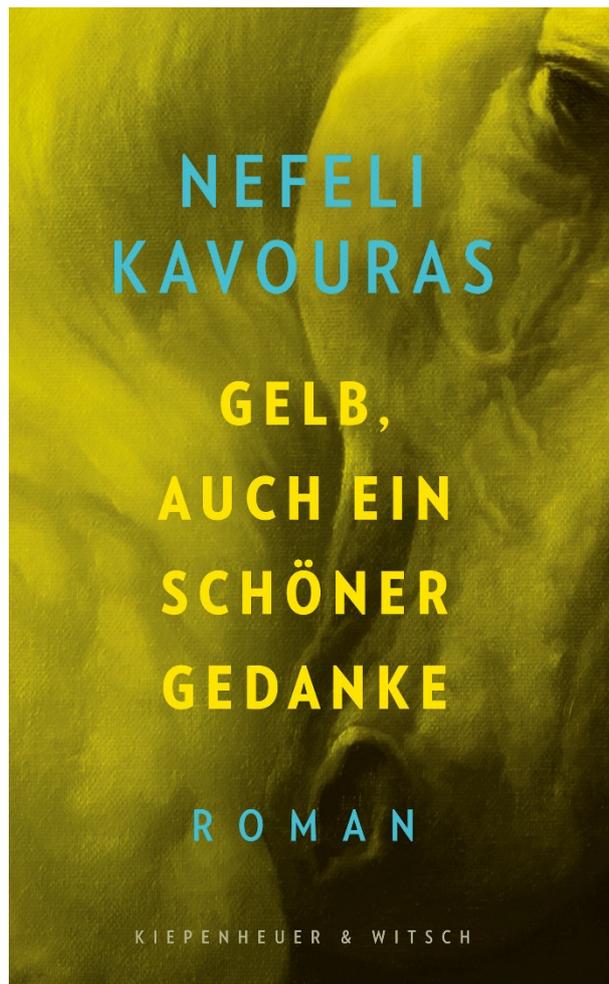


# CENTAUR

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### **Ruth doesn't find a map**

I nurse until I've finished nursing, and then I sit there next to my husband feeling bored, until something else needs doing and I can continue nursing.

I start reading aloud to him again. I haven't done that in ages, because it felt so laborious, and mostly he just fell asleep anyway. But now that he's no longer talking at all, now that communication of any kind has gone missing, I need to fill this empty space, for myself too. I read to him from the newspaper, and Georg stares into nothingness, I read the openings of novels, but they bore me, and Georg continues to stare into nothingness, so I stop reading. My mouth feels dry, and I wonder how Georg is feeling. There's no movement, and yet there are physical changes. I can't pinpoint exactly when he started to become less and less. But in this process of becoming less, so much happens.

His hair is growing more quickly; either that, or I'm noticing it more quickly. I shave his stubble daily, white foam, very gently. It reminds me of meringue, and no one's baking cakes for me. If it's your birthday, there's cake, but if your husband is slowly dying on you, there's nothing. And as I shave his upper lip, I remember something. That's strange too; nowadays the memories are sometimes as though Georg is already gone, but he's still there, lying right in front of me, breathing and smelling strange.

"Georg, I don't think I ever told you this, but you woke me up at night once, I think the medication wasn't agreeing with you, back when you used to hallucinate from time to time, but anyway, you woke me up

and said I should tell you the story, and I had no idea what you were talking about. Well, the story of the boy, of course!”

In the bowl of water, I remove the little hairs from the razor, then smear foam onto his face again. His beard looks different, softer and longer.

“And I still didn’t know what you were talking about, but you acted as though it were some world-famous story. A boy finds a map, you said. What happens next? you asked me. And you were wearing your red pyjamas, I still remember that. Anyway, what boy, what map? What are you talking about? But you just kept repeating the sentence over and over: a boy finds a map. And then, because I couldn’t help you, you turned over and went back to sleep.”

I’ve cut him on the cheek, so I dab the spot with a tissue. Georg doesn’t move.

“I felt bad that I couldn’t help you. And at the same time, I was relieved the next morning when you’d forgotten all about it. Or, at least, we didn’t talk about it again. But Georg, what story did you mean? Looking back, when I think about it now, it feels like a puzzle, and you can’t just leave a puzzle behind.”

I moisturise his face, this soft face.

“I mean, sometimes you drove me mad, all these stories you had to tell, and some of them were just nonsense. But maybe it’s time we tell this story, Georg. I mean, that *I* tell it, because obviously you can’t. Or can you? Hmm. So, a boy finds a map. I think you should be this boy. You’re little Georg with the knee-high socks you wore back then, and you find a map, and there’s treasure marked on this map. Otherwise it wouldn’t even interest you, right?”

