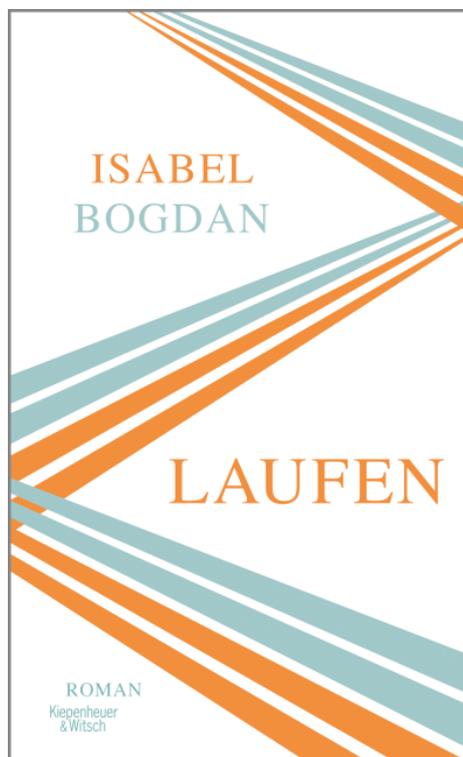


Running

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Literary Fiction

220 pages

Publication date: September 2019

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I can't go on. That's nonsense, of course, I've only just set off, but at the lights I'm already thinking I can't go on and it's been barely a hundred meters. My legs feel like sandbags, have I really ever run further than this? It's been a while. Maybe I'll find a reason, why I can't run, why I have to turn back right now, even though today's the best day to start running again, and running's definitely good, except that I can't go on, maybe this is not the best day, but the worst. Is that rain? Just putting on my kit was hard enough, it's unbelievable what an effort it can be, looking out your stuff again, deciding what's right for this temperature, which bottoms, the thick or the thin, are they warm enough, is a long sleeved top under the short-sleeved one alright or should I put a jacket over them, yet more effort, and then actually to get going once you're all kitted out, why the hell was it so hard, I'm managing to get to work, after all, that's not nearly so tough as it was at first, in fact it keeps me on my feet, and I've managed to get running again, green light now, I don't turn back, I carry on running, it isn't raining but my foot clicks with every step and no, that's no reason to turn back either, I pull myself together and carry on running. Rike's right, she said I should get running again, Rike's always right, of course I can still do it, I mustn't talk such rubbish. It used to take fifteen to twenty minutes for me to stop wondering if I could go on or not, or how far I could go, or for how long today, right up until my legs no longer felt like concrete and I'd stopped wishing I hadn't ever started running again, today of all days, and instead got the feeling that I could run for quite a bit now, and feel good about it. Whether it's still going to be like that, no idea, how long is it since I went running? Six years, maybe eight, ages in any case, I really don't know why I stopped, I was pretty fit after all and really quite enjoyed it, but that was way back, my shoulder blade's hurting now. At some point I'll get back that feeling of running without thinking, as if

everything's working of its own accord, when the rhythm's been set and my body's become a machine, well, my body's all things but not a machine, it doesn't run that smoothly, and whether I'll be able to carry on for so long that it gets better, I'll have to see about that. I need to get half an hour under my belt for starters, half an hour at least, it used to be a good hour, ten kilometres, but I hadn't hit forty then, I won't manage that now, not straight off, but half an hour should do it, I can't be that unfit, or twenty minutes at least, that's nothing. If I could just get this concrete out of my feet, and if I could breathe more easily, maybe I've got some allergy or other, my lungs are screaming, but I've never had hay fever or anything, maybe there's something in the air today, maybe I do have to turn back, I can't go on.

Okay, I can do a bit more, just a bit, at least as far as that streetlight, then along the roadside grass verge to Hammer Park, once round the park and then back down the verge to home. Home. If desperate walk it, like now, stop talking crap, I've only just set off, I'll have to run more slowly, but it's a run.

