



Andrea Heuser

When We Come Home

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Loss alone is owned for ever.

Henrik Ibsen, *Brand*, Act IV

PART ONE

How the Light Falls

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Chapter 1

Cologne, 1952

PERHAPS it was the light. Gentle and introspective, it lent the bare room that reflective quality intrinsic to the dawn of the new year, as the world, still hesitant, opens its eyes.

This light now shone also on the woman and the boy, who were clinging to each other in the doorway as if unsure who needed to protect whom.

‘A wall – here?’ Wilhelm tried not to let his bewilderment show. Little knowing that something of great import was unfolding on this quiet January morning, he nevertheless sensed a

certain tension; a speechlessness that he didn't understand. Lord knows she was not the first beautiful woman he had seen in his life. Yet, in this light...

Wilhelm had a weakness for good lighting, though what he cared most for was brightness. Sharp outlines that brought clarity, revealing the true nature of things: satisfactory or insufficient, yes or no.

Tightening his grip on the tool bag, he now tried to survey the room properly. After all, he had come here on business.

Wilhelm Koch, whom everyone called Willi, was a remarkably tall man, which was why he always leant forward a little as he spoke. In his dealings with clients, to whom he would endeavour to speak on a par, it was a beneficial pose; less so, however, for his back.

The public building contracts had been temporarily suspended just before the end of the year, supposedly because of the weather. Yet it was a comparatively mild winter; no snow lay on the ground – instead, the city centre was piled high with ruins. At least, Willi told himself, the cathedral still towered over the rubble. The day-to-day work was taken up with reconstructions and conversions commissioned by a few men of independent means, making the so-called recovery more than a mere rumour. 'A shortage of materials', meanwhile, was a phrase spoken only in whispers.

Ever since the large construction sites had lain fallow, Willi's back pains had got worse again. He definitely preferred to be outdoors; closed rooms, tight spaces – no, they weren't his thing. Neither was silence. It made him nervous. It was the hollow cavity where *things* could seep away.

Seven years had passed since the end; the end of the war. And every seven years, Willi optimistically told himself, we grow new skin. He loved idioms and adages, little bits of folk wisdom like that. Yet here and now, that much was certain, it was not his skin – old or new – or his back that was bothering him.

'You'll lose a lot of brightness if you put up a wall here, Mrs – De Boer?' This was the name he had noted down on the order form, but he'd searched in vain for a 'De Boer' family among the names on the panel with the bells to the flats. Perhaps that was why she had given him such precise directions: 'Go up to the third floor and look for the Heider flat on the right, at the far end.'

'Mrs De Boer?'

The woman in the doorway didn't move.

‘It doesn’t matter – the light,’ she said finally, and left his question as to her name unanswered. The boy at her side was looking at Willi. Not unpleasantly; more in a way that gave Willi a vague but compelling urge to tousle his carefully parted hair, and to lift him up, that thin, pale boy there in front of him, high up to the wind and the light, and let him ride on his shoulders. Yet he was finding it difficult to move so much as a finger.

The woman, her face: regular features, framed by obviously natural blonde hair; like the rest of her (simple turtleneck, capri trousers), it had that serene beauty which Willi usually registered without ever being touched by it. But now – there was something about her, about her attitude, and the look in her eyes which was not solicitous, not coquettish, yet hid a subliminal request. A request to do something? Willi felt oddly moved, and had a ludicrous urge to challenge the world to a fist fight, right then and there.

‘Go into the kitchen, please, Fred.’ The boy, who was clearly used to such instructions, immediately let go of his mother. Without taking his eyes off Willi, he picked up a book from the hall table as he went.

Golly, don’t tell me the boy already knows how to read, thought Willi, as Fred retreated to the kitchen with his book, leaving the door wide open.

At last, as if something had been neutralised by the boy’s retreat, maybe a hitherto unnoticed element of gravity perhaps, Willi was once again able to move at his customary speed and orientate himself on his points of reference: action, and words spoken to ascertain things: “‘Homes, not housing” – the excuses the city comes up with! I’m not a theoretical man, you know. I’m a pragmatist. There are apparently no resources for heat or noise insulation, or for attic conversions, but they insist that the radio station is completed by the summer. They say it’ll be one of the most modern broadcasting houses in Europe. And they’ll close their eyes as they make their way to it through all that rubble, will they? It’s ridiculous, if you ask me!’

He was feeling decidedly better. Reality had returned. Mrs De Boer – or was it Mrs Heider? – brushed a loose strand of hair out of her face. She said that she enjoyed listening to the radio. She found it comforting. Willi didn’t know how to respond, and recommended Simons’ Radios ‘just around the corner’, a shop that sold the best wireless sets around. Not only that, but they came with a warranty. ‘So you know exactly what you get for your money. Simons even part-exchanges used sets. If you – well, you know what I mean. – And now, about your wall...’

Willi stepped over a few scattered pieces from Fred's train set, and put his papers down on the prettily lacquered kidney table. He scanned the two delicate armchairs with a brief, almost sighing, glance, and then sank into the old but solid-looking sofa opposite, which was unoccupied except for a teddy bear.

