TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Almost Memories / Almost True Stories

By Dagmar Barnouw

Dagmar Barnouw first came to my notice as the author of Naipaul's Strangers *(2003), one of the best books I have read on the troublesome Nobel laureate. In my first weeks as editor of Transnational Literature I sent calls for papers around the world to every likely contact, and naturally Dagmar was one from whom I solicited something on a broadly transnational theme. To my dismay, it was not Dagmar herself who responded, but her husband, now widower, Jeff Barnouw.*

Jeff sent not only the news of her death and biographical information which alerted me to an astonishing breadth of scholarship of which the Naipaul book had been one small tributary, but also an autobiographical essay which Dagmar had written towards the end of her life and for which she was just beginning to seek a publisher. Immediately captivated by her story of a small child trying to make sense of a world blown to pieces by war, I wrote back with a bold proposition: would Jeff allow me to publish Dagmar's memoir? To my delight he agreed, and even offered a second part. Both essays are published here for the first time.

- Editor

1. The Organ and the Eggs

Memories are neither stories nor true stories but something in-between that emerges to become submerged again, its confirmations turning into suspicions. Augustine said that memories are the presence of things past. But if the past could speak directly, it might challenge the truth of memories because that presence would have changed the past to fit contemporary needs. And if you want to search for truth because it must be somewhere, it would be in the changes. Soothing or terrifying, they might be as imaginary as resurrection in the flesh; and as seductively deceptive.

There was that small, muddy village in Northern Bavaria where we had inexplicably landed at the end of the War. Over the decades, I have sometimes remembered those years as nothing but hunger, cold, boredom and fear. But it also seemed that in these memories the child preoccupied with finding food and staying clear of the ferocious village geese, dogs, and teenage boys was retreating. I was forgetting what it had felt like to be this child. Had I been able to watch my former self running away in panic from Wotan's wind-borne chase of a thousand geese, wildly gesticulating and infernally screeching, I would have sympathized with that terrible, hilarious panic. But the mesh of memories growing between her and the person I would have become in each subsequent instant of remembering made it easier to smile at that old fear. Later, I might even have been tempted to think that the teasing I still remember as unfair could have been partly deserved. Suspecting my memories, however gently, I would never really know who I was then, and where; and what the War had done to us. But, then, what

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do we mean when we say 'really' or 'truly.' Time changes everything. Appealing to our memories to sort out pasts and presents we act as if we know that. But do we understand that what we witness is the pastness of our fears and desires?

More destructive than anything else in Western historical memory, the Second World War inexorably separated the past from the future. It is true, many remote villages like ours seemed barely touched by it. But as if it needed an epilogue to Germany's dead cities and the enforced migrations of many millions of homeless people, the War had deposited into them large numbers of refugee mothers and children. Packed tightly into an open truck, we clutched our small wet bundles, ourselves shaken like rags by the cold wind and the fear of being flung off the truck. It stopped abruptly; our eyes, shut against the heavy rain, opened; we looked at the village and knew that it would always have been cut off from the rest of the world. All hopes of leaving here would be nothing but a hazy dream; and trying to get back to where we had come from nothing but a black rock of futility. Back there, in the past, I had been taught to ride the tram by myself when I started school. I had loved the safe adventure of riding around our city naming, as my mother had taught me, the famously beautiful old palaces, churches, and bridges so that I would always know where I was. That city would soon be famously bombed out of existence; we would leave our burnt-out house and for many months walk towards the promised land of the American Zone. Here, our mother said, we would all be safe.

There were many millions of refugee children uprooted by the War and there would be many more in the wars to come, though that would have seemed unimaginable in 1945. Many children must have felt hopelessly and helplessly out of place as I did in those unwelcoming villages with their ancient, alien ways. Mother said this was the first time in many months that we could stay for a little while, and in a house; and that we had to be grateful. We were; grateful and trying hard not to be seen or heard. But there was also the sudden sharp flash of memories of our house before it was bombed, all the things we loved now burnt or shattered. In the refugee camp we had inhabited a small square drawn on the floor, floating in our one-dimensional living space and trying not to trespass into the neighboring square. Now we had a real room, mother pointed out; all to ourselves, four walls, a ceiling, two windows, a door we could open and shut. Never mind that the floor was taken up completely by the three Red Cross mattresses and a small wood-burning stove whose smoke burned your throat and your eyes. Wasn't it good that we did not own anything but our small bundles.