I pause and think for a moment. It all feels foolish to me, but then, we have time for foolish things now. Luckily Lea isn't here, she would think I've completely lost my mind.

And then Georg coughs forcefully and spits. The spit lands on the blanket and his top. What am I even doing, telling a story, and for what? I continue nursing, wipe the spit away with a damp cloth. It'll be fine if I change the bedding tomorrow, I tell myself, then pick up his water beaker and try to give him something to drink, but he won't drink. I need to change his top, I'm too tired, but it has to be done. I pull off his top, his torso looks hairier and more gaunt than usual, and then I pull a light pullover onto him. He closes his eyes, dismissing me. I can go.

In the kitchen, I make myself a coffee and sit down. I can't get it out of my mind: a boy finds a map. Why now, years later? I find a piece of paper and a pen. I draw a treasure chest and a path, and I draw trees, I draw a map like for a child's birthday party. I draw them for a boy I have no access to.

I go back into the death room with the map and put it on Georg's nightstand. Maybe he'll find it tomorrow, maybe it will stir something in him. Maybe he even needs it for this path he's walking along now. After all, I can't do much more than accompany him. These are our final days together, our final hour, I can feel it. It's pulling us both beneath the ground, I can feel that too. I'm becoming aware of my own death, that at some point I will lay beside Georg again, and the earth will be damp, and Lea will stand by the graveside, for both of us. Life seems to be made of stages, and the next stage is beginning now.

### **Lea won't touch pink cannulas (anymore)**

“When do you think it will happen?” asks Max. I’m staring intently at my English homework. The vocabulary won’t fit in my head, nothing will.

“Hm?”

“Well, I mean, have the doctors said how long it’ll take?”

“For him to die?”

“Yeah. I mean it’s been going on a while already. That’s no way to be.”

“Hm.”

Max sits down next to me and points at my exercise book.

“You’ve made a mistake,” he says, “there’s supposed to be an *ou* there”. I correct my mistake. For some reason, I don’t like how Max is crowding me.

“Is there anything you’d like to do before he dies?” asks Max.

I slam my book shut. “Like what?”

“I don’t know, I just thought there might be something you’d been wanting to do but haven’t.”

“A cycling holiday in Tuscany would be cool.”

“Haha. No, I’m being serious. I feel like you’re in denial about him dying, Lea.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? He’s as good as dead already.”

“But he isn’t dead yet. I just don’t want you to regret not having taken the opportunity while it was there.”

Max’s mother knocks on the door and comes in briefly, asks whether we’re hungry yet, and I nod, not because I’m hungry, but so we can go down to dinner sooner.

“You know,” begins Max, “when my grandma was dying, I also thought that communication wasn’t possible anymore. But,” he takes my

hand, “there’s still physical touch, and I think that can reach the dying too. And you can always tell him things.”

I pull my hand away. It’s all too much for me. I don’t want to touch my father. His body is failing him, so why should I be nice to it? His body is shapeless and only half alive and strangely soft. His body stinks and makes noises, his body no longer properly belongs to him. I pull my hand away. “Yes,” I say, to bring the conversation to an end. “I’m going to carry on with my homework,” and then I turn away, open the book again and stare at the letters that won’t fit in my brain anyway.

Mum used to want me to sit by Dad’s bedside and read to him. I hated it. I sat there next to him, and Mum fed him, I read my school books to him, and then there were bits of spinach floating in his water glass and I felt disgusted and wanted to go back to my room.

When I was younger and Dad was in the hospital, I used to like touching the cannulas and all the objects that were attached to his body. I liked the blood pressure gauge, the tubes, the beeping of the machine. I remember telling the nurse that my Dad was a man and that the pink cannulas were for ladies, and everyone laughed. I liked the pink. And I wasn’t bothered that there was dried blood on it. When did this disgust begin? Nowadays I don’t want to see any of it. Die if you must, but in as sterile a way as possible, please.

It’s as though I can feel the dirt of dying in my own body, as though I can’t disassociate myself from it.

“Could I have a bath here?” I ask, and because Max is a really sweet person, even though he sometimes asks the wrong questions, he nods.

