

**Sample Translation (Pages 7-38)**

# **Sieben Tage ohne (Going Without)** **by Monika Peetz**

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# 1

It was one of those days. Eva was back from the early shift in the hospital, her four children were arguing noisily about whose turn it was on the computer, and her husband Frido, who had promised to take care of dinner, had got stuck at the office. In an hour and a half she had to be at Le Jardin – ‘her French place’. Eva had been looking forward to a relaxing evening with the Tuesday ladies for days. In sixteen years of friendship, the five women, who initially had nothing in common but a desire to learn French at Cologne’s Institut Français, had become sworn companions. The Tuesday ladies had weathered storms, catastrophes, and their pilgrimage to Lourdes. It wasn’t always easy to get on with her friends. Today, Eva’s problem was getting *to* them in the first place.

Eva was battling through an endless list of tasks, and trying to plan her family’s six different schedules. After the pilgrimage, she’d started working as a doctor again. Sadly the water from the holy spring had neither transformed her husband Frido into a culinary genius, nor turned three adolescents and a ten-year-old into willing domestic help. When she heard the shrill sound of the doorbell, Eva had a sense of foreboding. All her regular visitors knew that the house door was always open. It was just an act of self-defence against four children who had both a chronic tendency towards losing their keys, and highly-developed social lives. There was only one person who always rang the bell and expected the door to be opened for her personally. Eva let out a groan. No doubt about it: that could only be her mother. Since Regina had reached retirement age eighteen months ago, she had been there for Eva whenever she was needed. And when she wasn’t needed. And she didn’t bother with bourgeois rituals like phoning ahead if she was coming over.

Regina didn’t ring the doorbell: she sent Morse code signals that sounded like the triumphal march from Aida. Eva loved her mother. Just not always. And certainly not on the first Tuesday of the month when, as she had for the last sixteen years, she’d arranged to meet her friends in Le Jardin. Eva wished she could just say no. Instead, she forced a smile and opened the door. Leaning nonchalantly in the doorway was a sixty-two-year-old hippy chick, wearing a floor-length frilly skirt patterned with large flowers. Countless chains with giant pendants were hung around her neck, and her long blonde plaits peeped out from under a broad sun hat. Regina was also wearing Indian leather sandals.

“Your grandmother saved all my old things from years ago,” Regina explained. “This stuff’s spent so long in the attic it’s come back into fashion.”

Regina had been living in the house she’d inherited from her parents in Bergisch Gladbach for years. Newly-retired and feeling under-employed, she was pouring all her excess energy into dealing with the overflowing attic, which had spent decades lying dormant, gathering dust.

“Typical of the war generation. Your Granny Lore couldn’t throw anything away,” said Regina. “It’s all there still: my whole past. So tell me, what do you think of my outfit?”

“I’ve got to be in Le Jardin in an hour,” Eva said, weakly. But Regina’s need to talk was greater than her ability to empathise. She waved a yellowing pamphlet.

“I found one of my old books in the attic. Traditional Chinese medicine. Very eye-opening,” said Regina, stumbling as she headed for the kitchen.

“I must have lost weight,” she said, hitching her skirt up and eyeing Eva’s baggy jogging bottoms. The glance was enough to awaken Eva’s bad conscience. For years she had been waging a daily battle with calories, kilos and the countenance that looked back at her from the mirror. Eva was happy if she managed to get through half of her daily to-do list. Items like ‘cycle to the hospital’, ‘join the gym’ and ‘go on the pineapple diet’ always fell by

the wayside. Her wardrobe was like a museum to the thin girl she had once been. Stupidly she hadn't really appreciated the thin Eva. Even when she was still slim, she'd felt fat. Shopping trips with the Tuesday ladies were torture for Eva. Changing rooms without mirrors, places that only stocked clothes in a size 8, and trousers that pulled at the hips even in XXL. Whilst her friends all went home with full bags, as a rule Eva came back with some sunglasses, a scarf and a tin of shortbread.

"You can never have too much of the woman you love," Frido comforted her, when Eva could no longer do up the zip on her dress. Her mother was usually less restrained. Today she left it at a look; there was something else on her mind.

"I didn't realise just how few resources the West actually makes use of." Regina was getting worked up. "Our society is going to rack and ruin – and all because we have the wrong idea about illness."

Eva didn't care what was causing the collapse of Western society. Before she could go to Le Jardin, she had to unload the dishwasher and put a wash on. If she didn't deal with the dirty clothes before dinner, Frido Jr would be doing PE in his vest and pants tomorrow, and Frido Sr would be going to his board meeting with no shirt on.

