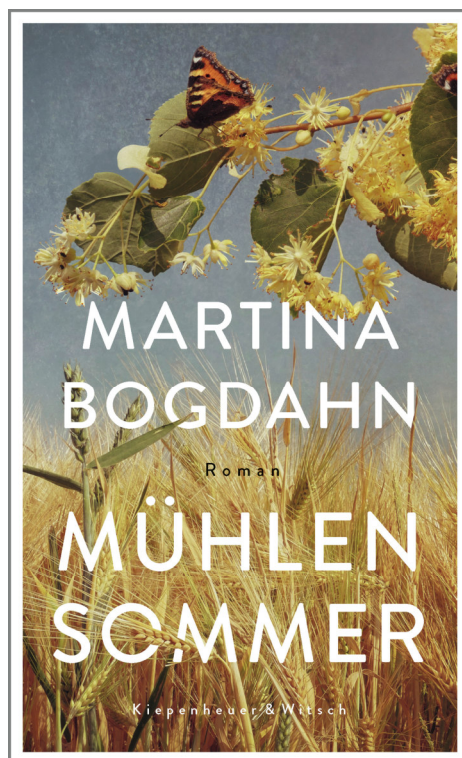


# SUMMER AT THE OLD MILL

by **Martina Bogdahn**

Sample Translation by Anne Stokes

© 2023, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG



[pp. 9–45]

Upmarket commercial fiction

336 pages

Publication date: April 2024

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG  
Contact information: <https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights#contact>

*With your feet on the air and your head on the ground*

Pixies, "Where Is My Mind?"

---

## Prolog

I'm driving along a boulevard edged with old trees, shift down a gear, then another. There's a sign leaning up against one of the trees: *Fresh Wood-fired Bread*. Around the next bend, a mill comes into view. White smoke rises from a wood-fired oven into the sky. I put my turn signal on and turn into the entrance. A man is taking a loaf out of the oven with a long paddle, and a woman is coming out of the farm store. She's holding a paper bag in her arms and smiling. I lower the window and take a deep breath. It smells of freshly baked bread. It smells of home.

---

A brief, heavy summer rain shower. Water runs down the windowpanes, taking the dust and heat of a hot August day with it. Steam is rising from the cobblestones on Munich's Promenadenplatz. Some tourists are hurrying towards the subway. I glance at my watch. I'd also intended to be sitting on a subway train a while ago. Instead, I've been stuck in a meeting since this morning. The new client is droning on. Neither the prospect of a long weekend nor the sight of the beautiful old city hall across the way provides any consolation. I'm sticking to my seat, and it feels as though I've been sitting here for days. I try to smell my blouse without anyone noticing. Then my eyes wander up to the ceiling. Our client. We just call him O. K., because he only ever wears shirts with his initials embroidered on them. He's talked himself into a rage. Dark blotches of sweat are mushrooming under his arms and across his chest. He hasn't noticed this yet, but we have. O. K. is a man of oversized gestures. He makes circles in the air energetically, and then sticks his index finger into them. The two of us are separated by a long white table, among other things. I'm seated at the opposite end from him. Between O. K. and me, there are nine half-empty bottles of water and three coffee pots. As well as the thing which has brought us here. On a small battery-driven turntable, the prototype of a slim silver wet razor turns and purrs.

Anne, the head of online marketing, Inka, our programmer, Bertil, the graphic designer, and my assistant Fernanda listen intently to O.K.'s deliberations. "Poor Fernanda!" shoots through my head, and I can't help thinking of her wonderful accent. No one rolls their Rs as beautifully as her. Her mantra – "Hair is every woman's trauma!" Before giving birth to her first child, Fernanda refused to go to the hospital, even when her contractions were only five minutes apart. Her distraught husband called us and asked me to convince his panting wife that they had to leave immediately. But Fernanda just groaned into the phone: "Oh, Maria, I can't possibly go into hospital now! I My waxing appointment isn't for another two days." At the moment, she is staring absently at the wet razor, worrying the spot

between her nose and her upper lip with her fingertips. Anna, meanwhile, is nervously plucking at her t-shirt, as her third design is swept aside with a sweeping gesture. She looks pale. I know she doesn't have another idea up her sleeve.

"Maria!" O. K. sits up straight, places his left hand on the tabletop, and leans forward. "Let me make myself clear one last time. The design of the new campaign has to be radically changed." Then, fixing his gaze on me as though about to insert an acupuncture needle into the first vertebra of my neck, he adds, "We also need a completely unique selling point in the visuals! The campaign color cannot simply be black. The shade I envisage ..." He reaches for a red marker and writes a single word in capitals on the flipchart: BLACK.

I nod and note down: German "Schwarz" has become English "BLACK". Out of the corner of my eye, I see Anne, Inka, Bertil, and Fernanda squirming on their seats. There's an awkward silence. At this point, my cell phone starts to vibrate. Outraged, O. K. straightens his back. I glance at the screen. It's Mira. I text her: *Can't speak right now*. But that doesn't matter to Mira. My phone vibrates again. I excuse myself and step out into the hallway.

"Mira, darling, what's so import ..."

"Mom, where's the charging cable at?"

"Drop the 'at'." In a knee-jerk manner, I correct my teenage daughter's grammar before answering, "I've no id ..."

The dial tone kicks in. Mira has hung up.

My screen shows a missed call. My mother. I'll phone her back later. First, I need the okay from O. K. And, even more urgently, I need to cool down. Maybe there are a couple of ice cubes in the fridge. No such luck. But how good it feels to close my eyes for a moment in the kitchen and to hold my wrists under the cold water tap.

