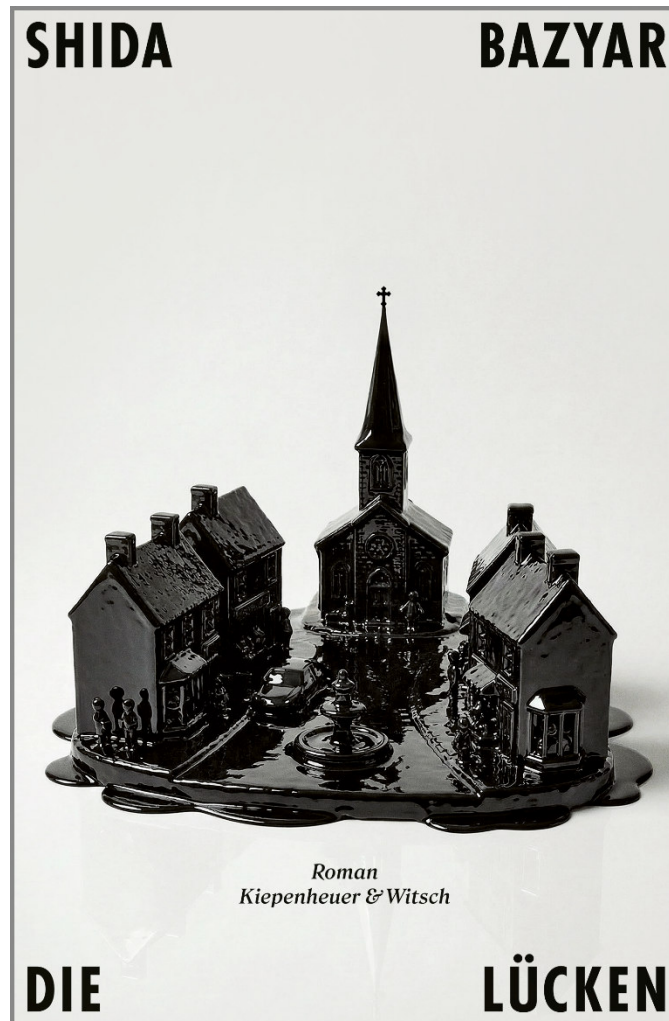


OMISSIONS

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Literary Fiction / Novel, 512 pages
Publication date: September 2026

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What we know, Lu (I didn't want to come here)

If we had known, what would it have changed? Would our mother have opened the windows and mistrusted the sun? Our father stopped saying hello to the old man next door? Maybe in protest, you and I would have stopped going to that particular clothes store, even though it was the only one in town that sold Levi's.

Maybe from then on, we'd have noticed the houses. Whenever we walked past, we'd have nodded to them like grieving relatives you meet for the first time at the funeral. You'll never really know each other, and yet you're acquainted.

I am not long dead, but this much I have realized: we'd have asked no questions. Not even if we'd known the things I know now, the things I'd like to tell you. We never would have confronted any of them about anything; we were polite, didn't rub people up the wrong way.

If I'd had a choice, then after my death I would have wanted to see our life, not theirs. I would have explored our places, never this one; why on earth would I have chosen this one, where we lived for such a short time? And yet here I was, with them, yet again. I told the gods they must have made a mistake, but they were already aware of both things: accusation and fact. They could at least have sent me to the people I loved, I cried out, because I

had an inkling before they told me: we were suddenly surrounded by a familiar wind, I knew its heavy, earthy scent, heard the roar, the change of height, and saw the tops of pines, beech trees, oaks, resolving into the dark woods – I was clearly being sent back to the town I once called home. The quiet sounds of the air, the unspeaking people, the cars on the highways: it had all been woven into me. Every last feature of my personality colored by the threads of this place. I was ten years old when we fled and came here. Thirteen when we left because they wanted to send us away.

If I had been allowed to choose, I'd have returned to our birthplace, to the silent kisses of its landscape, the time when the footprints between Grandmother's door and our own had not yet been washed away by the blood of so many. I'd have been a child again, seeing and feeling and tasting the things I longed for all my life like a madwoman, like a woman suddenly widowed. Instead, I found myself in Heimesbach. Among strangers. Either I'd been sent here by accident or I had gone to hell. Was that also what you thought when you arrived here, Lu? Or did you just feel safe? You were two years older than me and understood much more. You were an adolescent, in the car with your parents and your little sister, driving up Trierer Straße for the first time, towards the church, and as you looked out of the window you probably thought: either we've been sent here by accident or I have gone to hell. A few years earlier Parvaneh had arrived with her family, and she at least thought that. You know Parvaneh, though you won't remember her,

certainly not by her first name; she was an adult. You knew her as the mother of her three daughters, and after all this time you will have forgotten their names, too. But now I know so much about her, now I know all these things without knowing why I know them – now I see her and wonder: how could we all live there and talk to each other so little, find out so little about each other? You wouldn't have an answer to that question, even if we shared the same sphere and you could hear me. We lived happily during the wars, you know? And we all, each of us children, had wars of our own. We all lived up there, on that narrow street on the edge of the farmland, the grassland, spent three summers in a row out in the sun, smelling cow dung, getting rashes from running through the tall cornstalks, arguing with the other children, loving them so fiercely that we let them have the best stickers and didn't regret it. And no one asked where you were from, and no one said if their relatives had been murdered in another country, whether targeted as individuals or massacred as a group, no one talked about the wars we'd lived through or survived by being here. Those were conversations we never had. Because when we were outside, it all went away. And that's why we were outside. We rode around our territory on bikes or rollerblades, and were sometimes drawn to the small graveyard at the end of our street, and we had no one to tell us who lay buried there, and who no longer lay buried there. We filled the big watering cans and watered the mossy gravestones. I loved the silence; you loved the creepiness. None

of our parents could have told us who came from where and when something had happened – these things were unknown, and no information boards were bolted to the town's signposts. We were starting from zero, writing our local history ourselves. We were in this place and we were safe, that was all we needed to know. The people in the other houses knew a lot, I'll tell you that now, and later I'll tell you what they knew – at least, what I've discovered. They too only spoke about it amongst themselves later. Sometimes they told each other everything; sometimes it was lies. Now, or later, though preferably some other time. But no one ever admitted to still having the picture of the Führer tucked away in a drawer.

You and I, we stopped talking about Heimesbach. We arrived in the USA, as we had arrived in other places before. We unpacked, our parents drove nails into walls, we learned to navigate the new routes and trust the people, and made every effort not to let our new friends see how hard we found it. Our parents weren't discouraged, ever; they carried on, always. And they too stopped talking about the town, perhaps because it had betrayed us. But Lu, if I'm honest: when a town betrays its inhabitants, it looks different. A town that decides to... no. Not yet. I will come to that. I will tell you what I now know, because it wasn't paradise they expelled us from, oh no. Quite the opposite. But maybe we wouldn't have kept thinking about all that either; we had our own story, which burned in us and was our present. This arrogance people have about the past. Every present day believes itself to be

the only present, able to imagine its past only indistinctly, always denying it has a spark of relevance. Sure, it's over. And yet the layers of time cling together like thin sheets of parchment, forming a single, billowing sheaf, and if you believe in chronology you also believe in explanations. Only the town remains constant. It may change, but everything proceeds from there, only from there, and when I realized that, at the very moment the gods vanished again as they always do, it was because of what I saw. I saw the sun shining on the grass of our estate, drawing the children out into the street because the spring, their season, had finally returned. I saw doors opening and children running out, with just one task: to break the silence. I smelled the aroma of food from various nations floating through open windows, drifting across the cornfields and getting lost among the ears. What do you want, the gods seemed to be saying, you were all happy here. I heard the slam of a door and blows hitting a woman's body, looked at the closed door, only it wasn't ours, and my eyes couldn't be looking, and these weren't our parents. I saw corks being pulled from bottles, so close up, so clearly, heard the laughter of people who had grown up together and would die together, heard their dialect and noticed the common patterns in their thinking; they had drawn the same conclusions from the same facts and every year at the same time they would do the same things together and enjoy them each time. I saw the wine, saw how old it was – not because they were drinking old wine, but because this seemed to be another time,

and nothing was black and white, though it should have been, the people gaunt, the sun dull, though it was shining. I saw the ground, the deepdark earth and all it housed, all it hid. The ground that for so long yielded no harvest, until they finally stopped trying, the farmers, the Hunsrückers. Here, where they tilled the land efficiently and reared their livestock, here where people railed against snobbishness because their own stomachs were rumbling. And now and then I saw us, but whenever I drew near we vanished again, slipping away from me. Don't search for us, Lu, we will scarcely feature, we weren't important to anyone then and still aren't now. I learned nothing about us, but even so I did realize something. Had we known all this from the very first day, not just suspected but known, it would have changed one thing: from the start, we would have known they'd send us away as soon as they could. All the same, I sometimes picture our lives if you and I had been permitted to become German; we would have become Germans with German husbands and German children. On long weekends and when the schools were out we'd have taken *rural vacations*, hiking, bike rides, we'd have visited the nature reserve, always mentioned as Germany's most recently designated national park. We'd have studied flyers so we could talk about hanging bogs and meadow orchards, while our children ran off without us noticing. Afterwards, we'd go back to our real lives which, you guessed it, would have played out in a metropolis, let's say Berlin. If things had turned out that way, then maybe I'd have died an old

woman, not so young in that terrible, avoidable accident. And then for all I know, the gods might have given me a real gift, let me pierce the layers of time in Berlin, travel through minds and decades there, and what a treasure-trove of stories I'd have found – you know those stories, you love historical dramas, and they're always set in Berlin, because that was the only place people lived, nowhere else. Okay, maybe Munich, or other cities. What took place there in past centuries – that was world history.

