm at Columbia, where they have computers set up on the ground floor. This works well until a desk guy asks me if I’m a student. I even sneak into a class once or twice, thinking that I can get away with it if it’s lecture style, the way classes were often taught in Germany, but soon

receive looks of suspicion. A friend knows someone who teaches at the college, which is how I obtain access to Butler Library. The white-columned building atop a spread of wide stairs sits above a female bronze statue, *Alma Mater*. She's reclined comfortably on a throne beckoning her students. I've been circling venerable universities since I was nineteen, when I really wanted to study at Cambridge but didn't dare apply. After I got into UMass, also dubbed ZooMass, I looked with longing at the ivy-covered stone walls of Smith and Mt. Holyoke. When my pass to Columbia's library is about to expire, it occurs to me that it wouldn't be too difficult to change a number on the handwritten card, turn a one into a two, heck, I could even copy the card and make an entirely new one. I get away with it. After a few weeks of browsing there isn't really anything I need, so I stop going.

At the Institute I receive my first regular salary. Unlike most American students, I did not work during high school or college, except for an extremely short stint in a factory that produced CD cases. I'm unfamiliar with the worldly details pertaining to employment, such as taxes, health insurance, savings plans and retirement funds. At first I'm paid as a contractor, which means my paycheck matches what I've been offered by the director, but once the visa comes through I'm switched to a bi-weekly salary. There's quite a monetary discrepancy I can't explain. When I ask if it's normal to have such a large chunk taken out of one's paycheck, my supervisor seems sympathetic but not interested. It's probably taxes, she says, and others concur. I'm not yet aware of the American taboo subjects: politics and money, sex and God. Our bookkeeper is a bit of a firecracker, it's easy to set her off, so I accept the figures as they are and trust that everything is correct. Until a year or two later when someone up in the library mentions something about health insurance as an additional supplement to our salaries. The details are hazy now, it's possible that the remark was only a guess in regards to my particular situation, but it's enough of

a nudge for me to muster up the courage and approach the bookkeeper. As a woman from Israel, a place which has the effects of the Holocaust written into its very national fabric, she intimidates me even more than the new director does. I perceive the events of the war years like a chasm between us; my shame instructs me to play it safe. When I tell her that I believe the \$330 insurance portion was meant to be paid in addition to my salary, she takes offense at my supposed accusations.

It doesn't get fully resolved. The director seems to agree with my assessment, but it's water under the bridge so to speak. Earlier, when I approached her for a raise, she dismissed me with the words, "You're paid a living wage!" My morale has been slipping as it is. I've gotten bored with the same repetitive tasks of fielding inquiries, conveying copy costs and lugging boxes. I've begun to spend longer periods than usual chatting with Deborah in the library and with the two Austrian boys whose closet-like office is in an adjoining garret. Clemens smokes, so they have the window open. We sit on the sill looking past chimneys, trees and the tops of fires escapes. I put together that he's gay. Is that why I feel so comfortable with him, why our repartee is so effortless? I miss him once he and the other *Gedenkdienner* return to Austria. A friend from Freiburg gets in touch via a new text service called YahooMessenger. He's a scruffy, kooky kind of guy, the eternal student. His messages start out of the blue and crack me up. I now sit at my computer in the wood-paneled room, a few feet from Ruth, snorting with laughter at our nonsense German, silly rhymes and snappy slang. After a while she makes it clear that I could be a bit more discreet yet I can't help myself. I feel addicted to the quick shot of humor, the ease of communication with someone on the same wavelength.

During this time, two unrelated things happen. Visa be damned, I decide to follow friends who've recently transplanted to the tranquil Catskills. At the same time, the Institute is getting

ready to move downtown into a combined space with other Jewish organizations. I give several weeks notice and hand in my resignation. Then I devise a plan.

My masterful scheme involves a monitor. Ruth and I have recently been given bigger and better computer monitors. Here's what I'm thinking: they're going to receive new equipment anyway, who's going to notice one missing monitor in the midst of packing up a dozen computers, loads of files, thousands of books and reams of boxes? There's no point in asking the Head of Archives, a burly German man in charge of our equipment, who exudes a taciturn, scholarly authoritarianism I'm familiar with from Freiburg University. He'll turn me down flat. Mock me for even asking. I have a better idea. I know the old monitor is still in the basement. No one will be the wiser if I swap them out, and if someone does notice it, they'll have forgotten all about it by the time of the move. Meanwhile, it'll give me a nice little head start on all the things I'm going to have to acquire for my place in the country.

On my last day, I don't bike to work. Instead I pull up in my new used Toyota, the "nun-mobile" I've bought from a car mechanic in Sparkill who services the fleet of a local convent. From the keychain he hands me dangles the bas-relief charm of a saint, Michael or Christopher, I can't be sure. Miraculously, I find parking on 73rd Street. During a quiet moment in the afternoon I take the elevator to the basement and retrieve the old monitor. Upstairs I exchange it with the new one. Now all I need to do is bring it downstairs and wait for the Institute to close. This is all working so well! Until James, a young colleague from the Archives, enters the picture and joins me and Monitor in the elevator. "Oh, is this the new one, where are you taking it?" he wonders out loud. "I, um, well...the old monitor works better. Surprising, right? We need to get this one checked out so I'm taking it downstairs. It's just temporary," I add. True enough that last bit. "Really? Huh. Ok." Though I'm sure it sounds fishy to him, James

leaves it at that. When almost everyone has left, I go downstairs again, open the basement door to the stairs leading to street level and push the monitor outside. I return upstairs, pack my things, say my good-byes to Ruth and officially leave work. Now I need to wait. I get in the car and drive around the block, once, twice, then over to Central Park and back. While I'm driving, I'm not thinking about the historical significance of a German stealing from the Jews. I'm wondering how much time I should allow until everyone has gone home. Around 5:30 PM the coast seems clear. I pull up outside the Institute, retrieve the monitor from the stairs and drive off into the future.