Running's great, so beautifully dull, there's no need to think, I can't think of anything but the running and my body, not all the other shit, because that's too demanding, I can run that churning stuff out of my head, others claim they go running precisely to do all the churning but I can't think of anything apart from my body, whether it's working, how it's working, what running feels like, whether I still can and if yes, how far, and whether something's hurting right now, or what hurts most of all, as if I didn't know what hurts most, but anyway that's better than hours at the screen shooting at coloured balls or sorting playing cards, always thinking about –

Hurting the body, that's good, I can't go on, I speed on. They've brutalised a lot of shrubs and bushes here, chewed them off mechanically to knee height, now all dead and stretching far ahead the length of the roadside verge, twigs, bushes, tree trunks, all the usual confusion of growth between the footway and the road, you can't see how it was before, now it's only freshly slashed trunks and stumps, beyond them the traffic. What's that thing again, a deadwood hedge, we did it at school, you'd have known, it's where everything imaginable grows together once you've stuck in the ground some sawn off boughs and branches, that kind of thing, some things will thrive, others won't, and it's fabulous for nesting birds, must google it when I get home. But an urban grass verge, that's something else, no anarchic growth there, planted to a plan, and now they've lopped it, all the debris dumped nearby, all dead, I could take a few twigs home with me and put them in a vase, perhaps they'd thrive and bloom, perhaps not, who knows, maybe it's not all dead, it's surprising what can sprout again, but I can't carry anything when I'm running. Anything that's rooted in the earth can definitely renew but the sliced off stumps look so horribly mutilated you want to bandage them up and comfort them, it all looks as if it can't ever live again but it will, and that's such a pathetic metaphor. I can't go on, I must slow down or walk a bit, but I don't want to walk, I want to race, I don't care whether I can, I can't go on.

Breathe steadily, that's all I know about running, one breath for every two steps, I breathe in for two steps, out for four, in in out out out out, I'm supposed to be counting my steps, not thinking up metaphors, *breathe, just breathe*, says Rike, *keep on breathing*, if only it was that easy, try telling a drowning man he's supposed to breathe, but she's right, I know, why does she always have to be right, that doesn't help

either. Breathe in, breathe out, I can't go on but do go on, more slowly, I must run more slowly, of course I can go on, one foot still clicks with every step, I get a stitch, in in out out out out, my right knee hurts, maybe I need new running shoes, had these a while, haven't used them for a few years, but I remember the girl in the shop saying said the material gets fatigued even doing nothing, loses its give, that's why they have to be regularly replaced, even if you've hardly used them, otherwise you wreck your ankles, then the knees, then the hips, it spreads upwards. I can see that, but first I must just get running again, see whether I'm going to stick with it or drop it like before, I feel as though I won't be able to stick at anything ever again, I'll constantly be starting something and never seeing it through, buying food then not preparing it, running the washer then leaving all the wet stuff inside so that it stinks, and by the bed there's a pile of books, I've read the first ten pages or so of every one of them, most of all I want to hide under my hood, but all that's over, I'm going to run. In in out out out out, my head throbs, the air is cool, it looked so sunny but it's not particularly warm, I should have put on the thicker joggers, it's good I pulled on that extra layer. I've got a stitch, breathe, in in out out out out, it'll be fine, running gets you good and warm, it's only when you're sweating and your stuff's damp and it's cold that you feel chilled again, still sweating, like having a fever. I'm hot, I'm cold, everything hurts, but hey, I'm running.

A while back I was so miserable I deleted you from my phone contacts, and now even that's gone, why call a number that no longer exists, Rike would say it's good what you've done, it's a step forward, that much I know, it's probably good that I never knew it by heart, now it's really gone, like everything else, you're no longer in my phone, contact deleted, business card deleted, your email address is

still in my head, perhaps it'll go away on its own, perhaps it needn't, perhaps it should stay there, so much else is going, and I don't want that, you're not to go, and then I go back to wanting everything to go away, everything, you, out of my head, out of my heart, no, not that, yes, no, I don't want all that, I can't handle it, how the hell, I'm running much too fast, I can't go on.