When I return to the meeting room, the mood has unexpectedly changed. O. K. is leaning back relaxed at the open window, smoking. The rain shower is over. Anne closes her laptop with a smile, and Bertil has a grin on his face as he exits. In the middle of the table is a sheet of paper containing a single English word: ROYALBLACK.

•

On the way to the subway, I remember the bread. Shoot, I meant to pick some up! We've been invited to my friends Bea and Oli's mountain cabin this weekend. And I'd offered to bring along something from Brendel's bread bakery. Brendel's bread is something of a new status symbol in our neighborhood. A couple of years ago, no one could have imagined it ever being *The best bread in town*. Or that's what they claim on their paper bags at least. And below this is written: *Baked with fresh pure mountain spring water*. I moan to myself when I see the line in front of the bakery. Any sensible person would do an about face at this point, but Bea and her husband have pretty clear ideas about what constitutes a perfect weekend at their cabin. They like to plan ahead and make the stay as nice as possible for everyone. So, it simply has to be a loaf from *Brendel's*. And preferably the one with fermented pears.

While standing in line, I count fourteen pairs of white sneakers. Exactly like the ones I'm wearing myself. They're vegan, fair, sustainable, expensive, and consequently also incredibly uncomfortable. I wonder if the others also have this nasty little, painful, rubbed-sore spot above their left heel? My purse starts to vibrate. Mira again! I let it ring, and blow a strand of hair out of my face. My hair is sticking to the back of my neck with sweat. The heat oppresses from above, the shoes from below, and the short shower of summer rain earlier only brought some light relief from the heat, unfortunately. Right in front of me in the line is a woman with a dachshund. She has a leather leash in her left hand, and an expensive purse in the same color is dangling from her arm. Humming softly, she fans herself while the dachshund eyes me reproachfully.

When I finally make it into the shop, a good half hour has passed. But, after taking one step inside, I'm convinced it was worth all the bother, money, and minutes of waiting. It smells fantastic. Three samples of the *best bread in town* are laid out like jewels on a wide marble-effect counter. Behind the counter, a slim young woman in a lilac linen apron smiles at me. I point to the middle loaf. "I'd like two organic rye loaves with fermented pears."

"Sorry, that one sold out this morning," the young woman replies.

“Oh, then I’ll just have the one from the counter here, plus an ordinary loaf.”

“Sorry, that’s not possible.”

“What d’you mean, it isn’t possible?”

“That’s on display.”

“I can see that, but it’s also the last loaf of this kind ...”

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t take it off the counter. Our signature loaf must always be on display alongside the other icons from our Rye Collection ...”

I leave the shop fuming with two ordinary loaves under my arm, well aware that Bea will later press her lips together, because it isn’t the right bread. But before that, I have to get home and take a shower.

•

At home, I find the bathroom occupied. As always. For a brief moment, I had suppressed the fact that I am mother to two adolescent daughters. The apartment’s in chaos. And the garbage bag from this morning is still sitting in the middle of the hallway. Now, though, in a puddle of liquid that’s leaked out of it. It smells putrid. Next to it are hiking boots, a picnic basket, and two rolling suitcases. At least they’ve both packed their things. I shout, “Do you really want to hike up the mountain with suitcases?” No answer. Presumably they both have their earphones in. I type a message into the family chat: *Mira, Charlotte, we’re leaving in 20 minutes! I want to take a quick shower, so let me into the bathroom!* Still no answer, although I can see they’ve read my message. I type some more: *Otherwise, I’ll turn off the wi-fi.* The bathroom door opens a few seconds later, and they both greet me in passing. There are two missed calls from my mother on my cell phone, but first I have to take a shower.

We set off a good hour later. Before I get into the car, I pause for a moment. I’ve been looking forward to this trip for days, and the three of us haven’t travelled anywhere together for weeks. I breathe deeply in an attempt to shake off the tension. My daughters aren’t responsible for the stress in the agency, after all. Then I stretch briefly, and get in. Mira and Charlotte are already sitting in the back of the car, and I

suggest we all listen to music together during the journey for a change. “But definitely not your playlist, mom!” I have to laugh. But I can’t stand Mira’s playlist for five minutes even, so I ask them both to put their headphones back on. It’s now quiet in the car. I shift up a gear and accelerate. All the lights are green. I turn up the radio, take my sunglasses out of the glove compartment, roll down the window, and hold my arm out of it. Warm summer air skims over my skin. Off we go!

Gravel crunches beneath the tires when we come to a stop in the parking lot. Bea and Oli are already there, sitting in the car with their five-year-old twins Helen and Albert and quarreling. A few muffled choice words can be heard from inside the car. They don’t appear to have noticed us arriving. We take our luggage out of the trunk and slip into our hiking boots. After we’ve shouldered out backpacks, I notice the passenger door of Bea and Oli’s car opening. Bea gets out and comes over to us. Her hair is tousled, her cheeks red, and her shirt disheveled.

“Hey!”

“Sorry we’re so late, but ...”

“No worries, Oli and I needed to discuss a little something anyway.” She pushes her sunglasses onto her head. “The fact that men are still apes after a hundred thousand years.” She grins. “Shall we?”

