Sample Translation (pp. 7-28)

KAPOK'S SISTERS
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Werner Kapok leaps up from his sister’s desk at the sound of light and quick steps coming through the open window. Not that he had been waiting for it, but he now realizes how much he has missed this. The lively, flamboyant Schaechters, both approaching their late fifties, are tripping by, their black high heels tapping out their brisk pace. The two of them live next door in the house they inherited from their parents. The sisters, still elegant dressers, a bit extravagant, are a tick above the other long-time residents of the development. They know, of course, that their every move is being observed. He asks himself whether in recent years they might be less up to their neighbors’ perpetual gawking than they had been to the scrutiny that once had been mandated, and he remembers with astonishment their girlishness, which they long since have left behind them. The elder sister, Claudia, wore her hair long then and often loose, with Barbara serving as counterpoint, her dyed blonde hair cut short.

Standing in the attic, he looks down at them from above and grimaces: a broad swath of gray is visible at the middle part of their mahogany-dyed hair, which is cut to fall to the left and right of their faces at exactly the level of their earlobes. Barbara, who wears a shimmering green dress with the dropped waist in the style of a Charleston flapper, he thinks, smiles and turns to look at Claudia in her black dress with its wide, shiny orange leather belt. Both show the onset of a dowager’s hump, their heads extending slightly forward.

He had returned the evening before, after what seemed an eternity, but which added up to nearly two-and-a-half decades by his count, and Renate, after their not exactly warm and warily fumbling greeting, had, among other things, told him about the Schaechter girls. That they once again were living in the home of their parents, just as she herself was. That their father had died at the beginning of the ‘90s of a heart attack, a few days after being taken to hospital, and their mother, who was suffering from dementia, had followed him two years later.

Kapok notes that the place the elderly Schaechters had occupied in his heart, a space he had been unaware of all these years, has been replaced by a significant hole now that he is conscious of the fact that they are gone. But the hole is by no means empty: the

sisters, in reality slowly aging, are still crouched inside it laughing, which is painful to him.

In the meantime they have opened the front garden gate.

Now that it no doubt is too late, Kapok asks himself why it is he never proposed to either one of them.

Claudia Schaechter slips out of her high-heeled sandals and places them in the downstairs corner between the kitchen wall and cellar door. Her sister keeps her shoes on until she reaches the top floor, then takes them off and tosses them into the shoe bin. After the death of their mother the sisters had divided the house, sharing the kitchen downstairs and the garden. The place needs a complete renovation. They’re in agreement that the roof should be replaced and the facade resurfaced, the electrical system totally redone and the basement dried out. Entire nights were spent totaling it all up before they contacted the workmen.

Barbara has a job as an administrator of local cultural events in the district office of Marzahn-Hellersdorf. Claudia is a costume designer who worked in the theater until the early 90s. After ending up out of a job following yet another round of lay-offs, she had no desire to go back and began instead to create extravagant dresses that brought in good prices and therefore a good living and secured for the sisters a singular position in the Eintracht housing development. This sleepy corner of Berlin between the allotment gardens of Formosa and the development known as Old Sod had once been very close to the Berlin Wall, and therefore secluded. The Wall is long since gone, but a broad expanse of tree nurseries has ensured that the area’s seclusion remained intact. In the end it was like everywhere else in the world: the elderly inhabitants have died off and left their homes to their children, who in the intervening years are too old themselves to want to move on. But the succession of ownership is unsure, for the children of those now occupying the houses are scattered across the country and even across the world, with lifestyles unlike those of their parents, who simply don’t understand them. They neither would nor could take over the houses. So some inhabitants make no effort to renovate them or to keep them in especially good condition, but instead survive on their pensions and wait for their own demise, while others sell off their houses cheap and, depending on

the familial situation, either set the money aside for their children or blow it on themselves. And so, over the years, this or that piece of property gets new owners who, however, have so little money left after the purchase that they can’t afford to tear it down and start again. Thus the development has maintained its original character to the present day.

Neither Barbara nor Claudia Schaechter has children, and their house, as well, sets them apart. Built by a student of Gropius in the 1920s, the house’s two floors are crowned by a single pitched roof that emphasizes the clean lines of the design. In contrast, neighboring houses, over the years, had tacked new little rooms onto the original tiny rooms under low peaked roofs, which were covered, depending on availability, in assorted types of tiles set at different angles and which, best case scenario, had disappeared in recent years underneath the knotweed vines. Barbara and Claudia Schaechter believe that even from afar it is obvious that the residents of these houses had become resigned, and not only to the wild growth that had overtaken everything after the fall of the Wall.