Mrs De Boer/Heider did not comment on his fairly detailed explanation of the work and expense involved. When he asked why she wanted to add a wall to this 'so pleasantly laid out room', she blushed almost imperceptibly, and replied, 'For privacy.'

'Privacy' was a word that Willi heard only rarely, despite the fact that what it signified – intimacy, peace and quiet – was, one way or another, the aim of all his indoor work.

He now also noticed that the woman had a slight accent. De Boer – the name suggested a Dutch background, but the Dutch people Willi had encountered in the course of his work spoke German very differently from her. They spoke it in an unmistakably *Dutch* way, he thought. Without making any noticeable mistakes, but at the same time clumsily, as if something was preventing them from moving freely within the language. Mrs De Boer/Heider, however, who had just mentioned that she'd moved in only recently, spoke neither clumsily nor a recognisable dialect. Yet her voice would go up a shade at the end of a sentence, which sounded French and charming. He could still hear it as if it were only yesterday. Saint Denis, 1944 – something about the memory made Willi start up from the sofa. He went to the head of the room and tapped on the wall as thoroughly as his doctor had tapped on his chest the other day.

'We won't be able to make an opening in this load-bearing wall. There are a lot of electric wires running through it, too...'

Willi loved walls. He loved their stoic – and therefore all the more enduring – promise of steadfastness, a promise you could (assuming that no bombs happened to be falling on it at the time) bank on, depend on. He also loved the utterly obvious and unquestionable usefulness of their existence, and the way they imperturbably evened out any flaws left behind by inexperienced hands.

He was seventeen when he completed his apprenticeship as a builder and stonemason, and went from there straight to the front line; and the war was followed with a disconcerting seamlessness by his training to become a master mason.

In the first weeks following the end of the war, as he pulled skulls and bones from the rubble, his hands had shaken so uncontrollably that he was reduced to merely murmuring ineffective commands to his limbs.

‘I can’t watch this anymore,’ said Jochen Schäffer, the foreman and former machine-gunner, and sent him home. ‘It would have ended in tears. But he’ll be all right.’

Indeed, after a period during which his anxious mother couldn’t get her son away from the windows – which he would fling open wide, only to stand at them motionless, as if waiting for something – it looked as if he was going to ‘be all right’. One day, Schäffer heard him joking around again, chattering to the others in the troop. Willi’s hands, too, appeared to be recovering, and to remember more and more of what they used to do before the war. At any rate, the bricks, trusses and stones submitted to his will, as if they, walls and man, were shaping and erecting each other. His fingertips discovered their weak spots; he could sense where cracks were threatening to form, the loads they could bear and the ones they couldn’t. The results arrived as if automatically – his master craftsman’s diploma, his own construction company, employees, in short: responsibility, which hungrily seized him and ran away with him in its jaws.

‘...a glass of water perhaps?’

‘What? Oh no, thank you.’ Not a Frenchwoman after all, thought Willi. French flowed softly, while her words sounded harder, more polished. Where in God’s name do they speak like that? Willi wondered.

‘I’d use high-pressure laminate,’ said Willi, ‘for the dividing wall. We’ve had a lot of success with it, especially in kitchens. It’s easy to clean, fire-retardant, and most importantly light-resistant. You can also add various degrees of gloss to it. You know what I mean – for the optics. And...’ he took a deep breath, ‘...if you decide one day that you don’t need the wall anymore, you can take it down easily. Other companies would probably recommend plasterboard panels. They’re using plaster everywhere now, but we can’t process it properly these days, and you can kiss fire safety goodbye. Well, each to their own. But we still need to sort out access to the space. If you ask me, I’d make the partition more like a sort of sliding door—’

‘It’s cold again.’ Fred was standing in the doorway. Hearing his voice for the first time, Willi realised that he was older than he’d thought. Children these days were so thin, and they had to make do with whatever was available by way of clothes, which meant that unless you looked them in the eye anything that might suggest their age simply slid off them. Seven, no, probably more like eight, Willi estimated. That would make sense, what with the reading.

‘The oven, Mother.’ Fred didn’t sound plaintive, the way younger children often did when they complained of hunger or, as in this case, the cold. He spoke simply and calmly. A message – nothing more.

Mrs De Boer/Heider went up to a beautiful dresser of solid, polished ebony, which stood at the bare window side of the room like the stubborn declaration of an absence. She stroked its ornate brass fittings – an evidently unconscious gesture which, in its casualness, struck Willi as deeply tender. Then she pulled out the top drawer and extracted a large cotton cloth, which she held out to the boy.

What poor sod dragged this monster up all those stairs, wondered Willi. In the same instant, he realised what the cloth was for. ‘Come on, lad, I’ll give you a hand. The coals are heavy.’

The next moment he found himself standing at the top of the stairs with Fred, holding the key to the cellar and a wicker basket. The worn-out steps were desperately in need of repair, he thought. He protectively held out his free hand to the boy, as if it could compensate for the lack of stability, albeit only temporarily.

Yet Fred grasped the railing with one hand, holding his mother’s cloth, which bore the marks of previous coal hauls, in the other.

‘The mill on the stream is forever at work, clip clop, clip clop...’