A year later, I call Ruth. I need a job reference and wonder if she'd be willing to write one for me. There's silence on the telephone. "I can't believe you're calling me," she says. I'm suddenly feeling very hot. She asks me outright whether I stole the monitor. A wave of nausea washes over me. "Yes," I admit. I almost add, "It never worked properly," as if that would change anything. Ruth tells me that after I left, everyone was looking for the monitor. The Head of Archives accused her of taking it, whereupon James admitted that he'd seen me in the elevator with it. Ruth suggests the least I can do is make a monetary donation. Reparations.

The amount she names, not much in the grand scheme, is still more than I can afford at the time. Several years later I make a small donation to the Institute. As for any remainder, I decide to pay it forward.

My Father

The call comes two days after Easter. Typical of my father, he didn't want to spoil the holiday by telling me the news: he has stage IV lung cancer. My mother says it took the doctors two hospital visits to determine what the persistent cough and then sudden pain in his stomach were. Since he is only 69 and fit, none of us had thought anything of his symptoms. Now, suddenly, he is to start chemotherapy. The prognosis is dire.

My father loves his garden. After work, he has always mounted his bicycle and covered the three miles to the allotment garden, #13 in the row of gardens named "*Gut Grün!*", literally "good green." Rather than the adjacent "Heather Flower," this name is like a greeting, as if this is where the serious gardeners work and create beautiful spaces blessed by the plant gods they worship. My father stashes his bicycle behind the garden hut, turns on the radio, smokes a cigarette at his leisure, and starts pruning, planting and watering. Over the course of the afternoon and early evening, four or five bottles of beer will be enjoyed. At dusk he cleans up and bikes home, where the evening continues with the TV news, a pot of tea, and open dinner sandwiches. Never a man of many words, his routines deeply satisfy my father.

Two weeks after my mother's phone call I'm on a plane out of New York. In Hannover I find my father in his bed, skeleton-like, in agony. The chemo treatment, which was supposed to gain him extra time, has in fact debilitated him. He won't eat and will hardly speak.

Before I left New York, my acupuncturist gave me essential oils and showed me points on the stomach and feet that could crank up his appetite. My father's feet are cracked and dry, but his belly is warm and already tan in mid-May. I haven't touched my father's belly, or his feet,

since I was a child. I apply the grapefruit oil and massage it in, aware that this intimacy is crossing an unspoken boundary. Yet he accepts the touch. When I ask if it feels OK, he says, "*Ist angenehm*," it's nice.

To everyone's surprise, with the help of infusions and a returning appetite, my dad gets back on his feet again. We spend a marvelous week together. He makes a meal plan of his favorite dishes, from potato pancakes, to kale and sausage, to breakfast at McDonald's (a memory from the road trip my parents took when they visited me Stateside). I drive him to his allotment garden, which I mowed in his absence. Badly so. He teaches me how to mow properly and how to plant tomatoes. When I mention it to my cousin on the phone she exclaims, "You sound like the two of you are in the Maldives!"

One afternoon, sitting in his garden, I nervously ask him, "What do you think the goal in life is?" "Well, to find inner peace," he answers simply.

This comes as a surprise. My father grew up in Lingen, in the Emsland. It's a traditionally Catholic region in the north-west of Germany, close to Holland. Whereas his mother and siblings remained believers their entire lives, he didn't care for organized religion and only visited a church when family gatherings demanded it. To hear him talk of "inner peace" sounds either very Catholic to me, or Buddhist in fact, much closer to my own beliefs.

At the end of my stay Dad can drive again. He wants to drop me at the train station. Caring for him has been profound. It has solidified something in me, given me a sense of my own gifts. In the station, as we part, he kisses me on the lips. I don't stop him as I might have in

the past. Instead I tell him, "*Ich liebe dich!*" I never say this in German, though I say it all the time to my daughter in English.

Five days later I'm back in Germany. This time my father is in the hospital on morphine. The second round of chemo has dramatically weakened him. His four siblings come to visit but he doesn't really want them around, doesn't want the fuss. At first my father clings to life, asks me to help him sit up, but soon he is in and out of consciousness. On the third day, again I take out the essential oils and massage the Chinese acupuncture point known as Gate to Heaven on his sternum. I tell him it's OK to let go. Driving home under a gorgeous pink evening sky, Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock", his favorite rock 'n' roll song, comes on the radio and I turn up the volume. He passes that night.