Oli unloads the luggage in silence, and I ask Mira and Charlotte to fetch the twins from the backseat. With their curly hair, Helen and Albert look like miniature versions of my daughters. They’re also wearing functional clothes and hiking boots, and they have tiny backpacks on their backs, and already no longer feel like a mountain hike on a much too hot summer’s day. But their mother doesn’t seem to be bothered by the heat in the least. Leaning against my car, she shouts across the parking lot, “Oli, are you coming?”

Moaning, Oli heaves the last enormous backpack out of the trunk. Bea laughs. “He’s brought half the kitchen along again.”

I’ve known them both for years. They used to live in the apartment above us. He was a financial adviser in an insurance firm, and she worked as a freelance translator. We met the day they moved in. Oli isn’t the most skilled handyman, so,



a few hours after they got there, Bea came to my door to borrow a first aid kit. And a short while later, the doorbell went again. This time it was Oli. Bea couldn't stand the sight of blood. She was lying dazed on the kitchen floor, and he wanted to know if I could maybe help them out. After I had attended to the bump on the back of Bea's head and Oli's bleeding thumb, and each of them had told me half their life story, I had no option but to take them into my heart. The same evening, we celebrated their bloody start with copious amounts of prosecco.

Bea and I became friends and spent many an evening chatting out on the balcony. We never ran out of things to talk about, because we often shared similar views, or were at least interested in the same things. And when the twins came into the world, Bea and Oli asked me to be Helen's godmother. I didn't have to think about it before I said yes. A short while later, they established a start-up, and ever since they've been selling traditional herb and spice mixes produced from sustainable agriculture. After only three years, they were able to buy their own home, and now have a pool and two financial advisers.

We set off on our hike. The sun is beating down from the sky. I try to concentrate on where I'm placing my feet. It's just under a mile and a half to the cabin, where we can rest. There won't be any rest before that, that's for sure. We start off by going up a steep asphalt forest path. I wipe the sweat from my brow. Bea, though, still doesn't seem to be affected by the heat. Energetically, she links arms with me and babbles away. She tells me about their new babysitter, Helen's piano teacher, the summer fair in the Imps kindergarten, and about how she cannot grasp that the twins will shortly be starting school. I let her talk as I place one foot ahead of the other, while poor Oli, burdened by his heavy backpack, is already so far behind after only fifteen minutes his moaning is barely audible. But after the next sharp bend, Bea also stops her nattering. The trail is steep and arduous, and I am gradually coming to feel that we no longer have as much in common anymore and that we maybe don't have so much to say to each other any longer.

After countless bends and a number of much too short breathers, the cabin appears in the distance. Finally! I'm relieved. Helen and Albert have also now seen

the end in sight and tackle the final meters with renewed energy, while Mira is beaming. "There's even a good signal up here, mom!"

Then, as though waiting for this very moment, my cell phone rings. It's my mother. Yet again.

"Mom?"

"Finally! Jeez, Maria, no one can get hold of you. I've been trying to get you all day." My mother sounds exasperated.

"Calm down, mom, not so fast, what is it?" I catch myself wondering if I'd maybe promised to visit her this weekend.

"You've gotta get into the car straightaway and drive here. Today there's ..."

I cut her off: "Mom, wait, before you go any further, I'm in the mountains with the girls, and we're just about ..."

"You have to come!"

"Yes, but we're just arriving at the cabin ..."

My mother blubbers, "But this is an emergency, Maria!"

"... we're just about to ..." At this point, a switch flips in my head. "Emergency, what kind of an emergency?"

"An accident!"

I sit down on the small wooden bench in front of the cabin. The straps of my backpack slip down off my shoulders.

"Oh God, what's happened?" I feel queasy. "Is it grandma?"

"No, grandma's alright, but in the woods today, a rope broke and a tree trunk fell on your father. He lay there for hours until a walker came by and called 911." Her voice shakes as she carries on talking. "I don't want to even think about what might have happened if the man hadn't come along ... I still don't know if your father broke anything, or how he's doing. They told me in the hospital they'll call me as soon as the preliminary examinations are over, but I haven't been able to reach anyone all day! Neither at the hospital nor anywhere else. Your brother's in Brandenburg with his family. Your uncle's motorcycling in South Tirol, and my back is still so bad. I just can't manage everything here without you." Her voice

falters. "And your father doesn't have a single decent pair of pajamas. He can't be lying in the hospital like that. What will people think of us! And I can't leave grandma here on her own either." Now she's sounding desperate. "You simply have to come, and before you ask, I've called the co-op ten times already, and there aren't any farmhands available until Tuesday because of the long weekend."

I swallow, my mouth is dry. I promise I'll set off as soon as I can. I hang up with my head in my hands and close my eyes. My back is soaking wet. I could cry on the spot. Charlotte and Mira come over to me.

"Mom, what's up?" The girls are concerned. They put their hands on my shoulders, and Mira takes the backpack from me. "You're really shaking." Charlotte kneels down on the ground in front of me and looks at me, her eyes wide.

I swallow hard. "Grandpa had an accident in the forest. We have to go back. They need our help on the farm."

Bea sits down next to me and puts her hand on my arm. "You're white as a ghost, darling. Is everything okay?"

I take a deep breath, then try to explain what has happened. And Bea shows some understanding. She even suggests I go to my parents on my own at first and leave the girls at the cabin. Oli, the twins, and above all she herself had been looking forward to spending time with us and to the fine bread with the fermented pears.

"Oh yes, the bread. Bea, unfortunately, I have to tell you ..." Her lips narrow as she turns away.