His helping hand having been ignored, Willi could think of nothing else to do than sing. He kept singing, alone, down all those steps from the third floor to the ground floor.

‘All day and all night, the good miller’s awake...’ Willi pushed open the heavy door to the cellar and flicked the switch. A flickering electric light lit up the top steps, which led steeply down. He blinked – ‘DUCK.’

‘Down there...’

‘In here.’

‘Faster, faster.’

‘Willi, Hans, go, go!’

‘Get out of here, get out!’

‘Willi...’

‘Hans! Haaans...’

And now it was he, Willi, who involuntarily grabbed the boy’s hand, which had let go of the railing. They stood like that for a few seconds, for an eternity, until – ‘...mill the corn for the nourishing loaf, so long as there’s bread we’ll want for naught...’ – he heard Fred’s voice beside him, as clear as crystal, returning Willi to the hear and now. ‘Clip clop, clip clop, clip clop...’

Willi released the boy's hand and descended the rest of the stairs without hesitating any further. He vowed to screw that blasted lightbulb in properly on the way back up. It must have come loose in the fitting.

'Which one is it?' he asked when he was halfway down. Then he realised that Fred hadn't followed him. He was still standing at the top of the cellar stairs, looking down at him.

'Don't you want to come with me?'

Fred shook his head.

'All right, then.' Willi walked along the narrow passage and carefully tried the locks on the stores, like a thief, until one of them gave way to the key in his hand and opened. Without looking around, he went up to the heap of coals in the far corner and filled the wicker basket to the brim. It made a nice change. Not all that long ago, the only way to get your hands on coal would have involved actual theft.

Back at the stairs, Fred's figure appeared step by step before him (lace-ups, breeches, jumper, face). When the boy saw Willi, he stepped aside to let him pass. He was still holding his mother's cloth, which hung down to the floor, oddly drooping. Intuitively, Willi wrapped some of the coals in the large cotton cloth, and tied one end of it in a knot so that the boy could carry it. Fred's face instantly brightened up, and Willi started climbing the stairs to the upper floors.

Their return proceeded rather more slowly. Willi suddenly remembered that he'd meant to fix the lightbulb in the cellar, and realised he'd already spent too much time on this call-out; lost in thought, he didn't acknowledge the lady who passed them on her way downstairs. The lady, who was in a cornflower-blue swing coat and hat, looked Willi and Fred up and down with a mixture of pity, condescension and scorn. Had Willi noticed it, he would have been puzzled and asked her to explain. Yet Fred bent his head over his bundle of coals, as if the woman's glance had burdened him with a heavier load.

'There was a white lily blooming, on a blue tropical night. When the lonely sailor beheld it, his poor heart leapt at the sight...'

The was music coming from the neighbour's flat. Fred's mother had left the door ajar – for her son, for Willi, for the music.

When they entered, the first thing Willi did was put down the heavy basket and replenish the stove. Fred put his bundle down by the stove, next to his. Mrs De Boer/Heider was sitting by the open kitchen window, smoking. Her legs were casually and elegantly crossed, highlighting the slim ankles left uncovered by the capri pants; she was looking towards the window. Her

attitude radiated a tantalising suggestion of self-sufficiency, which excited Willi as much as the sight of her cigarette repelled him. He was sensitive to smoke, and had an irresistible urge to throw the window wide open. But it was already open.

‘Where is the bathroom?’ he asked. He needed air, and it was the first thing that came into his head.

Mrs De Boer/Heider turned towards him and stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette, which came to rest in the fat-bellied ashtray in front of her like a doubled-over insect. Fred ran up to her and put his head on her shoulder.

‘Right there,’ she said. ‘One could say that you are already standing in it.’ For the first time, she smiled, which lent her face a completely new and unexpected expression. Willi saw something girlish, something mischievous flash in her features.

Dimpleglint, he thought. Odd, the things that came into his head today. He pulled aside the curtain that was evidently being used to partition the room. Behind it was the ‘bathroom’: a zinc bath, a sink with a little mirrored cabinet, and a shelf for towels. The floor was covered in the same pale-grey linoleum as the rest of the kitchen.

“‘Tielsa’, the easy-going kitchen.’ Willi had laid just such a linoleum floor only a few days ago. He went over to the sink, picked up the bar of vegetable soap, and cleaned his hands from fingertips to above the wrists, with that mechanical, precise motion used by doctors and soldiers, for whom cleanliness has become second nature. He used the scrubbing brush, too, to get rid of as much of the stubborn coal dust under his nails as he could.

‘The devil lives under your fingernails, son.’ Willi looked up. He almost expected to see his father’s face (didactic, friendly, weary of humanity) beside his own in the mirror. Yet all that looked back at him was his own reflection, those clearly defined features that never blushed – and which therefore didn’t blush now, when he did what he did; yet his palms grew damp as he opened the mirrored cabinet, with a delicacy that you wouldn’t have thought was possible for those large, heavy hands.

Ever since he had first seen mother and son standing there in the doorway, he had more or less consciously been searching for hints confirming the existence of a Mr De Boer or Mr Heider. The flat itself revealed nothing in that regard, be it in the shape of clothing, furniture, or those objects that usually indicate the presence of a master of the house: no slippers or hats, no newspaper on the kitchen table, no photographs. Everything pointed to a woman living here alone with her son.