Smiling, my mother told me later that I had cried protesting the terrible emptiness of the tiny room; and that my two younger sisters had wanted me to stop lamenting. But also that they had listened when I recalled some of the things each of us had particularly liked – toys, books; clothes, furniture; or the whole big playroom where one could run and jump and not have to be a 'good child.' Do you remember our living room in the winter? How when lit the tall white tiled stove became a column of rosy glow, wonderful to watch and touch on the gray cold mornings, that made the relief figures on some of the tiles come to life with the flow of its magical warmth. Still in our pajamas, we would press our backs and tummies against the warm smooth surfaces of the stove and run our fingers around the warm shepherdesses, tracing their hats and skirts. Playing memory

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games, none of us would have thought to ask our mother what she missed most; not at that time. She would probably have said the main thing is that we all survived and are together.

What my two younger sisters truly enjoyed were not my mournful memories but my horrified stories of the present; especially about the geese on attack which I would have described in great and awed detail. We agreed that one could not do much about the dogs but get out of their way as quickly as possible; if luck had it that they were chained, their chains often broke from their straining to get after us in big leaps. The geese, however, they did not think really dangerous, citing the opinion of our brother who had figured out how to trick them. But his uncanny ability to cope with the geese did not mean that I could do it too. He seemed to be able to pick up a lot of useful information from just standing around in different places of the village with his hands folded behind his back like the village men, quietly observing. A good little refugee boy that showed the proper respect and did not disturb them; nor the geese marching by in orderly formation.

Snub-nosed, looking at the world through big round watchful eyes, he was the youngest and the only man in the family. Our mother remarked on his early developed excellent sense of direction, very useful, especially now. To me it seemed admirable because, older and bigger, I did not have it though I knew that 'especially now' was an important challenge that he could meet and I could not, not really. This mysterious sense, I thought, might have something to do with his patiently studying the village like a jigsaw puzzle, his favourite toy. He had always had a neatly packed stack of them next to his bed but when I asked him whether he missed them he just shrugged and rolled his eyes at this stupid question. Remember, they burned; get it into your head that they are gone.

Our mother thought he was right but I think now that I needed to remember. The jigsaw puzzle also made me understand that my trying so hard to avoid what I feared had cut up the village into relatively safe and definitely unsafe spaces that could not be put back together again. Where our brother pointed out the individual dogs' different habits of attack, some real, some sham, I would just see them as one terrifying pack of wolves that I could only escape by immediately turning around and running. I never learned to see their differences because I never really looked at them. You need to look at them, he would say when helping me to plot my detours around the worst of them, and look pleased when I repeated our mother's praise that he knew the village like the 'back of his hand.'

Over the years I have remembered him as a weirdly lovable ball of smallness and shrewdness rolling around in the village, stopping here and there to look and ponder. Too young to really miss the things of the past, he was content with what he could puzzle out now, the people and animals of the village. I fantasized that we should change places, miraculously absolving me from being the eldest. But I happened to be the eldest and the only one tall enough for certain tasks. He was in many ways smarter than I, better suited to cope with what was needed now; but still too short. Every day I had to carry the big heavy pots of boiling water upstairs from the communal kitchen, he running ahead of me and warning everybody to get out of my way. Every day, my heart in my throat, I had to

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pass the house with the meanest dog on my way to gather fire wood and he would call after me what I should watch out for.

Overcoming my village fears did not toughen me, as my mother had hoped. I never overcame them and, as my mother finally said, I just had to live with them. I did and it worked out, sort of. Our brother who was never afraid accepted my fearfulness as a fact, as he accepted the fact that we all adored him. He was the 'cat's pajamas' – an American expression I heard years later that immediately struck me as fitting his role in our family at that time. We admired his wily strategies to keep the geese at arm's length; and his cleverly fooling the peasants who promised to beat us black and blue if they caught us picking up some of the bruised apples from the ground underneath the overloaded trees in the open orchards. Perhaps because he was so young and thought everything an exciting game or puzzle, he liked to let them come quite close, flinging their long sticks at us like the geese their big wings, and then somehow managed to get us out of their way at the last moment. Our meticulously planned escapes delighted and scared me because they were so successful and seemed so risky – exactly what he liked.