What was it that man on the park bench called out for just now, I didn't catch it, *no, sorry*. Money, I suppose, looked like a rough sleeper, surely he can see I've got nothing on me, can't have anything on me, I'm wearing running stuff, what am I supposed to have apart from my mobile and my house key, there's nobody at home to let me in, maybe a homeless man just can't see that I've nothing on me, maybe he can't see I've nothing to give, maybe I should stop and listen, ask what he wants, what he needs, what he lacks. He's bound to have lived through more shit than any of us and, okay, that's neither here nor there, being objective about a shit life has nothing to do with it, just how shit someone else's life is doesn't interest him, and didn't I ask you time and time again what you lacked and what you needed, and you knew yourself that you didn't lack anything I could have given, and you couldn't put into words what you needed, said you didn't need anything, it was okay, and then things carried on.

But I haven't done this to think about all that again, I wanted to push myself so hard that I can think only of my body and yet I can't go on, I can't go on, everything hurts, my lungs, my legs, my whole body, but I can't switch off what's in my head, I can't breathe, I must run more slowly, at least to that next tree, then maybe walk a few steps, I'm hot, I'm cold, my knee hurts, I must run more slowly.

The two words I spoke to the homeless man broke the rhythm of my breathing, just two words, shameful, but it's always been that way, some people can hold a conversation while out running, I never could, the moment I say something I'm breathing out of time, as if someone has caught hold of the bow of my viola while I'm playing and then nothing works, no rhythm, no melody, but at the moment nobody wants to talk to me, that's better for the running, right now I'm not very good company in any case and nobody has the stomach for my kind of misery, apart from Rike, thank heaven for Rike. In in out out out out.

Whatever happened to that homeless guy, it's got to be something major that's thrown you off track for you to wind up on the street, perhaps first it's some stroke of fate, then booze, or the other way round, classic combination, at times the thought of sitting on a bench and just drinking is pretty tempting. Pleasurably heroic to go running instead, but Rike says her Grandma always goes yes, you can drink your grief away but only for six months, then you've got to pack it in, and I don't want to finish up on a park bench for good, drowning my sorrows until I fall off the bench, dead, or am found in the gutter, stiff as a board. In in out out out out, I'm not resorting to the bottle and a bench, I'm working, it's what you do, we need structure, get up in the morning, rehearsal, practice at home, performance in the evening, three meals a day, it's that banal, and yet it's so damned hard to get up in the morning, what's the point, shower, who for, dress, what in, don't care how I look or whether I really do spend the day in bed. Practice my viola, how, how am I supposed to make music when the world's fallen silent, how am I supposed to make music, if you –

Fortunately there are moments when I feel I'm working through it all with music, not simply playing like an automaton or doing finger

exercises, but really making music, and that is a consolation, but often it's nothing more than duty, but then that's not so bad either as not playing ever again is no solution either. In in out out out out, perhaps running helps with making music, perhaps it relaxes the body, not immediately, nothing's relaxed right now, not the body, not the mind, maybe long-term, who knows, maybe it helps your head when your body does something, it can work the other way round, if your head can't go on, then at some point the body can't either.

Still, I'm not going to be homeless, the new flat's nice, I like it, it's far smaller than the last one, but it's enough for me on my own, and I can afford it. What a good thing I'm not a brass player or a singer, I feel so choked the whole time, how on earth do brass players manage, I've heard from Imke how she doesn't play at funerals because she wants to cry with everyone else and that would mean losing control of her oboe. It doesn't matter for the viola, nobody hears the lump in your choked up throat, and you can hide away a little in an orchestra. In in out out out out, more slowly, I'm going to break down any second.