But something told Willi that this wasn't the case, and that the 'privacy' which the woman wanted to create in her flat by adding a wall was designed to separate more than just mother and son. He didn't know why he was so sure. But there was something not quite right with the picture that presented itself to him, even if he couldn't put his finger on it.

The cabinet opened, and Willi suppressed a sigh. Shaving brush and soap, blades, styptic pencil, eau de cologne, toothbrush, all neatly arranged like little watchful tin soldiers. There was even a manicure set.

Not here but here, he thought somewhat disjointedly, and closed the cabinet a tad less carefully than he had opened it. All of a sudden, he was in a hurry. He drew the curtain aside and returned into the kitchen area, where Mrs De Boer/Heider had just brewed fresh coffee. She turned to him. Her face, perhaps because of the steam, looked slightly flushed.

'I've made coffee. Would you—?'

'Mr Rohde, my colleague, will look in tomorrow, Mrs... De Boer? We have to check the moisture level in the wall. When would suit you? Three o'clock? Good.' Willi quickly gathered up his papers, and was halfway out of the flat when a hand softly tugged at his trouser leg.

'Goodbye, young shaver.' He bent down towards Fred, and this time allowed himself to pat his head.

He left the flat, and it seemed to him as if his steps were echoing in the staircase louder than before.

Footstep noise insulation: unsatisfactory. Structural analysis: vital. Flaws were listing themselves in his head as if of their own accord. Yes, you could always rely on checklists.

Mrs De Boer/Heider had lingered at the door after she had opened it for him. Now she went to the railing, leant over it a little and called something out to Willi. She called it out to his fleeing back like a confession: 'My name's Margot.'

Chapter 2

Cologne, 1952

MARGOT shrouded herself in a fog. Smoking was like breathing. It had become so natural to her over the years, so organic. She sat at the kitchen table, trying to avoid looking at the two empty cups.

‘Koch is my name, Willi Koch. I’ve come about your wall.’ – Why had he refused the coffee, and suddenly vanished like that? It was positively rude.

‘Fred? Fred!’

No answer. The boy was probably sitting in the living room with his nose in one of his comics, or had gone outside to play. Ah well, she didn’t mind. She forcefully exhaled a cloud of smoke...

‘Margot. Margot!’

How emphatic her own mother’s voice had always been, so imperious, and used to giving orders. It suddenly came to her again, like a strangely distorted echo of her own unsuccessful call.

Yes, she thought, a touch peevisly, back then *she* had always answered her mother’s call. She could almost see it now: she would leap up from her cross-legged position on the floor in one fluent, natural movement, the kind only children can make, whose bodies are still unburdened by life’s corrections and inscriptions.

Back then...

Echternach, 1933

‘MARGOT, *tout de suite.*’

‘*Oui, Maman.*’

That ‘*oui*’ was actually directed at the maid, as if to say, Yes, I can do as I’m told when I feel like it, but *you* can call me until you’re blue in the face. In fact, she had once again ignored Clarissa’s summons to lunch; for ‘Lissy’ had played a cheap trick on her that morning: armed

with cod liver oil and spoon, Mother's favourite maid had positioned herself in the door to the breakfast room, so that they couldn't go in without passing her.

You don't know how stupid you look, in that silly apron and with that stiff bow at the back, Margot thought, ill-tempered. As if you are secretly crossing your fingers behind your back, like the sneaky snake you are!

She did it herself sometimes, that finger-crossing thing, when she was fibbing. But that was completely different.

Her four siblings had once again obediently lined up, with Charles and Emilie at the head of the queue, and were swallowing that disgusting medicine. Even Jean, but they gave him a cup of hot cocoa straight after. Not her, though. Annoyingly, the cocoa made her feel sick. Which was probably only because of the cod liver oil, that sick-making substance she had been infused with beforehand.

She herself was standing right at the back of the line. Mathilde was in front of her, and when it was her sister's turn and she dutifully opened her mouth, Margot's moment had come. She nimbly ducked under Clarissa's raised arm and was about to rush towards the table, but Clarissa, flinging out her free hand like a professional fencer, yanked her back and dipped the disgusting long spoon intended for Mathilde deep into her throat instead. It was so full of oil that the revolting drops ran down the corners of her mouth.

'MAMAN!'

How she spat and retched! The world's entire sticky bitterness was suddenly in her mouth – worse, stuck deep inside her throat, and simply refusing to dissipate.

But when Mother rushed in, Margot couldn't say another word for all that disgusting stuff in her mouth. Unlike Clarissa, who cried, 'Oh Madame, I'm afraid none of it has gone down!'

Whereupon an entire second dose was imparted to Margot under her mother's supervision.

Margot left her favourite place, the deep window sill in the study, with its wonderful view of the garden.

Which was really a park.

Every morning, as Clarissa opened the heavy brocade curtains with an enticing jingling of rings, Margot would come running – but she was always too late. Morning had unfailingly arrived before her.

Yes, and today it was Sunday of all days, another utterly boring Sunday.