Deceived by the fact that he was so small, the peasants may have expected him to be a hindrance to us in trying to get away when in reality, as we thought, he was protecting us from them. But they may also have been not as serious as we feared about catching and beating us. I remember seeing some of the village men talking to him and smiling at something he was saying when I was sent to find him in one of his favourite places in the village. He may even have asked them about their dogs; their names; at what hours they were chained; how we could better cope with them when they weren't. They would never have talked to or smiled at us girls.

My sisters liked my stories because we were story-starved; we had not seen a single book in what seemed to us a very long time. Our mother's store of stories was all dried up, like mother's milk, she said. It was her worries about finding enough food to prevent our current starvation diet from seriously affecting our physical and mental development. Heavy and unhappy, this sentence was meant for grown-ups. We nodded earnestly since we knew only too well that we were hungry all the time. Only much later did I put my mother's worries together with her own experience of years of serious hunger after WWI when her mother would have had the same fears for her. I remember that she repeatedly mentioned the importance of the food we needed and she could not give us when we begged for stories about 'the time before,' beginning with her childhood in Berlin. Like the food, she did not have them. We would have to wait for better times, less dark and lean, which she was sure would come, but she did not know how soon. Eventually, it would not be so difficult to find food and she might even find people who had books and who perhaps could lend one to us. And then, perhaps, she would even remember some of the stories we wanted to hear. Things would get better in time, she hoped; and so should we – hope.

I don't remember whether we knew how to hope; or, if we did, the shapes such hope would have taken. There are many things I don't remember of these years, probably because their darkness and leanness was so all-enveloping. I don't remember when my mother began again to tell us stories about the time before our world had exploded or

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collapsed. How long it had taken her to remember herself as a young girl, only a few years older than I, roller-skating 'all over Berlin,' by which she meant Berlin-Wilmersdorf, a large pleasant middleclass district with solidly handsome apartment buildings and attractive parks where I would walk many years later, remembering.

There would be stories about her studying animals at Berlin University, walking around the lab in a white coat with a visible guinea-pig in one pocket and her tiny spirited dachshund hidden in the other. She played tennis, she was a member of the university's rowing team; she went dancing, she drove cars, she rode horses, she sailed. These were literally fabulous activities: where and how could one have done these wonderfully exciting things? I barely remembered riding around in a tram by myself or in a train with my grandfather. It was not our mother who was changed by these stories; she remained just that, our mother, the absolute center of our small, threatened, barren world. We were awed, spellbound, utterly fascinated by her large, secure, colorful world; her share of the magic past full of promises. I probably cried that it was all gone and was shushed by my siblings who wanted to hear more stories, no matter that there were no more promises.

My mother also worked on an island in the Baltic Sea studying its most important inhabitants, birds; she wrote many pages about their sense of direction when flying and became a doctor but not a medical doctor. She was a scientist, not a physician. I was intrigued by this distinction but the villagers would not accept it. They turned to her with their ordinary cuts and fractures and to ask her help with tricky deliveries since it was difficult to find a physician or midwife, not to speak of a functioning hospital. Mother had no instruments, no bandages, no medications, just the proverbial kitchen table and scissors, torn sheets and water boiling on a rickety wood-fired stove which I had to feed very carefully, trying to look and listen away. She would have been nervous at first; not about the blood, broken bones and screaming, but her competence in dealing with them. But she quickly learned to like making people well despite her anxieties, and it seemed that it made her feel more at home in the village so that she began to tell us stories again. There also would have been gifts of food in exchange. I remember a large sack of potatoes I found one morning leaning against the door and her delighted laughter – perhaps the first of such gifts; or a particularly impressive one. At any rate, we welcomed it by dancing around it to the tunes that she played on the fiddle of her voice.