The water is too hot, my feet are burning, gently, gently I lower myself into the water, my skin’s burning, but somehow that feels good. Max

knocks on the door and asks whether I need anything. I answer with a “No” that I hope sounds friendly, but really I just want some peace and quiet. At long last there’s nothing, and I let myself sink in completely, heat, heat, and the water rushing in my ears. I feel like I’m arriving, but I have no idea where exactly. I close my eyes. When I was little, I always wanted to get in the bath when the atmosphere at home was bad. It wasn’t even that Mum and Dad argued a lot, but sometimes there was just this emptiness between them. I couldn’t bear it, and wanted to go straight into the water. And for some reason I always held Mum responsible for it. I can still remember wishing as a child that she would die. I mean, I didn’t really wish she was dead, but I sometimes had this longing to be alone with Dad. When he got sick, I thought that maybe it was my fault, for wishing so often that Mum would die in an accident or something. I thought it was my punishment.

I surface again and stare at the pink disposable razor on the edge of the tub. Is it Max’s mother’s? She looks so perfect, as though she never has to shave. Mum uses disposable razors too, but hers are all rusted. And then something comes over me, I grab the razor and shave my legs with it, without any foam, just in the bathwater. Now I too am a neat, orderly person who fits into this house. I climb out, pull out the plug, dry myself off. The hand towels here are soft, much softer than at our house. I need to moisturise my legs. Little red dots have already appeared on my skin. In the bathroom cabinet, I find a body lotion that looks expensive. My mother would never buy something like that. It smells a little like talc, but in a good way. I moisturise my legs with it. If Max were to notice, or even worse, his mother, I don’t know how I would explain it. How often am I allowed to use my dying father as an excuse? There are still some stubbly hairs on the base of the bath tub. My gaze fixes on them. Why do I keep thinking about my father? Why

does no one understand that I want him to be gone? If Mum weren't nursing him so manically, he would be long dead, and I would have a proper life. Is that really asking too much? Other people go on holiday, while my mum tries to teach me how to give my dad a thrombosis injection.

I dry my hair and my face. Everything carries on somehow. When I open the bathroom door, Max appears and puts his arm around me.

"You smell of pumpkin," I say, and he says: "Dinner's ready, come on."

### **Ruth thinks about raisins**

From one moment to the next, I lose all concept of time, and everything blurs. But I'm there, I'm always there. I haul the spare mattress up from the cellar and place it next to his bed. I'm now living in the death room with my husband. It's a long time since we've slept in the same room. When I'm not in the death room, I leave the door open. I convince myself he would call out to me before he dies. All I eat now are nuts and pretzel sticks. I look out of the window, see people cycling past, and I'm struck by all the things Georg is saying goodbye to. He'll never again walk in the park, sit in a restaurant, fold up a newspaper, reach for the remote control, refill a salt shaker, he'll never again cook his favourite meals or wish me a happy New Year. Never again will he spoon chickpeas out of a can or accidentally drop a glass. I always have this image of Georg in my mind, dropping a glass, the way it chinks on impact and how I don't care. And yet it's simple. You're alive until you're not anymore, and then life is just over. I'm already a widow, after all, as my husband lies here and his face slowly tinges with yellow. Dying doesn't smell anywhere near as dusty as I'd imagined. It has more of a sweet smell, a little like raisins. Georg didn't like raisins. There was a time when he would definitely have laughed at that, if I'd said to him: "Listen, Georg, your death will smell like raisins." Georg will never again laugh at the things I say. When I think about it, he was the only person who found me funny.

It's also easier now not to be irritated by him. I was always so irritated by his slowness. But now I respond to his body, his rhythms. I study the beauty of his slow death with fascination. His hands and feet turn cold and I warm them, wrapping Georg in blankets. Ever so gently I

moisturise his lips, there's such a strange smell coming from his mouth. I feel as though I'll never be disgusted by anything again. My husband, he's now allowed to be exactly who he is. And now, he's someone who is dying.

And how irrelevant everything becomes when you simply let someone die in peace. I no longer need to keep a grip on things. Sometimes I even go to bed without brushing my teeth. And how thrilling it is too, because every day he changes a little. It's like before, when I was captivated by watching Lea grow as she sat on my lap, my fingers in her tight grip. All of a sudden, I find blue flecks on Georg's palms. His organs are no longer functioning; they're gradually slowing down and soon they'll throw in the towel entirely. They've had him up and running his whole life long, so I have to be thankful for the little things. And for the big things too. He was a good man, a kind person. A person. When someone is dying, really dying, they're no longer a person. And yet I comb his hair regardless, so he can die with dignity. I change the nappy, the urine is brownish, I inspect everything closely. I used to nurse him with my eyes squinted almost shut. As though I wanted to keep my distance, and also because I thought he would be ashamed. But I was the one who was ashamed. Brown urine, it's crazy what nature can do. Lea suddenly appears in the doorway, staring, staring anxiously, and I can't help but send her away. She doesn't fit in here. We don't want her here, do we, Georg? This time should be ours, you understand that, don't you? I'm sleeping so well. If we sleep, we don't die. I'm sure of that. Every time I fall asleep, I'm looking forward to our reunion the next day. And then I'm shocked by how your cheekbones protrude even more. Georg, I can almost see your skull. And yet you were such a milksop, when you first spoke to me. Even though you were older than me, fourteen years