Maybe I'll make it to the bend, then get across the road, cars are coming, what a relief, I must stand still a moment, a little break, it's not my fault that I can't run on. Lots of people do that silly running on the spot, what's the point, just to feel at the end that they've done the whole stretch at a running pace, me, I'm glad to catch my breath. I don't need long breaks, tiny ones will do, a few walking steps are enough for me to get my breath back, relax the muscles a little, then afterwards I mostly say to myself you could have run that bit, but at times people need a break, like during a prolonged session at the dentist when you need to close your mouth for a bit, sit up, flex the muscles, then it's okay again and you can open your mouth once more and the dentist carries on drilling, if only I could have that in life, a

pause during which everything's okay, everything's normal, a pause to get my breath back, a rest before it all starts again, yes and that's when I'd like the numbing of an anaesthetic, but this sadness is more like seasickness, you puke and puke and want nothing more than for it to stop, the rest of the world fades from view, it just has to stop, at least for a moment, enough time to draw breath, and after a bit it continues, you put yourself to rights, but it's still not over, seasickness doesn't do breaks, it's a constant, it's a storm, a wave may have gone by and there's a fraction of a second of relief but here comes the next wave before you've recovered from the last, the ocean is in turmoil, the nausea never stops, you retch and retch, nothing's left. But even with the worst seasickness, you eventually come into harbour and all of a sudden everything's good, the floor might still move, the stomach muscles still ache from vomiting, but it's over and the next voyage might be really calm with barely any waves, I wished for this to be only seasickness or the dentist or just running, I wished for a break, a break from weeping, from chattering teeth, from retching, a break from this lump in my belly, this stone, this sharp-edged, stinking stone encrusted with dried snot and mucous that pulls me down to the depths where we rot together, I'd like a break, I can't go on.

I wonder how far it is to the park, once round it and back, it looked a fair bit on Googlemaps, let's see what the app I've downloaded tells me afterwards, I feel like I've been going for an eternity here, as if I've run the longest distance any human has ever done, it's probably nothing. In in out out out out, I can't go on, I don't think I can, but somehow it's okay, how often I've thought in the last year I can't go on, but I'm still here, and the same goes for running, you're knackered, that's all, but you can go on. It's obviously time to do something for my body, I'm no longer fit, everything hurts and

everything wobbles, funny feeling. That'll get better soon, I hope, if I go running regularly, if I stick with it, then I'll be beautifully honed and fit, that at least, as if it isn't a matter of indifference whether I'm beautifully honed and fit, as if I couldn't equally well stay home in bed and shoot at coloured balls on the laptop screen and stuff crisps down my throat and *remain lost to the world*, but none of that will help anyone, especially not me.

Rike says it'll get better now, a year's gone by, for a whole year I've done everything without you for the first time, my birthday, without you, no summer vacation because I didn't want to go away alone and didn't have any money because I'd had to pay your share of the rent and because Rike and the children were already fixed up with Oliver's family, then your birthday the first time without you, I did it all wrong again on your birthday but how's anyone to know the right way of doing something like that, I went down to the harbour on my own and raised a glass to you, the beer tasted disgusting, like it always does for me. Our anniversary without you for the first time, you saw it as sacrosanct, you'd bring me flowers, I mostly didn't remember the day itself, but your flowers always, those bunches of flowers, and you, you took such a delight in bringing them, I was the envy of other women. I often got flowers. The first Christmas and New Year without you, nobody to make me a gift of a whole cheese, everything without you for the first time, and everything was terrible, but from now on it won't be the first time without you because it's just been the first anniversary of your death, I'll never be able to run away from that, but your parents, I can run away from them just as far and as fast as I can, but if I carry on running like this I won't get that far, I can't go on, I must slow down, I feel sick.

Rike thinks it gets better after a year but the first anniversary of your death knocked me back, on your birthday you always used to say well, every day's another day alive, no need for such a fuss about a birthday, just like with every day that passes you are another day dead, but the anniversary of your death knocks me back, while every birthday kind of struck you merely in passing, for me this is a belly blow that strikes me down. Your parents are still unbearable, from