And then I rush the long way back along the path. I run so fast it feels as though a hot hair dryer is blowing into my face. Alone on a steep descent. I'm completely done when I reach the parking lot. Soaked with sweat and puffy from crying, I get behind the wheel and turn on the engine. My stomach is rumbling. I stare in a daze at the road ahead and pass by a never-ending traffic jam. I step on the gas. And as the sun slips toward the horizon, I turn up the music. *Where is my mind?*

•

Two hours later, as the sun descends dark red behind a wooded hill, I turn onto the final stretch of country road. *Birkenmühle 2 miles*. A few more bends, then I'm finally there. In the yard, I pull out the car key and take a deep breath.

There's a bench in front of the house. My grandmother is sitting there, peeling apples. They're piled up on the table in front of her. A small white cat is rubbing itself against her legs, and right next to the bench, a couple of chickens are looking for food between the cobblestones. It looks idyllic. I get out, stretch, and look around as I breathe in the air: it really only smells like this here. A mixture of apples, earth, grass, and manure.

"Hi, grandma."

My grandmother is cutting an apple in two with her little old fruit knife. She looks me up and down, and frowns.

"And who are you? Tell me, are you Herbert?"

"But don't you recognize me, grandma? It's Maria. Herbert's your son."

"Your hair has gotten really long."

"I've always had long hair."

"Oh, come on, Herbert, you've never had long hair in your life."

I place my hand on her shoulder, and she holds out a piece of apple for me while scrutinizing me with her small grey-blue eyes. A long white strand of hair has come loose from her bun, her skin looks like wax paper that has been used a few times over."

"D'you wanna help me peel?"

On the table in front of her is a folded note. *For Maria* is written on it in my mother's neat handwriting. I unfold it:

*Dear Maria, I've got to head off now. The hospital just called. I can see dad, but I have to buy him another set of pajamas before Hoffmann's closes. I hope grandma is still sitting on the bench peeling her apples. Please send her off to bed later on. She can manage that herself. Today she turned on the gas on the stove, so I've turned the main valve off just to be on the safe side. If you're hungry, you can make yourself a sandwich.*

On reading the word *bread*, I realize I'm famished. For a few years, my mother has been baking bread herself in the old wood-fired oven in the yard. The oven was out of service for a long time, and in my childhood, it was used as a kennel for our yard dog Rex. Until my mother at some point started baking sourdough bread in it based on an old recipe. Very plain bread. But for me, it's the best there is.

Grandma passes me another piece of apple. With a worm in it.

"Herbert, where are you coming from at this hour?"

"Grandma, it's Maria!"

She shakes her head. "I didn't ask you your name but where you just came from."

I give up. "Straight from the mountains."

"From the mountains? In God's name, what were you doin' in the mountains?"

Grandma takes another apple and starts to peel it in a single thin strip.

"We were going to hike to a cabin and have some supper up on the mountain in the sun."

She shakes her head again. "Can't you do that at the bottom?"

I glance again at the note:

*The cows have been tended to, but you'll have to deal with the pigs. I've already prepared their feed. I don't like the look of the mother sow on the left at the back. Can you take her temperature? The others ...* The rest of the sentence has been crossed out, and after this it states: *Give each sow two shovels full of grist! I won't be back till late, so don't wait up for me.*

*Mom*

*PS: I can't find my cell phone.*

I shake my head as I fetch my backpack from the car. It doesn't actually matter that my mother can't find her phone, since it's never charged anyway. I put my things down on the bench next to grandma and take another deep breath. Then I get to work.

I find the work clothes at the end of the hallway in the boiler room. In an old country cupboard, massive and coarse. I take out work pants and tie one of my mother's washed-out headscarves around my head. The shoes are next to the

cupboard. Heavy steel-toed boots for the forest work alongside dark green rubber boots for the barn, and I'm taken aback, for there's a pair there that previously belonged to me. Surely, this isn't possible, but I recognize them straightaway. Did my mother really keep them so long?

I pick up one of the boots. I once stepped on a rusted nail in it. The boot is full of yellowed newspaper. When I pull it out and turn the boot around, some small stones and dust trickle onto the floor. I unravel the newspaper and read the headlines: *Another fire in the county. Arsonist apprehended.* These really are my boots, for there's a small hole in the sole. I'm shaken by it. I can remember the exact moment the sharp piece of metal pierced through the rubber into my foot. As though with a long, thin spike, I was bound to a plank of wood. No one had dared pull the rusted nail with the plank attached out of my foot, so I'd had no choice but to free myself. Would they still fit? The rubber is already very porous. I remove my sneakers and slip barefoot into the old boots. Hard to believe, but they fit. I stride over to the barn, for there's no chafing, pressing, or rubbing.

The heavy wooden door of the pig stall is stuck shut. I have to pull hard with both hands to yank it open amid loud squeals and squeaks.

What a stink! But it's the heat that almost floors me. I had completely forgotten the smell. Ammonia travels like snuff tobacco through my nasal passages up into my sinuses. My eyes fill with tears, and I breathe through my mouth. What a noise! The pigs' squeals are as loud as a loose fan belt. I turn around in a circle. Where is the feed? In the corner, there's an old wooden sled with two buckets full of roughly ground grain.

As fast as I can, I tip two shovels of grist into each pig's trough. As soon as a sow has something to eat, she falls silent. But the others squeal all the more loudly. I can feel the beads of sweat on my forehead. Afterwards I take a rolled-up hose from the wall and fill the troughs up with water. The pigs all respond with contented slurps. I look around as I wipe my hands on my work pants. The worst seems to be over, and although I can already see a small blister forming on my right hand, I suddenly feel much better. They're all full, content, and none of them is

complaining, moaning, or wants to talk the whole concept over again.