She had spent the past hour tracing the scratches the squirrels had left behind on the drapes. The moment the windows to the gardens opened, the half-tamed animals would come to purloin nuts from the bowl she secretly put out for them. Her embroidery, meanwhile – a veritably endless confusion of loose threads – waited somewhere behind her on the rug...

At any rate, today the squirrels had scurried up and down the long, heavy strips of material as usual, incited by Margot's calls, and played with the cord and the hems of the drapes, until – 'Shoo, shoo!' – Clarissa had ejected them with the broomstick. She couldn't let anyone have their fun, not even a tiny bit.

'Margot!'

Margot left the study to its slumber.

'...is too old, Mother. Everyone in the group has a new one. I'm the only one who...'

'It fits you perfectly, child.'

'Down, Sepp! Down!'

As always, it was bedlam in the dining room. Sepp, the rough-haired dachshund – Lord, was he stubborn! – had secured his usual place beside the father, which he commanded even at mealtimes; holding sway at his master's feet, he now bestowed a loud, withering bark upon Blackie, the tomcat, who had smelt his chance and entered the dining room hard on Margot's heels, hoping to snatch one of the carefully guarded delicacies behind the door.

'Shoo.' At a wave of her mother's hand, the cat scurried out, accompanied by Clarissa. Sepp, pacified, rested his head back down on his paws. Order had been restored.

Yet now Emilie noisily gasped for air, immediately followed by a coughing fit, which shook her as well as the whole table. Emilie had been ill ever since Margot could remember. Perhaps that was why she was barely taller than Margot, although she was nearly three years older. Fascinated, Margot watched her collarbones rise and fall on her narrow chest. Her sister reached for the water glass with a steady hand, while pressing a handkerchief to her mouth with the other.

‘...really, now!’ Amid all this, Mathilde had just carried on chattering. She was apparently talking about the spring procession. Once again, Margot wondered at how unlike the rest of them her oldest sister was – as if she were saying, ‘See, there’s more than one way to do it.’ She was the only one to have inherited their father’s strong dark hair, while Margot, Emilie and their brothers, all had ‘noble blonde’ hair; that’s what Mathilde called them all, ‘my noble blondes’. Except, of course, their mother, despite the fact that they’d inherited their hair from her.

Anyway, Mathilde was already thirteen years old – Margot couldn’t wait to be as old as her – and was a lot like Father; she even had his square jaw, and his enchanting, resonant voice.

‘I’ve practised so much this year, and everyone will stare at me in those old rags, and...’

‘Be glad if anyone looks at you at all, with all that unrhythmic hopping around.’

‘Charles!’

‘Well, it’s true.’

Charles was already fifteen, which was ancient, but according to their father he was ‘still young and dumb enough to tease his sisters’. Her brother was about to sound off again, but was distracted – ‘Oh Father, please!’ – by Jean. Margot smiled, because Jean’s unkempt hair was sticking up at the back of his head again. It was a wonder that Mother allowed him to appear at lunch like that. If she had done that, there would have been a proper to-do.

‘Pleeeeeease.’

The way he whined! You could hardly believe that he was older than her, if only a bit.

‘Can I sit in front this time? Please. Just once...’

You could tell that Charles was on guard; Father would surely give in any moment now, and banish him to the back seat on their Sunday drive. With the girls!

‘*C’est mon domaine, Jean.*’

‘*Mais, Papa...*’

How quiet it was. You could distinctly hear the ticking of the kitchen clock. Still no sign of Fred. Margot normally loved peace and quiet, but today it bothered her for some reason.

‘*C’est mon domaine, Jean.*’

‘*Mais, Papa...*’

Margot reached for the packet of cigarettes. It was almost empty. She shook it, but of course it was pointless. She lit one of the remaining cigarettes, and inhaled. How wildly they all

used to talk over each other in those days. French, Luxembourgish – yes, even German. Their mother had loathed it.

Kaweechelchen.

That lovely soft word had come back to her all of a sudden, and she giggled, as if she was that child again, secretly taming her squirrels, her *Kaweechelchen*...

‘*Kaweechelchen*, Father, *vèier Stéck!* Four of them, and there was a grey one too. They’re much more agile, you know, than—’ Finally, it was her turn.

‘No dialect at the table, Margot!’ Mother was frowning at her, and even more so at Father, no doubt because he was smiling so indulgently.

‘*Pardon, Maman.*’

Mother picked up the carafe with the table wine and topped up Father’s glass. Margot enjoyed watching her do it. Unlike Aunt Sophie, who now belonged to the aristocracy and was waited on hand and foot, Mother luckily disliked ‘all that fuss’.

‘I want us to be among ourselves at the table,’ she had explained to them once. ‘It’s more appropriate for people like us.’

‘...is even threatening to refuse all food, because she isn’t allowed to join the procession. Poor girl. Only because she broke her ankle last time.’ Mathilde was outraged.

‘Why don’t they decide on the choreography once and for all? It’s the same shambles every year. One would think that you youngsters were falling on top of each other on purpose.’

‘But Father...’ Margot retorted, and blushed. She was about to continue, when her mother intervened.

‘After all, Georg, it’s a religious tradition, and not one of those primitive military parades that are all the rage in certain neighbouring countries these days.’