"I've been doing some research," Regina continued. "You can do courses in Chinese medicine. Alongside your work. It would be great for you."

Eva had attended countless seminars to keep her medical knowledge up-to-the-minute. The very idea of another course almost made her go to pieces.

"I'll load the washing machine; you freshen up," Regina suggested. Her eagle eyes had spotted the waiting laundry basket. "We'll have a cup of tea, and then I'll be off." Regina pulled a packet out of her brightly-coloured embroidered tote bag.

"Tea of Cheerful Ease," she read out, "bought specially for you."

Eva was a highly-respected doctor. She could reassure patients, comfort agitated family members, and manage a six-person household alongside her 19.5 hour working day – but she was powerless against her mother.

As she hastily got changed in the bedroom, she strained to hear what Regina was up to in the kitchen. You could never be sure that she wasn't rearranging the cupboards as she went. Regina gave Eva advice on all aspects of her life. For free, and without Eva even having to ask. Colourful garlands of words disguised quite how much her mother interfered. Regina's sentences always began with phrases like: "You know, I'm a very tolerant person, but if I could give you one tip..."

"Of course, you should do whatever you think is best. I just think you might consider..."

Regina's spontaneous visits had a similar effect to a medium-sized tornado. Her arrival was like a surprise attack, coming from nowhere and sweeping right through Eva's life, leaving behind a scene of emotional devastation. Until the next time. The worst thing was: Regina really meant well. After two short, failed marriages, several unhappy affairs and the end of her somewhat haphazard career, Regina hungered to be important to somebody.

Flap, flap, flapeddy-flap, went Regina's sandals across the kitchen tiles, accompanied by the constant jangling of her necklaces. Eva heard cupboard doors opening and closing, running water, and the kettle going on. Then the cellar door squeaked. Regina started down the stairs to the utility room, whistling cheerfully. Suddenly there was a curse, an ear-splitting scream, the noise of the washing basket falling and hitting the bannister, muffled thuds, and then nothing more. No footsteps. Not a single sound. Nothing. Eva's heart skipped a beat. She ran out of the bedroom and plunged down the stairs, with one leg already in her jeans and the other trouser leg dragging on the floor behind her.

"Mum!" she yelled towards the cellar. "Say something. Mum!"

Eva felt her legs give way. Regina was hard work, but she was always full of life and plans. This couldn't happen. Not now. Not ever. Why hadn't she just sat down with her mother in the kitchen and had a cup of tea? Why had she left Regina to do the washing? The monotonous noise of the computer game, the typical backdrop to so many afternoons, had fallen silent. The kids were gathered in the hall. They often seemed so big and grown-up to Eva; now she was looking into the eyes for four frightened children.

"Stay here," Eva instructed them abruptly, though none of the kids looked like they wanted to go down to the cellar and see what had happened to Grandma.

That horrible silence. Please let nothing have happened to her. Please let Regina be alright. A surprising thought emerged from the depths of Eva's subconscious: Now I'll never find out who my father is. Eva was shocked at herself as she went down the steps to the cellar, her knees trembling. The question of her parentage had kept coming back to her over the years, like the ebb and flow of the tide. There were times when she was so preoccupied with her own life that the circumstances under which it had begun seemed unimportant to her. Then she went through phases where she felt she couldn't grow without knowing about her roots. As a teenager, her father's absence had been painful for her. And yet she didn't even know his name. Regina smothered all Eva's questions with her stubborn silence. Was it disappointment that made Regina keep quiet? Anger? Grief? Was it hurt feelings? Why didn't her father want to be a father? She was alarmed by how many thoughts came to her at the same time, in the brief moment before she reached her mother.

Regina was lying at the bottom of the stairs, her body strangely twisted. It suddenly dawned on Eva that without Regina, she would never get an answer to her question. A second later, she realised she wouldn't get an explanation *with* Regina, either.

Her mother was doubled up in pain. Her left leg was turned outwards, which meant Regina couldn't lie or sit or stand. She could only grumble. "I'm not going to hospital," she said as Eva bent over her, proving she was very much alive. "No way."

"Call an ambulance," Eva shouted up the stairs.

Eva forgot that it was Tuesday. The first Tuesday of the month. She was suddenly completely calm. As a doctor, she knew exactly what she had to do.