At the back, in the last stall, is the sick pig my mother mentioned. It's the only sow that doesn't want to eat. She has little piglets that are no more than a day old. They are moving around her awkwardly and grunting softly, looking for milk, I think. But the sow only lets the little ones drink for a brief moment before she jumps up. Presumably, she's in pain. I fetch the thermometer and take her temperature: 104 degrees. Too high. As I read the thermometer, I stoke the sow's back. In return, she tries to bite my hand off. I'm going to have to bring in the vet.

I straighten myself up, switch on the heat lamp above where the piglets sleep, pat the sow encouragingly on the back of her neck, and try to console her. Then I bring her a couple more pitchforks full of fresh straw and close the barn door firmly behind me.

Grandma is still sitting on the bench where I left her, and where she's presumably been since this morning. She's peeling yet another apple. Her head is slightly tilted, and she's watching my vain attempt to remove one of the boots. My feet seem to have fused to the old rubber with the heat. I should have worn socks. I'm annoyed at myself. It's clear you don't put rubber boots on with bare feet. I try repeatedly to remove the boot that is far too small. No chance.

"Herbert?"

I moan loudly. "Yes, grandma?"

"Did you hear? Maria's home again."

Cursing, I finally slip the boot off and land hard on my butt on the cobblestones.

But still: In the kitchen, I find a cold beer, and I cut off a thick slice of bread that I smear with butter. Then I sit down with it next to my grandmother on the bench.

"So, grandma, what were you just saying? Maria's back home again?"

My grandmother first touches her forehead with her old wrinkly hand, then her cleavage followed by her left and right breast. "Yes, and I think she's going to stay for longer this time, God willing."

Did she really just cross herself? She reaches for another apple. "And, Herbert, where's your father yet again? I looked all over for him today. There's an apple cake

in the oven that he loves.”

There’s something comforting about watching my grandmother peel apples. But it’s discomfiting that her husband died over thirty years ago. And what are we supposed to do with all the peeled apples anyway?

“Herbert?”

I sigh: “Yes, grandma?”

“This here apple, d’you see it?”

I nod.

“It doesn’t fall far from the tree, and neither do you.”

“I know, grandma, I know. But I think you’ve done enough peeling for one day. It’s time for bed now.”

Grandma puts the knife off to one side, kneads her left knee, swipes her hands over her apron a couple of times, and stands up with difficulty. She’s so small. She hardly reaches my shoulders. And you just need to glance at her stooped back to see that this woman has worked hard all her life.

“Good night, Herbert.”

“Good night, grandma, sleep well.” She grabs hold of the door frame and struggles to pull herself up the three steps, before disappearing into the house.

I rub my upper arms and can feel the strain in my muscles. Tired, I sit down on the stone doorstep that has been warmed by the sun. I always liked this spot. And gradually darkness descends around me. Like fine pinholes in a blue velvet curtain the first stars shine forth. Some of them flash. As the crickets strike up their evening song, a couple of bats whirr above my head through the last of the evening light, and peace descends.

And out of nowhere, the fear for my father that has been boiling up like noodle water overflows and evaporates with a hiss on the range. What is going on? Why hasn’t my mother been in touch? She knows I’ve been here for ages. Is it so serious she can’t even think of making a quick call? Or perhaps in all the excitement she has quite simply forgotten she’s not the only one who’s worried? That’s probably it. I try to calm myself down, lean my head against the warm wall of the house, and



close my eyes. Suddenly I realize how wonderfully quiet it is here. What would it be like if I could sit here every evening? Would the peace and quiet do me some good? Or would it suffocate me? Could I do my agency work remotely, or quit it altogether and come back here, work more with my hands and less with my head? It wouldn't have to be farming straightaway. Maybe I could make a living another way. My thoughts circle around like this. And circle. And eventually rise up into the sky and get lost in the blue of night.

I shower late. Then I take my backpack upstairs. Whenever I spend the night here, I sleep in my old bed. My room was never refurbished, and although I would never admit it, this is how I like it. How I love to stroke the old woodchip wallpaper. I open the window and listen. A creek flows directly in front of the house. I can hear the water chortling. A half-moon casts feeble light onto the white trunk of the birch that stands on the bank of the creek. How often did I look out of this window as a child? How many years have I scarcely been here? And why?

When I was fifteen, I cut off my long blond ponytail, dyed my hair in loud colors, skipped loads of classes, and hid behind the pig stall to smoke my uncle's cigarettes. Had I already at that point decided to leave the farm, or had I taken leave of my senses? I ridiculed my parents, who tilled the fields and shlepped the full milk can down to the road each morning, shook my head at my brother, who was attending vocational school, and felt certain that at some point I would belong to a better class of people.

Back then, whenever a boy came by to pick me up in his car, my father would ride around the yard in his tractor and spray a full tank of manure until it was empty and my suitor fled on account of the stink, while my mother at some point sighed and gave up repairing the holes in my pants. During this time, grandma would curse at her upstairs window no matter when I came home. As soon as I left school, I packed my bags and left the mill, my family, and home county, without looking back once. I wanted to go to the city. I wanted to live in a street where there wasn't a single tree.

And now I'm sitting here on my old bed, smelling a little of pig despite having

washed my hair. I look around the room. Nothing has changed. The wallpaper might even come back into fashion again sometime soon. There are still a few children's books and audio cassettes on the shelf. And next to the shelf, there's a box with something written on it in large letters that has been crossed out.