‘Oh, come on, Johanna.’ Father sounded grumpy.

He was an imposing man, their father, with his square chin and carefully groomed moustache. His forehead and eyes radiated wilfulness and ambition. As the photographer had put it not long before, while taking their family portrait, he was a man who ‘gives definition to a photograph’.

Margot knew that he'd been born and grown up in the shadow of St Willibrord basilica; yet he despised sanctimony and religious folksiness, and abhorred the annual spring procession. But he wouldn't let anyone speak ill of their neighbours.

'Come on, Johanna. You said it yourself: it's just a fashion. That Hitler and his gang, they won't be around much longer. The German people probably only need to let their hair down, after those years of misery. All those parades and torchlight processions! In this country, too, we're not entirely strangers to letting our hair down, isn't that so, Mathilde?'

Father had switched to German. He loved the language. His mother was from Thuringia, and he never tired of telling you about how she taught him countless songs when he was a boy.

He would sing them on his long walks with Sepp. 'Outside the gates, by the well, stands a linden tree; as I lie down in its sweet shade, it sends sweet dreams to me...'

She enjoyed listening to it. Her mother, however, spoke German only when business was to be done, and otherwise stuck to French, especially during meals. No wonder she was a little put out. To make matters worse, Father was now talking about something that adults called 'politics'. That is, on a subject that supposedly didn't concern her. Margot pricked up her ears.

'...come to their senses when they realise that a country needs sensible solutions. Then Hitler and the whole brown-shirt menace will be passé.'

'It's astonishing, the way he behaves.'

'Who is this Hitler?'

 asked Jean, as he piled his plate high with parsnips and vol-au-vents.

'No one,' said Father and Mother, almost in unison.

At a stern glance from Mother, Jean, who had stuffed his cheeks with food, returned a few of the smaller vol-au-vents to the dish. 'You know, Margot, when I grow up I'll buy myself a car much bigger than Father's, and...'

Margot drew the ashtray towards her. She exhaled with a sigh, and it seemed to her as if the memory emerged with the mouthful of smoke: Jean. The voracious, red-cheeked little brother, whose shirt tails were for ever hanging out of the back of his trousers, who would talk enthusiastically and with a full mouth at the table; who dreamt of having his own gang, and marching – or, even better, driving – through the streets in Father's car, with him, Jean, personally at the wheel. Ten years later, he would be dead. He fell at the front, near Königsberg.

‘You know, Margot, when I grow up I’ll buy myself a car much bigger than Father’s, and...’

‘I’ll sit in the front.’ Charles had gauged that this was the moment to secure his seat. Father was always particularly malleable after dessert and coffee. Annoyingly, Margot couldn’t think of anything to ask for.

Their afternoon drive would be fun. It would decidedly improve the day.

The car – ‘Not just any car, a limousine! A Marmon, Margot, the Model 69 with a V16 engine and a rear-view mirror!’ – was kept polished to a shine. Until recently, children would come running from all directions to watch their father drive the car out of the garage and then leave the engine idling, purring away so beautifully. They would wave and cheer, quite as if they were the royal family itself. They often pursued them past the orangery and the abbey, all the way

to the old bridge across the Sauer. Yet there were ever more limousines like that around now. Only the other day, they had passed six of them within the city walls alone, on the rue de Luxembourg. And the children had run after them too. It was a shame...

Mother rose and rang the bell. ‘*L’heure de repos.*’

At last! Margot started fidgeting. It would last exactly one hour and thirty minutes, during which time Mathilde and Emilie had to ‘get their beauty sleep’. Fortunately, she herself wasn’t ten yet, which is when that sleep-and-beauty thing started. Charles and Jean had to – rubbish, were *allowed* to – devote themselves to ‘instructive reading’. Apparently they were already beautiful enough.

This was her favourite time, when Clarissa was nowhere to be seen, and there’d be no murmurs of ‘Oh, Madame’, none of that ‘The young lady once again didn’t behave *quite* as well as she might have.’ And she, *only she*, was allowed to visit the angora rabbits with Mother. Although the thing with her and Mother and the angora rabbits wasn’t always guaranteed. The ritual could be denied her anytime, for instance as punishment for ‘inappropriate behaviour’. Indeed, there it was: ‘Next time, Margot, be so good as to appear at table on time. And no dialect. Or else...’

‘*Oui. Bien sûre.*’

She very quietly walked down the long corridor alongside her mother, keeping so close as to almost touch her, as if she could vanish in an instant...

Shoo. Margot waved away the smoke. How quickly things disappeared. Had she felt that way as a young girl too – how unreal their life really was, in that big old house with its countless nooks and crannies? (Who had built it? Who had lived there before them?) Hardly. The things she had adored most as a child were the things you just couldn't hold on to: the morning light behind the heavy brocade drapes, *Kaweechelchen*, Sepp's content snuffling at Father's feet; the bread in the basket on the table, still warm from the oven; *l'heure de repos*, and, yes Clarissa – *shoo* – scurrying out with the cat. Dismissed by Mother, you could say. Ha! And her mother... what had she looked like?