## 2

"Where can the ladies be?" asked Luc. The owner of the French restaurant gazed at the door in puzzlement. Judith was the only one who had arrived at Le Jardin on time. Judith didn't have a family, or a partner, or a demanding job. There was nothing and nobody preventing her from being punctual. Sitting on her own at a table set for five was torture for Judith. She shuffled nervously on her seat, feeling the other customers giving her sympathetic looks. She wished she at least had a smartphone - if you were online, you looked busy and important. Judith only had an old mobile, on which you could do nothing except make calls and send texts. And even that was seldom switched on, because of the radiation - and because there was no point. Since her husband Arne had died, the phone stayed silent most of the time.

"Can I get you anything?" asked Luc.

Judith shook her head. She hated eating alone.

"Caroline will be here any moment," Luc assured her. "She's always on time."

“Caroline’s probably meeting another one of her clients,” said Judith.

The successful criminal defence lawyer had been working harder than ever since the pilgrimage.

“I wonder if Caroline’s even noticed she doesn’t live with her husband any more,” Estelle sometimes joked.

Judith didn’t laugh. She was the last person to consider making jokes at Caroline’s expense. After all, she had played her own inglorious part in the breakdown of Philipp and Caroline’s marriage. When Arne died of cancer, she had sought comfort in the arms of Caroline’s husband. At first, Philipp had been her GP, then her friend and adviser, and finally her lover. Their secret affair had come to light on the pilgrimage. As it transpired, she had not been his only lover, or his last. Philipp vanished from Judith’s life, but her guilty conscience remained her constant companion. Unfortunately, it was her *only* companion.

Luc put a little plate of appetisers down in front of her. He was so lovely. Since the trip to Lourdes, Judith had been working as a waitress in Le Jardin four days a week. But on the first Tuesday of the month, she came here as a paying customer. She used to think a job in gastronomy would be stressful, but today, Le Jardin seemed an oasis of happiness. As a waitress, Judith had one of the few jobs where 'having a night off' still meant something. Unlike her friends, she didn't have to answer emails constantly, at all hours of the day, or make herself available to answer queries. Even Estelle was stressed, and she was the wife of a rich pharmacy owner. She gave herself an easy life by avoiding real work, and delegating any unpleasant tasks. But, against her better judgement, Estelle had allowed herself to be roped into helping organise the golf club's big charity gala. Ever since, she had been incredibly highly strung. Even the question of what she should wear for this occasion was giving her a nervous breakdown.

“They’ll get here, don’t worry,” Luc comforted her, bringing her a second glass of prosecco. “That’s on the house.”

It was a shame she couldn’t fall in love with Luc. Once, and only once, she had tried to tell him about her problems. About how she often felt like she couldn’t keep pace with her friends.

“I understand,” Luc had replied, giving her his most profound gaze. “I feel the same. Every time FC Cologne plays Bayern Munich.”

Judith was glad that at least there was Kiki who, like her, lacked balance in her life. Kiki was a designer, and when they went on their pilgrimage, she had brought with her not only the successful design for a range of vases, but also a special little reminder of home. This reminder was called Greta. She was six and a half months old, and she was the reason that things were now more serious with Max Thalberg than they had been with his numerous predecessors. Even though Max was only twenty-four, and the son of Kiki's boss. Ex-boss, now. If the man who was reluctant to become her father-in-law had hoped that Kiki would pass through his son and heir's life like a nasty bout of bronchitis – serious, but temporary – the abrupt arrival of his granddaughter, Greta, taught him otherwise. Kiki and Max shared a bed, a table, and their worryingly meagre budget. And yet they thought that Greta was the best thing that had ever happened to them. Judith envied her friends their full, colourful lives.

As she staggered home at nine thirty, dissatisfied, and with four proseccos and a plate of bread and olive tapenade in her stomach, Judith discovered she had four new text messages. She didn’t want to know why none of her friends had made it to Le Jardin. “We can’t go on

like this,” she wrote, “let’s go away together for a few days, before our daily lives take over completely.”

### 3

Go away with the girls? Now? Eva gave Judith’s text the briefest of glances. Since Regina’s fall, she hadn’t had a moment to think. Hospital, A&E, X-ray – everything had to be done quickly. Luckily Regina hadn’t broken her neck, just the neck of her thighbone. The fact that her skirt was now longer than her body, which is what had led to the fall, pointed to something that tests over the next few days confirmed. Even if Regina refused to admit it. It wasn’t Eva’s lethal steps that had caused that disastrous stumble, but post-menopausal osteoporosis, which had cost Regina a few centimetres in height.

“It’s a chronic illness that women can get after the change: over time, your bone density gradually decreases,” Eva explained as carefully as she could. “The skeleton becomes unstable and porous. And eventually your bones start breaking.”