What They Remember

In the bitter-cold winter of 1945, the last year of the war, my mother Edeltrud and her older sister Edith fled from the Russians. They were aged two and almost five respectively. From their farm in Posen, a province located in the western part of today's Poland, they and their aunt Meta made their way westward; first to Berlin and eventually to the village in northern Germany where they would grow up.

When I ask my aunt Edith about their flight, she begins by telling me that she had just been given a doll house for Christmas. "Then in January we fled, you know, because the Russian came."

That was how people said it at the time, *der Russe*. Singular. Or, even more reductive, *der Iwan*, Ivan.

"That's why we lost the war," my aunt goes on. She means, I suspect, that if not for the Russians they would have won the war. I don't say anything. "Posen was under Polish administration. We lived there as Germans."

When I was young, the Province of Posen was no more than a nebulous concept to me; like the Sudetenland or Silesia. We didn't talk about it in school, and there was no Internet to look things up. They were places like chemical elements that only exist in the lab for a second. They also implied a diaspora of Germans. I'd heard that there were small associations of exiles clamoring for political influence but, like many others, I wrote them off as people who hadn't learned from history.

Now, when I pull up Wikipedia to get the political timeline straight, I'm surprised. Apparently, the northwestern section of Posen where my family lived was never part of the Polish republic. It was part of Prussia, then briefly independent after World War I, and

administered as the Frontier March Posen-West Prussia during the Weimar Republic, before Nazi Germany annexed it into the Reich, along with the other part of Posen which had been turned over to Poland. This runs counter to what I've always been told. My aunt says they had the same problem. "We once looked in an atlas, we had some old one, to see where the borders were, and they weren't even all in there."

What my family and historians seem to agree on is that there were a majority of people in the area who spoke Polish and others who considered themselves German. Given its westerly location, Posen had a relatively large number of Germans making up about 35% of the overall population and reaching 70% in and around the district of Czarnikau (Czarnków), where my mother's family lived. The land there is flat, dotted with finger lakes and farms. Streams make their way to one of two rivers, the Netze (Noteć) in the north and the Warthe (Warta), which ran through the middle of the region, just a few miles south of the family Klemm's homestead. I've heard my mom use several different names in regards to her birthplace. Sometimes she says she is from Mensik, other times she refers to larger towns in the area such as Schneidemühl or to Province of Posen.⁵ Her father, she says, always referred to their home as lying in the Warthegau. This is what the Nazis renamed the general area.

In 1945 all of Posen became part of Poland. This much we also agree on. When people ask me where my mother's family is from, I've always said that they lived in what's now Poland but was occupied by Germany at the time. Now I realize that they come from a no man's land.

Aunt Edith isn't sure if she was able to take the dollhouse with her but, in any case, it got lost. The girls and their one-year-old cousin Manfred rode on a hand cart pulled by his mother, their Aunt Meta. "There was a horse tied to the back of the cart," Edith remembers, "and a farm

⁵ There's also the city of Posen (Poznań).

servant walked alongside. Then the horse was gone one day and so was the servant.” A couple of nights they were able to sleep in a farmer’s hayloft—a blessing, despite the rats, because it meant they were able to get a little milk. For the most part they had to beg for potato peels. Manfred was malnourished, Edith was sick with typhus. My aunt remembers being nervous about safeguarding her tin cup. Each night she was to put it under her pillow so it wasn’t stolen. She also recalls a woman she didn’t know undressing her. “I had a mink scarf tied around my neck which was my mother’s. Later it got lost.”

The girls’ mother had died in 1943, when they were one and three years old. When I ask her for details, my mom is quick to say nobody told her anything but she thinks it was *Hirnhautentzündung*. I’ve translated this as encephalitis. Edith knows more. She says that their mother Erna died during the hay harvest. “She drank some water and then she had something going on with her brain. It was probably meningitis, you didn’t know exactly at that time, or maybe she had a cerebral hemorrhage.” Their father Arthur was away in the war. He was informed of his wife’s death by a letter from the physician.

Many times I’ve wished this and other letters had survived. A few years ago Aunt Edith’s daughter, my cousin Anke, suddenly produced a black and white photograph of Arthur and Erna’s wedding day. Aunt Edith must have had it all along. It’s a close-up, in which my biological grandmother wears a loose, white dress and, on her dark hair, a vine-laced tiara from which hangs a long veil down her back. Their heads slightly tilted toward each other, the couple looks into the camera, their chests covered by a large bouquet of wildflowers. Erna’s face is at once soft and strong, her pretty, wide-set eyes shine with a shy curiosity, but there’s also a sense of determination. My grandfather wears a white bow-tie matching his stiff-collared shirt and lace kerchief tucked into his dark suit. Both of them have the high cheekbones many of us in the

family inherited. What stands out most to me about my grandfather are his eyes. Closer together than hers, they're wide open, staring at the viewer. They seem frozen.

According to historians, about 85% of the German population living in the eastern territories started on the flight west before it was too late. About two thirds of them made it across the river Oder to safety. Losses were due to exhaustion and illness in the cold weather, or enemy action. First-hand accounts make it clear that the fear of murder and rape drove the refugees on. Many more would have made it unscathed had the Nazi *Gauleiters* not prohibited the flight until the last moment. Most of the railway lines had been cut, and motorized vehicles weren't available. There was nothing to do but trek on foot with carts and horses. People in the western part of Posen, such as my family, had better prospects than those from the north-east, in East Prussia or Silesia. The distance Aunt Meta and the children had to cover to get to Berlin was around 130 miles.