But Lu, the town is the town. And now I have given you enough warnings and now I will tell you what dice the gods rolled for me. I'll take you by the hand, take you with me, and we'll travel through the years in this place, back to our unintended home. To a village that once was given a railroad station and pulsed with life; which was named a Gaumusterdorf, an ideal Nazi village, where people marched with pride swelling their chests; and which was bombed until people stopped speaking. The honorable title disappeared, and the village was just a village again, until it was made a town. A town with a station to which the trains no longer run, because they're no longer needed. And nor does that unwieldy word starting with Gau pass anyone's lips. Today, the town is simply called by its name. We will travel back to the place that calls itself Heimesbach, which is like so many other places, and yet is only this one.

Johanna's secret (in the 1920s)

We will begin in the mid-1920s, because Johanna had fallen in love. There might be and are many other things to say about Johanna, just as there might be many things to say about 'the mid-1920s': about the world after the Great War in general, and the Weimar Republic more specifically; about the village and the French-occupied zone, the separatist movement and passive resistance more specifically still. The world had been turned upside down, but we are not in the world, we are with Johanna, the first person we are going to accompany, and Johanna's world, too, had been turned upside down, because in the two decades she had spent on this earth, no one had warned her that falling in love was not a decision you made – it just happened. Her older siblings hadn't warned her, nor had her best friend Lore, no one. There was no one to tell her all this was normal, and millions had gone through it before her – enjoyed it, even –, no one to reassure her, because Johanna was still keeping it to herself. That was what Johanna did, she dealt with things herself. I know this; the town keeps her emotions safely stored away, as it does with all its inhabitants.

There were days, for instance, when Johanna's body was made wholly of fury. She wasn't *furious*, what was that, a feeling? Something you borrowed for a little while, pulling it on over your clothes and removing it on Ash Wednesday? When Johanna ran – and that's what she did on those days – then she was pure fury and nothing else. Johanna's legs moved at a speed that outstripped even the wind, and the animals who fled as if two pounding rifle butts were coming to destroy their paradise. Johanna's body rent the air, fighting its way through something that was invisible and yet still in her way. Sometimes the fury was due to her parents, who hadn't given their permission for something, sometimes due to what she'd said in an argument with Lore or what Lore had said to her. When Johanna was a child, her mother would say with a laugh (and ideally with an audience), she used to bang her head against the wall when she got into this state. Did it so hard that it scared her and she would then throw herself into her mother's comforting arms. Rub her weeping face on her mother's shoulder as if she wasn't the one responsible for the pain. Relatives laughed when Johanna's mother told them this, laughed at the wild child who had finally become a sensible young adult. The story was about a past version of Johanna and was told only for this reason. It would otherwise have been kept quiet out of embarrassment; a child who behaved like this was clearly disturbed. And so Johanna had started going out, drawing no attention to herself until at last she reached the place beyond the houses whose little windows hid the

neighbors' eyes, where the trees were her only witnesses. She conquered the silent, cool woods and ran her heart out. Only when dusk fell and chilled her sweat-soaked clothes, her muscles trembling with exhaustion rather than fury, her jaw quivering with the cold, was she once more aware of time as a very real concept, because it brought consequences. Then she went back and waited with the animals until her clothes and hair had dried somewhat. Getting changed would have been too conspicuous; her four siblings and their mother would have noticed and asked. The animals' bodies radiated warmth, she stood close to them and inhaled, they were soft behind their ears and smelled of home. The animals came and went; scarcely had she given them names and they were gone again, sold on and traded off, but Johanna was used to that. In her mind, it was the defining feature of animals; they were there for her while they shared a moment, but strangers before and after. Johanna's childhood and that of her siblings had been spent by the pond. They'd caught frogs, whooping and crowing with laughter that leapt higher into the sky than the legs of the ungovernable little amphibians. She had stood around the pond with the other village children, small people who never had to ask each other's names or addresses and moved from one game to the next without exchanging many words. Johanna's playmates were related to one another, or not, lived around the corner or further away, had parents who worked on farms or owned a piano, it didn't matter; there was room for them all at the pond, though some could only come when they

had finished work in the fields, and others had to be home on the dot for supper. In the time between they leaped around their treasures: animals living or dead, they found ferns and holes, picked sorrel and made daisy chains, and the more winter days and rainy days had sunk into their bones, the harder they had to jump and shout to expel them. When Johanna was playing, ideas came to her at the moment she uttered them. Sudden ideas in the middle of a game were moments of absolute happiness, and so Johanna seldom announced something without leaping in the air at the same time. At the end of the day, arms and legs had new bruises and freshly swollen mosquito bites; clothes were stained with grass, fingernails rimmed in black. They felt the loveliest kind of exhaustion coming home in the evening, having drunk their fill of the day outside, of all they so desperately needed, games and sunshine, light-heartedness and freedom. The village children did what all previous generations of village children had done before them. And in their midst were the two girls who told each other everything, with no exceptions, because otherwise it didn't feel real.

Johanna had sat beside Lore through every single day of school, their bodies leaning in; she would have known her friend's smell with her eyes closed. They were the littlest ones and sat in the front row, good girls, overawed, trying not to stand out. They thirsted for their teacher's praise and never complained that their small backsides could find no position on the hard bench that didn't hurt. They tried desperately to keep their feet from

swinging rhythmically back and forth. They were good girls, Johanna and Lore, the teacher loved them, and ambition never poisoned things between them; they both worked hard and spurred each other on. Lore could make things with more care, while Johanna's pencil swept across the paper with more confidence; here we have the prettiest picture and there the prettiest straw star, and they were pinned side by side on the blackboard to set an example for the others. Johanna whispered ideas into Lore's ear and Lore's reaction brought the ideas to life; if Lore was delighted, the adventure would begin. They grew taller and moved back through the rows, giving the front-row seats to the younger ones. Younger ones like Lore's sister Anni, who sat there a few years later, a feeble child who had been ill a long time and often cried, be it because she had been reprimanded, or because she was tired or didn't understand the work. Anni was just as receptive as all the other children, she wasn't slower or more dreamy or scatterbrained, she was simply more anxious, and anxious people wept and didn't learn, making one mistake after another and failing to remember their times tables, even the low numbers. Lore sat two rows behind and had no sympathy for this, still a little way from contempt but with a foretaste of that feeling already. The nights when the doctor had come and been unable to say whether the sick child would survive the night had made Lore afraid. And because fear had no place in this time and in these children's world, she had chosen resentment. Here, she could follow her parents' example; it was a feeling

she knew well, one that was directed towards children. And so Lore had been annoyed by every coughing fit from the little bed, every glance at her mother who'd sat and slept beside the feverish child. Anni's illness had been serious, but it had passed. Lore couldn't bear the whimpering that heralded her sister's tears; she looked at her small back and was grateful when the teacher finally yelled what was on the tip of her own tongue: 'Stop makin' such a fuuss, chield!' Lore would have liked to add: 'Come on, enough's enough!' Johanna, who found personal dramas fundamentally dull, only involved herself when a solution was at hand. Her brain wouldn't allow her to remain a passive onlooker if something could be resolved. The times-table business, for one. She began to intercept the little girl, sometimes after the lesson, sometimes in the morning before school. Taking her aside, whispering in her ear. 'Show us your fingers. Aight times sivven's fifty-six. Aight fingers, sivven fingers, six fingers, see? Allus one less!' The next time she whispered: 'Six times six is thuurdy-six, teacher's absent with the shifts.' Anni giggled bashfully. After a while she began thinking up her own rhymes, a big grin on her narrow face as she recited one to Johanna. 'Nine times sivven's sixty-thray, my sister's prettier 'n may!' It broke Johanna's heart. Lore wouldn't even feel flattered. But then, she would never get to hear the rhyme, and so Johanna said well done and laughed as honestly as she could. When Johanna and Lore finally reached the back row, they no longer depended on their teacher's praise. It wasn't important to them now.