I remember most distinctly my mother's stories about roller-skating and rowing, probably because of her clear and detailed memories of the fast controlled motion on smooth surfaces, sidewalks and water, that seemed to her – and then to me – deeply satisfying. But the most alluring, mysterious stories were about walking in large beautiful city parks where it always seemed to be spring or summer. After the chaos of the war and stuck in our muddy village with its many large piles of manure bleeding into our little brook, our sober, skeptical mother became unabashedly poetic when she tried to make us see the pleasures of ordered, predictable nature. There were the large, well-kept trees, the well-planned flower beds that changed with the seasons, their wonderfully mingled smells; the well-dressed children walking with their fathers and mothers on the carefully raked lanes dividing the smooth emerald-colored lawns; the golden-green sunlight filtered through the trees, the delicate sounds of birds merging in a musical stillness. I

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would have recorded these descriptions as if they were to become my own memories; and as I am writing this, I even remember that later I felt I had to suppress my own memory of one of the few pleasant sensations I associate with our years in the village, the early summer smell of haying. It was a wonderful smell, light and sweetly yearning, that has stayed with me for many decades; but it was not worthy to be mentioned next to the smells of my mother's enchanted parks, the magical, innocent, never to be found again past.

The best memories of these years were of singing with my mother. Soon after our arrival, she had begun to play the ancient, neglected organ in our little church. When the congregation seemed to like her playing, she had proposed that she and I sing simplified Bach cantatas on Sundays for which the village families would pay us with food. The bundles of yellowish, mould-stained sheet music which she had found under layers of dust in a large, otherwise empty cupboard on the organ loft would have been left behind by several generations of organists, most of them probably teachers at the village school, she thought. They were precious to my mother for several reasons; for one, they had given her the idea to sing in church which added significantly to our food supply. But she also interpreted the discovery as a friendly omen: the sheet music had been collected and used by past organists and been passed on to someone in the future – as if they had anticipated and welcomed her, the quintessential outsider.

I remember her saying this to me at the time but I did not then understand the depth of her loneliness in that village which she could not simply reject, as I did, as 'a god-forsaken place' because it was all she had for us to survive. Until much later, until television connected them with the gradually rebuilt modern West Germany, these villages, their houses, cultural conventions, and beliefs were still in many ways medieval, a darkly mysterious, paranoid mix of Christian and pagan lore focused on the all-important issue of fertility. My mother was most intrigued by the witchcraft stories about carrying and delivering babies. A few years later, still in the same village, she would be amused and appalled by the exotic advice about menstruation given to the village girls preparing for confirmation. We had been sworn to secrecy by some of the older women in the congregation who guided us through the incomprehensible rituals. Curious what the boys had been told, I wanted to ask them but the other girls were afraid that they would just hit us and drive us away because we were breaking a powerful taboo. Most of the small farmers in this area were still the cautious, superstitious peasants of the past, working their small stony fields, irregular and dispersed over the hills, the same way their ancestors had done in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. My mother had not just come from another place but also from another time. The War we barely survived had managed to do that to many millions of people in many different places. Wars are still doing it all over the globe as we, who let them happen, know but don't seem to understand; or don't seem to care.

The organ, too, seemed medieval. It worked with bellows that had to be pumped up 'manually' and I had to tread it, an excruciatingly boring activity. I had been very lucky to find a pile of old newspapers in another dusty cupboard, miraculous after the many months on the road where anything printed, even the idea of it, had been one of the

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never again attainable wonders of the lost past. I read what must have been pre-war local news in small portions to stretch out my reading material when I had to pump the bellows for my mother's practicing; and the organ often stopped with a heart-rending sigh and groan and an ominous shudder because I had been treading too slowly. But during our little performances, I had to really concentrate on pumping while singing – for which I was praised by my mother, and proud that it mostly worked.

Thinking about singing with my mother, I also remembered again the old peasant who had climbed up to the organ loft after the service that had ended with our cantata for that Sunday. He wiped what seemed a tear from his cheek with one hand and with the other one pulled two eggs out of his frayed coat pocket which he put into my cupped hands, praising us in his untranslatable harsh Northern Bavarian dialect: 'you've been singing beautifully; like a gramophone' – the highest cultural compliment. Milk in a pitcher, a loaf of bread and a small chunk of butter would have been placed by the family whose turn it was to 'pay' at the bottom of the ladder to the organ loft for us children to find them after the service. I thought in some ways we were like cats; not that we minded being treated like cats. Unlike them we couldn't be sure and were always excited and delighted to be fed; more grateful than cats.