~~THIS CAN GO~~ and ~~DEFINITELY KEEP.~~

Intrigued, I open the lid. Under several rustling layers of tissue paper, my hands make out a smooth round form. When I realize what it is, I have to laugh, for I suddenly see my brother Thomas in front of me, handing it to me at Christmas. Made with his own hands and a success nonetheless.

It is a glass ball filled with a clear liquid with hundreds of tiny white particles swimming around it in that slowly sink to the bottom. At the base of the snow globe are a couple of small buildings, which seem to be arranged by chance in a circle on a green surface and are surrounded by a blue band. It's a river that's divided into two streams by the buildings and then comes together again after it passes them. I can make out a little chapel, a cow barn with an adjoining meadow, a chicken coop, a pig stall, a pile of manure, an old brick-built wood-fired oven, and a barn next to the light blue house with dark green shutters and high red tile roof. At the back of the house turns a plain waterwheel made out of slate-grey wood. Its axle rotates smoothly, transferring energy via a large gear that slots into other gears, which drive the heavy millstones inside the mill.

The farm seems to be on an island. To enter it with dry feet, you have to cross a little bridge. A narrow country road lined with chestnut trees passes in front of it, then disappears in a gentle bend behind a rise, containing a sandy potato field and a hop garden.

I follow the road to the next village. Pretty, narrow timber-frame houses in bright colors form a circle around a market square, which a Corpus Christie procession is crossing. It is led by a priest wearing a gold-plated monstrance under a red velvet canopy. The collar of his festive vestments is dark with sweat. He is followed by a crowd of first communicants in white dresses and dark blue suits, who are being led along by a woman in a light blue woolen suit. Behind them is a man with an

enormous gold chain around his neck. That must be the mayor. He is surrounded by men in suits and their families, jutting out their chins or chests, or both, with pride. At the end of the procession are the ordinary people with their shoulders bent. A bus is parked at the edge of the market square. Its left headlight is broken, and the driver is leaning against the door. He bites into a liver sausage roll, then waves at a man sitting on an old tractor, who is turning onto the road and heading toward Einödhof. The tractor stops next to a golden Opel Ascona. I can see a couple of chickens picking among the cobblestones, searching for food.

My memory sinks down ever deeper with the white flakes, all the way to the bottom of the globe, and the moment the first snow crystals touch the ground, the door of the house opens, and I see a boy and a girl exit. I can hear them shout: "It's snowing!" The girl has her arms open wide, tilts her head back, opens her mouth wide, and closes her eyes. And I close my eyes, too, for I am the girl.

I am ten years old, called Maria, and live with my parents, my brother Thomas, my uncle Herbert, and our grandma here on the farm, which has belonged to my family from time immemorial. The next houses are a mile and a half upriver. And the place where my brother and I go to school, where mom shops, papa has a drink, and grandma goes to confession is nearly three miles away.

Today is the second Saturday in November. It has been freezing cold for a couple of days already, and it's snowing for the first time this year. I jump up and run to the door. Oh, how joyful I am in this brief moment when delicate snowflakes trickle down from the sky for the very first time in the year, and you cannot run outside fast enough to welcome each and every one of them.

The sky extends over us like an opaque nylon stocking. I close my eyes, tilt my head back, and open my mouth wide. I can feel each individual snow crystal land on my tongue and melt with a gentle sigh. The flakes get thicker and the drifting snow grows quieter and more dense, and slowly the luscious green of the meadow, the matt red of the roof of the cow barn, and the gleaming grey of the damp cobblestones in the yard disappear. The water in the mill creek that flows around us turns dark blue until it lies there like a silk scarf. On its banks, the long fine branches of a large slender birch sway in the wind. Its roots are in the water, so it's well provided for even in the hottest days of summer. The tree stands directly in front of my bedroom. I've pushed my bed over to the window, so the birch is the first thing I see every morning and the last thing I see before I fall asleep at night. In the spring, it produces hundreds or even thousands of little sausages and bright green leaves, and in the winter, when the moon shines through its countless thin branches and is reflected in the water, it looks so incredibly beautiful it takes your breath away.

The snow continues to fall and gets deeper and deeper. My brother and I romp around until we can no longer feel our fingers and toes. Our faces are bright red, and snot has even frozen to Thomas's nose. "At least it can't run any longer." He laughs and tries to reach it with his tongue. "You wanna give it a try?" I shudder and

press my lips tightly together.

We go inside before our feet fall off, and we have to hold our frozen hands under cold water for a long time. There's a cozy crackling sound coming from the kitchen stove, which has two chairs in front of it. Then one of the best winter things happens: mom opens the oven, and we're allowed to place our ice-cold feet and toes on the door and stick them inside a little.

We sit there, giggling, for the blood is pumping vigorously through our feet and toes, and our snot has started to run again. Only when we shout that our socks are about to catch fire do we get warm cocoa from cups that are almost as big as our heads. And afterwards, we want to go back out again, of course. I need to look for my cat Elizabeth. She had kittens six days ago in the hayloft above the cow barn. Now of all times, when the winter is setting in so soon, and the baby cats are most surely freezing. I was crazy pleased, nevertheless. It is Elizabeth's first litter, and four cute, tiny kittens came into the world, and now belong to me. Three of them are sweet little white girl cats with funny black spots through their soft fur, and then there's a small black tomcat with a white triangle on his chest.