They whiled away their time comparing the softness of their hands, drawing in secret under the desk, passing notes, observing the others. They were arrogant, they knew, and a little mean. Both of them. They were bored and each as arrogant as the other. But that brought no consequences. No one heard them. Everyone liked them. And anyway, there was nothing else to do. Waiting for them at home were housework or work in the byres, their mothers' endless nagging, arguments with their older brothers. It was all so horribly boring. They certainly weren't condescending and mean without cause; they were just looking for something to make the other laugh, and they looked all day. One quip after another was fired off in the back row, until the girls' round cheeks ached from holding in something for which the word laughter wasn't nearly strong enough. If the other laughed, it only made things worse, two bodies quaking beside each other in their seats. They were reprimanded over and over, and no one knew what kind of reprimand it would be: one that only made them laugh more, or one that magically robbed the situation of all comedy. Then they would sit there, strangely tired and a little sad. After too much of what made them dance on the inside came the moment of sobering up. And usually, an immediate hangover.

What happened at the Posthof inn stayed at the Posthof inn. It was a long time since they had been schoolgirls, and were not yet married. The question of whether something was proper was left at the door of the Posthof. Hours

passed, the air was heavy and hot, it was a miracle no sparks flew when the soles of their shoes struck the worn floorboards. Johanna was so drunk she had to force herself not to look at the dancing feet; it made her nauseous. Until in the midst of all her drunken thoughts the face of a particular boy appeared, clear and distinct, more distinct than her surroundings, and at once everything inside her fell silent. So she was in love. Awkward. Inauspicious. Annoying, almost, that it had to be with such a try-hard. At least he was Jewish. You couldn't choose, of course, but at least that was one good thing. Maybe today she would finally tell Lore, and that would finally be done. Lore wouldn't have guessed, and would cast a weary glance at the dirty floor. He wasn't like the two of them. He was hard-working, straightlaced and serious, never at the Posthof. But he had such lovely eyes. A way of moving. And when Johanna bumped into him in the street, when she was out shopping or walked past his house, everything was different. The sky shone. The trees smiled. Other people were invisible. Her belly turned hot. Sweat and chills on the back of her neck. The ground was paved with gold. His eyes were the most beautiful thing Johanna had ever seen. And the eyes couldn't help the fact he was so uptight it made you want to scream. She was in love, and she was sitting down. At this hour, no one in the Posthof was still sitting. Anyone who wanted to sit could go home, had failed, lost, was flagging. She sat because sitting drunk in the hubbub and thinking about him almost made her feel he was really there. Telling Lore

wouldn't just mean revealing the secret, but naming a thing without knowing if it would last. Perhaps at the moment Johanna confessed to the feeling it would vanish, and then it would be absent but official at the same time. This was a precipice. Johanna preferred to get up and mingle among the dancers, give herself into the unfamiliar arms of familiar neighbors. The room stank abominably of sweat and bad breath, of alcohol and a day's work done, and she loved to surrender to the music. *Oh Katharina* they bellowed, and many quietly thanked the Lord or someone else that they weren't called Katharina, while others cursed their own names. Song followed song and ääh, one more song, come on, have another drink, ye can sleep when ye're dead. When Johanna and Lore left the Posthof, they were embraced by the familiar cool of their home village and the familiar scent of the working day. No, wait, Johanna wanted to murmur, please let's suspend normality a while longer. Tomorrow everything will start all over again, even what's new isn't new, however scandalously it's whispered about. But the birds were announcing their presence, and worse still, the sun was already making itself known, and the friends said their goodbyes with kisses and grumbles; as usual something had been seen that should not have been seen, but what could you do. They stood on the corner, the Posthof behind them, the church and the synagogue in front, censorious faces whose warnings they ignored. Spent a touch too long over their kisses and goodbyes, heard the door to the Posthof being flung open again, hoped no

one was coming out wanting something else from them. Johanna felt the particular kind of weariness that always came over her when she'd been with Lore. When they had talked until their throats were sore, for example. Now she could have told Lore, this would have been a good moment, and it would finally be done. But then they would have to swap comfortable weariness for excitement, no, not now, she would tell Lore some other time. There was no hurry, after all. It was time to say goodbye, for real now, time to go home, alone as always, but satisfied. Lore passed the church, walking quickly to snatch an hour's sleep, and Johanna turned down Trierer Straße, which was not yet called Trierer Straße but Bahnhofstraße after the station, walking quickly, before the people getting off the first train could meet her coming the other way, wanting no one to see her like this. On their solitary walk home, heads swimming, they each thought about who they were and who they wanted to be. The walk home was a chance to take an inner inventory. They were drunk, contented girls in their home village, with warm beds reliably waiting for them.

Parvaneh and the square (1989)

Suddenly, undeniably, something was there. Parvaneh stood on the corner of the square, with no children, no shopping bags, her body lighter than it had ever been, but not her heart. She stood there, and something could have fallen away, but instead there was a strange feeling – what was it? The wind? She closed her eyes and became aware of her tear duct; it was dry, but it was there. On the street behind her, let's say fifty paces away, was the kindergarten. And in the kindergarten were her two children. Since when? Two minutes ago. She had dropped them off. Strangers in a strange place, an institution named after someone called Adolph – his surname was Kolping, but still, it didn't inspire trust. Bahman said it had once been a perfectly normal name, yes, that made sense. Now they were gone, her two little ones, they were in that long, handsome building that smelled of fruit tea and little feet. Parvaneh was free. Until one o'clock, when she had to come back, no earlier please, it would confuse the children if the parents didn't come consistently at pick-up time. They also had to say their goodbyes as quickly as possible, ignore the crying, and by the end of the week the pair would have got used to their new surroundings, the kindergarten teacher said. 'So that's how it works, then?' Parvaneh wanted to ask. 'You just have to be consistent, ignore the crying, and eventually you'll settle in?' She was still waiting for it to happen, but she wasn't getting used to Germany, and

certainly not to this place where they'd been living for a few weeks now, the name of which she couldn't remember to begin with. We must have been sent here by accident, she'd thought, looking at the sign on the road into the town. They had hoped so fervently to be given accommodation in a big city – country life was hell for Parvaneh, no matter which continent she was on. But that wasn't a consideration, not any more, she was mother to three children and had ended up here, where she was now standing, looking at the square that had been a puzzle to her from the start. The kindergarten behind her, and on the far side of the street a half-timbered house that was unusually large and beautiful for the town, something like a hotel for school classes? Behind that, on the corner: the elementary school. With her big girl inside, learning quietly, uncomplaining. From birth, even in the delivery room, Bahar had looked around with eager eyes, taking the world in. Since they had been in Germany, but most of all since she had started school here, she looked with caution not curiosity, as if dangers were lurking everywhere. What dangers, azizam? They were here, they were safe.

Parvaneh stood on the corner and wondered what purpose this strange square served, right in the middle of the town. The kindergarten, a long, two-story building with an endless roof, was close to everything. Close to the bank, close to the pedestrian precinct, close to the two supermarkets. Parvaneh's perspective was that of a mother, in other words, a pragmatist. When the two younger children were in kindergarten, she would go grocery

shopping. How much easier it would be to look at products and compare prices when you didn't have to look after a six and a three-year-old at the same time. But now she had got stuck here. Was it just a car park, in the middle of the town? Though not everyone was allowed to park there? What were the vans doing here? If Parvaneh had noticed the street signs, she would have seen that the square was called Neuer Markt, but in all honesty, that wouldn't have made it any clearer. No market was being held there, and nor did anything look new, she probably would have thought. A public square is a public square because people do something on it, she thought instead, like having a family picnic, or because there's a fountain, because sweets and pastries are sold there, because you can stroll around it. In the metropolis where Parvaneh had grown up, every last millimeter of ground was too valuable to be left unused; everywhere you looked people were touting things that would bring the buyer a few moments of pleasure and the seller their day's wages. But here no one sold things designed to be eaten while walking. Despite everyone constantly going for walks. They took their dogs or did it for their hearts. Never at night, and never to see each other or be a part of something. How quiet it was. It was so quiet here. She might have found it oppressive or disconcerting, but if she was honest, she liked it. A time-out for the senses, that's what it was. Everything on pause. This square had no function; the few cars that were sometimes parked on it were embarrassed to be there, and it looked ragged, she thought, with no clear

outlines. A few buildings over on the far side, here the three streets, there a bit of green and a few trees. But *something* was here, and yet today there was hardly any wind. She was in no hurry, if she was honest, though she found it hard to be honest, because hurry was the sign of an orderly life, and that, at least, she wanted to be permitted to keep. She went grocery shopping every day, what else was she supposed to do, though they never needed anything urgently (that was the case today, as well) and she mostly bought fruit – then at least it was fresh. She could stand here. She was allowed to stand here. Allowed to feel her shoulders not carrying anything and her hands not holding on to anyone. Allowed to look out over the square. Behind the trees and houses lay the wooded hills. She was allowed to remain immobile, at this moment when her body was immobile. Someone's there, she thought. Maybe that was a thought you had when you were never alone and then suddenly were. You sensed bodies, sensed pumping hearts, because they'd never been absent before. Like pain from an amputated limb. In her mid-thirties now, Parvaneh had become an expert on absences, and yet knew little about being alone. 'Don't be startled,' he said, and Parvaneh was horribly startled and then ashamed of herself as soon as she recognized him. She didn't know many people in the village. But the few she did know, she would see everywhere, on every shopping trip, every errand. Herr Völker was one she had to see every day; they lived on the upper floor of his house. 'It's alright,' he said, laying a hand on her arm. He was an old