My mom remembers seeing silver-gray birds in the sky. Planes, she realized in hindsight. When she tried to mention the birds to others, no one knew what she was talking about. There must have been many silver birds overhead that January, their drone more immediate than the rolling vibration of tanks in the distance. Other birds, Bohemian Waxwings, picked red berries off viburnum bushes on their annual winter visit to the area, and in the forests deer clustered. As villages emptied, the main roads became thick with people, eyewitnesses write. Women mostly, since many of the men, including Aunt Meta's husband, had either been killed in action or were missing. One day a man on horseback appeared, presumably Russian. "Aunt Meta quickly jumped over a trench and hid," my mom says. "She was lucky."

At this point in the narration, Aunt Edith tells me about their grandmother. I realize she must have been on the cart as well, yet the only time my aunt and mom mention her is in the

context of her death. “She was buried on the way, in a *Rumpelkiste*,” Edith says. I’ve never heard this word. A *Rumpelkammer* in German is a junk room or attic. *Rumpeln* is a colloquial, onomatopoeic verb which means to make a lot of noise. Aunt Edith describes it as a light-colored box made of wood. She says she doesn’t know where her grandma was buried, “whether on a mountain or in a cemetery or where.” My mom on the other hand has told me that the ground was too frozen to dig. Each of them has settled on a different upsetting aspect of the event; my aunt pictures her grandmother as being hauled around unceremoniously in a box, while my mother thinks of her left in a ditch. She now adds that their grandfather was buried when they were still in Posen, and, since the pastor was already around, she was christened the same day.

They made it to Berlin. The sisters don’t agree on where in the city they stayed in a rescue camp, whether it was Köpenick or Marienfelde. I imagine these *Auffanglager* of which I can’t find any pictures online, to look like a refugee camp. It is estimated that between twelve and fourteen million people were displaced and up to two million died. The figures fluctuate depending on who you ask. When they fled the Red Army none of them dreamt that their journey was anything other than a temporary evacuation; yet for all of them it was to be a final separation from their homes.

Sometime in 1946 my mother and her sister arrived in Dassel. Their father Arthur, released from Russian captivity later that year, made his way to the neighboring village of Sievershausen. He knew of a relative there. His children’s whereabouts were unknown to him. The way Edith imagines it, “he probably walked through the village and past the sawmill one day, noticed someone there and thought, ‘But those are my people.’ So he called out to them.” Someone—my aunt mentions the names of two women—led him to the girls. At this point my aunt is speaking so fast it’s not clear to me who these helpful women are. When I ask my mom

about them, she recognizes Frau Bartels' name. "She was the one who supposedly said about me, 'That child looks just like her father, the same blue eyes.'" Reunited, their father found them a room inside an old forge owned by the Bartels and fixed it up. They were to share this room for the next two years with Aunt Meta and her son. Across the way lived another family, also resettlers from the East. Behind the forge was a large meadow with apple trees. Edith remembers climbing over the fence or jumping off the roof in an effort to steal apples, for which her father beat her. "Because I was the oldest. I think he hit me in the neck, I don't know anymore."

"He slept so strangely," she goes on. "Traudel and I slept together in one bed. I said to her, 'You can put your head at the foot of the bed, Traudel, and I'll lie the other way, then we don't bother each other so much.' Later in the barracks we also slept together." My mother adds, "*Vater* slept in his army coat on top of the trunk." When she couldn't fall asleep she would rock back and forth on her shoulder and in the process pull the pillow out from under Edith. When her sister complained and called, "*Vati, Vati*," he took a belt out of the locker and spanked my mother.

"In 1948 my new mother and father got married," Aunt Edith tells me. "I have no memory of that, it was all swept under the rug. She was thirty-one, a local woman. Her husband had been killed in the war, so they both benefited from it. And she dressed us and took care of us." The new woman was called Wilma. When she first came over, my mom watched from behind a hedge and threw rocks at her.

That same year the four of them moved into an apartment owned by the sawmill where Arthur had found work. It was much better than the one room they had shared in the forge, my mom says. Now they had two bedrooms and a *Wohnraum*, a living room which included the kitchen. The building also housed the local school. Its two classrooms were right next door to

them, which made it easy for the students to drill holes in the wall and peep into the apartment. “Until we pushed a cupboard in front of it,” Edith says. My mom and aunt have always referred to the place they grew up in as the *Baracke*, the shack or barracks. Having pictured them like shantytown huts for most of my life, I’m now told that they were built quickly by the sawmill proprietors and made out of wood. Most of the eight or ten families living there were what the locals called *Rucksack-Deutsche*. They were often met with hostility. My mom remembers feeling ashamed because they didn’t own much clothing. She had to wear a *Klapphose*—pants with a flap, Google tells me, worn by men in the navy—and kids made fun of her.