Grandma cursed when she heard about the litter. "We don't need no autumn cats, they're no good," she complained and grumbled to herself. "And kindly stop feeding them. A cat with a full belly won't catch any mice." But I don't take this seriously, since grandma is always complaining about something. In fact, when I come to think of it, she's always been like this: nagging, bitching, grumbling, screeching, roaring, foaming at the mouth, spitting, and blaspheming. And her false teeth are often askew as she does so, first because she's always so agitated at the start, and second, because she skimps on the adhesive she uses to stick them into her mouth each morning. Whenever she rants and raves at me, she bores her thick index finger into my upper arm, which, unfortunately, is rather thin, like the rest of me, and so I always have countless blue, green, and yellow marks on my skin. I think that if I were to list all my grandma's swear words here, I'd have to reverse my first holy communion and say twenty-five Lord's Prayers as penance. Thomas and I think that grandma goes to confession every Monday because of all her swearing. She

believes she has a particularly clear line to our Lord, because she was born on Christmas Eve. But we children know she will initially only make it as far as purgatory, no way directly to heaven, to which mom says, "Your grandmother had to work so much and so hard all her life, in fact always, she doesn't know anything else, and she can't help herself, so let her swear and ignore it. And if it's too bad, just imagine something nice."

Grandma also always has a pain in her left knee, which is swollen up like a soccer ball today. Once a week she has to visit the doctor because of it. He uses a thick syringe to take the pus out of the joint. Mostly, she limps and curses on the way home more than on the way there. And once she's back, she smears a thick layer of quark on her knee and wraps wide sheets of plastic wrap around it. An old wife's remedy. So grandma says. The quark eases the inflammation, and the saran wrap keeps the quark fresh. And she doesn't throw it away afterwards either. Quite the opposite, in fact. In the following days, she makes quark strudel, mini-cheesecakes, or we have quark with fruit. We don't let anything go to waste.

But now, back to the baby cats above the barn. Thomas and I climb quietly up the old wooden ladder, and there they are. Elizabeth has bedded her children on an old sheep skin, and today two of them opened their eyes for the first time. I am over the moon, because they're so cute. I stroke the soft kittens, and they whimper quietly. They can't mew properly at all and search awkwardly for milk. I put cat food down in the corner for their mother, and kiss each of the little cats between their ears. I intend to think up names for them tomorrow.

A beautiful day is coming to an end, and in the evening, shortly before we have to go to bed, I look out the window again. Grandma is out in the garden, limping on the gravel path toward the well from which we fetch water for the flowers and vegetables in summer. I can't quite make out what she's doing, as it's already pretty dark. There's only a little moonlight in the garden. I can see an old sack in her left hand and a cobblestone in her right one. I open the window and am about to call out to her when mom's bright voice resounds throughout the house. "Brush your teeth and off to bed, I'm counting to three." I pull the window lever down again with a squeaking sound, then turn around. "Coming!"

---

I hold the snow globe from the box in my hands and can feel how fragile it is. Behind the thin glass a painfully sharp image of what must have happened in the garden back then emerges. By the time our mother had counted to three, the little cats my grandmother was carrying to the well in an old sack would have been drowned.

---

“One!”

We squeal with pleasure, slide into the bathroom on our socks, and hold our toothbrushes closely together so that Thomas can squeeze a single long line of toothpaste onto them. Then we pull them apart so we can brush our teeth as on the TV ad we saw earlier.

The freezing water splashes upward, wetting the jute sack like a terrible embrace from the underworld. The kittens squeak out of fear, cold, and desperation. Grandma pushes the sack deeper into the water.

“Two!”

I simply can't manage to get my confounded pajama top on. Thomas had tied the lower part of the sleeves in a knot, and I already got my head stuck in the orange velour, so I'm staggering through my bedroom like a blind chicken with Thomas and mom laughing at me.

The water engulfs the sack with the little cats. The whimpering comes to an abrupt end. A large air bubble bursts on the surface. Then quiet descends.

“And the last number is: three!”

We've managed it. As always. Mom tucks me in tight. I love when my feet are wrapped up warm and mom pulls the cover up to my chin and tucks it in around me so tight that my arms disappear and only my nose peeks out of the enormous down pillow. Mom sits next to me and strokes my hair. We always pray together before I go to sleep. “Dear Lord, let me earn /a place next to you in heaven.” And today, I continue praying on my own: “And please look after my little cats. Amen.”

“God bless you, Maria, amen.”

Mom kisses me on the nose, and I kiss her simultaneously on the chin, and then we do the same in reverse, I kiss mom on the nose, and she kisses me on the chin.

“Sleep well, my dear.”

“You sleep well, too, mom.”

Silently, life leaves the little cat bodies. The cobblestone keeps the jute sack



under water. A final couple of bubbles burst on the rippling surface of the well before it becomes quiet and smooth and reflects the moon. Grandma straightens herself up and rubs her aching knee. Then she says three Hail Marys and the Lord's Prayer.

Later she throws the dead cats on the manure heap. Their wet fur looks dark and clings in small swirls to their motionless bodies. It only takes three forks of manure to cover up the wet furballs.

On the following afternoon, the school bus spits us out onto the road in front of the entrance to the farm. All morning, cars have dug mushy wheel ruts into the blanket of snow on the road, and with every step, thick, wet clumps of snow squirt out from under my suede boots. Thomas and I are always hungry when we get back from school, because we ride the bus for such a long time, but today I have to go see the cats before I eat lunch. On the way home, we had thought up names for the little kittens. We agreed on Bernhard, Katrin, Henni, and Carmen.