Claudia understands the hardship of depression. It is for this reason that she has talked her sister into taking Sunday walks, down Spinatweg to Alpenrosenweg and Ligusterweg, pausing at the walls of the knotweed-vine houses, on the lookout for their occupants. If spotted going about their normal activities in their gardens or behind the curtains, the two sisters move on. But if they see no one they ring the bell. Then knock on the door if there’s no answer, and try to get in. That’s how they found old Achernkötter half-dead in his bathtub, where he had fallen and couldn’t get up. He had given up on himself and the world, which now appeared in the guise of two elegantly dressed women from nearby, who insisted that he not abandon it yet.

It all came to a good end, the Schaechter sisters called a paramedic and after two weeks in the hospital, followed by four weeks in rehab, Achernkötter returned home. With a great show of energy he cut down the knotweed vines, and since then slowly makes his way with his cane to the Gropius house to play a game of skat with the two or discuss why the hookup to the sewerage system had failed, a cause the sisters had

agitated for back in the old days and which, with help from their parents on petitions to the Central Committee of the party then in power, they believed to have advanced.

The longer the sewerage hookup was put off, the more indifferent everyone in the development became to it. Achernkötter and the two sisters appear to be the only ones who mind having to ask that their crap be carted away on a regular basis. They stuffed mailboxes with printed flyers urging their fellow citizens, over and over again, to keep at the water company on this issue, but even when they talk to their neighbors directly they get only resigned shrugs in return. Each time they have this discussion Achernkötter departs energized, agitated enough to keep himself alive for a few days longer.

Actually, everyone in the vicinity, even those who died long ago or have moved away, flit through the sisters’ heads for the length of time it takes them to sew on a button or drink a cup of coffee from the coffeemaker they purchased the year before. It is only Werner Kapok they wish to banish from their thoughts. Kapok, whom Barbara constantly prefers referring to as Kapo, after she read somewhere that in Albanian slang the word means “stool pigeon.” If she spends more time thinking about him than she wishes, she resorts to the interpretation that Kapo was introduced to south German craftsmen by itinerant Italian workmen as their word for “boss,” which, following the opening of the Dachau concentration camp, became part of camp jargon because members of the Bavarian workers’ movement were Dachau’s first prisoners.

His sister still resides in the house next door, which once had belonged to the Kapok children’s parents. Kapok never slips completely from the Schaechters’ thoughts, actually, and besides which, Renate seems to be looking at them through his eyes whenever they risk stopping for a chat over the garden wall while hanging out clothes or encounter her shopping. Claudia, like Barbara, tries to banish him from her thoughts, but for different reasons than her sister’s.

Today Claudia has bought mozzarella to serve between slices of tomato drizzled with olive oil and balsamic vinegar and topped with chopped basil leaves. She gives Barbara a call on her cell to save a trip upstairs, and asks her to join her in the kitchen for dinner. Tomorrow the first workmen arrive, and she already dreads it.

Night billows over the housing development, black muslin touched here and there with gold, points of light from a streetlamp. Nothing can be heard, no one is returning home late. It is the 24th of August, Kapok’s sister goes back to work at school the next day, the summer holidays are over. She has gone to bed early this evening.

Werner Kapok sits on the side of the terrace facing away from the Schaechters’, moving the candle lantern six feet from him, as he is afraid of insects. It is so quiet he can hear anything that approaches, so he stares spellbound at the candle, prepared to flee inside at the appearance of a hornet, say. The garden, all 800 square meters of it, surely requires chores all year round, chores he has long since forgotten about. It was here, in back of the house, that his parents once grew vegetables, strawberries, potatos even, planting marigolds and asters in the beds under the fruit trees and gooseberries and red currants along the fence. His sister has, to be sure, transformed each and every bed into lawn over the years, which she does have to mow, but this obviously is something she accomplishes thoroughly and neatly. At least the berry bushes still survive, they cast long shadows even at night, the red currants in particular have reached an amazing size. His sister could harvest berries from the end of June to the beginning of July, Kapok figures. She had baked a gooseberry meringue pie for his arrival. As he was eating it Kapok envisioned his elderly parents sitting at the table with them. She had even prepared red currant wine like in the old days.