time to time there've still been things to sort out, your father won't meet my gaze, he just looks past me without a word, your mother is one big accusation, as if I could have guessed, as if I should have known, as if I could have prevented it, as if I wasn't constantly asking myself if I could have, must have, should have noticed it, maybe I should have, of course I should have noticed, but I didn't, and maybe I couldn't have, hey, I noticed you weren't so good but didn't get that it was so bad, how was I supposed to know, you said it wouldn't be so bad this time and that you wouldn't need any help and if you did then you'd go to Super Doc and I believed you, you were still full of fun, well, sometimes, because just because your spirit's breaking down, your sense of humour doesn't go with it, but it's only now I can see that. Your parents act like it's my fault, at the same time I'm blaming myself and that's hardest of all, not to blame myself, that rubbish about 'the hardest', everything's the hardest, the usual daily stuff, the unexpected stuff, that gap in my life that's meant to be full of you, it's there even in the new flat that you never lived in, even there you're missing, I'd thought maybe it'll be better in the new flat, a bit because it's mine, not ours, but how on earth do you think I'm supposed to live without you? I've nearly ticked the *widowed* box a few times as that's what it feels like to be me, yes, of course I'm widowed, I was furious that I couldn't tick *widowed*, all because we weren't married, but I feel widowed so it's got to be that box. Single, that's all wrong, I'm not single, that smacks of singleton, as if I'm out there, I'm not out there, I'm lost. Lost you. Lost my place.

In in out out out out, I hardly dare go to the cemetery for fear of running into your parents, they're there all the time, especially for those special occasions, day of your birth, day of your death, you name it, they're always replanting the grave, ever since they made it

so clear what they think of me, I just don't want to see them, they'd always thought I was odd, musician, in an orchestra, not a job, not a proper one, in their little world music's a hobby at best, and they've never understood why their solid, normal son with his own classic car workshop would ever want a woman with such a rarefied profession, and my books all over the flat, and as for the sheet music, they saw that as of questionable value and, in any case, incomprehensible, but we managed to get by and now they're behaving as though I'd killed you, and like they said, after all we'd never been married, and so they'd made all the decisions, the burial, where and how, near them in Elmshorn, of course, not near me in Hamburg, *after all we weren't married*, the funeral music, it didn't even occur to them to ask me if I'd have liked to play, okay I couldn't have done it, but I'd have known what you'd have wanted to hear, and I'd have asked my friends from our quartet to play, and Bettina to sing, and I felt so crippled I couldn't challenge them and that's how you came to get such a bourgeois funeral. You'd have hated those ghastly hymns, you wouldn't even have wanted a church burial, they must have known that, but they didn't want to hear anything different because things are done the way they've always been done, so I let it go because I didn't have the strength to fight on your behalf. I've no idea if they're truly religious or whether they wanted it like that because certain things are done in church, baptism, wedding, burial, and then it's over and done with, that's how people carry on, and I went on thinking, the idiot I am, they're grieving, too, let them do it if that's what they need, but the way they assumed I would offer them my condolences without ever thinking of reciprocating, that assumption of theirs brought me so much pain, but only later, yes, I understand that parents will mourn their son even if they hadn't exactly showered him with attention, and I also understand that they wanted to have things their way, but for me

the fact of being treated as if I'd been no more than an episode in your life, that really offended me, that it clearly never occurred to them that it's as hellish for me as it is for them, perhaps even worse, because you hadn't played a big role in their everyday life for a long time, but in mine you had, every second I believe you're going to walk through the door, every second I want to tell you about something, I keep buying too much food, not that you ate that much, but I always have too much of everything, too many carrots, I can't get out of the habit of buying carrots, never got used to you calling them 'tap roots', you really liked eating them, raw, even at breakfast, and I always made sure we had them in, but now they're going rotten, and it's not simply too much veg I've got here but too much love, what can I do with all this love, I can't just dump it all over someone else. At times I deliberately buy all your favourite things and eat them myself, sometimes even things I don't like, so liquorice I can handle now and then, but when I try to eat marzipan just because you liked it, or try to drink beer, that's when Rike says she's really concerned about me. Beer on your birthday, that was something else, she says, and that she'd have joined me if she hadn't been at her parents' place with all the family. Your parents have no idea what you liked eating, they only know what you liked as a kid, they knew nothing about the tap roots reference, he loved white chocolate, they said, and I kept my mouth shut, the truth was you thought white chocolate was stupid, said you might have been able to go along with it if it hadn't been called chocolate because by definition chocolate contains cocoa, so first of all white chocolate isn't chocolate and second tastes nondescript. I didn't actually say that to them because I figured it didn't matter if they want to go on believing you liked white chocolate, maybe you did as a little kid, but for as long as I've known you, that's the last ten years, you've thought white chocolate's weird and I take a really mean

pleasure in letting them go on thinking that even though I know they're thinking something about you that's actually incorrect, maybe that's naughty of me but I can't really help it and it wouldn't make it any better if I told them, and you, you fool, you're not in a position to tell them.