“Grandma’s got a Menopause thing,” Eva’s youngest daughter posted on Facebook, after Eva had called to update the family. “But it’s got nothing to do with a lack of men.”

“Typical age-related illness,” said the doctor who was treating her, less diplomatically.

“I’m not having that incompetent Flash Harry treating me,” Regina decided. She’d rather go to another hospital. Preferably the one where her daughter worked. Then Eva could pop in and see her more often during work hours.

“I’ll take care of it,” Eva promised. She took care of everything. The transfer, the organisational details, the long list of things Regina needed in order to survive her stay in hospital – and the frilly skirt.

“Burn it,” Regina ordered, “burn all my old clothes. That junk from the attic has got to go.”

“Your grandmother saved all my old things from years ago,” echoed in Eva’s head as she sat in the car on the way to Bergisch Gladbach to pick up Regina’s things. “It’s all still there, my whole past.”

In previous years, Eva had seized every opportunity to sniff about for traces of her father in Regina’s disorganised papers. As soon as her mother had gone on holiday and Eva was left to take care of her plants and sort out the post, she would start rummaging through the old cardboard boxes where Regina kept official documents, certificates and letters. It had never occurred to her to look in the things her grandparents had left.

Bergisch Gladbach felt at once strange and familiar to Eva. She had lived on Bussardweg with her grandparents until she was five. Eva was born out of wedlock to a teenage mother. In the sixties, this caused a great deal of unpleasant whispering amongst the neighbours. The day after her twenty-first birthday, Regina escaped to Cologne with her young daughter. What followed was what Regina now called ‘my messy years’. Driven by an irrepressible zest for life, she tried out whatever came her way: places to live, jobs, men, ideologies. A lot was neither U-rated nor suitable for children, and Eva still spent a lot of time with her grandparents in Bergisch Gladbach. Regina often parked her with Granny Lore and Granddad Erich for weeks at a time, while she went off to find herself and the meaning of life in Indian ashrams.

Outwardly, the plain-looking semi on Bussardweg had hardly changed since Eva's childhood. Everything about the house was rectangular, straight and sensible: six-paned transom windows, and a heavy, enclosed porch with steps leading up to it. Plain, austere and upright, like her grandfather, who had been head bookkeeper at the Anton Dorsch Machine Works. The Buddha in the garden and the colourful Indian garlands didn't disguise the fact that the house had seen better days.

"Why doesn't Regina get it painted?" Frido would ask every time they went to visit.

"No money, no volunteers," Eva summarised.

The DIY mania that had gripped the former Dorsch company housing estate in recent years had passed the house's greying plaster by completely. Even the loud guitar riffs and the crash of drums coming from the neighbouring garage were a blast from the past: "Love me tender, love me sweet," purred a deep male voice.

Eva had hardly parked the car when the garage door flew open. The lead singer of 'Schmitz & Friends', a gentleman in his late sixties with black horn-rimmed glasses, sideburns and shoulder-length hair, had heard Eva coming. "What's up? Has something happened to Regina? She didn't come home last night."

Henry Schmitz was a few years older than Regina. Their fathers had both worked in the machine factory. They had lived next door to each other as children, and as the heirs to their respective family properties they were neighbours again now. They had been young together. Now they were old together. Each in their adjoining semi.

"Regina didn't come to the barbecue yesterday. We were really worried," his wife – small, round Olga Schmitz – called out of the kitchen window. Social control functioned perfectly on the estate.

Eva had known the couple next door her whole life. When Regina fell down the stairs, Eva's immediate thoughts about her lack of a father-figure had brought her past flooding back. Along with emotions she thought she had left far behind. She could sense the little girl she had once been, who had watched the family next door with envy. The Schmitzes were the traditional family that Eva had never had. Father, mother, and three girls around Eva's age. Frau Schmitz, small and bustling, had been quite round even at a relatively young age, and always wore an apron. She cooked, baked, knitted and sewed, whilst Henry Schmitz ran around in the garden with the three children. At Granny Lore's, they read aloud from the bible; the neighbours sang pop songs. Her grandfather was a pencil-pusher; Schmitz was practically minded. He could do anything. Hook up lights, build tree-houses and mend bike tyres.

"I never want to live like the Schmitzes," Regina had often said in those early years in Cologne. While she sailed along through world history, across continents and in and out of love, Schmitz went the way of all Schmitzes. He worked for Dorsch. For Regina, this was the epitome of suburban boredom: "He's never thought his way out of Bussardweg. Spending your whole life with one woman, and one company. Horrific."