older, I saw you and thought, huh, a chubby-faced mummy's boy, but he'd be faithful to me for sure. And now you consist only of the paper-thin skin that covers your bones. As though the skin were wrapping paper for your body. I touch your face and feel sure I'm actually touching your bones. We've never been this intimate. If I could, I would let you touch my bones too. When did we last say we loved one another? I can't remember, but I want you to know you could touch all my bones and take care of them – that's my way of telling you I love you. We did pretty good, didn't we?

**When no one was looking, Georg woke up.**

**And so Georg spoke:**

I'm here, I'm still here.

Nothing has been bright for a long time.

The world is tired of carrying me.

And – every time I open my eyes, I'm less of a person.

I'm not hollow, I'm less, but I'm  
still here.

Yellow is also a nice thought.

Every touch remains.

I understand that as my time ticks away.

My nails grow.

And I think of shades of green.

I think: a camel, it becomes a lion, it becomes a  
child.

I notice: a pulling, a pushing, but never the  
letting go.

Let me go  
but  
stay a little while longer

### **Lea would rather call child services than her mother**

“She’s unbearable right now, Max. She locks herself in the death room, she doesn’t talk to me. Yeah, of course I try to talk to her. But she’s into all this spiritual nonsense. Dad’s wasting away and she sits there next to him like some kind of silent buddha. I swear, if she starts burning incense, I’m moving out. She doesn’t notice whether I’m here or not anyway. I could easily call child services, the way she’s neglecting me. Anyway, can I come over for dinner again this evening? I can bring something from the supermarket. Yeah? Oh, I have to hang up, the witch is coming out of the death room, perhaps she might even be approachable today.”

Other fathers die within a few weeks or months.

Other mothers care for their daughters.

By now I know every pasta ready-meal at the supermarket, and I’m tired, so tired.

### **Ruth sings softly falls the snow**

Georg breathes in, I breathe out. It's our last dance together, and eventually Georg will leave the room and I will stay, but I'll stay in dignity. That's what survival is all about, isn't it, Georg? I don't have anything against death anymore. I'm not a person who embraces things, but yours, this particular death, this I embrace. It's your last mission, and your body is slogging away, slogging its way towards death, with every breath a little more, like a ladder you're climbing, you pull yourself up, your body so gaunt. I leave the light off, because I imagine death to be like going into darkness. Of the two of us, you were always the one who turned off the light before we went to sleep, do you remember? And now you have to do it again, but I'm here, I'm always here, my hand on yours, you've curled it into a fist, I can barely let go of your fingers, as though your hands were transforming into fists. And quite right too, ready for the final battle, strike death in the face, that's what it's about, isn't it, Georg? Sometimes I rest my head on your chest and feel the rise and fall and hear the inner workings of your body, and you never hug me, you can never hold my head, even though I so wish you could. You have this fluff all over you, as though death were inside you and emerging through the roots of your hair, like a flower, a brown fuzz blooming from everywhere. Soft, like you always were. I never allowed us softness, and I promise to do better. Every time I wake up, you're more and more like a stranger, nothing surprises me anymore. Your entire head is becoming pointed and narrow, carried by your long neck. And your nose is suddenly the centre of your face. Then I wake up and your eyes are large. It reminds me of Red Riding Hood, and I hate fairytales, but Grandmother, what big eyes you have! It's unlikely to be so you can see me better. Perhaps so you can look death in the eyes. Ha,

you would have laughed at that before. And I wake up, and you're lying on your belly, your back arched, your hair long, I touch the back of your neck. And the hair there is long too, and I don't know why, but I don't dare touch your top, because I suspect the hair under it might be long too.

My scalp is starting to itch. Georg, now my body is transforming amid this dying process too. I scratch, scratch until my scalp is raw and, softly falls the snow, silent and frozen lies the snow. Everywhere this white dandruff, on your pillow, on my blouse. Georg, why are funeral clothes always black, I can't wear black if I've got dandruff, what would people think. But this scratching sensation, this I like. When I scratch off the scabs and they get stuck beneath my nails, I feel like I'm close to you.