They've collected all your things, I was allowed to help pack them and had to say which pieces of furniture were yours, as if after years of living together anyone can possibly say, I really have no idea who paid for what and what we bought jointly, we didn't really run separate finances, that's when it first struck me how revolting it was the way they were insisting on taking all your things away with them, I had to account for practically every book, every CD and every cup in the cupboard, was it yours, was it mine, the books were easy, CDs far less so, classical were mine, folk were yours, the rest I simply had to make a decision, make some sort of claim, it was all so undignified that I tried to switch off and packed quite mechanically. They let me hang on to your laptop so that I could download music and photos, but they still wanted to take it away for themselves, purely as a matter of principle, I think, as they've no idea how to use it. After so many years together you can't divide everything as yours and mine, and anyway what do they want with your few books and your CDs and your coffee mugs and your clothes, they'll probably put them all in a chest in the room you had as a kid and never look inside it again, the main thing for them is that I haven't got them. I didn't give them your pyjamas, I'd stowed them away safely beforehand, and do you know your mother actually noticed, just as we'd cleared the wardrobe, she really did ask where your pyjamas were, and I said you'd hated pyjamas and had always slept in the nude, said it just to shock her, in

fact you loved your pyjamas, and now your pyjamas are all I've got of you because your parents have taken everything else because *after all we weren't married*, and now I can't tick *widowed*, even though I am, and it's all my own fault, you'd wanted us to marry but for me that seemed simply superfluous. I held back a few little things, things we'd shared, at least they didn't ask for a second set of the double bed linen, I'd really have told them where to get off, there wouldn't have been enough in any case. Talking of bed linen, the words barely crossed their lips, *after all, we weren't married*, and I kept the bed, other than that they took nearly half the furniture. As their punishment they think you liked white chocolate and hated pyjamas and I know it's the other way round. I didn't need to worry about the workshop, your father did all that, they didn't even ask me if I wanted to keep the Buckelvolvo, I don't know what they've done with it, perhaps sold it off with the workshop, I haven't been there since, what would I do somewhere like that. I don't go to Elmshorn except to visit the cemetery and change something or other at the grave so that they know I've been. All that with the workshop was good for your father, having something specific to do, something to sort out instead of dealing with the difficult stuff. No idea if he kept the Volvo or what he did with your instruments, the mandolin and the guitar, they know as little about those as the laptop, perhaps they've hung them in the living room as decoration, I wouldn't put it past them to have sold them on the cheap, knowing perfectly well that I gave you the mandolin, and when they were packing it away I was too taken aback to make a fuss, to say I'm keeping that, of course I'd love to have kept it and would have played it, now it's probably festering away somewhere in your old bedroom, an instrument like that needs to be played. It's not such a jump to make from viola to mandolin, I'd have had a go, I could learn how to play, of course I'd have played it. Your mandolin and I, we belong

together even though I'll never sing as well as you and my music's so different from yours, that was still our thing, what's it to do with your parents, why are they taking that away from me. This is where my parents are so much better, they just feel helpless and don't know what to say, but then I don't know what they could say, they've come to see me, duly admired the new flat, said it was really pretty, nice and practical, talked it all up, looked for the positives, but what else can they do, they can't just say *It's so shit for you to be on your own again*. I was pleased they'd come but it's so tiring when they keep asking if there's anything they can do for me and I can't think of anything, what on earth are they supposed to do, this is something nobody can do anything with.