He opens a beer and squints up at the dormer window. It stands open, barely visible, the glass gleams in the moonlight if the panes are open at a certain angle. It seems to Kapok that the darkness hesitates each time before risking a quick lunge into the room, only to draw back in fear at the next moment. Renate told him that Henry had lived there until roughly a year before. She doesn’t know where the boy is now, but he comes by once or twice a month, only to disappear again without a word once his clothes have been washed. He gambles whenever he can get his hands on some cash. She assumes he‘s selling his sexual services for the money.

He hasn’t seen his son’s mother for a solid twenty-six years, he doubts he would even recognize her if she walked right past him. The gaps between the times he had picked his son up in the past, for a weekend or a few days’ vacation together, had been large enough for him gradually to notice how bloated her body was becoming. The last

time he encountered her, when enrolling the boy for school, he was almost ashamed to be seen with her. Now, thinking of this, he can smell her: beef broth kept for too long, on the brink of turning sour. He shudders just as he is lifting the bottle to his lips, and the beer runs down his beard and drips onto his shorts. Kapok utters a curse. As he is wiping his chin with his left hand he hears light music coming from the Schaechter sisters’. Classical, like he sometimes plays at home in Trebsee on his ancient Rema andante with its wonderfully clear sound, his pride and joy assembled from the parts of two defunct radios. He puts his bottle on the table and sneaks under cover of the berry bushes over to the fence, eager to catch a glimpse of the ladies who today had tripped back their way back into his consciousness, on the far side of which he seems to have been waiting for them. They, too, are sitting behind their house, Claudia is filling two glasses from an open bottle of wine as Barbara, as if unconscious, is almost spilling out of her wicker chair, all four limbs stretching out in different directions. Claudia taps on the glass to bring her sister back from her drowsy dislocation, Kapok can feel the expression on her face more than he can see it, she’s standing behind the post supporting the wooden roof that extends the garage. But he has a clear view of Barbara as she opens her eyes and then appears to become aware of the center of her body; she pushes her rump back onto her seat, bending slightly forward to brace her arms, and gracefully folds her legs at a slight angle to her body, sharply drawing in her knees. The bluish tinge of her face, the result of the terrace lighting, irritates him and he must force himself to look at her. Age has caused her eyes to sink into their deep violet sockets, which they peer out from only with effort. Her nose has gotten even sharper. But what truly startles him is her mouth, which appears to have drawn in like that of a toothless old woman. Werner Kapok feels the hairs on his lower arms stand on end in fright. Time is a steam-driven pile driver that nothing can resist. He runs his tongue over his teeth, probing the three caps on the upper left side of his jaw. But on the lower right, the cost estimate had him leaping off the bridge, so to speak, that would have been necessary to close the gap there. He has convinced himself that he prefers this solution to the caps, where bits of food get caught and can be removed only with the vigorous application of a toothpick after meals, whereas on the lower right he can just work them loose with his tongue. If something gets really stuck and no one is looking, which is almost always the case at home in Trebsee, he simply uses the index

finger of his left hand to work it free. Faced with the aging Barbara Schaechter, he imagines stuffing a fat bratwurst into his mouth like a cigar and trying to mash it with his gums. A fat pork sausage can still remind him of when he was young and spent many of his holidays in Wölfis, in Thuringia. As a child he had been taken to many of the celebrations dedicated to meat and sausages made from freshly slaughtered pigs. The pork bouillon, blood sausage, liverwurst, knockwurst from those days all remain unrivaled in their flavor; only a few brands of cheap bratwurst still have something that tastes slightly similar to those days. He has tried to figure it out: marjoram, thyme? In the light from the terrace his eyes fall on the Schaechter sisters’ herb spiral, rampant with lemon balm, mint, borage, and savory, but overrun by the lovage. No, he simply can’t recall which ingredient it was that had given him such a sense of well-being.

To tomorrow! Claudia toasts her sister.

Barbara Schaechter laughs suddenly and reaches for the porcelain box on the table. She shoves something into her mouth that brings her face back from the far side of age and returns it to the present summer night.

They drink with pleasure, taking tiny sips, and place their glasses on the table.

From the bits of conversation he can hear, he takes it that the workmen will arrive the next morning at some ungodly hour, erect scaffolding around the house and begin tearing off the tarpaper in order to put on a new roof. Barbara gets up and goes into the house, then returns. The music changes to a slow jazz tune. Claudia stands and holds out her arms to her sister, leaning slightly backward.