The snow is falling outside too. Lea knocks, but I don't let her in, I call out "not now", and that's also what your body seems to be telling me: "Not now, Ruth." No dying yet. I'm slowly losing my patience, perhaps because of the itching, or the fact that I can't roll you over onto your back anymore, you resist every movement, you twitch, you do it in such an alive way, and I pull off your trousers, a tuft of hair is forming over your bottom, another death plant sprouting out of you, and I know I could question all of this, but I accept it, and at night I dream of a forest, a thousand animal eyes staring at me, all of them wanting to be fed. They don't want to eat me, they're not threatening, but I know I'm the one who has to look after them, and I can't. I don't have the capacity, there are too many animals, and then I wake up, and Georg's big eyes are staring at me, his body seems gigantic, is the bed still big enough? Sometimes people say the body expands in the final hours, how many hours are there still to go, what will be the culmination of all this?

## **Lea stops staring at the ceiling**

Anna calls, I reject the call. Anna calls, I let it ring until finally the room falls silent. I look at the ceiling, the ceiling is white. My phone pings, Anna writes: “Heeeellooo, answer your phone, Lea!”, I lie in my bed, I don’t want to see anyone, I want to wait until it’s nighttime and I can carry on sleeping. I don’t want to participate in life, but the ceiling is so white, maybe one day I’ll paint it dark blue, that would be good somehow, to lay in bed all day long and stare at a dark blue ceiling, that’s the only way I can imagine my future. I see myself lying in this room my whole life long and staring at a ceiling that sometimes changes colour. Although, painting is such hard work, I’d have to drive to the DIY store, and I’d have to fetch a ladder from the cellar, and where am I supposed to find the energy for that when I don’t even have the energy to leave this wretched bed? And my phone pings and I pick it up and Anna writes “Sweetie, please let me be there for you” and then she calls again, and I don’t want to, I really don’t want to, but I pick up.

Anna has always been there. We’ve only known each other since we started school, but my life doesn’t exist without Anna by my side. Her mother is a single mum, and it kind of feels like my mum is too, and we talked about how overstretched our mothers are, but more than anything Anna has always made me laugh. I still remember the time when we were eleven years old and Anna’s mother wasn’t home. Anna said she’d bought a razor in the drugstore, I didn’t even realise we were allowed to buy them at our age. For some reason I’d assumed we had to be fourteen or something. And Anna said: “Today we’re shaving our legs”, and I didn’t really know what to make of it, because I’d never thought about hair growth. But Anna, who was Spanish, had. She talked about the dark hair on her arms and legs as we both pulled off our jeans. Then we stood

in the bath tub in our shirts and underpants. We sat down on the edge of the tub, and the edge of the tub was cold, I remember that. The razor was light blue, and looked like a toy. I couldn't imagine there being a sharp blade inside such a harmless-looking thing. Anna squeezed shaving foam onto her palm, and then into mine, and I copied everything she did. I rubbed the pink foam onto my legs, and the gunk got stuck between my fingers in a gross way. Anna was the first to start shaving, I watched as she drew paths with the pale blue razor, making the foam disappear, and that astonished me. Then she passed me the razor. We didn't rinse it out even once, that didn't occur to us back then, which is actually really disgusting. I felt a twinge of pain as I shaved my legs, I felt like I was shaving away something childlike, and that made me feel uneasy. I shaved until the foam had disappeared, then I passed the razor back to Anna, and Anna said: "Okay, this might be a bit weird, but my toe hair bothers me even more than my leg hair."

"Your what?"

"Look, there's a full-on tuft right there on my big toe. It's embarrassing."

"Wow, I don't have that."

"Well, you're German."

"Hm."

I sensed that Anna felt embarrassed shaving her toes in front of me, but also that she needed me. The shaving made our friendship closer.

The doorbell rings. Anna comes up and hugs me, and for some reason I don't like the hug right now. In the background I can hear Anna's friends, they're older, they're laughing, one of them can even drive a car. "Come on," she says, taking my hand and pulling me towards the black

car. I don't know where Anna knows these boys from, though really they're practically men, at least eighteen years old. I don't let go of Anna's hand, but she seems so far away, much more grown-up than usual. I can't even say why that is, maybe it's her perfectly-applied eyeliner or her nonchalance. She's so beautiful and relaxed that I can't imagine this woman shaving her toes. Inside the car, there's music playing, it's loud and jarring, and I'm not sure whether I like it. "Is this the band we're going to see?" I ask Anna in a whisper.

"Yeah. Really cool, huh?"

I nod, because what else can I do. We arrive. People are standing in front of the club, smoking. We climb out.

Have I been here before, one of the guys asks me with a warm smile, and I slowly start to relax and shake my head.