man, and he smiled at her, eyes benevolent, moving slowly. He wasn't to blame and his hand on her arm was caring, kind, nothing insistent about it. All the same, Parvaneh endured his touch and found it improper. She smiled and nodded, which was all she had to contribute to most conversations. 'It's only me, eh,' he said. 'Are you well?' she asked, smiling, nodding. 'Oh, yes, thank you. Lots to do, as per usual,' he said, already walking away, hand in the air now, waving. He was old, thought Parvaneh, out without the dog, and he always had something to do. That's how they were, the people of this place, they always had some occupation. When they'd been brought here, when after all those months they'd finally been told they were getting an apartment and could move out of the dilapidated, dreadful hostel, they'd stood in front of the town hall and waited and watched people in the pedestrian precinct. Until finally the man from the council came and drove them to their new apartment in his car. He tried to joke with the children, introduced them to Herr Völker on the first floor, and on the upper floor he opened the doors and pointed to various things, as if otherwise they wouldn't have known where to look. Parvaneh followed him. So here was the house, with the old man downstairs and his wife and the garden outside for the dog and the upstairs where they would be living and here was the furniture, as many beds as there were people, and a table and chairs where people were to sit, every object had a function. Some pictures even stood against one wall, which they could hang, watercolors of the village's

fountains and churches which they didn't yet recognize; and next to the pictures were shelves that held the right number of glasses and plates, everything had been prepared for them. It was all for them. Nothing belongs to us, thought Parvaneh when she saw all this. She walked across the room and stood at the window, heard the woman downstairs clattering crockery, and looked out. The house stood on a hill, and even if it was only two stories, she could see a long way and the wooded hills stood on the horizon, protective. They protected the inhabitants of this place. They themselves were strangers, she dimly realized, but the protection was what it was, and would apply to them too. Until now their focus had been escape, survival, organizing and waiting. But now they were here and now they were strangers. The electricity masts in the distance seemed like new neighbors; they would become familiar to her more quickly than the people, she thought, and from downstairs rose the smell of the food Frau Völker was cooking for Herr Völker. Parvaneh saw someone pulling into the driveway of a house across the road, someone steering the car and trailer into the precise spot meant for them, backwards, with all the steadiness that required. The person getting out, disappearing into the house and returning with gloves soon after. Throwing back the tarpaulin covering the trailer, knowing exactly what he was doing. Unloading wooden boards of various sizes and carrying them round to the back of the house, one after another. A completely normal day, uninteresting weather, indifferent weekday, the lives

of people here simply taking their course, and in their houses, in front of their houses, behind their houses, they all knew exactly what they had to do.

‘I don’t think your wife likes it,’ said the man from the council, quiet, rueful.

Bahman looked over at her standing by the window, and she looked back.

She thought that these categories no longer applied. Whether you liked

something. She looked at the hills and the man with the boards and

wondered if she would ever be like him. Ever again have such a life. In

which you simply did things. Eyes fixed on him, she stood upright at the

window, a distance between her and the glass, between her and everything

in this room, and felt herself swaying slightly, but only slightly,

inconspicuously, like the spruces out there. She’d been able to do that, just

stand there. Knowing that meanwhile, Bahman would be showing gratitude.

Herr Völker was almost halfway across the square now, passing the men

who were unloading the vans and laying out electrical cables, no denying

now that something was going to take place on the strange square, and then

he turned back to her and called out with a smile, ‘Is it their first day today?

The little ones? At kindergarten?’ Parvaneh nodded. She hadn’t told him

that. She had told his wife. And his wife had reliably passed it on. He raised

his thumb and wrapped the fingers of his other hand around it and said,

‘They’ll be fine. Good luck!’ And as he walked on, greeting the workers and

calling something out to them, she watched him go. His small, slightly

stooping frame, his clean jacket, his rather erratic gait. An old man, a little

older than her father maybe, she thought. And sometimes it came like a sudden cloudburst in an unexpected storm. Parvaneh watched him go and took a deep breath, the tears already pouring out, here, in the open air on this corner, flowing from her worn-out eyes, too much liquid for the tear ducts to hurt as they usually did, and she watched him walk down the steps to Trierer Straße with a little spring in his stride, a man who'd been born and grown up here, he knew every step, and she stood here alone for the first time, unable to bear his helpless kindness. He was a kind old man, but not the old man she missed so much. She was standing here in this country, on this square, talking to the wrong old men instead of leading the life she'd planned, and she didn't know if it was her father she was crying for, or the planned life she wouldn't get to lead. She needed to distract herself and turned around towards the town center, bank, hair salon, pedestrian precinct, she should go there and get inside the supermarket quickly and not look at anyone and hope she didn't bump into someone she knew who would ask her what was up. They were always asking what was up here. Parvaneh turned around and faltered mid-turn, and this time she wasn't so much startled as caught in the act, and the tears came to an embarrassed halt. She'd just been thinking that no one had seen her crying, but of course someone had seen. Someone always saw. Someone was always following her, ever since she'd come here, following her every move. Even on the day they arrived and were waiting outside the town hall, the first time they'd

stood in the pedestrian precinct – the few stallholders had already laid out their wares, but not many people were around at that time of the morning – even then she'd noticed, and looked around, and there was the severe but kindly gaze. It was a gaze, even if it came from a church tower. This tower had a face. This church tower had a purpose as well, looming over everything, white with a pointed black roof, benevolent and stern. That was what unsettled her in this place, even when she didn't encounter anyone she had to speak to. Whatever she did, sooner or later her gaze always fell on the tower, and the tower's gaze fell back on her, and they looked each other in the eye and she saw that she was there.

Carols in the care home (1994)

Oh no, not like this. These were moments when Anni felt younger than the others, more vital, not yet so apathetic. The fact that they needed to have these people come and sing to them, alright, the idea was laudable, she could acknowledge that. But not like this! They had been maneuvered or wheeled into the dayroom, ‘accompanied’ they called it. Anni had knocked on Margot’s door and waited in the doorway until she’d got her belongings together, which she then just arranged on her table rather than bringing with her. Margot was excited, Anni thought, and that pleased her, because Margot deserved something to look forward to occasionally. It was also nice that she had left her frame behind and hooked her arm into Anni’s, and they promenaded into the dayroom together, where the air smelled of cinnamon and warm apple juice. The carers shuffled people from one table to another, arranging them so they would have a good view of the youngsters, and, as if they were trying to solve a puzzle, changed their minds and moved Heinrich from the right of the third row into the front, eye contact with the group leader, for whatever reason. They were behaving strangely, Anni thought, having felt the looks when she entered the room, though it wasn’t so unreasonable for Margot to leave the frame behind for the few steps to the dayroom. Much more practical for everyone, in fact, because then it wasn’t in the way, with all this rumpus. Though the rumpus had not yet arrived. As

she sat Margot in her chair and lowered herself down beside her with a groan, the carer appeared in front of her. Bending slightly, hands between her knees and speaking in a low voice, as if she'd been waiting some time for her, she asked if Anni wouldn't mind moving, would that be alright, maybe to the front row beside Heinrich. The carer said the people with heavy legs and mobility aids should sit further back and the more mobile ones at the front, and Anni was pleased by this, by being the mobile one here and anyway, she knew she was the only person in the room who could judge the quality of today's offering. The others might have their own children, grandchildren, but from what she had so far discovered, pedagogical experience was thin on the ground. Maybe that was another reason for her to sit at the front; the schooled eye must have an unrestricted view. From her new seat, she also had a better view through the window, outside which a rag-tag bunch of little people appeared. Moving across the glazed front of the building like a bundle of laundry with puppies inside. Uncoordinated and immortal. It couldn't possibly be them, they weren't even walking in twos, but clustering around the older girls, with whom they all had to chat at the same time, almost tripping over each other, half on the pavement, half in the road, and when they met the obligatory man with a dog coming the other way, they made space for him with such clumsiness that the dog began to bark anxiously and the man had to stop and wait. Those couldn't be the youngsters they'd been promised. And the front row

couldn't possibly be for the more vital residents; Johannes was now being seated next to her. Rita, the young carer, shuffled him along in front of her, and he seemed rather confused, as if he didn't know what was going on, but then that was true for many of them. It wasn't ideal to hold such an event after the afternoon nap, when most people weren't yet quite awake or were already hungry again. Sitting side by side, both pretended not to notice the other. And did so quite successfully. Anni sat between Johannes and Heinrich, all three pretending they were alone in the world.