“Oh, the rabbits!” Aunt Edith groans. Without fail Sundays meant rabbit roast for dinner thanks to the many rabbits they kept at the barracks. “We hated having to look for rabbit food every morning!” My aunt and mom agree. “We had to get up very early and were expected to come home with full bags. Sometimes our bags were taken from us, or stolen, and our mother was so embarrassed because she had to go pick them up,” Edith says. They don’t remember where she went, presumably a village office or perhaps the farmer next door. The farmer’s wife always scolded the sisters. Besides the rabbits, there was other work to be done before school. It was Edith’s job to harvest potatoes. Mom remembers biking to one of the four allotments the family tended and either digging in the garden or picking raspberries and cranberries with Aunt Meta. She did well at picking blueberries because they didn’t get so mushy. They also gleaned and ground grain for other farmers. For five hours of labor, Edith remembers, they received only two Marks.

Back in Posen, I learn, Arthur had worked at the post office. My aunt specifies it was the *Feldpost*, the military postal service. Again, I take to the Internet. The *Feldpost*, in existence from the 18th century until today, was in its heyday during World War II, delivering letters

between soldiers and their families free of charge, without stamps. Arthur expected to find work as a postal worker again in Dassel but that wasn't the case, my mom tells me. "He was very strict. Our mother, however, was loving. My father..." My mom pauses. "He couldn't show any emotion. Though he did play *Hoppe, hoppe Reiter* with me."

This is a game every German child is familiar with. I played it with my own father. He would bounce me up and down on his knees as if he was a horse, while singing about a rider who would yell if he fell off, would be eaten by crows if he fell in the ditch, and if he fell into a swamp, he would go "plomp," at which point he dropped me between his knees. My father held on to me, it wasn't as if he let me fall on the floor, and yet I never enjoyed that final moment of the rhyme. My mom says her father played the game with her riding on his foot. As we disagree on how we think the game is to be played, whether it involves knees or feet, I wonder if it affected how we felt about it.

In 1956 they moved into a house Wilma's brother had built. This was the home at the edge of the village that I'm familiar with from our many visits there. My mom references an inheritance dispute. It's unclear who else lived in the house with them in the beginning, but both Edith and Traudel mention their grandmother. "She liked me," my mom says. "She spoke a local dialect, *Plattdeutsch*, and I was good at repeating it after her. '*Der Hof is buten*,' she'd always say." When Edith was in the hospital for an operation, the grandmother died. My mother recalls the moment. "She was still warm after she had died. I know because I dressed her."

"When Traudel was sixteen," my aunt tells me, "she went to Göttingen for six weeks. I don't know what it was called, a psychiatric hospital?" My mom remembers that stay being three weeks long. "She had to take an exam for her apprenticeship," my aunt explains. "Later she found out that she'd passed it. That was her first depression; probably she had test anxiety. I went

to visit her there during the week, and our mother Wilma went on weekends.” My mom has no recollection of what it was like in Göttingen. She thinks it occurred when she was already an apprentice at the bank. Better in school than her sister, she nevertheless left high school after tenth grade because she was failing a couple of subjects. Most of the children at my mother’s co-ed, protestant high school came from well-to-do families. Her friend Gelinde von Kampe boarded there, as did some of the others. The von Hardenbergs owned a schnapps factory. “They had no time for children,” my mom scoffs.

I’m surprised to hear of these aristocratic names in what I’ve always experienced as a backwater place. Thinking about school reminds my mom that she had a good grade in French, a B, which in turn reminds her of her father. He knew a few words of French, like “cheval.” Neither of us understands where he would have learned the French word for horse but we agree that it must have been during the war. “Maybe he was in French captivity,” Mom muses. I like hearing about my grandfather speaking another language; at the same time I notice myself getting annoyed. I thought he was in Russia during the war. Mom suddenly seems unsure.

“Did grandpa drink?” I ask her. “No,” she replies. “My parents were frugal and stingy. Lights were kept off in the evenings. We used the stove both for heating and cooking. The fire would flare up nicely when we sat in front of it in the afternoons. It was cozy. I called it the blue hour because of the flame. Then I wanted to sing "*Flamme empor, Flamme empor*, Rise up flame, climb with blazing glow from the mountains on the Rhine" but my parents shushed me, “You mustn’t sing that!”

Unfamiliar with the song, I look it up. It was written in the early 1800s during the war with Napoleon. The lyrics are general enough to lend themselves to be sung through the changes of history. At the same time, it is one of many old folk songs the Nazis ruined forever by using

them in their ritualistic displays.⁶ “I was too small for everything and didn't know about that.” My mom sounds very young as she speaks. “In the past, all of it was hushed up.”

In her opinion Edith was treated better. She worked diligently, cleaned everything up at lunchtime, and was more pious too, whereas my mother was thought of as “too lazy.” This reminds me of how guilty I used to feel at my aunt’s house when not offering to sweep the kitchen after lunch. (I think we’re all lazy, my mom, me, and my daughter who hates chores and leaves orange rinds and empty containers out for me to clean up.) Every Sunday the girls and their parents dressed nicely and went to church, followed by a stroll. At home, they had two dolls to play with; one was filled with sawdust and had a broken seam, the other was a real Käthe Kruse doll with eyes that could blink.