In in out out out out, I must run more slowly, must stop getting worked up about your parents, let go, chill, so easy to say but how can I be expected not to get worked up, as next of kin they immediately took power of attorney and without a word stopped your share of the rent going from your bank account, I had to fathom out a way of covering the rent on that half empty flat and it was a year before I felt strong enough to look for a smaller place, actually clear out and make the move, maybe it was a kind of Stockholm syndrome and all I wanted was to stay put in the flat once they'd taken all your stuff. All I had left of you was the flat and your pyjamas, I must get these dreadful people out of my head, forgive me for thinking so ill of your parents but I've got to take care of myself, I must run more slowly, I must think of something different.

My head tells me that it's good there's no trace of you in the district I've moved to, no invisible presence at every turn, you never bought me flowers from that shop by the tube station, we never went to that mini-mart together, and your Choco Softies go by the name of Choco

Puppies at the bakery here, you'd have thought that was stupid. It's just a place to reside, there's no going to the pub or the shops together, we were never here together, there's a reason for the move, and it's not like Eimsbüttel where every street corner and every paving stone is a reminder of you, where I can hardly step inside the cinema, let alone the café or the bar, without all the memories surfacing, where the shop assistants sometimes still ask after you and I slide out of the conversation with *He's not around anymore*.

It's actually good to live where nothing reminds me of you, except that everything reminds me of you regardless, at least it's not every street corner and every shop. But everything in my pathetic, godawful life is a permanent reminder of you, and when that lets up for a moment, when my life's fleetingly not pathetic and godawful, then I immediately get a guilty conscience, I don't want everything to remind me of you, and I don't want to forget you, what should I do, who am I without –

The new flat's nice, much smaller, and it's full of my things, not half empty like the old flat, but it's still not my home, you were my home, and now I'm widowed and lost and homeless and still have only your pyjamas and talk myself into believing they still smell a little of you, that's rubbish as you've not worn them for a year, I have, they've been washed and washed, how could they possibly still smell of you, but they feel like you. It's probably weird to go on wearing your pyjamas, I ought to put them away in a drawer and sleep in something different, but I had to let everything go, just like that, first you and then all your things. Possessions mean so much to people, our hearts shouldn't depend so much on things, so they say, but we all feel at home surrounded by our things, where everything's familiar and was our own choice, and if someone's no longer there, we want at the very

least to keep something belonging to the one who's now gone, something that meant a lot, your mandolin, your guitar, your pyjamas, I could have played the mandolin, only I can't sing, not anymore.

When Bettina's husband had that bad motorbike crash and was in hospital, and it wasn't clear whether he'd make it, whether he'd ever come out of the coma and if he did, how he'd be afterwards, she'd already been booked to do a matinee, hadn't had a wink of sleep, left the hospital, got into her evening gown, stepped onto the stage and, pro that she is, sang *Heut' macht die Welt Sonntag für mich* and it really felt like Sunday, she gave them a solid hour of light opera, *Glücklich ist, wer vergisst, was doch nicht zu ändern ist, Happiness is forgetting what cannot be changed*, I don't know how people do things like that but she said when you're in your evening gown on stage, you act professional and you do it, you can crack up afterwards. I couldn't do that, I don't know how anyone can do it, having said that the viola still works for me, sometimes even sounds more beautiful, the more it's tearing me apart inside, but I can't sing, not even in an evening gown. But your mandolin, they could have left me that, you're gone, they didn't have to take your music away from me as well, what on earth are they thinking of, why on earth did I let all that happen instead of making a stand, letting rip at them.

I wanted to think about something else, flowers coming into bloom, tra la, in in out out out out, I feel like after a marathon, and that's what it's been. I probably should have noticed you weren't that well again, not singing, not playing your mandolin, it was the same the first time, at first I hardly noticed because I usually had to play with the orchestra in the evenings and you'd be at home, but when we were there together, that's right, you didn't pick up the mandolin and sing, and when we first met I had to persuade you to stop thinking your