The last thing he wants to watch is the two sisters dancing with each other.

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On Shrove Tuesday, 1962, the two sisters were dancing with each other at their kindergarten, to music on the radio. Barbara and Claudia, three and six years old respectively, made an excellent Hänsel and Gretel. Joachim Schaechter had his old Reflex-Korelle with him, which he had bought on the black market shortly after the war. Being familiar with its predecessor from the 1930s, he had been very happy to get his hands on one.

His daughters were fortunate that he had brought them here today, as it meant they hadn’t had to stand outside with their mother in the cold until the kindergarten opened at 6 a.m. And then he stayed for the celebration and took pictures, he didn’t have to ask anyone to smile: the children were leaping around, screeching with laughter. Five weeks before he had had an assignment to snap away at another location; he had left the Reflex-Korelle at home and instead had taken the Ercona II, which he had purchased four years before. He felt more secure with it on such occasions, though he couldn’t have said why. At the end of January an escape tunnel had been discovered at the train station on Wollankstrasse, and the story was made public at the beginning of February. The station, with its raised platforms, lay directly on the border between East and West Berlin. Though it was located in East Berlin territory, it could be entered only from the West Berlin side. An odd egg laid in one’s own nest, remarked Kurt Kapok in the offices of the Tribune, the mouthpiece of the Federation of German Trade Unions, where he had worked his way up from correspondent by the sweat of his proletarian brow -- something he set great store by even after his successful rise to full-time editor. Joachim Schaechter, in contrast, had gone to university and had never in his entire life produced one drop of proletarian sweat. Because he was an outstanding photographer it was often overlooked that he was an even better writer, but that was just as well to him in times such as these. If, for instance, he had had to write that the tunnel had been built to smuggle Western agents into the East, his hand probably would have turned to stone over the typewriter keys. He left things like that to Kurt Kapok, and later tried not to read the article, but he did contribute a photo, which Minister of Transport Kramer then exhibited to the journalists gathered for the press conference.

Kurt Kapok sensed that Schaechter didn’t produce proletarian sweat, which sometimes enraged him but often also led him to move up very close to Schaechter in order to take in his scent. He just didn’t know what it was he was smelling when, sitting right behind Schaechter, his would flare his nostrils to take in the ambient air. At the whiff of Perlonta, Kapok’s preferred aftershave, Schaechter would feel a trace of antipathy, but before this could be noticed would quickly turn his head and address the nose next to his ear to inquire what it was that it desired.

Kurt Kapok’s son, Werner, went to kindergarten with Schaechter’s daughters, he wore a little budenovka to the celebration that his mother must have sewn for him. Schaechter smiled when he saw the little fellow push his way between Barbara and Claudia, the children were very close, and now all three of them were dancing together. Schaechter pressed the shutter a number of times. The red star on Werner Kapok’s hat shone, it wasn’t, as was the original, made of red fabric, but rather displayed Lenin as a child at the white center of the pronged, shiny metal star that crowned the little cap like a huge brooch. Schaechter suddenly felt himself grow small at the sight of this boy, yes, he noticed how he shrank before the memory that threatened to overwhelm him. He tugged at the collar of his turtleneck, had to get more air and rushed outside. But there the cold glue of winter cemented his crossed arms to his chest; he took a couple of deep breaths and slipped back inside.

Barbara, still a bit pale following a bout of pneumonia, had returned to kindergarten only the day before. She had become fretful when she couldn’t find her father. It was only with effort that Schaechter unfolded his arms in order to take his daughter, who was quietly sobbing, from Frau Theuerkauf.

Do you know, he said, I think I’ll take her home, it’s too early. He dressed his daughter as quickly as he could in her heavy little black coat, which Frau Kapok had refashioned from the still good pieces of an old one. Frau Kapok had decorated the two front pockets with stitching in white wool, and had applied a good bit of Minchen to the collar. Minchen was the Schaechters’ black cat, struck down before Kapok’s eyes by one of the few cars that came swerving through the development. Experienced in the killing of rabbits, Kapok on the spur of the moment decided to take the animal behind the house, skin it, and give the pelt to his wife for the coat. Barbara was too small and Claudia too unsuspecting towards adults. When Barbara, delighted, buried her face in the collar of the coat for the first time, Schaechter was tempted for a moment to reveal its origin. He once had promised himself never to pull the wool over his children’s eyes…

He shook himself now, loudly wheezing, gave both Claudia and Werner a kiss, and shook Frau Theuerkauf’s hand before leaving the building.