Margot frowned. Yet no matter how hard she tried, her mother's face refused to come into view. Her voice, so used to giving instructions that were obeyed, yes, her voice was there, in her head, in her memory. As was her brisk walk through the endless corridors and rooms, and the pressure of that rough, surprisingly warm hand, which Margot held on the walk they took every single Sunday of her childhood. But her face? No, there was nothing of it in her memory – except her own gaze, that girlish gaze, which kept scurrying up to her mother's face and away again...

Take a look at Mother: she had the same noble blonde hair, though she wore it shorter, arranged in perfectly even waves. How she would love to stroke it, just once, to see what it felt like and what would happen then to these waves, but naturally she didn't. It would surely put an end to their Sunday afternoons together, if she brought something as 'private' as Mother's hair into disarray.

Everything about Mother was bright and beautiful. And stern. Her skin, the slim nose, the eyes. Only her brows and eyelashes were surprisingly dark, and looked as if they were painted on. And her dresses came from Paris...

The portrait drew her glance away from her mother; it was a large oil painting that hung on the wall of the girls' wing, beside a series of other portraits, most of them representing old men with beards and wide gold chains. Tedious pictures.

Yet the woman's portrait magically attracted her gaze whenever she walked down this corridor with Mother, maybe because it was not as cracked and dark as all the others. And the woman in the painting was somehow like Mother, bright, stern and beautiful. But who was she? Was it Mother? No. One of Mother's sisters? Who was it?

Margot flicked ash into the ashtray. Now that she thought about it, she always saw Mother (although her face was blurry) as a slender, elegant woman. But was it true? Had she not, rather, been a little plump? The apron she wore over her dresses had always been a little tight about the chest. And her hair – had it really been as fair as her own, or was Margot only picturing it that way, because Mathilde always teased her about being a ‘noble blonde’? Had her memory of the woman in the painting merged with that of her mother? What did she actually know about her?

One thing she knew for sure was that her mother had been unable to conceive once.

She could no longer remember how she found out, but her mother had said something about it one day, something she had not fully grasped. Not to her, of course, but to her aunt, on one of her frequent visits. Margot had been eavesdropping – perhaps that is why she could recall it so clearly, that one curious sentence: ‘The body never forgets.’

Her mother had said it in a voice that Margot had never heard her use before, and added something about ‘secret losses’.

She couldn’t understand these secret losses. There was nothing secret about her mother. She always spoke calmly and clearly, if never particularly much, and rarely laughed. Her hands, yes, she was sure about that, were narrow. Strong, warm and rough. Maybe from all the work she did. But she was never ill or bedridden. She was always in motion. Especially her keys!

She had lots of them. She had one for every room, and for each of the endless cupboards and compartments in the house, and she carried them all on a big, heavy ring hanging from her hip. This ring belonged entirely to her mother – or she to it. It moved – clink, clink – with every step she took. Which was just as well, because that way you always knew exactly where Mother was in the house, even without seeing her.

Clink, clink...

Mother unhooked the keyring and opened the door to Emilie’s room.

Margot blinked. No, you couldn’t make anything out. The room had been carefully cast in darkness. She imagined Emilie lying there, in her bed, a narrow body in a giant, unforgiving sea of blankets and pillows, over which her noble blonde hair lay spread out like the long-fingered, golden threads of some enchanted fairy-tale creature. Were her eyes closed? Was she dreaming? Was she breathing?

Margot got up on tip-toes, but she couldn't make anything out. There was nothing but an intense smell streaming towards her, a mixture of camphor, disinfectant and tiredness. Mother quietly closed the door. Apparently everything was as it should be.

They walked on.

In Mathilde's room, the curtains were only half drawn; a soft breeze played about the hem of the drapes, but you couldn't see anything of Mathilde either. Nothing but a huge eye mask, and blankets drawn primly up to her chin. She could hear her mother's almost inaudible sigh. She herself was a little disappointed. Mathilde hated things like beauty sleep, and usually would be secretly reading a book under the blanket, though Mother nearly always caught her out. Then there would be an exhilarating to-do. Mother hated it when they read for too long.

'Don't overdo it, girls. You'll only ruin your eyes.'

Pah! Unfortunately, only very few of the many books in the study were of any interest to them. The really thrilling ones, the novels, were kept in a special bookcase, which was obviously locked.

'You're still too young for that.'

But there were two keys. One hung out of reach at her mother's keyring, but the other, which had been entrusted to Father's care, lay in the top drawer of the secretaire, only half-heartedly covered by some loose letters.

Naturally, it hadn't taken them long to work out the most opportune time, when the parents' absence, and ideally the brothers' too, would be guaranteed for at least an hour. Then they set about unlocking things.

While Emilie and Mathilde would stand guard near the door and held their breath, she herself would open the bookcase. The first few times, her hands trembled a little from all the excitement, and she quickly wiped her damp palms on her skirt, hoping that her sisters hadn't noticed. Then she pulled out a book with a particularly beautiful binding, from which Mathilde would proceed to read aloud to them, with that wonderful voice of hers: 'They had already said their goodbyes, and stood in silence; the fresh air would blow round her, ruffling the unruly hairs at the nape of her neck, or tossing her apron strings about her hips, where they rolled and twisted like streamers. One day there was a thaw; in the yard the bark on the trees streamed with moisture and the snow lay melting on the roofs of the outbuildings. She had come to the door; she went back for her parasol, and opened it. The sun, filtering through the iridescent dove-grey

silk of the parasol, cast flickering reflections on the white skin of her face. As she smiled from beneath it at the soft warmth of the morning...'