kind of music was too simplistic for me, that it would in some way fall short, what a crazy idea, I liked your music and the way you used to sing, yelling out your despair at times, and you thought I didn't like your amateurish serenades, how did you think I couldn't differentiate between a professional and an enthusiast, between classical and folk, as if your music was in some way second-class, it's about feeling and, anyway, you were really good. The Glen Hansard numbers don't sound right coming from a trained voice, that would be all wrong, and you used to put so much passion into your music, more than I did, I sometimes thought, and then I felt ashamed because yours was simply a different kind of passion, not what you'd call highbrow, but then it wasn't a competition. I hadn't noticed you'd stopped playing because often we saw one another only in the mornings before you went off to the workshop, and then when I got back late from a performance, you'd already be in bed watching some box set or other, and when I'd ask how you were I heard nothing back from you, ever, whenever I asked about you, you were far more interested in hearing about me. And now when I come home there's nobody there, lying in bed, asking me how it went, the bed's not warm, who can I tell about the clarinettist's music slipping off the stand and about how Cathrin's viola case has a postcard saying: Viola left, bow right, which isn't surprising once you've heard so many of her 'there was a blonde with a viola' jokes, sometimes I almost feel sorry for her with that sense of humour, you used to shout with laughter whenever I told you her latest terrible joke and yet she never realised that neither of us found any of them genuinely funny, maybe I should envy her more than pity her, she's cheerful by nature. I got your jokes and you mine, you didn't tell jokes about blondes but gave me cheese for Christmas every year, sometimes we only had to look at one another, knowing what the other was thinking, then we'd burst out laughing. That

wasn't a trivial thing, how could you ditch it all, who am I supposed to laugh with now? It was so funny what happened in our first year together, you kept asking me what I wanted for Christmas and I couldn't think of anything because I was hopelessly in love, you wouldn't give up asking, so in the end I said it's all the same to me, give me some cheese if you want, and then you really did give me cheese, as well as a proper present that I now can't recall, but you had me unwrap an entire cheese and I could have fallen off the sofa laughing, where did all that go, where was all that in your last two or three years. I still got gifts of cheese, but we didn't laugh any longer.

In in out out out out, can that advert in the pharmacy window really be serious, 'Dr Bach for Loneliness'? I guess it's about Bach Flower Extract. For loneliness? I feel like running right in and telling them where to stick their Dr Bach remedies. I'll willingly take everything possible for loneliness but not bloody flower extract, what a nerve, to display that in the chemist shop window, medicine's what I want from the chemist, not some arcane remedy, anyone after an arcane remedy should take themselves off to some daft trade fair on happiness, no amount of Dr Bach will help loneliness, I don't get it, a pharmacist is supposed to be academically trained, studied chemistry and biology, so no pharmacist can in all seriousness even think about flogging flower extract for loneliness, let alone sticking a notice like that in the window. Whoever designed that advertisement clearly has no idea what loneliness feels like, when the whole time someone's not there but the gap is, this void where something's supposed to be, where something belongs, this *unspeakable void*. That person has never stood in the supermarket and had a fit of crying simply because the balsam infused tissues have run out, and with so much sniffing and snivelling all the normal tissues give me cold sores, that's why only

those damned balsam ones will do, and my God howling in the mini-mart for want of the right tissues, that's what loneliness can do, you almost want the cashier to close down the till and give you a hug, or the nearest customer would do, because it's unbearable not to have any balsam tissues, in that moment I'd have let myself be comforted by any passing idiot, because those wretched Dr Bach remedies can't help with this, and that's rubbish, too, the tissues are irrelevant, but this kind of thing knocks you back, and I'd like more than anything to blow out all the snot at the pharmacist's feet, and then do the same in front of whoever dreamed up that advert and whoever invented Dr Bach's remedies, what do anyone of them know about loneliness, nothing, nothing at all. Not so fast, in in out out out out, they've no idea how it feels to stand helplessly in front of the bed trying to decide whether to lay out two blankets and two pillows because if you make up one side of the bed the other half looks empty and sad, but if you make up both it looks as if someone else is around, and as I reflect every time, what's more sad, to use two of everything or one, to sleep on your side or mine. Sleeping in your pyjamas, switching the light off night after night, these things hurt me inside, but I can't not do them. Dr Bach, listen up, boy can I tell you about loneliness, I'm going too fast again, I can't breathe, I'm collapsing, I can't go on. Slow down, slow down, I feel sick, I've got to puke.

[END OF SAMPLE]