We open the red steel door, we stand in the dim light, I feel the urge to take Anna's hand again but don't dare. Anna's friends go straight to the bar, they bring us beer, the beer is chilled. I'm glad to have something to hold, and gradually peel off the label as the room fills with people. We stand crowded together, I can smell Anna and that calms me, I look up and stare in amazement: the ceiling here is dark blue.

Then it starts.

Guitars and drums and I feel as though I should be something or move my body somehow, but I still feel alien here. The people around me bob up and down, everything gets louder. My heart pounds, do I want to leave? Drums, drums, then the voice starts and – it's croaky, but somehow it speaks to me.

Anna puts her arm around me. "Close your eyes", she whispers, and I obey, because I always do everything Anna tells me to. As though she were putting a razor in my hand here too, and then I let go.

I move and wonder whether I look ridiculous, I open one eye halfway, but everyone is moving weirdly and freely and I take a deep breath, close my eyes, everything dissolves.

I'm not alone after all. The thought suddenly comes into my mind as I feel Anna's arm around me.

How arrogant of me to ever have thought I was alone in this world.

And everything crumbles away, the frustration, the rage, the sadness.

My father is dying, but I'm not alone. The voice is loud and I want to roar along with it, roar something, and I hop up and down.

I didn't realise it was still possible to feel this alive. Nor how incredible it is that I'm living my youth right now.

Anna accompanies me to the door, then hugs me tightly. She smells kind of sweet and slightly of sweat. I don't want to let her go. "Promise me you'll never ignore my calls again, you silly cow?"

I nod. She kisses me on the cheek.

"I'll call you!" she says as she gets into the car.

### **Ruth hears a breaktime bell**

And then I touch his top after all, and try to pull it off him, but I can't get it over his head. Georg convulses and I feel the hairs along his spine, long hairs, it makes me shudder, and just above his bottom I feel a proper tuft of hair.

It's becoming too much for me, was it always this warm in here, I scratch my scalp. Is it still the dying, or are we perhaps both already dead, Georg? And Georg turns his face towards me, and I can still see his features, my Georg is still in there somewhere, I raise the beaker to his mouth, don't dehydrate, my darling, and his lips are soft, but hairy too, his teeth huge and yellow. And then a sound comes from his mouth, an almost musical one, I could sing along, an idyllic holiday on a farm, that's what the sound reminds me of. It's time now, Georg. Die, at long last.

Enough. I need a break.

I leave the death room, close the door behind me, turn the key – could someone get in? Could he get out? – go into the bathroom, open the window, hold my head out, breathe breathe breathe. My lips turn cold, it's winter now, I've forgotten how time passes. Before long it will be Christmas, and I scratch my head and the dandruff trickles down, and I get into the shower, I shower with hot water, wash my hair again and again to get all the dandruff off me, and then I stand in front of the mirror, I'm old, ugly and wrinkled, and now seemingly full of dandruff too, but I apply lipstick, eyeliner, tie my hair up into a ponytail, put on proper clothes – not just Georg's old jogging bottoms that I've been wearing these past few days for the sake of comfort – and then I knock on Lea's door, open it, she looks at me in shock as though I'm a ghost,

and I say: “Come on, let’s go to the supermarket.” My gut tells me I should go back into the death room, something is pulling me there, but I resist it. It’s no longer my husband in there dying. It’s someone else. Someone I don’t even know. Wouldn’t it make more sense if I knew everything about him at the end of his life? It’s strange, he’s dying, becoming a stranger to me, and at the same time there are many things he’ll never find out about me. And if he isn’t the person who knows me best, then who is?

I need normality, I need control, I have to pause this dying, and maybe then it will happen without me, but I just can’t anymore. Lea comes out of her room, and we’re like strangers with one another. I want to hold out my hand and introduce myself: “Yes, hello, I’m your mother, yes, still, in spite of everything, haven’t you gotten tall, what shall we have for Christmas dinner, that’s soon, isn’t it?”

### **Lea wants a fight (and doesn't get one)**

“What, so you're vegetarian now?, Mum asks me, banging the shopping trolley into some woman. I roll my eyes.

“For a month now.”

“But why?”

“I just prefer it.”

“So, no beef roulades for Christmas?”

She stands there awkwardly in front of the ready-made dumplings. She looks awkward in general. After all, until a moment ago she was in a different world. Why is she even here? What's happening to our dying man while we're here shopping as though we're a normal family? The good goat's cheese is on offer, and I wonder whether maybe my father is already dead but Mum doesn't dare tell me. I feel astonishingly little at this thought, the goat's cheese with the blue logo looks good. I reach for the packet.

“So what now?” she asks.

“You can eat whatever you want. I'm not trying to convert anyone.”