Eva thought the two of them were wonderful. One rainy day, Schmitz had driven her to school in Cologne in his turquoise Opel Kapitän. She was nine, and it was during the first of Regina's weeks-long disappearances. When Eva's inquisitive school friends took him for her mysterious father, she kept quiet. She told herself that she had been swapped with his oldest daughter. After all, she was far more musical than the girl next door. Secretly, she sang along when Schmitz belted out the hits of the day with his children. Sometimes now, when she was sitting in the living room with her own four children, David at the piano, Lene on guitar, and

Frido Jr and Anna singing, Eva remembered how she had listened longingly to those songs as a child. She was glad to have left that lonely little girl behind. She had found her way to where the music was playing. In her own family.

“I’m going to bake a cake,” Frau Schmitz decided, after Eva had recounted the story of Regina’s fall. “My poppy-seed cake, that’s Regina’s favourite.”

Frau Schmitz was of the firm belief that cake cured almost every ill. “We’ll go and see her in hospital tomorrow,” Schmitz told her.

“My mother will be very glad,” Eva nodded. It was the truth. Friends, lovers, interests, fashions and decades had come and gone for Regina. The Schmitzes stayed put. The couple next door had proved themselves to be true friends over the course of the years. And they weren’t as stuffy as Regina used to think, either. Since Schmitz had retired, he had formed a garage band with three of his ex-colleagues.

‘Schmitz & Friends’ made regular appearances at weddings, family celebrations and company parties. They played at the openings of pharmacy chains, in pedestrian precincts and civic centres. Olga Schmitz supplied their stage outfits.

“If you have time,” said Schmitz, “we’re playing in Gummersbach next month.”

Nothing had changed on Bussardweg. Eva ignored her phone ringing. The Tuesday ladies, wanting to know how Regina was doing, would have to wait. It was time to start tidying up – in the attic, and in her life.

## 4

For 7600 generations, hoarding possessions was the most sensible strategy for arming yourself against whatever life threw at you. There was nothing Eva's grandmother hadn't been prepared for. Regina's hippy clothes were hanging in one of the old cupboards. In another, there was Granny Lore's emergency folder, containing important bank and vaccination papers in case of war or other crises; used wrapping paper; spare shoelaces in brown, blue and black; bargain multi-packs of envelopes with and without windows, and the Christmas decorations, including the lead-foil tinsel from the sixties which, as a child, Eva had reverently smoothed out and wrapped in newspaper after Epiphany. Every letter, every present tag, every official notification, and every postcard, was carefully archived. Eva hoped to find something about her parentage here in the attic.

Layer by layer, Eva plunged into the dust of the past, and the documents from Regina's childhood and youth. With each one, Eva came closer to the time of her own birth. The carbon copy of a letter from her grandfather, thanking Anton Dorsch for Regina's apprenticeship contract, provided her first clue.

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1965, Regina started her apprenticeship as a housekeeper in a factory-owned children's convalescent home, housed in the castle at Achenkirch. Eva knew the story of Anton Dorsch. Like many employers of his generation, he had made it his task to look after his workers even when they weren't working. His social engagement was particularly strong when it came to his employees' children. The children's convalescent home he had founded was in Franconia, and was run by his sister. During her apprenticeship, Regina wrote a few postcards from Achenkirch. Then came the bombshell: Regina, at only sixteen years old, was



pregnant. In the mid-sixties, this was moral bankruptcy and social death in one fell swoop: "A person who has stooped to this sort of depravity," Director Frieda Dorsch fumed in her dismissal notice, "cannot be allowed to come into contact with our children, who are in need of rest." Regina left Achenkirch in disgrace, and went back to live with her parents. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1966, Eva was born. On her birth certificate, there was no mention of her father.

Eva was putting the 'letters' folder back in the attic cupboard when she noticed an envelope that had slipped down the back. The letter was addressed to her grandmother, *for the attention of Miss Regina Beckmann*. The year 1993 was just recognisable on the smudged postmark. In the envelope there were three black-and-white photographs from Regina's time in Achenkirch, and a postcard with a view of a mountain enthroned high above a village. *It can't be a coincidence, my dear Regina*, it said on the back, in a confident, angular, man's handwriting. *I'm back at the castle in Achenkirch, Doris Day is on the radio, and Emmerich has brought boxfuls of old photos for our funding proposal. And suddenly, there you are again, sitting in the window. Do you want to see our new old castle again? In spite of everything that happened? Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. With love, Leo.*

Eva had no idea whether her mother had ever received the letter.

## 5

"Why are you crying, mummy?" Anna asked. "Is the song really that sad?"