I hadn't remembered before the old man's gesture of wiping his cheek and my cupping my hands to receive the eggs and then carrying them down that rickety squeaky ladder with great care. But I have always remembered his compliment for our singing as very dear and inadvertently funny, partly because for years it would be cited in the family with friendly irony if something tricky had turned out well. I must have been about ten then, and I remember how I habitually flinched from the growls, screeches, and hissing complaints of the tired, disgruntled organ when the air went out. Like the chorus of the congregation, it was also horribly and irresistibly out of tune. But my mother, resourceful and a good organist, did what she could with the ancient unwilling instrument and, though she showed me some of her tricks, I remember that I could never really figure out how she coaxed it to yield so many unexpectedly smooth, reassuring sounds.

She had a beautiful alto voice; and what I heard of my own voice moving around hers, echoing together from the bare walls in that little church, sounded eerily clear and certain. Carried by her voice, its larger and softer darkness, mine seemed to be climbing up the intricate spirals of the melody like the unearthly, silvery sounds of a glass harmonica. They had enchanted me when I heard them in a friend's house, translucent airy drops falling one by one into the hushed silence of children listening in awe.

That house, across the street from ours, would soon be gone; burned to the ground with everyone, everything in it. In reaction to Germany's aggression, and to win him over to the Allied war effort, Churchill had promised Stalin in the summer of 1942 the destruction by fire-bombing of all German houses and all Germans living in them. It would be a spectacle the like of which the world had never seen. The minutes of their meeting records that Stalin smiled and said that would be good.

Why should it not be wrong to forget? Even though our mother, anxious about our future, seemed to think so. I have always remembered the fact that I loved listening to us singing together when we practiced in that cold, dusty, neglected church. But there was

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also my feeling of it as an aggressively inhospitable space, not unlike the peasants' hard, suspicious reluctance to acknowledge the presence of us refugees dropped on their village by ‘the authorities.’ Mother had told me that the church was neoclassical and had good acoustics, good for singing. But it was much later that I remembered how some of the cantatas had made me cry because their beauty seemed so exquisite, its perfection so sharply exhilarating. And that I heard again her unhurried whisper ‘the organ, the organ.’ After the service, after we were done, she would observe with amused fondness how happily I had been crying. Tears were fine – she knew where they came from – as long they did not interfere with my pumping needed for her playing, and our singing needed for the food.

What I remember as my reaction to the old peasant's praise, 'very dear and inadvertently funny,' must have been my mother's; she would have been charmed by the compliment because it was put so quaintly and offered so generously. Our efforts to make heard at least part of the beauty that she understood and loved, and that for me was such a powerful sensation, had moved him to speak to us and make us the present of the eggs. The eggs were precious and for me a lovely reward; for her it would have been his individual response to our music making. It would have seemed to her a momentary fragile bridge to the passively hostile village community ordered like all other German villages to accommodate a certain number of refugee women and their children who had come with literally nothing to their name; often not even that if in the chaos of deportation they had lost their birth certificates. So totally dispossessed – no husbands, no land, no house, no furniture, nothing that could be called proper and property – the refugees’ past would have seemed to these peasants totally unimaginable, their present insubstantial, their identity a moot question.

My former self, that always hungry and fearful refugee kid, would in the end have survived quite well without a childhood, happy or unhappy, to be remembered. True, I easily remember the village dogs, geese and teenage boys. Or the tenacious, heavy, sticky yellowish mud; or the old peasant women in their dirty, smelly black clothes shoving and pulling with a hangman’s thick rope unwieldy, stubbornly resisting cows uphill to another patch of wet grass, slippery from the eternal rain. Sliding, staggering, falling, they often got themselves entangled in that unforgiving rope. Their shrill, monotonous lamentations echoing from the hills about the malicious stupidity of the animals, of the rain, of that particular hill, of the village, of the whole world struck a deep chord in me when I passed them on my way to gather wild greens, my favourites dandelion and sorrel, wild berries, and always firewood. Handing me the sack for foraging, my mother would soberly point out the advantages of being stranded in a village rather than a bombed-out city where there was nothing to gather but stones and nobody had food to give to us for playing the organ and singing.

I would have nodded in agreement. But on many of those cold rainy days, I surely thought that my life was as miserable as it could possibly be. All that walking around to gather food, without enough warm clothing, in the precious but never fitting shoes we sometimes got from the care packages and shared by stuffing them with whatever we could find to adjust the size. The few socks that survived the trek had been mended so

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often that they were turned into scouring pads. Most depressing, at those moments I seemed to share the misery of these incomprehensibly alien old women, barefoot in their worn-out and much too large boots. And it struck me that I did not even know how to wail in distress.