“How good-natured of you.”

We walk on and stand in front of the chilled cabinet with the ready meals. It's from here that I made my way through all the varieties of tortellini when Mum didn't emerge from the death room. I could tell her that the ones with pumpkin and red onion are really delicious, but how would that kind of exchange help us?

“But you eat eggs, right?”

“Yes, mum.”

“So what shall we buy for Christmas?”

“You don’t need to cook anything for me, I’m having Christmas dinner with Max and his family.”

Another shopping cart bangs into her as she stands there staring at me like I’m a traffic light. I feel rage rising inside me, the urge to cry in the supermarket like a kid. My mum doesn’t even know I’m a vegetarian and she’s surprised that my life is continuing.

“That’s ridiculous, Lea.”

“Why?”

“You can’t just impose yourself on people like that.”

“What you mean by “people”? He’s my boyfriend, and his family invited me.”

“And I’m supposed to spend Christmas alone, am I?”

“You can just carry on rotting in the death room with Dad,” I say quietly.

She shakes her head curtly and walks over to the meat counter.

“250 grams of beef roulade, please,” she says to the saleswoman. There we stand, at the meat counter between the rump steak and the shashlik skewers, and we have nothing to say to one another, we can’t even argue anymore. There’s a family next to us, and the little boy gets given a slice of Bavarian sausage. The parents are discussing the size of their Christmas roast. That could be us, in another world.

“So you’re properly together, you and Max?”

“What does properly mean? Can you be un-properly together?”

“Well. Yes. So what does a vegetarian eat at Christmas?”

I’m not in the mood for the conversation. I can’t even get properly annoyed. I’m just tired. The family next to us has reached an agreement, and are given their order. Mum takes her roulades. “I also need sour gherkins,” she says, more to herself than me. Then she pushes the shopping trolley away. She’s gotten old, I can see it in the way she

walks. And if things carry on like this, she'll start to become muddled too. Who will look after her when the time comes? I don't even know how it works, the caring thing. I can only just manage not to be completely exhausted from doing my homework. Mum turns down the aisle with the canned goods. I follow her.

“Do you need anything?” she asks, not looking at me even once.

There's so much I need, but where would I start, and am I even allowed to need anything in exceptional circumstances like these? But we're always in exceptional circumstances, it never stops. Soon I'll be grown up, and my entire youth will have been accompanied by my father's dying. Was the light in the supermarket always this garish? I can see a few flakes of dandruff on the collar of Mum's jacket, and I want to brush them away, but I don't dare. We're not that close anymore. Sometimes I think we're all different animals. My mum is a raven: sombre, mean and agile, my father is a tortoise creeping slowly towards death, and I'm a chameleon, always adapting to the situation, and always we are alone, never together, never a family. We can't help it; we can't do anything but be lonely next to one another. And yet we were a family once, a proper one. We went to the supermarket together and were full of life, and Dad could stand in front of the selection of tinned tomatoes for an eternity and I got a slice of sausage and Mum was still interested in the new cheese offers. And we celebrated Christmas together, Mum used to wrap up my presents, but she hasn't managed that in years. Sometimes the tag is still stuck to the oh-so-useful-things she gives me.

I swallow.

I'm getting angry again, but where to put all the anger?

And I think about the presents that I've always wrapped for her, and how I still got presents for Dad too, once, out of helplessness, a silk blue cloth that we used as a bib so he could look like an adult for a little

longer. Where did that cloth even get to? I haven't seen it in ages, everything has become so meaningless. The way Mum hypocritically wants to celebrate Christmas in spite of everything, without filling it with anything real. The way she's standing there in front of the gherkin jars, she looks lost and unreachable.

### **Ruth and the tiredness (yet again)**

The drive home is the longest of my life. Lea plays around with the radio, but I just want silence. She wants to provoke me, it's her age. We just have to get through it, or rather, she has to. Everything bounces off me. Nothing bothers me anymore, I just want to go home, take off my things and go to sleep. No one asks me whether I need a holiday. Nobody cooks for me. Nobody calls, not even my daughter wants to spend Christmas with me. We turn off into our street. How many times have I driven this route? From the supermarket back home? I don't even know the city centre anymore. When did I last go to a café, a restaurant, when did I last participate in life? My fate is that of someone who's accompanying the dying process. We arrive home, Leah rushes inside. She's so alive. She doesn't even realise how much energy she has. And what a difference it makes. I'm too tired to be a mother or a wife. I told Georg from the start that I wasn't cut out for it. And he gave me security and a kiss on the left cheek, he said he wasn't like the other fathers, that he would always be there. And if I wasn't a mother and a wife, what would I be?