At the end of our conversation, my mother returns to her father. She makes a statement with a decisiveness I’ve never heard before. “My father was mentally ill.” The only thing he ever divulged to her about the war was the moment he stood in front of a mass grave. “Our mother did not allow him to tell us children about it.” At age fifty-six, around the time my mother left home, he was sent on a cure. During his stay he attacked someone with a knife. He also threw away a key, she remembers. When I want to know more about both incidents—unsure why I seem to be more interested in the key than the attack—she can’t provide any further details. “They had to go pick him up.” A number of years later he was sent to a psychiatric hospital in Hildesheim. This time my mom was the one who got him out of there, once she saw that all they did was give him tranquilizer pills. “He never got well again,” she says.

⁶ It was sung during solstice celebrations which, though initiated by youth movements in the earlier 20th century, became a central part of the Nazis' festival calendar. At the same time, an alternative version of the song may have circulated in concentration camps as an act of parody and resistance, with the words changed to "Rise up flame, shine for us in dark hours."

Growing up I knew none of this. My grandfather Arthur was someone who sat quietly at the head of the table during family gatherings. He ate his cake much more slowly than the rest of us. As he got older, I noticed from across the long table that his hand was shaking when he lifted up his coffee cup. A brown puddle collected in his saucer. Grandma Wilma, always by his side, sometimes chided him in a low voice, “Arrr-thur.” At other mealtimes, when we sat in the kitchen, I was told that he and grandma had already eaten. By his furrowed eyebrows I could tell he didn’t like it when loud noises erupted around him. The few times I went into their small separate living room off the hall, I saw him sit against the wall, his helpless hands leaning on the table in front of him. The tall, brown clock was ticking loudly in the corner. Time didn’t seem to move. I couldn’t wait to leave.

My Mother and the War in Ukraine

My mother is 79 and lives in a nursing home in Germany. This winter, during Putin's war on Ukraine, the videos of families fleeing from the Russians have prompted her to remember her own past.

"Some of them are such small children," she says, "just like me, I was just a little child myself when we had to flee."

We're on the phone. She can't stop watching news coverage of the war.

"It brings it all back," she says. "Another war in Europe! We never would have dreamt it."

The events are, of course, much closer to the German border than to our American shores. Here, I put blue and yellow flags on my office door and then go on with my life. In Hannover, where my mom lives, and especially in Berlin, Ukrainian refugees are pouring in. They are being fed and taken care of by volunteer crews of women who, night and day, work logistics via social media from their cramped apartments.

"It's day five," one of them is quoted in the newspaper, "I thought we'd be done by now and the local authorities would have taken over, but they don't even communicate from one department to the next, I have to introduce them to each other—me, a housewife from Pankow."

My mom looks at Putin on TV. He's at some meeting with his ministers. A golden door is held open by guards, and he marches through it.

"Dreadful!" she says. "He looks like an emperor. Is he batty? Something has to be wrong with him, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do."

“The others here at the Albertinum, when I say how it reminds me of our flight”—she says it in German, *die Flucht*—“they tell me, there was nothing worse than the bombing during the war, when they were sitting there in their basements not sure if they’d make it until the morning. That’s what all this is reminding them of.”

She doesn’t see it as disaster one-upmanship, a question of who had it worse. For once, my mom is not caught in her own concerns but genuinely cares about her neighbors and about the Ukrainians driven from their homes. She can relate to their anguish. The children she sees on TV, holding their mother’s hands, packs slung across their backs, remind her of herself. Their clouded eyes bring tears to her own.

In the nursing home, the people remind each other to take a break from watching the news, it’s not good to watch too much, they say.

Sometimes they pick on her. My mom, eager for authoritative advice, asks those seated at her lunch table whether they think she should fire her aide? Do they think she should assign her financial oversight of her affairs? Would they throw out an old blouse? But where? Gossip makes the rounds quickly. “You shouldn’t be sharing so much personal information,” a neighbor on her floor says. At dinner, a woman remarks loudly, “That cardigan you’re wearing clearly has no life left in it.” Many times I’ve encouraged her to go sit in the club room with comfortable chairs, get to know some other residents, or sit in the reading nook. “*Nein, nein,*” she says. “They wouldn’t want me there. And I don’t know what to talk about.”

The scorn and derision she experienced as a refugee from the East still seem to fence in her life.

For a brief moment, however, their wartime childhoods erase the differences among the residents at the Albertinum. Usually, my mom cannot look past the fact that some of them receive regular visits from their grand-children or have sunny apartments filled with flowers, whereas her own window faces north-east. When asked what her daughter in the U.S. is up to, she can't remember what I've told her, which leaves her with nothing. Seventy-five years ago, though, none of them grew up under "normal" conditions. The bombings, hunger, persecution or expulsion they experienced are suddenly front and center for all of them. And while I can march in a protest rally, my more or less housebound mother has no outlet for her emotions. She says her heart palpitations are getting worse. Her jaw is locked so tight she has a hard time eating. "A woman told me that every time she hears a siren in the Ukraine on TV, she feels a pain in her elbows. The gout acting up," she says, her voice unusually soft.

A week goes by until we're on the phone again. I picture her sitting in the narrow rattan chair with the faded cushion, facing the pine desk covered in papers she has forgotten where to file.

She sputters, "I didn't even know this! My mother died two days after my birthday. Edith told me." Edith is her older sister. "I don't have any dates. And we were always supposed to remember our mother's birth and death dates. Oh, my father would get so upset."