Mom calls out of the tilted kitchen window, "Maria, Thomas, your lunch is on the table."

Elizabeth comes up to us in the yard already, and rubs against my legs, mewing. She's definitely hungry. Thomas and I put our schoolbags down at the bottom of the wooden ladder in the barn, and climb up the steep and crooked steps as fast as we can to the hayloft.

But up top it's completely silent. The nest is empty. There's no trace of the baby cats. Elizabeth follows us up to the loft, lies down on the bales of straw, and starts grooming herself extensively. She acts as though all this here has nothing to do with her.

Where are the little kittens? In disbelief, we start shouting and searching through the hayloft. We look under every single pile of hay, reach into every crevice in the hollow floor, and repeatedly stop to listen, holding our fingers to our lips. "Psst, be quiet," we say when we hear a rustling sound. But it always culminates in silence.

Up here, I can hear and see my quickening breath in the cold winter air, and like the lead apron that you have to wear when getting x-rayed, a weight oppresses my

chest. A thick lump forms in my throat, and I stammer tonelessly, "It's much too cold, isn't it, isn't it much too cold?" Then I start to cry silently.

"No idea." Thomas shakes his head somberly.

"Come and eat now, you two!" Mom is standing down at the door and she's mad because we're not coming, the food is getting cold, and we're covered in straw and dust. When we tell her in hysterics that the little cats are gone, she no longer looks grumpy but serious. Sadly, I put a bowl of milk next to the abandoned cat nest for Elizabeth, and Thomas shakes some dry food onto the ground. He tries to console me, because I'm starting to sob again. "Elizabeth will fetch the kittens again! Definitely, Maria, no need to cry."

Mom presses my hand as we go inside. Really firmly. She only ever does this when something really bad has happened.

During lunch, I'm not hungry, I don't feel well.

We think about where Elizabeth could have hidden the kittens and spend the rest of the afternoon looking for them, until we're half-frozen and it starts to get dark. We search in the woodshed, under the bridge, in all four granaries in the mill, in the big barn, the cow barn, the pig stall, the workshop, and even in the little chapel. Grandma watches us from the kitchen window, shaking her head. I consider it really mean of her not to help us look. It's as though the little cats have simply been swallowed up by the earth.

In the evening, I lie in bed and can't sleep for worrying. Thomas is lying in the room next to mine, and his door is open a crack. He tries to cheer me up. "Maria, you're a real Katzenjammer Kid."

Now I can't hold back the tears. The birch in front of the window sways gently in the wind, and tears stream down both of my cheeks and over my temples to my ears, where they seep into the pillow.

My bedroom is directly above the kitchen, where mom, papa, and grandma are having a serious argument. The sound is muffled by the carpet, so I can only make out a few words here and there. They're almost surely quarreling about the cats, because grandma didn't help us look for them.

---

My cell phone is vibrating on the bedside table. A message from Bea: *Maria, darling, a change of plan! We're bringing the girls to the mill tomorrow morning. Okay? Up here in the cabin there's no wi-fi, and Mira used up all of Oli's data allowance in an hour. Oli is a bit peeved, to put it nicely.* After this, she inserted an emoji of a little monkey covering its eyes. *You know how he is.* After this, she put a winking smiley and another little monkey. *We could stop by the farm for an hour or so for a coffee. Charlotte has gone on and on about her great-grandmother's apple cake.* A winking smiley.

Did she really not enquire at all about what's happening here? How my father is? Or me? I sigh, put the cell phone back on the bedside table, pull the cover up to my nose, and nestle my face in the cool cotton. Already as a child, I'd loved this bedlinen with the blue checked pattern and the red hearts, for when my mother put it on our beds for the first time in the year, it was springtime. How good it smells. The scent of summer meadows mixed with the washing powder my mother uses. Has always used. I turn onto my back and notice my legs. My thighs are burning from going up and down the hill today. My knees are throbbing dully, and I can still feel the straps of my backpack on my shoulders. I stretch myself out and try to relax my neck, but then everything else kicks in. Suddenly everything is hurting. My bones, my muscles, even my skin. My entire body has had enough for today.

Except for my head, which is still running at full throttle. Countless thoughts come and go at the same time, before they're fully thought through. I scan the room. On the wall opposite my bed, I can make out a couple of lighter spots in the dim light. My posters hung there previously. I try to recall which stars I stuck up on the wall. The only bright spot that evokes a memory isn't square-shaped but shows the silhouette of a woman with a wild and magnificent head of hair. It must have been a cutout of Tina Turner. Or was it Rod Stewart?

The ceiling light has an old-fashioned cloth cover, and I remember that once a

pair of mice fashioned a nest out of pilfered Styrofoam in the false floor above it. There was a constant rustling noise, and if you knocked on the ceiling, you could hear them rush off with tiny mincing steps. Then they had babies. I could hear gentle whimpering, and a few days later something along the lines of an indoor weather phenomenon occurred in my room. If you touched the light, delicate flocks of Styrofoam came down. I never tired of telling my classmates about it. It was only the middle of August, after all. I think this was maybe why Thomas made me the snow globe.

I shake my head, reach once more for the globe, and place it on the windowsill. Now and again, a car passes by on the road, and its lights are reflected in the glass. Slowly, my thoughts fall away, and my eyelids get heavy. I can feel sleep coming on. The snow crystals have long since sunk to the bottom. I've no idea when there was last a solid blanket of snow in these parts.

[END OF SAMPLE]