I get out, the shopping bags are heavy. As I step inside the house, I hear music coming from Lea's room. The trek into the kitchen exhausts me. I put everything away in the fridge. Even the things that don't belong in there. But there's space. And there'll be time to organise things later. I should look in on Georg, but I don't look in on Georg. I don't take off my shoes or coat either. I lie down on the sofa just as I am, and then I count myself to sleep.

## **Lea wants to be far away and warm**

I hate the fact that the year is almost over and my father is still alive. My resolution for next year? To become a half-orphan, and to convince Max to do an exchange programme with me. In Mexico or something. Far away and warm.

I'm sitting at the dining table with Max's family, and everyone's laughing at a joke. I've drunk red wine, I hate red wine, I mean, who actually enjoys it? Max's mother serves home-made focaccia and artichokes from the oven. I've only ever had them from a jar, and had no idea that they're so huge and that they taste nutty. Everything looks like it's out of a cookbook, there are even serviettes made from actual fabric. It's unfair somehow, how they're sitting here and having a good life. It's even more unfair that they're so nice and invite me over for dinner and that Max's mother always asks after my mother. It would never even occur to my mother to ask after Max's mother. Maybe because my mother has other things on her mind. Max asks whether I'd like seconds, and I feel like saying: "Are you dumb, I still have Fuck-accia on my plate, but I shake my head, I don't fit in here, he takes my hand, but I pull it away.

Another sip of red heaviness in my mouth.

What do I actually want, where do I actually want to be, is it really here?

God, that's how men sound when they're having a midlife crisis.

Max's father makes yet another joke. Is he having a midlife crisis? For some reason I find myself wishing that Max's father was having an affair, and that it would come out, so that things here would finally be a mess. In a few days it will be Christmas, and I'll be sitting here again. It's unbearable.

I say goodbye very politely, thank them for the delicious food, promise to pass on their best wishes to my mother, yes, of course we'll both come for dinner sometime, it's just difficult in the – and I like to emphasise this – *present situation*. Grown-ups always nod so understandingly if you mention the *present situation*. They don't ask questions, because they don't really want to know, they just nod, nod dutifully, everyone is so dutiful, and Max kisses me on the forehead. I can feel the red wine warmth on my way home, headphones in, volume up.

At home, Mama is still lying on the sofa, she hasn't even taken off her shoes. If Max's family were to see that. We used to be like other families. And now we're a half-corpse in a death room and a half-corpse on the sofa, plus a daughter. As I walk past the death room, I hear my father coughing. When will I finally have some peace from the dying? This entire house is dying and if I don't watch out, I'll become a half-corpse too, on the brink of seventeen and already emotionally ready for the coffin, isn't my big freedom supposed to be about to begin?

The coughing gets louder. I turn off the music – and freeze. That's not coughing. Am I really that drunk? I go to the kitchen, get a large glass of water, chug it down. Hopefully I'll sober up quickly, hopefully I won't hear these noises anymore. I shorten brushing my teeth to a maximum thirty seconds, wanting to get to bed. If the dentist asks whether I've been brushing properly, I'll simply say that my father is dying. Once I'm finally in bed, I hear sounds from downstairs, and I feel uneasy. Is it my responsibility to go down and check on him? But I don't want to. I don't want to be responsible. My gaze falls on Max's sketches. I count the zigzags of the paper until I feel sleepy.

### **All Ruth wants is to sleep a little**

When I wake up in the morning, I find myself staring into Lea's anxious face. Like before, when she was little and didn't want to go down into the cellar with me. When she's like that, my child again, I want to hug her. Come here, my love, do you still smell like you did back then, when you would sit on my lap and I would sniff your hair? But Lea doesn't want to be close, she doesn't want to be close. Lea is saying something about a noise, Lea says not to think she's crazy, because it doesn't sound like coughing. So what does it sound like? I ask, and she looks at me as though she doesn't want to say.

“Mum, why did you lock the door?” Just because, Lea, just because. “Mum, please can I go into the room, this is all a bit strange.” She never wants to look after her father, and now all of a sudden she's showing an interest, and I'm too tired, I'm letting everything wash over me, even the vegetarianism thing, everything's fine with me, I reach into my trouser pocket for the key, I just need a bit of sleep, and she takes the key and goes.

Then she comes back again.

“Mum. What's happened to Dad?”

That's just what dying looks like, my love, let me sleep, your father needs sleep too.

“Mum. There's a horse in the room.”

No, no, the body just does strange things when you're dying, it's very normal and human, we don't have a horse here.

And from the death room comes the very audible sound of neighing.

[END OF SAMPLE]