What a charming front row, Rita thought with a hint of despair on seeing the stony faces – and only now did it occur to her that this was the view awaiting the children. But nothing more was to be done about the seating arrangements, there wasn't time, as the roaring and bellowing from the reception area informed her. Here they were, then. Girls between the ages of ten and sixteen, members of the Protestant youth group who met every week for communal singing, prayer, stories and games, and who had offered to sing to the old folks. Rita was certain the old folks would like it, of course they would, singing was what always coaxed the most emotion out of them. Youngsters coming into the home was always good, no matter who they were. Sometimes adult grandchildren would visit with newborns, sending not only the happy great-grandparents, but usually the whole wing into raptures. Rita had been pleased when the management accepted the youth group's offer, though a little surprised to be given responsibility for

organizing the event herself. And of course it just had to be a day when Parvaneh was on the late shift and wouldn't be there until the evening. Rita had tried convincing her to come in early – her two eldest daughters would be singing, after all – but as ever, Parvaneh stuck to the original plan. Rita sighed. She liked her colleague, but she was a little prim. No one could accuse Rita of that. And she probably wouldn't have felt any less annoyed by it if someone had explained to her that a person who has had to throw their big life plans overboard clings all the tighter to the small ones. Or that a person who often lies awake trying to stop thinking about her friends has to be even more diligent than her colleagues in catching up on sleep after a night shift. But this is no longer about Parvaneh, so back to Rita, who has had to take charge of this event. How hard could it be, Rita had thought, to get everyone into their seats, quieten them down, give the children something sweet afterwards, supervise as their parents came to pick them up. It was high time they had another performance like this – though a bit of a shame that the Protestant girls were the ones who'd got in touch. The old folk were almost all Catholic, but then carols were carols, weren't they? Rita wasn't entirely sure, not having had a religious upbringing, but she liked the fact that she was Catholic on paper, at least. It was good, inconspicuous, not controversial, even if she did only pretend to know the words to the Lord's Prayer. Now she resisted the temptation to swap Johannes for Margot, who didn't have her walker and seemed to be getting on with Anni today, but it

really was too late, so she took a deep breath and approached the two slightly older girls in the group. Apparently no one here was an actual adult. It hadn't occurred to her that the pack would arrive in anoraks and hats and mittens; there was no cloakroom, and when Rita suggested leaving their outdoor things on, the children all groaned. She had to admit, it was insanely hot in here. And so all the brightly colored clothes, smelling of the wild, were flung in a heap on the sofa by the front door, which wasn't an everyday sight here. And then they stomped into the dayroom, slushy brown snow falling from their shoes and leaving the pattern of their branded soles on the linoleum. They were all so confidently childish, even walking loudly; even the ones who weren't saying anything caused a commotion. They gathered in front of the silent old folk and waited, arms swinging, until the half-baked leader in the back row had tuned her guitar, pluck after pluck. They all made a huge effort to be silent, as if the power of silence might persuade the chilled guitar to cooperate. But then the single reverberating notes from the guitar were joined by the humming of long-rehearsed vocal cords, and Rita almost rolled her eyes. Anni was humming audibly along, as if that was some kind of help, though the leader clearly had a tuning device, no ear was required to determine the direction in which the pegs had to be turned, no one had to repeat notes to discover if the string had gone up or down, but there was Anni in the front row, playing the music teacher. Although it was unclear whether the guitar was now in tune, the spectacle

began anyway. It was lovely to hear the children's voices, bright and inviting; no one was shy about singing, either, trilling out how much they were looking forward to Christmas, how sure they were of their place in the world. They sang about the coming of the Lord, and had brought the necessary enthusiasm – at least, this was how Rita imagined it. At Christmas she, like most other people, could completely understand the whole faith business. These children could just as easily have stayed at home today and done meaningless things, and instead they – Rita counted, thirty-two of them plus the young leader – were here, bringing joy to others. Wasn't that the idea behind the festival of love? Sometimes when she locked the staffroom door, left the home and was greeted by the silent cold outside, a kind of loneliness crept into her, and she thought how bad that must be for the old folk, who as a rule had very few people left to care for them. These children gave Rita hope, standing there, putting all the abundant energy of their youth into singing for others. But not like this, thought Anni, who was peeved at having to watch these brats wailing from the front row. Here a wet pants leg; there a nose that had run and was now caked in dried snot. These children might well have combed their hair, but a long time ago, so it seemed, and must afterwards have crawled through a quagmire and worked down a mine – how else to explain the state they were in. How old were most of them, thirteen, fourteen? Attempts to beautify themselves had been made, Anni couldn't ignore that, but the attempts had failed, they didn't

count: dangling earrings, eyeliner, that sort of thing. Their appearance troubled Anni the least, however, or rather it didn't surprise her; she knew what young people looked like, she bought her own groceries, observed them closely as they sat around outside the supermarket. What horrified her far more was that no one here seemed to have the faintest idea about communal singing. Communal, meaning with one another. Meaning together. Here everyone was singing for themselves, lost in their own world. Arms flapped; some girls looked dreamily around the room as they rattled off the words. They had no idea that a communal song could also mean a communal aim! That the joy you shared was always strengthened by the others, too. They probably didn't know this because they were Protestant children, there could be no other explanation. Though what did Protestant even mean, the group included at least two Turkish girls, she could see that, sisters probably, and a Black child, where did all these foreigners come from, and what were they doing with the Protestants? And at the back of the group, every repetition of 'Hosanna in excelsis' caused one girl to give her neighbor a dramatic poke in the ribs where the emphasis fell. Anna, no doubt. There had always been humorless children who craved recognition, but no one here seemed to want to set her straight. The leader with the guitar didn't know her chords by heart; one of the girls was holding the songbook for her. The songbook drew Anni's attention for a moment: just wait till you're old, she thought, and see if you're still allowed that, and what else

will have changed by then. She had often recognized the typeface in her singing group, where the carer kept mistakenly handing out the sheets he was no longer allowed to hand out, according to orders from the highest level. As if you could simply forbid people their youth. The group leader's songbook looked dog-eared; astonishing that she couldn't even stay in time. The prodding child didn't stop what she was doing, and Anni closed her eyes in protest. Not like this. No one here deserved this. Not even Johannes next to her. He snorted, but he always did that, it wasn't to be taken as criticism. Anni's closed eyelids were heavy. The others' excitement, the children's chaos, it was all getting to her. When the carol died away with the final guitar chord and the others applauded, Anni decided to fall asleep and was annoyed at the images that came into her head. She was once more the girl she had been all those years ago, feeling light, fragile girl's bones to her left and right, the intimacy when they clustered together and shared ideas, the warmth behind the shielding hand. The closeness had been intense and was always bound up with an existential fear. Always a chance someone would be mean, out of nowhere. A chance they might not actually want Anni there and she'd be put back in her place on the periphery with a harsh insult. The old, familiar, unendurable pain. They could do that to her. Now Anni could smell it. She smelled the other girls' fine, soft hair – you were never so close to another person's hair as in your first friendships, not even when you were married. Girlhood smelled of hair and warmth from a

covertly giggling mouth. She hadn't seen children's eyes laughing for decades, nor had she missed them, hadn't thought about them, and certainly not from this perspective, which made no real sense: that of an adult, but seeing the others' eyes so close, the lids so delicate, the lashes with their subtle curl. She knew these lashes by heart and the song the Protestant children were now singing was 'Silent Night'. The warmth of the melody became a blanket wrapped around her. All is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child. The tears ran down her cheeks; Anni couldn't help it. *This* was why she had so loved her work, back then, it was the music that had moved and touched her and the children. A long time now since her body had responded like this. The children's voices were bright and clear. Ringing water, such a pure tone, so guileless, free from everything. And unrhythmical. Disharmonic. The high E string was still out of tune. The leader an insult to everyone who had previously taken on this kind of responsibility. Anni's anger had never left her; what an affront, this tactless racket, and a guitar was an instrument too – just because you took it on hikes and to campfires didn't mean it deserved less respect than other instruments – and Anni suddenly opened her eyes and at the same time opened her mouth and clapped her hands, she was the conductor and the startled children seemed to wake up and instantly adopted her tempo. The conductor replaced the guitar, her beat taking them to a new place, and the other old folk were neither startled nor surprised; it seemed only natural for

them to part their thin lips now and sing along. The conductor's waving arms were easy to see, even for those sitting behind her, looking at her back. In this room, this overheated, oxygen-depleted dayroom, which was always populated with people, but seldom with their voices, they felt a moment of unexpected community, as if little sparks were flying from one person to another. It was a special moment that they would all remember afterwards, though no one could find the words for it. The final notes vibrated, vocal cords that had finally warmed up concluded the song, and everyone let out their inner heat in an almost synchronized breath. A collective, astonished sigh filled the room, a collective murmur as everyone said something to their neighbor, but no more than a few words, then came a taut silence. As if now, something big had to happen.

The children should have been collected straight after the performance. But someone seemed to have grossly misjudged how long the event would last. This would never have happened in her day, thought Anni, but she was well used to these thoughts now. The girls had dispersed around the dayroom, at ease and not far from the moment of all-shattering weariness. They weren't waiting for their parents; poor time management seemed to be no inconvenience to them, and they behaved as uninvited guests do. Taking up too much space, being too loud, reaching too often for the plates of sweet things and being conspicuously rude. In their midst, Rita was doing her best.