She was disconcerted. Was it something about Mathilde's voice? Or was the narrator sitting right inside this Emma's head, and now creeping into her own?

'...she had believed that she was in love; but since the happiness she had expected this love to bring her had not come, she supposed she must have been mistaken...'

How could anyone know so precisely what this Emma was thinking and feeling? Why would someone take it so seriously, and make an effort to write it all down? No one was particularly interested what *she* felt.

Margot sighed. Now that the spring procession was in the offing, Mathilde clearly cared more about being beautiful than secretly reading books. She was sleeping, or at any rate pretending to.

Clink, clink...

Margot watched her mother lock this door too. They went along the corridor and left the girls' wing. Now and then the wooden floor creaked under their feet, but other than that the only thing you could hear was the keyring's quiet, persistent movement. Until they approached the music room.

Ave Maria, gratia plena...

Charles was playing Schubert. He had somehow managed to convince their mother that playing music counted as 'instructive reading'. Yet she had insisted that he use the trumpet's mute when he practised.

Margot briefly closed her eyes. You didn't need to see Charles to know that he was playing his trumpet; the rigid corridors would fill with his breath and his sound. If only she could stand here a little longer, listening.

Ave, ave dominus, dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus...

But Mother had already gone ahead. She inspected the living room. Margot didn't bother to look at it properly. This is where the furniture lived. Deep-green velvet wallpaper – she liked running her fingers over it – and thick rugs that impeded everything. Standing lamps, which is was best not to get too close to, an easel, a secretaire, a chaise longue and small groups of armchairs. Some dreary art books on little tables, a fruit bowl. Well, that was something at least.

Nevertheless, the room's message was clear: *You are redundant here*. Mother seemed to think differently.

'Jean?' she called, unnecessarily.

For Jean was not there. The prominent upholstered chair with its broad, curved back was empty. Mother called it 'Biedermeier', but it was in fact Jean's horse, his 'trusty steed' which he rode into every battle; and even though Charles had explained to him a thousand times that he would damage 'that good piece of furniture' with his 'monkeying around', Jean remained undeterred, yelling 'Advaance!' as he rode off on 'Biedermeier' to attack an invisible enemy. Yet now he, too, was invisible. Which, of course, was what he was supposed to be right now.

And then, at last, her mother drew the bolts and pushed open the heavy back door, which led down a short flight of steps into the garden and to the rabbit hutches.

Light!

Margot soaked up the clear midday light. It was everywhere, breaking through the leaves on the branches of the ash trees, gliding across the shrubs and the grass, covering the wall of the house until it shone and caressing her forehead, nose and cheeks. It flashed in her mother's hair too, warm and pale gold.

'Do you want to grow roots there, child?'

Her mother was already putting on the cotton apron to protect her clothes. Then she took five angora rabbits out of their hutches and placed them in front of her on the lush lawn, which the tame little animals immediately started nibbling. It was all the exercise they needed. They were valuable. Margot had had it drummed into her early on that they weren't 'playthings'. She let her fingers glide through their unbelievably soft fur, and as always a gentle happiness swelled inside her. Mother sat down next to her in the grass, and undid the buckles on her shoes. She sat there like that, her hands loosely crossed in her lap. From time to time her fingers, too, stroked through the rabbits' fur; slowly, deliberately, as if wanting to preserve this feeling of contentment.

And in fact, after a little while Margot heard her humming. *'Meereenchen ass eng giedlech Saach. Net wann es sabbelt Dag fir Dag...'*

Mother looked up and smiled at her. 'My mother used to sing it all the time. She didn't get to be very old, you know. I hardly knew her at all.'

The kitchen was slowly getting cold. Margot extinguished her cigarette. She should hurry and refill the stove.

‘I hardly knew her at all...’ Yes, during that strictly choreographed *l’heure de repos* she had sat on the lawn in the sunshine, humming, with a soft, almost girlish expression on her face.

But where did the light come from? Was it not usually a little dull, and rather cool in the half-shade of the ash trees? Didn’t she always have a woollen shawl round her shoulders, because she was so chilly? And anyway, what had she said to her mother, there in the grass? Had she hummed along with her? Had she ever told her anything, about her hopes or her dreams? Had she clasped her hand? And what else had Mother said? Why hadn’t she listened more closely?

‘You’ll lose a lot of brightness if you put up a wall here.’ There it was again, that young builder’s voice, intervening between her and her memories like an unbidden commentary. ‘Brightness,’ she murmured. ‘Not light. He said “brightness”.’

So what? Why did it matter? – It was time she put those desolate coffee cups away.

Margot pushed back her chair. She left the cups where they were. Before leaving the kitchen, she briefly paused. In truth, that hour after lunch spent with her mother on the lawn had been rather boring. And her face – she had lost it. For ever.

Yet there was one thing that had never faded, never dimmed: the clinking keyring at her mother’s hip.