*You won't admit you love me.  
And so how am I ever to know?  
You always tell me  
Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps,*

...Doris Day was singing in the YouTube video. Caught in the act, Eva reached for a tissue. "It's a song about lovers who don't get together because they never tell each other the truth," Eva explained, hurriedly wiping away her tears.

"But you *did* get together with daddy," Anna soothed her mother in a sympathetic tone.

"I did, yes, but Grandma..."

Anna looked thoughtfully at the photos that Eva had found in the attic. On the first was a section of a medieval building. A door, and three high windows in a thick wall. Regina was sitting in the middle window with her legs dangling out. The second showed her in the middle of a swarm of children, in front of a decorated Maypole. A third had been taken in a vaulted room. Regina was standing on a stage with a microphone in her hand: a young woman laughing flirtatiously and light-heartedly into the camera. On the back, in the same man's handwriting as the letter, the line: *perhaps, perhaps, perhaps*.

"You've got the same eyes. But Grandma's much thinner," said Anna contemplatively.

"Maybe I look more like my father," Eva speculated. "I must have inherited something from him."

“Making yummy food,” Anna suggested. “Grandma’s no good at that at all. She cooks everything until it turns into mush. Then right at the end she puts spices in and says it’s Indian.”

Could her father cook? Did she look like him? Did she have the same personality? At about three o’clock in the morning, when she could be sure nobody would disturb her, Eva typed the two fateful words into Google: “Castle Achenkirch”. A second later, the Wikipedia page opened. After a chequered history as a knight’s fiefdom, a hide-out for robbers and highwaymen, as a count’s family seat, a military base, refugee accommodation and a children’s convalescent home, the castle had lain empty for almost twenty years. In 1988, the Association for the Preservation of Franconian Cultural Heritage had taken over the monument, which had been left to rot. In 1993 the castle was reopened as a hotel. Eva clicked on the homepage. Instead of calorific food and convalescence for war-damaged children, the castle now offered a variety of experiences. You could do anything there: conferences, family holidays, weddings, recreational programmes. There were health-farm weeks, Silence Seminars, Slow Movement courses and therapeutic fasting. There was no information on the website about the staff and leaseholders. Only one name in the Company Information: Leonard Falk.

Was this the man she was looking for? As a child, Eva had made up stories every evening in bed, in which her father showed up and explained away all the misunderstandings in well-chosen words: she had imagined him as a South American rebel leader, as a chef on a cargo ship, as a selfless aid worker in Africa. Her eyes filled with tears. Judith was right. It was time for the Tuesday ladies to go on their annual trip. They’d all earned a break. Why not Achenkirch? A week of therapeutic fasting sounded great. And if, in those seven days, they *happened* to learn something about her past, so much the better.

## 6

“Fasting! Come on, that would do us all some good, don’t you think?” Eva suggested enthusiastically.

A week had passed since Regina’s fall. Judith had insisted on them making up for the missed dinner, doing it properly, and finally deciding on a destination for their annual trip, which had been put off several times because of Greta. To everyone’s astonishment, Eva was doing all the talking.

“Therapeutic fasting isn’t just a diet, it’s not about calories,” Eva explained, “it’s a very credible concept, whereby mental concentration helps you shift some extra pounds.”

She had even found the perfect place. It had to be Achenkirch: “A castle in the Altmühl valley. Remote, lonely, wildly romantic. It’s ideal for us,” she announced with complete conviction. “We need look no further.”

Caroline was astounded at how vehemently Eva had voiced her suggestion. Now Eva was back to doctoring, she was usually absorbed in her everyday life. She wasn’t in a position to make longer-term plans.

“I’ll go along with that,” was Eva’s standard phrase whenever the Tuesday ladies were planning their annual trip. On family holidays, she basically complied with whatever her four children or husband Frido wanted to do. Eva regularly ended up in overly-expensive club

hotels, where pathologically cheerful holiday reps always tracked her down just as she'd nodded off on a sun lounger.

At their Tuesday meetings, Eva defended this defensive stance: "What good is it to me if I get my own way, and everyone else ends up unhappy?" She was always the one helping out. Even at the hospital, she had become the go-to person on her ward when it came to collecting for a colleague's birthday, wedding or other life-changing event.

"No wonder I'm missing the self-sacrifice gene," Estelle said pointedly. "Eva has it for both of us."

The spoiled pharmacy owner's wife was a master of getting out of unpleasant tasks, and devoted herself exclusively to the nicer things in life: taking care of number one. For the Tuesday ladies' holiday, she usually suggested a wickedly expensive all-in hotel that oozed luxury.