I have very few memories of my missed childhood. Habitually admonished to be invisible and inaudible so as not to irritate their involuntary and unwilling 'hosts,' many refugee children seem to have been preternaturally 'good,' as if we had permanently shrunk ourselves to fit into hiding places that would have no space for future memories. For many of us, after the worst war and postwar years were over, life was often unpleasant, uncomfortable, unfair but mostly in gray and shabby ways that do not lend themselves to haunting memories. Embarrassed rather than ashamed, I sometimes still remember the hot sting of envy visiting the homes of classmates whose world had not been overturned, who had stayed where they belonged and kept all their belongings, their pictures, their books, their well-tuned pianos, their music – sometimes it would be handed to me to sing one of their favorite songs. Like millions of other families, we had barely survived and never recovered what we lost; and I thought then that saying to us refugees 'but you were lucky, you survived' was too easy.

Were I to think it now, so many decades later, it would be for my mother's generation that bore the brunt of the War and its consequences, not for mine, certainly not for myself. There are all the children who did not survive World War Two, millions of them; and many more who died, and are dying now, in the wars that came after it. Why have the grown-ups never learned to overcome their acceptance of man-made warfare, the death of others, when there have always been plenty of natural disasters that do the killing for them? I thought of that terrible irrational acceptance when I could not get out of my mind the image of a little boy in very skimpy clothes who had just survived the huge Pakistan earthquake of 2005. A small group of international aid workers and journalists making a documentary film had managed to get to his remote snowed-in village and was handing out warm clothing. Waiting his turn patiently, the small, thin child was given a warm jacket which he immediately began to put on, all smiles in that moment of receiving a wonderful gift. But before he had gotten his arm into the second sleeve, a burly man came up behind him, tore it away from him and ran off. The boy did not protest, not even cry, just stood there hopelessly for a moment and then went away, not even trying to get another piece of warm clothing crucially important for survival. Nobody intervened on his behalf; the camera crew just went on filming.

I cannot remember a moment of such betrayal in all my now exotic experiences during the last years of the war and the early postwar years. Eventually, somebody would have stopped the young drunk Russian soldier who kept knocking my head against a big chest demanding I give him the watches that were not in its drawers. I got away with nothing worse than a broken tooth and a concussion. There would have been many such incidents, some of them quite serious. But over the decades, as I remembered the child living through this bloody and brutal war, I never found her as abandoned as that little boy seemed to be. She was lucky that there was always somebody; and that we survived.

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Transnational Literature

2. The Care Package

The package came from Benson, West Texas. It had to be picked up at the Red Cross distribution center in the small market town ten kilometers away. When we first saw the large carton, it was tied to the bar of the bicycle and mother was holding on to it as she swayed into the muddy yard. She seemed excited as she was not even trying to avoid the most treacherous chain of puddles. The family bicycle, squeaky with rust, its tires made of patches, was our most glamorous possession; without it, mother said, we would be hopelessly stuck. It had traces of bright red paint and a thrilling shrill bell that impressed the village geese I feared most, even more than the dogs.

Wet and shivering mother patted the bike. She was still holding on to the package that was lumpy from the rain and made me fear that it might not contain anything but dissolving cardboard. She called that we should close the window and let her carry the package in, because she did not want us to get our feet dirty. It meant pumping, carrying water in our two small cooking pots, warming it up on the stove and finding rags to dry our feet. Everything seemed hard to do and harder to find and I was wondering how she had managed to get the piece of rope to tie the package to the bike. She did not have it when she left; and always suspecting that things would not (as she always assured us) work out somehow, I had been almost sure that the package would not make it to us. For days we had been talking about it, speculating what it might contain. Mother maintained that it would be lovely to get it in any case because it meant that people in far-away places were thinking of us kindly. This, she said, was a promise of better times to come. I thought it unlikely: how could they even know about 'us', much less think of us kindly. Who in the world, not even our father, knew about us? Nor we about him; or the rest of the family. And even if they did, how could that give us hope. As mother remembered, I did not keep the objections to myself. I thought I had because she looked so cold and exhausted. But she did not seem to have minded. In fact, she sometimes reminded me of them as examples of my early suspicion that things would most probably not work out. Sometimes I thought she considered my shrinking away from promises with a degree of approval, certainly of amused fondness: the first word I ever said was 'no' – an indication of future reactions and quite suitable for the times, she said. Trying to survive with the four of us she would have had to react differently.