Anni could hear her explaining for the fourth time that the chocolate marshmallows might just taste a little different because they were diabetic chocolate marshmallows, which they always had here, but however many times the explanation was given, it didn't lessen the number of chocolate marshmallows abandoned on tables with a single bite taken out of them.

Anni watched the two foreign girls, who were in fact sisters, aged 14 and 11. She had inquired about their ages, it wasn't an estimate. Had called them over and asked and then watched as, once they'd answered and waited for a moment, they went back to mingle with the other children. She had also wanted to ask where they were from. If they had moved into a house with a family called Völker a few years ago. At the time, Anni had wondered why anyone would take in asylum seekers, but she had to admit, it seemed to have worked out. Anni was about to call the children back when she drew a warning look from Rita, as if it was inappropriate to ask the girls questions. That was silly, everyone was asking the children questions. Almost everyone. Which was to say, those who were still fit enough, and in fact, without exception those were the people who were able to take an afternoon nap. The rest period after lunch was Anni's favorite time. Most residents were in their rooms, the sun shone tentatively through the curtains, and Anni could lie down and do nothing but wait for the church bells to ring. All her life she'd wanted to have more time for this kind of thing, though she knew of many others who'd finally been granted it in old age and then couldn't

use it. Margot, for instance, found it impossible to lie down in the day. The body had never learned how, and wasn't prepared to start now. Anni's ability to lie down and dream might be due to the fact that as an adult, she'd always had it slightly easier than others. Perhaps to counterbalance her childhood, which had been shaped first by illness and then by bullying. But she hadn't been made a war widow, or forced to wait for someone to return from captivity, hadn't had to care for parents or parents-in-law or rebuild a house. Anni's life had not been easy, the nightmares that dogged her sleep were a reminder of that, as were her back and legs and rattling lungs. But at least the life she led had permitted her a few moments to look out of the window. To run her fingers over the stones and pine cones the children brought her, build towers of them or lay out patterns while the potatoes cooked or the coffee dripped through or she was waiting for Reinhard to come up from the cellar, two beer bottles in one hand and a cigarette in the other, whistling as usual. Those pauses she'd been granted were of course in large part due to the goodhearted man she had married. Anni sighed. That's how it was; wherever her thoughts began, they all ended with him. And when they did, it always brought tears, at least two. Anni quickly wiped them away – no one was looking, in any case – and heard with surprise the two foreign children telling someone what they wanted for Christmas. They must actually be Christians, whatever next! Anni got up and sat in another chair, further from the swarming throng. She made sure she had sight of the reception area,

wanting to see who came to pick the children up. Johannes was sitting at the table, his own visitors having arrived in the middle of the official visit. This didn't happen often, and he didn't seem to be fully enjoying it. His answers were brief, he barely asked any questions, and his coffee remained untouched. And yet this visit was the kind of rarity everyone loved: a baby. 'This yuur grandchild, hm?' Anni asked. The young mother's eyes filled with hope on seeing Anni; she didn't seem on familiar terms with the surly old man. 'Well I ha'nt become a faather agin,' said Johannes, and the young parents laughed, which was good. Their laughter made a joke of his mood, though everyone at the table knew the maker of the joke had no desire for communication. And so Anni stepped in, talking to the newborn with aahs and ohs, earning a toothless smile and gaining all kinds of unsolicited insights into his life. Anni's only interest was in the innocent baby face, but the rest came with it, of course. The only thing that was too much was what the young mother said when a bottle of fizzy water smashed loudly on the floor and set off panicked wails from the baby. While Anni's heart raced and she had to regain her composure and calm her nerves, the young mother laughed and, gesturing to the little one's face, which was distorted with fear, said that although it broke her heart, every time the baby got a fright she just melted, it was too cute. Anni nodded politely and stood up. She bade them farewell, without worrying that anyone might think her rude. That was the free pass you got for being old. You were never rude, just old. She wanted to

get away from here, away from the Protestant and foreign girls, who seemed to grow ever louder the longer they were not collected. The shards were swept up by Rita, who was struggling to keep her cool. Finally, Anni saw the first father appear in the reception area. He came in with his young daughter and looked around. So now whole family clans were turning up here, thought Anni, walking up to him. ‘Your girls are in thuur,’ she said, before disappearing. He called his thanks after her, as if the comment had been helpful and not a signal to gather the children and leave. In her room, Anni lay down on her bed. There was nothing adorable about babies getting a fright, nothing at all. She could still hear the door of the bunker slamming shut, a sound that went right through her, making the baby in her arms scream, night after night after night. What a squalid, spoiled generation this was, to look at their babies like that. Anni and Reinhard had been caring parents, always tender, even though they knew babies had to cry to strengthen their lungs. Anni and Reinhard had never told anyone, but they let their firstborn sleep in their bed all the same. It was their secret, their right; neither of them could stand the crying. Their firstborn slept between them, his breathing fast and regular. Sometimes – though only later, when he’d grown a little and been blessed with his first skills – he laughed in his sleep. Not the smile you see in newborns, but a clear, chuckling laugh, suddenly, out of nowhere; he must have been having a pleasant dream. Then

she was startled awake, glad of this unexpected gift. Something she'd never have known if he'd slept alone in a cot like his siblings.

Anni got up and went to the window. From here she had an excellent view of the children scattering into cars and going home. Satisfied with themselves and tired from the adventure. It wasn't every day you sang for the old folk.

I am here, Lu (only briefly)

I'm holding back, Lu, telling you only how I've seen things, sometimes as the wind, sometimes in a memory. I wished I could see you. I know how the call reached you. How you made sense of my accident on your way to the hospital, reading everything you could find online. Imagining I was the woman people were talking about, and hoping all the way to the hospital that they would tell you different. Going home to your family afterwards. Having to be strong for your children, and then breaking down again as soon as they went to bed. I know that at my funeral, you wished you'd known this would happen from the beginning. But Lu, the reason I know all this is not because I was there. I wasn't permitted to see it. I wasn't sent there. I know all this simply because I know. It isn't bad, Lu, it's alright, that's just how things went: there was a lorry and I was on a bike, there was an avoidable collision and the road was closed for hours. That's how it was. Now listen, I know it's confusing and you don't want to remember these people, but I see them, observe them from every possible angle and get to know them better than they know themselves. The village is their stage, and we are the audience. The main character's name is Lore. No, there are no main characters here, that's plain enough, but someone thinks she's the main character and you and I, we watch her walk past because everyone does.

Come to me, Lu, trust me, I'll show her to you, we'll watch together. Lore won't hear us, but we, we hear everything.

Lore walks down the street (timeless)

We see you walking, Lore. Everyone sees you. The way you walk. You walk by and looks snag on you and, light-footed, you drag them behind you. It's what you want. You walk upright, Lore, that's the most important thing, no rounded shoulders; you achieved that by avoiding work, letting your older brothers do it, not wanting to look like your mother, like Grandma, like Godi, you wanted to look like a woman of the world, not a Hunsrück farm girl. On your right is the church, you pass by, they all love you, a child pleasing to the sight of God, you're a good girl when the dean is nearby, you sing beautifully, bright and clear and sure of the words. To your left the synagogue; you're indifferent. Queer fish, maybe, but no, not even that, you don't even think that; they're *the others* and although you don't forgive them for having killed the Lord Jesus, the cantor is nice and his son is handsome and almost directly opposite is Loeb the butcher's, their veal liver-sausage is devilishly good, and the fact that it's kosher is not important in your world. You open the door with a broad smile, your broadest smile, Lore, you know when to be girlish and when to be tomboyish, you know they'll fall for you like everyone does, you take the sausage, drop a curtsy and walk out, making the dark places light, altering the time of day and the season. You have everything in your hands, Lore, in your small, white hands, which were born to seize things ('Jeessus, a girl!'), your family isn't

quite poor, but better if you'd been born to work, to do a man's hard labor, with no breaks, no aspirations. What the bit of farmland brings in has to sustain you all, purchases are few, and when your family makes butter, they swap it for margarine and earn a little money. You walk with a spring in your step that makes your braids swing, which you think is pretty, and you only do things that seem pretty. You don't turn left down that street, vaguely picturing the other church tower, the smaller, uglier one; everything of theirs is ugly, you think, and if no one was throwing stones at the Protestant children, you'd make sure they did, you simply don't like them. You are at the market, here they haggle, here they trade livestock both large and small; the farmers and traders are so loud – but they're no longer here, and you? You're no longer a child, you're twelve years old, and you place your hands on your hips, walk slower, step lightly, your braids mustn't swing, how undignified if anything swung – you must set yourself apart from the cows who were just here flicking their tails. It doesn't occur to you that someone might make fun of your affectations, and if you were to go back to the church now, Lore, you would drop those affectations at once, you're twelve years old and you know what decency is, and if you were to go into Loeb the butcher's now, then it would only be to shop like a good housewife. This route is a detour; you want to pick up your cousin from the station, but also to be a lady, and being a lady requires an audience. True, you'll have an audience down at the station, but only briefly, hence the detour, hence