The fact that she now has more concrete information doesn't change anything for my mom.

"I think it was because of the refugee crisis"—she uses the word she has learned from the news—"that I became depressed, already back when we lived in the barrack."

Every time I hear my mom making connections like these I feel a jolt of hope that she will get better. That this most recent and longest bout of depression, which began ten years ago,

will lift, and that by actively working with a therapist she'll be able to find a measure of peace during the last years of her life. I would like to imagine that there's still a chance she can be a grandmother to my daughter. Perhaps even a mother I don't have to mother.

“I would always rock back and forth like that on my shoulder, you know, in the bed I shared with Edith, and then she would call, ‘*Vati, Vati*’, and my father went to the cupboard, he always called it a locker, and he got out a belt and then he hit me. One shouldn't hit children!”

No, one shouldn't.

During the current war, which Putin calls a special military operation, a second mass grave has just been discovered near Kiev. My mother and I have both read about it, and for her the connection is immediate.

“It was the same back then. My father often talked about the moment he stood in front of a mass grave. I don't even know where he was in the war.”

There it is again, *nobody told me anything*. I've often considered her helplessness as an infuriating ploy to be taken care of. My father's sister once revealed to me that the family had always seen her as a bit of a princess. In other words, she was lucky to have found her husband, my father. I know this isn't entirely fair, because when she was well she was the driving force behind several changes my father and she made as a couple. For example, she was the one who found and bought the co-op apartment they moved into in later years. She would suggest travel destinations which they both enjoyed—they liked traveling together—or got them to join a bowling club.

“Whether he was in France...” My mom trails off, only to pick up pace at what she does remember. “He wasn't allowed to talk about it. My mother always said, ‘Stop talking about all that!’ when he wasn't doing well.”

I think about this for a moment. *When* he wasn't doing well. Did his war memories exacerbate my grandfather's moods, or were they the cause?

Meanwhile my mom has shifted back to the present and the news on TV.

"I've seen how Putin's people just kill others, the bodies are lying there on the street, even their own people, Sandra! And they just leave them there." She continues, "It shows you how a single man can upset the apple cart for the entire world. Because you can't blame any others. He's got to be disturbed somehow. He wants to make the *Reich*"—she uses the German word for empire—"still bigger."

For a moment neither of us says anything.

"What also stands out to me is the compassion. Such vast sums of money are being donated."

Now she sounds more like the jealous mother I know who hates other women for wearing beautiful clothes.

"Back then," she goes on, "I think people weren't as sympathetic as they are today. Everyone looked askance at us. We got nothing."

Conversations with my mother are usually circular. I expect her to tell me about her lack of sweaters next.

"*Na ja*, I turned the TV off, because I can't watch all that either." A thought occurs to her. "It could happen that here, too, there'll be war—since we belong to the disagreeable countries, is that what it's called? Because we're sending weapons."

I steer the conversation back to less upsetting terrain, ask her what's going on at the home.

“*Ach*, Sandra, we’re supposed to always wear a mask, mealtimes are half an hour and then everyone goes back to their room. I don’t belong to any of the cliques here, so then I watch the news, read the newspaper, and outside it’s too cold. You’re very alone here. You can’t really have a conversation with anyone.”

That sounds unlikely to me.

She tells me about a recent news report which makes no sense to me in its seemingly blatant display of racism. A woman with “Rasta hair” was not allowed to perform at a demonstration in Hannover.

“Yes, because of her hair,” my mother insists.

“That’s horrible, Mom, it’s racist!” I’m aghast. “How can hair be a reason? That’s like the Nazi era all over again.”

I google “Hannover, demo, woman with dreadlocks.” A young white singer with blond dreadlocks was uninvited from performing at a *Fridays-for-Future* demo because of what the organizers deemed cultural appropriation. Subsequently the move was widely criticized. A speaker from an African Diaspora organization commented, he has no problem with white people wearing dreadlocks. Why not? He’s more concerned about vestiges of paternalism.

“Mom,” I say, “details matter. We’re not reliving those old times. You need to stop looking at all the negative stuff.” I talk to her about how we reinforce grooves in our brain by repeating the same lines over and over until that’s all we can see. “And you have to stop seeing yourself as a victim.”

“*Ja*,” she chimes in right away. “The volunteer woman who comes every two weeks, she always says to me, ‘No sentences with but!’”

All my life my mother has been allowed to be negative. A tendency to find fault in others that has rubbed off on me.

No sentences which include “but.” That’s succinct, I marvel.

American Baptism

I awake when the second alarm goes off. There isn't enough time for a good breakfast—dressing always takes longer than anticipated, and today I want to look good. It is a rainy May morning. At the last minute I decide to leave my father's pocket umbrella at home and risk arriving at my appointment wet and bedraggled. Chances are it would be confiscated as a potential weapon anyway, though it could scarcely look alarming in its old-fashioned navy and red herringbone design.

The 6:30 am bus out of New Paltz is nearly empty. I chat with a mom I know about my upcoming appointment but soon decide to conserve energy and close my eyes. The bus rattles along. At the Port Authority my friend wishes me good luck, and I descend to the downtown A train. Adopting my no-nonsense NYC stride, I promptly walk in the wrong direction.