I remember the fire we made in the stove using up almost all the wood we had gathered the previous day to dry out Mother and the package and celebrate their arrival. The festive sheath of warm air protected us for a little while against the familiar acrid smell rising from the skin of the long black stove pipe. The package sat on the table, inscrutable under its wet dark brown wrapping paper. First we looked up 'West Texas' on one of the maps that were leaning rolled up against the walls of the one-room schoolhouse to which we had been assigned for the time being. My mother believed in orientation – too much, as I remember thinking then: you have to know where you are or at least what questions to ask to find your way back. But what if you didn't, couldn't? if people didn't answer? Well, you must always try. Texas was easy to find; its emptiness occupied a large chunk of the huge United States. The name of the place where the

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people lived who had sent the package on its way thinking of ‘us’ was not on the map. Probably too small, my mother said; or god knows how old these maps were. People were moving around more in that part of America; perhaps it was a newer town. I remember asking why would they move around if they did not have to? Where would they live, if they left their old place and all their things? They would build new houses and buy new things, my mother said. But who would build the houses and with what. There were men who had tools and they could buy wood – many houses in America were built of wood, and quickly, families and friends working together, she thought. It was all very different from where and how we had lived and especially from how we lived now. Families were together; there were fathers and older brothers, uncles, cousins.

It seems to me curious now, remembering, that we were so patient, letting the package sit there, all its promises still intact, as my mother warming up to them wanted it. But we were. We were amazingly ‘good,’ sober children, easily satisfied, adjusting without much hope to what we were told had to be our life for the time being. Children adapt more easily than grown-ups; their past has more room for losses. Not me, I would most likely have thought. I wanted my Steiff dachshund back, and my book. When we left what was left of our house, the two older children were each allowed to carry two small favourite objects; somehow they also vanished, like the house and everything in it. But she remembered that not even I complained much; even being the eldest and remembering more. Somehow I understood, she must have thought; I didn't, I thought then and think now.

There was a letter for ‘us’ in the package: Mrs Anderson wrote that she had three young daughters and thanked God that their family had a good home and did not have to be refugees. She had tried to imagine what it would be like for us and packed things that she thought we could use. There was a photo of three little girls, impossibly pretty with their tidy curls and neat dresses and what seemed to be miraculously small, well-shaped shoes. ‘We’ were two girls and two boys. The boys would therefore get the larger part of the food that was surely there, underneath the pretty dresses, my mother hoped. I remember being doubtful that this decision was fair. The dress that might fit me next summer was light blue, with a lacy collar, much too pretty for me and I cried because I could not fit myself into the pleasure it promised. Mother always thought that the dress had pleased me. She reminded me that I did wear it often the following year, even though I had already outgrown it by then. I would not have cried over a dress; I was a sensible little girl who understood the situation. But I am sure I did cry; and later, still disagreeing about how ‘good’ I had been, we both smiled, consoled in remembering.

There was lovely food in the package; hard yellow cheese, some cans of fruit, beans and corn, and stony cookies that came to life when chewed for a while. There even was chocolate, the ultimate marvel, which I thought I had never tasted before. I remember that first taste – almost as violently distinct as the taste of pressure-packed peanuts. A smiling GI, gently pulling at my pigtail, had shaken them into my hand out of a can he had just opened. I had kept a portion for the others, telling them that I had just been there when the can was opened; I had not ‘hung around.’ You must never do that, never beg, mother would have repeated. I don't remember how we distributed the

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chocolate; perhaps because I was ashamed that I thought it was unfair; or because I was angry that it could not but be so.

Much later I would be driving through West Texas several times, waving at the exit sign for Benson but stopping only for the picnic tables along the well-kept, empty road. I would gaze with pleasure at the harshly, beautifully exposed empty land – a splendid drive, purposeful, fast, unencumbered. My pleasure then would be light-years away from the child's distress at the fact that the place where the promised better future was to come from seemed so remote, so vast, so different. Mother would be proved right.

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