walking down here where cars stop at the road's edge to fill up with gasoline, that's ideal, they're forced to look, what else is there to do, past the hair salon, the baker, the department store, the upholsterer, people greeting you here and there, whether landlady or cobbler or cattle traders, they must all admire you in your dress, made by your mother and not made especially well, but you know you transform every scrap of fabric into something noble just by putting it on, by the way you move your arms as you walk, how you place your feet, it's a quality you've had from birth that others don't, which you know because they've told you this, every day of your life – and because the other girls copy you, every day of your life, and you know it because your sister envies you for it, every day of your life. Johanna doesn't copy you, at least no more than you copy her. You are the kind of friends who meet as crawling babies and from then on do everything at the same time: walking at the same time, writing at the same time, bleeding at the same time. At your side, Johanna knows you have what many others don't, she tells you because she's honest with you. She is honest with you, as you are with her. You are both twelve years old. The adults found you charming as children, when you came running up to them hand in hand, feet in the shoes your mothers bought you together at Lichter's department store, you pretty and lively, she pretty and clever, you unusually pretty, she unusually clever. You are both twelve years old. Walking down the street, you know every adult here and you need every adult here; your slow

movements, the way you move your arms as you walk, the effort would be for nothing if the adults didn't notice. From the corner of your eye you see exactly who is doing what, you know that the man from the other butcher's owns an inn as well now, and the man from the other inn is at odds with the old landlord. You walk past adults and tot up their stories, while they change the village; you see it all. Just as you see every boy – whether you like him or not is secondary, boys are boys and important for that reason. Johanna likes boys, too, but she doesn't talk about it. Maybe because there are so few clever things to say about them, and maybe because the solution to the problem doesn't lie in her hands, and in fact there is no real problem. Your friend is bored by these things. You are sixteen years old. You wonder if her being the clever one makes you the stupid one. Really, you hope that you being the beautiful one makes her the ugly one. Sometimes you think she isn't actually that clever anyway; someone just said it once and everyone repeated it, but if there has to be a division then please let it be this one. We see you walking, Lore, walking to school, you're a child again in the morning, in the dark, with your sister; you look after her and so you're allowed to tease her, telling her she was born in a cow shed and that's why she's so sickly, telling her your mother told you you're her favorite child, at least you're healthy. What you really love to tell her is that your older brother creeps over to her bed at night and puts spiders in her mouth, to speed up her recovery. You tell her things you later forget and she doesn't

believe anyway, but it doesn't change the fact that you talk and she listens and you decide what is truth and what's lies. Sometimes you fight with Johanna and then you'll play with your sister, but otherwise, Lore, otherwise you are one big annoyance. You'll grow older, more serious, and you'll stop teasing your sister like this. You'll stop because it stops being fun. Now, you would rather make sure she's doing what's right, tell her off because no one else does. And when she tries to take Johanna away from you, you'll be mad at them both, and neither will be able to stomach that. In the mornings, on the dark walk to school, you pass down the black street and we see your footsteps, recognize your walk, hear your shoes and your sister's, both of you walking and talking, and the village lies silent and unspeaking and the snow lies on your path, you kick it away with the toe of your shoe, past the church, always past the church, no matter where you're going, church on your right, synagogue on your left, Loeb the butcher's is still closed. In the morning these places are not yet places, but sleeping heads on soft pillows; you know who wakes up when, you're awake before any of them. But the church has an effect on you, even when it's asleep, you can sense the boom of the bells even when they're silent, sense the organ's anguished wooden howl, hear the dean's deep voice – you aren't really, fully hearing any of it, but your legs feel weak the way they do on Sundays when you hear it all, and so you walk along here with soft knees, which isn't good because of the snow, the two of you quicken your pace, hurry, you'll be late, your feet are

wet, it's cold in the classroom, the little ones get to sit at the front by the stove, sweating in the heat, while the big ones have to sit at the back where very little warmth reaches them, they shiver, the village school is still a tiny building, too small for you all and crooked, and you drag yourselves there and drag yourselves through this time, but Johanna waits outside the building for you every morning, smaller than you but with a seat at the back all the same, she comes from the other direction, lives by the station, where everything throbs, where it pulses and hammers and roars. She waits for you, despite the cold. You go in together; your little sister disappears, and Johanna strokes her hair as she passes as if she was her sister, a big sister, a better big sister. You walk down the street, you are a child, you're twelve, you're sixteen, getting older, you're thirty-one, a mother. A proud mother. Where trees used to line the street, houses are shooting up, displacing narcissi and blocking the children's sledging routes, spring arrives, then autumn, the wooden fence has become a stone wall, the uneven track a kind of pavement, and your feet conquer the ground whatever it's made of. The village belongs to you, you always know everyone, and however much changes, you're always you and eyes always follow you down the street, even when no one's there. It's dark, snow on the ground, you walk past the market, you're grown up now and the ground is covered in filth, covered in garbage, all the things they threw out and set alight, what's missing are the things they stole, by the sackful, here is debris, there are shards, mingled

with groceries, jam, preserves, clinging to the walls and the cobbles. You have no business being here, and you grow fearful, this is a desolate place, and no one has ever needed to explain to you that angry men are not a good sign, pick up your feet and walk faster, and if your daughter asks who did all this, then snap at her, what kind of a question is that and you haven't seen anyone, no one at all, and she'd better not ask anyone else, either. You run home, Lore, it's better that way. And then you don't walk down the street and are simply a mother. Simply an adult. Then, one day, your cousin comes to visit and you walk past the wall that was once a wooden fence. Down the street, the snow isn't proper snow anymore, grey, sandy, you slip and steady yourself on the cold stone, your cousin is coming and you hope she has brought dresses, more than one, you hope she'll let you wear one when you go out to the Posthof that evening, you picture the dress, wonder for a minute if the windows of Johanna's house are shuttered and then wonder if your cousin will stay, if she'll move here; she used to live in the Saarland, then moved to the Eifel, she's unhappy, wants to get away – but she could come here, a lot of houses are standing empty, you picture it and look towards the station, look ahead, only ever ahead, then check that your back is straight and your shoulders don't look like you spent your childhood using a pitchfork, and head for where she will come in, where she will come to you. For the next few days, the two of you will shine. She is rich, and you're still beautiful, and you'll both shine this evening. But there's a fly in

the ointment: your cousin is usually too tired to dance right through till morning. That's her only disadvantage.

When Stefan started a fire (1993)

Stefan's greatest fear was someone asking whose idea it had been, because the answer was: his. But strangely, no one was asking, including his mother. If afterwards, Stefan had had to say exactly what had been said at which point, he couldn't have given a proper summary. He and the boys didn't say much anyway, that was for sure. Nor did they look at each other; they always became different people when adults were around, and it made them uncomfortable. When adults were around and accusing them of something like this, however, they became not only different people, but different people who had committed a crime. Young offenders. They were ashamed. Firstly that they were being taken for young offenders, and then at having to look at each other in that situation. Normally, when you got caught doing something you weren't allowed to, and let's be honest, that happened pretty often, there was one person who would take the pressure off by making the whole thing ridiculous. One of them would start, and that was the signal to the others not to pile in as well. When one person was making jokes, balance was restored and the adults seemed almost relieved, it was a welcome distraction. But if they all made jokes, that was a problem. Then they were being cocky; then they looked like people from whom no admission of guilt was to be expected, and that was a risky basis for negotiation. But now, no one wanted to be the joker, and that was unnerving.

Stefan didn't want to start, either, and wasn't sure if that was because nothing occurred to him, or because this time the situation was serious. Was it serious? It wasn't serious. Nothing had actually happened. They were sitting in the headteacher's office, as usual when they'd committed some misdeed, but this time it wasn't just the four of them as usual. Their parents were there. The others' parents, anyway, two per boy. Stefan's father hadn't made it, though in any case he generally wasn't much help. His mother had the say in these matters. Rita looked as exhausted as she always did and at the same time as if she wanted to wring someone's neck, and it was hard to judge whether the tiredness from the nightshift would stop her. She hated having to come into school; Stefan understood the fury that was quite obviously at work within her, and if he hadn't been so afraid that in the end they would trace it all back to him, he might have sent her some signals. He'd have put on a stern face, agreeing with her that this was a god-awful bunch of people, the headteacher had blown this out of all proportion, they were all taking themselves too seriously and boys should just be allowed to be boys. The problem was that Stefan had now looked at his mother for far too long and when she gave him the briefest glance, that moment of eye contact between mother and son had such a force in it that Stefan flinched. Beside him, Kobi looked at Stefan kind of helplessly out of the corner of his eye, but then showed no further interest in him. Kobi stank. Not of anything specific, just the way you do stink sometimes. Of feet, of yesterday's t-shirt,