Before Estelle could get a word in, Eva ratcheted up her argument. She started complaining volubly about her Christmas weight. The weight from last year that was still hanging around on her hips even now, after the summer, and next year's weight, which would doubtless soon be joining it.

"In the REWE in Klettenberg they've already got *lebkuchen* out on the shelves," she moaned. "And they taste *so* good in September."

Caroline was unsettled by Eva's verbal barrage. She could not for the life of her imagine that Eva, who was a passionate cook, could be excited by the idea of going without food for seven days. For the sake of losing a few pounds? Eva was a doctor. She knew only too well that the weight you shed in a week of fasting would go straight back on. Why was Achenkirch important to Eva?

The idea of fasting together got the Tuesday ladies so riled up that apart from Caroline, it didn't occur to any of the friends how strange Eva's enthusiasm was. On the issue of weight, the otherwise dissimilar friends were united.

"Size zero in seven days? Count me in!" declared Estelle. She was struggling with her new Chanel suit, which she had bought for the golf club's big charity gala. "It fitted perfectly in the shop," she moaned. "I just can't sit down. At least not if I want to breathe as well."

Judith, the Tuesday lady with the spiritual streak, had no other suggestions. Instead, she was raving about the mental effects of physical self-denial.

"Fasting is supposed to put you in a state of intoxication," she enthused. "No drugs involved."

"I could do with losing a bit as well," said Kiki, who was still wrestling with the last of her pregnancy weight.

Before Caroline could put her finger on what was behind Eva's sudden burst of proactivity, Eva surprised her friends a second time.

"Why don't we go straight away?" she suggested. "Let's go next week."

"What about your children?" asked Caroline. Now she really had no idea what was going on.

"Oh, it's never the right time," Eva explained succinctly.

For sixteen years, it had taken a huge effort for Caroline to convince Eva that she should go on the Tuesday ladies' annual trip, despite her family commitments. For sixteen years she had preached to her friend about encouraging her family to be more independent. And now Eva was getting carried away and doing something spontaneous? No military-style preparation? No week spent cooking? No pages of instructions for her family on how to

survive this awful period of motherlessness? No feelings of guilt? Eva's behaviour was so unusual that the others weighed in.

“You want to leave Frido on his own with the kids? Just like that?” Estelle marvelled.

“And your mother?” Judith added. Regina had been in hospital for weeks, with broken bones and a very much unbroken spirit. On the ward where Eva worked. The Tuesday ladies knew how much energy Eva put into caring for her mother.

Only Kiki said nothing. Max had sent her an email. “She can do yoga,” he had written. Underneath was a photo of Greta, sleeping peacefully. She was lying on her stomach, and had brought her fat baby arms together in front of her head. Her knees were bent and her bottom was sticking up in the air. Kiki was touched. She would never have guessed that a baby photo could move her to tears. Even if it was clear where Greta had made herself comfortable: she was lying diagonally across Kiki's half of the bed.

“I'm all for going on this fast straight away,” declared Kiki. “If I drop a few pounds, I'll fit comfortably next to Greta in my bed.”

“So who's for it?” Eva forced a quick decision. A second later, four hands shot up. In the background, Luc hurriedly opened a bottle of champagne. The unexpectedly quick agreement, which was traditionally toasted with a bottle of *Veuve Clicquot*, had caught him off guard. In the sixteen years the Tuesday ladies had been coming into his restaurant, they had never managed to decide on a destination after less than an hour of animated discussion. Caroline was still thinking. Something didn't add up.

“Fasting isn't a good way to lose weight. But as a starting point for a new relationship with food and a healthier lifestyle, it's ideal,” Eva explained, as if Caroline was short of arguments.

Since their pilgrimage along the Way of St James, Caroline had wondered about a lot of things the friends did. She was even more astounded at what she herself was capable of. But she preferred not to talk about it. Not about the strange presentiment that crept over her at Eva's plan. Not about the hotel key hidden in her handbag. Not about the man who was waiting for her at the Savoy. Instead, she nodded: “Fasting? Why not? I could certainly use some detoxing and downtime.”

## 7

“Turn off,” cried Eva. “Left. It's left here. Left!”

Ten days after their evening in Le Jardin, the friends set off for Achenkirch. Whether they would actually get there was another matter. The car zoomed past the fork in the road without slowing down. Caroline, who was at the wheel as she usually was when the Tuesday ladies went away together, kept her foot doggedly on the accelerator. The route wasn't complicated. But Caroline's head was still in Cologne. As was Kiki, who had finally got another job interview and would only be joining them that evening.