At 26 Federal Plaza, armed guards point me to a side entrance. There is a stand with disposable umbrella bags and a friendly sign "Please Help Us Keep Our Building Clean." Can this be real? Then it's on to the usual airport-type security.

Thirteen years before, the last time I was here, a line of people snaked around the building. My then-husband had to throw out his tiny Swiss army knife before we could enter. The breast pump I placed on the x-ray scanner bewildered the attendant, who quickly waved me on when I answered what it was.

Today the procedure is smooth. The building also houses the FBI and the Social Security administration, and I quickly disappear into a sea of suited, slick-haired office workers. As I get on an elevator, I lock eyes with a handsome young man a moment longer than I usually would. This is starting to feel good.

When I check in I'm given a number, J-103, and sent to another room down the hall. About half a dozen people are waiting. A man speaks Arabic in a gentle voice to the woman beside him, then leads a young girl out of the room. They come and go several times. An old woman is called up next. She needs an interpreter. One of the officers, an older black woman in a bright blue blouse, is impatient when someone doesn't understand the number she calls up. I hope I don't get her! My future hangs in the balance. I tell myself that if I do end up with her I will break the ice as soon as possible—perhaps compliment her on her blouse.

Forty-five minutes have passed and I'm starting to get tired. A wave of stage fright washes over me. There's a TV on the wall with a breakfast talk show on. A woman is showing us how to cook a perfect omelet. I look up briefly, then look again: there is Matthew Rhys, the male lead of the TV show *The Americans* and one of my favorite actors. On screen he is a Welsh man playing a Russian spy playing an American. I wonder how well I will play the American today. I have lived here half my life. When my daughter and I practiced the 100 questions of the civics test, she showed off her school knowledge of American history. But do YOU know how many members the House of Representatives has?

The waiting room has almost emptied when the door opens. It's the woman in the blue blouse. "J-103," she calls out. After preliminaries we head right into the test section of the naturalization interview. I think I get the first question right, but she crosses something out on her sheet, then coughs and says, "I'm sorry." I'm startled, did I get it wrong? When she reaches for a water bottle from a shelf with half a dozen of them it dawns on me that she merely apologized for coughing. I laugh and admit my assumption, adding that she has quite a bit of water there. She smiles, the ice is broken. I answer the six questions correctly. Then I am asked to read a sentence out loud, followed by her dictating the phrase "We have 100 Senators" for me to write

out. I forgot to capitalize senators, the way it's printed in the civics booklet, but keep my mouth shut.

Suddenly she starts a conversation about my daughter's unusual name. I'm taken aback, not quite ready to fully relax. She can be hard to understand and I'm caught between not wanting to offend and needing to give the correct answer to her official questions that come out in rapid succession. Like the next one: "Are you prepared to bear arms for the United States?" What? Did I say yes to this on the application? I mumble a non-committal "If I have to I will."

We are done. I think I have given the right answers and she is going to recommend my application for approval. Once it is granted I will be sent an invitation to the oath ceremony. My step is light as I emerge into the Manhattan rain that hasn't let up. I'm a new American now. Well, almost.

It's still early in the day. I decide to do something very American: I go shopping. At Sephora's. I've never been to a make-up store. At the end of my mini spree there's foundation powder, liberally applied by the 20-year-old salesgirl, now all over my boots and the floor. I'm exhausted.

From a food truck outside I get lunch, carry it across the street to Trinity Church and eat in the company of a homeless woman under a tent outside. Afterwards, I decide on a whim to go inside. A service is in progress, people have just risen from their pews for communion and the *Our Father*. The lights are bright, candles flicker in the alcoves and although tourists are milling around, the unified focus on this ritual is palpable. My family barely attended church. Perhaps because it's cold and rainy outside, I feel immediately comforted here, held. On a deeper level, however, the truth of my American baptism has a chance to sink in. I walk over and light a

candle for my dad who let me go, so many years ago, when Germany seemed too small-minded for me, and thank him.

Just south of the church, I make one last stop. I see the park at the tip of Manhattan, I see Ellis Island, and in the distance, behind a Liberty Cruise ship, is the statue in the mist.

The oath ceremony occurs a month later. I'm a bona fide American citizen. I don't feel different, though perhaps a little safer to speak my mind. After close to twenty years in this country I receive my voter registration in time to vote in a ridiculous presidential election. I continue to try to explain this and more unfathomable realities to my family in Germany.

The shiny blue passport book that arrives quicker than expected does bring me a sense of relief. I'm out of the immigration system at last, can't be put in rooms by airport officers without explanation anymore, or otherwise bullied. At the ceremony, after a Christian choir has sung the *Star-Spangled Banner*, the judge says to us, "Look around you. You're looking at Americans."

It's the immigration officer present in the hall who perhaps understands best what it took all of us to get here. Addressing the motley, international group sitting in the Kingston Court House, he says, "I don't want to see you again." We laugh. With a smile he adds, "Goodbye, and good luck!"



Arthur & Erna Klemm in Posen, 1939

(I know no one in the photo below except Aunt Meta and my grandfather)



Wedding of Arthur & Wilma
Dassel, 1948

(Mom is second girl from left,
Edith is on her left, with braids,
Manfred in the middle)





21 Ferdinand Wallbrecht Street in 2020; Josh and Sandy in 1988