of penis. On the other hand, it couldn't be yesterday's shirt, or it would reek of smoke. Stefan was glad that Rita hadn't been home last night or she would have noticed the smell. From the look she just gave him, he couldn't assume that she'd mentally filed the whole business under 'boys will be boys'. Stefan's fear of how this would turn out sank ever deeper into his body, and was starting to feel like a gastro-intestinal illness; he'd been to the toilet this morning already, so what was going on in there? Shitting yourself. It occurred to him that this was where the expression came from. Were the others shitting themselves too? Last night, when they'd been caught, none of them seemed to be shitting themselves. Had he? The memory of the night certainly brought with it a very disquieting feeling now, if it hadn't earlier. But not before the fire, and Stefan didn't quite understand where it had come from. No one was hurt, after all. And the man had actually said it wasn't that bad. The other men had looked angry, but the man, the children's father, basically dismissed the whole thing. The igloo-tent being broken was the only thing that had really interested him. Maybe that's just what today was all about, too. Who was going to replace the igloo-tent; it had been brand new. The thought reassured him. Talking to adults about money was always a little weird; in their minds, money seemed to be somehow linked to other things he didn't understand, but at least then eventually there would be an end to it, i.e. when the money was paid and everything was forgotten. Now something in him relaxed again, and suddenly the thoughts he'd had

on the way in, that someone might go to jail, seemed excessive and hysterical. The idea of them all going to jail wasn't so bad. The bad thing was the idea that he would go alone. That in the end, everyone would think it had just been him. That the whole school, the whole town would be telling each other about the fire in the Grafenwald park and talking in horrified tones about Stefan Malburg. Because he was the biggest failure. He alone. The headteacher asked whether anyone would mind if she tilted the window open, and the adults agreed at once, as if they'd get extra points for being interested in oxygen. Adults were really just schoolboys. Schoolboys who earned money and sometimes had to sit in the headteacher's office feeling embarrassed because of actual schoolboys. When Kobi's father sat down, his pants slid up his legs and you could see his ankles and half his calves. The pants were too tight at the top, the fabric taut across his thighs, and Stefan's gaze was caught on the pale, hairy calves. That was where his eyes would stay, he'd decided, and anyway the sight really was fascinating. Would he get man-legs like that one day? Did all men have such hairy legs? Was it strange that he himself had such thin, fine leg hair? Would girls regard it as unmanly? Would he be better off sticking to long pants in summer? Stefan flinched once more. Everyone was looking at him. He went hot, guts churning again, his body was made of fear. 'What?' he asked hoarsely. 'Are you even listening?' said the headteacher. 'Oh my God, are you for real?' Rita burst out, much too loudly for this room. Now they were

all looking at his mother. Stefan had been over to his friends' houses plenty of times. Only Kobi lived in the town, Andi and the Pick came in by bus from surrounding villages. Stefan knew the other parents didn't speak to their children like this. They probably didn't speak to anyone like this. He had an inkling that today the role of joker, usually taken by one of them, was being played by his mother. He looked at her aghast, saying nothing, thinking he would rather someone had finally made a joke. When he gave no answer and the other parents had stopped looking from him to his mother and back, the headteacher must have started speaking again. Stefan spotted moles on Kobi's father's legs. 'So no one is going to press charges?' he asked now. Strange that you can have moles and also talk like that. Every word Kobi's father spoke was oddly drawn out; he must be an incomer. That was good. Good to have someone like that on your team. As long as he didn't get round to asking whose idea it had been. Ultimately, you could never be quite sure who was playing on which team. Stefan had forgotten to listen again. But there didn't seem to be any charges in the offing. Otherwise they wouldn't have moved on to talk about something else already. The mood in the room relaxed a little, it seemed to him, the adults letting their shoulders drop, and beside him, Kobi had started swinging his legs like a man possessed. Those were good signs. No charges meant no one was going to jail, Stefan was sure of that. Now came the part where first the headteacher spoke and then the parents suddenly joined in, and Stefan

realized the teams had been reshuffled once again. Everyone was now in complete agreement that he and his friends were close to becoming absolute failures, serious criminals. The minutes that followed were filled with remonstrations and big words. Each set of parents seemed desperate to say their piece in front of the other parents about how disappointed they were and how horrified and what might have happened. But as I've mentioned, in the end Stefan couldn't recall exactly what had been said. And which of them talked about things like 'danger to life and limb' and 'throwing away their future'. Which of them suddenly started talking about other fires and said you know, people had actually died as a result of childish pranks like this, they'd been Turks, hadn't they? And although the other parents nodded, they were clearly also battling a shame that seemed to annoy them at the same time. Stefan resolved to run to the bathroom as soon as this meeting was over. It was almost unbearable now. Words like 'responsibility' and 'your future depends on these things, too' were uttered, until the conversation finally turned to whether the boys might be underchallenged and in need of more structured activity, more physical exertion maybe. Stefan thought about the fires he'd heard of, the half-timbered house on TV. But those were things that happened in other places, places where the TV crews went. The adults thinking that something on such a scale could happen in this dead-end town surprised him. What next, were they going to start comparing the pitiful local soccer league with the Bundesliga? And just

when Stefan was sure the conversation would end without any consequences, once the adults had listened to each other for long enough, his mother, who had stayed quiet for a long time, spoke up. And unfortunately put a question to the boys. ‘What I’d still like to know,’ she said, looking at all the boys – boys who’d stayed overnight at her house at least three times, for whom she’d set up a bed and made the next day’s sandwiches – all the boys, not just her own, ‘is why did you do it?’ The unfortunate thing about this was that the four boys now had to look at one another, for the purposes of agreement, order of speaking, and strategy. Beside him, it was difficult for Kobi to catch his eye, but Andi and the Pick looked back and forth between him and Kobi. The incredibly unfortunate thing was that their eyes ultimately had to rest somewhere, and that place was Stefan, or a point behind Stefan. Because it had been his idea. Any idiot could see that now. ‘Dunno,’ said Stefan, ‘we just did it.’ His mother’s head looked like it was about to go up in flames; the contempt in her eyes wasn’t new, but its intensity was. A look like this was usually directed at Stefan’s older brother, less often at Stefan, and never at his little sister. That wasn’t good. The other parents, who seemed to have just settled on a consensual, vaguely conciliatory end to the whole thing, now found a fresh sense of moral outrage. Why was that, Stefan wondered. Did they think that, if their kids were going to do such a thing, they should at least be able to give good reasons for it? Anyway, now everyone was looking put out, and looking at

Stefan, and he couldn't believe his own mother had placed him in this situation. 'We just thought nothing would even happen,' he said, sounding (he thought) confidently innocent. 'You set fire to a tent where people were sleeping, and you thought nothing would happen?' his mother exclaimed. 'Yeah, because, nothing actually did happen!' Kobi finally put in. Good, loyal Kobi. Not leaving Stefan alone in this conflict. It would have been better if he'd sounded less like a kicked dog and more like a pragmatic realist. That could have been a good point, but why did he have to say it with such desperation? 'And the people in the tent being Turkish didn't have anything to do with it?' That was the hairy calves. They had turned towards Stefan and Kobi; it must have been Kobi's father who'd gone on about the dead Turks. Stefan looked up and saw everyone's eyes on him. The question was clearly directed at him. 'I think they were Albanian?' said Pick's mother, which was good, because now all the eyes turned questioningly towards the headteacher. But before she could open her mouth, Stefan's mother finally exploded. And very quickly, Stefan was able to let out the breath he'd been holding. The explosion wasn't directed at him. No one was really interested in it having been his idea. All the adults wanted to know now was whether the Turks, who might be Albanians or something else altogether, could have been the reason for setting the tent on fire. Stefan's mother was very sure it couldn't have been, and she wasn't about to let Kobi's father – who in her eyes, clearly, thought himself better than

everyone else because he watched too much news on TV – accuse her son of such a thing. That wasn't why she'd come here, that wasn't it. The other parents still seemed undecided on whether to back Kobi's father or Rita, but most importantly they were no longer interested in Stefan, and that was his mother's doing. She had betrayed him, true, but not for long, and now she was defending him like a lioness. 'There is no way my son's a neo-Nazi, that much should be clear to everyone!' she was shouting just as the bell went. The adults gave a collective start, no longer used to being put in their place every day by that sound. 'I really need the bathroom, can I go, please?' Stefan finally said. The headteacher didn't seem quite satisfied with the conclusion to this meeting, but she also knew that the bell triggered a universal impulse to pack up your things and get the hell out. And so the parents stood up too when she nodded to Stefan and he ran out of the room, not looking at his mother, not looking at anyone. He could still hear the headteacher, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the commotion that was now spilling out into the corridor, saying that there might need to be some clarification on the reimbursement for the tent, but she hadn't heard anything as yet and would be in touch if she did. Stefan ran to the bathroom and pushed in front of the three year 5s who were waiting their turn with such cringeworthy patience. They didn't complain; this wasn't their first time trying to go to the bathroom at school. Don't worry about it, you want to murmur to them, it isn't that bad. But when you have to watch Stefan

releasing all his troubles into the toilet, bidding farewell forever to all thoughts of the fire with a press of the flush, then you stop wanting that. You want to go back to the year 5s, to shake them and say: come on, fight back, don't let guys like this get away with it all the time, *do* something. But even if they could hear me, they wouldn't dare open their mouths.

[END OF SAMPLE]