“Achenkirch Castle Hotel. Fifteen kilometres. That's what it said,” Eva complained. Three missed turnings and the constant task of reorienting herself on the unwieldy *Donau-Alt Mühl Valley Alliance Leisure Map* had frayed her nerves just as much as the ‘music of the spheres’ relaxation CD that Judith had selected to get them in the mood for their holiday.

“Switch the sing-song off and the satnav on,” Estelle recommended. Half asleep, she peered out from under her cooling eyemask. "Life is so much simpler when you let others do the work."

“The satnav was my parting gift to Philipp,” Caroline admitted. It had been a dig at her ex-husband, who insisted that his natural sense of direction beat any electronic device. Philipp could get round the rush-hour traffic on the Cologne ring roads, avoid the constant road-works on Severin Bridge, and find the hidden holiday villa in the South of France. Better than Caroline, and better than the bimbo on the navigation device, who put him off with her penetrating “turn around when possible”. Philipp didn’t listen to advice, and Philipp didn’t turn around. He had his own ideas about manoeuvring through the city, and through life. In the end it wasn’t the satnav bimbo who was the final straw for Caroline’s marriage, but the long chain of women with whom Philipp strayed from the path of faithfulness. Caroline’s work-life balance was not good: as a criminal defence lawyer she was successful and notorious; she was mother to two grown-up children, and since the pilgrimage she had gone back into tax bracket one. "Permanently separated" was what her state of limbo was known as in German officialese. Caroline had a lot to work through. Judith, for whose sake she had gone on the pilgrimage in the first place – Judith: delicate, childlike and freshly widowed, her old friend and confidant – had gone behind her back. She had been one of Philipp's many lovers. The real miracle of Lourdes was that the Tuesday ladies had survived Judith's betrayal. Which was more than could be said for Caroline’s marriage.

“You need orientation more than I do,” Caroline had said, putting the satnav on the table for Philipp as she left. Instead, she got out the trusty old map for the Tuesday ladies' annual trip. First, take the A3 from Cologne towards Nuremberg, then turn onto the A9 until the exit for the Altmühl Valley. Caroline should have turned off at Kipfenberg...

“There. You could have turned round there. Why aren’t you turning?” cried Eva. Caroline wasn’t paying attention. With an abrupt movement, she turned the car into the entrance of “Achenkirch Panorama Parking”.

“Because you get the best view over the valley from here,” Caroline lied, grateful for the unexpected excuse.

The view was breathtaking.

“It looks like a village from a model railway!” shouted Estelle. A strong wind was blowing hair and autumn leaves around her head. Patches of light and shade darted across meadows, woods and juniper heaths. On the valley floor, sheltered and snug, were the river and the village of Achenkirch. The greyish-white alpine houses nestled close together under their shallow roofs. Smoke rose from their chimneys and disappeared, lost amongst the vibrant treetops. Above them loomed spectacularly craggy, dirty-white limestone cliffs. On the saddle of the mountain lay their destination: Castle Achenkirch. Six hundred years of eventful history were manifested in its thick walls of rough grey stone, overgrown with ivy. It had crenulations, arrow-slits, turrets, and had been extended in a later style in all directions. An imposing castle keep grazed the scudding clouds.

“It doesn’t look very homely,” Estelle remarked.

Caroline could see from her friends' faces that they had similarly mixed feelings about their arrival at the castle. Downtime, detoxing, losing weight: that was the order of the day. Caroline was looking forward to leaving her busy everyday life behind. Seven days without urgent emails and phone calls, no difficult clients and impatient judges, no mountains of files and overtime, no last-minute shopping at the petrol station, no family birthdays, no car needing its MOT, no naked light bulbs in the flat. Fifteen months since her separation from Philipp, they were still hanging there reproachfully from the ceiling of her little two-room

apartment, a constant reminder of the facts: Permanently Separated. Seven days without men, without the usual responsibilities, without the banking crisis, the weak Euro and tax reforms. Unfortunately also without solid food. Fasting was the only thing on the menu.

Caroline had taken on much more than a week of giving up sweet things, comfort food, and the glass of wine in the evening that helped her to sleep. If you slowed down, you gained leisure time: time for yourself, time for your friends, time for conversations and confessions. If Caroline wanted the Tuesday ladies' friendship to last, she would have to let her friends in on the unusual direction her life had taken.

"Such an imposing property. And not even a decent kitchen," Estelle sighed.

"What do you say to a last meal for the condemned women?" Eva suggested. Caroline nodded. By the look of Eva's deathly pale face, she guessed she wasn't the only one who had something to confess over the next few days.