It was Kapok who had seen to it that Schaechter could move with his family into one of the pre-fab cubes of the Eintracht development, the former occupants had made

their way to the West the summer before. He lived with his family in the house next door, so knew of the vacancy straightaway. Schaechter and his wife had worked in Moscow in the Fifties as correspondents of the party’s Central Organ, and had returned only two years before to rent a little hole-in-the-wall in the Köpenick district, stepping off the career ladder that, for the time being, was blocked to them. The Schaechters’ bourgeois tendencies were a thorn in Kapok’s eye, and not only Kapok’s. Joachim Schaechter had gotten a job on the Tribune, his wife a management position at the electric power plant on the Spree. The offer to move into a house was more than agreeable to them, they were incredulous when handed the housing allocation, but then they decided to get onboard.

Kapok’s wife, Henny, worked as a seamstress at the state-owned Fortschritt Menswear company and now and then enjoyed doing a good deed for the Schaechters, for which she did not wish to be repaid. Schaechter was astonished by the fact that after only a quick glance she could create something for the children that actually fit them. A few weeks after the cat disappeared, Kapok’s wife brought the coat by. Cilly Schaechter was a bit anxious as Barbara tried it on, but nothing happened.

Schaechter didn’t like the coat. It was as if he himself had worn it for years.

There was something alarming buried in this gloomy impression of his, but Schaechter let it lie, covered it up with his plans for the day.

Once home, he brewed a cup of chamomile tea for Barbara and considered what he would prepare for lunch. There were noodles and soup vegetables in the pantry, he dissolved some bouillon cubes and made vegetable noodle soup as Barbara sat quietly at her little table, drawing a bit and otherwise looking out at the terrace. They had put a birdhouse out there and filled it with oats and sunflower seeds. His daughter watched the birds in total silence, something that astounded him.

He sat down on the floor next to her and observed her for a long time from the side. Her short hair was so dark that the soft skin of her little face appeared almost translucent, he could see the veins and even, he believed, the blood pulsing at her temples, which brought tears to his eyes. At forty-three he no longer belonged to the generation of young fathers, to the middle-aged one at best. He had first laid eyes on Cilly around sixteen years before. At that point women were standing in line for him, he hadn’t even noticed Cilly at first, she had been so shy around him. Barbara had Cilly’s

high, curved forehead and small mouth with its drawn-in lips, but his pointed aquiline nose. Looking at her, Schaechter wondered that she wasn’t ten years older. Something that might have been possible. But perhaps he and Cilly had needed ten years to learn to trust each other.

The trail of scars from her nails had changed the landscape of his back. She had never been shy about drawing blood when sexually aroused, he had been surprised, paralyzed, actually, the first time she so violently lost control. But barely had he gotten over it the first time when he found himself craving again and again the pain she had inflicted on him. Her way of sleeping with him was nothing like that of her predecessors. She neither purred nor sighed, was imploring and demanding and very serious about it, which confused him at first. Until Cilly, he had fun picking up women on a regular basis. Bittersweet caramels. But from the beginning Cilly made no effort to conceal her imperfections from him, which required that he ignore her, disregard her for a time. Over the course of his first night with her, the “fun” was hard-won, exhausting, but ever since he knew exactly how whole a woman could make him feel.

He enjoyed this as a secret he had no difficulty hiding. Staring at his daughter’s cheek he was overcome by the desire to put his arms around her, he had to make an effort not to hug her too tightly.

They didn’t have a phone yet, a fact not really conducive to his work. In order to inform editorial that he was staying home he would have to find a public phone. He regretted not thinking of this earlier. Kurt Kapok had a telephone, but he had long since gone to work, of course. He could hardly dress Barbara once again, weak as she was, and take her with him, the next phone booth was at the train station, and he didn’t have the heart to leave her by herself, even if he’d only be gone for twenty minutes. He wouldn’t want to leave her even if she were asleep, the idea that she might awake with a start, alone, distressed him. Cilly didn’t know that he had taken Barbara home either, but she would find out when she went to pick up the children that afternoon and found only Claudia there. As he was thinking about all of this, staring out at the street lost in thought, he saw Henny Kapok locking her door to leave the house. He quickly opened a window and gave a whistle, she spotted him right away and came over when he waved. He asked her to call his office if she had the time, and explained the situation to her. She laughed

and said that she was on her way to the second shift at the factory and had wanted to leave earlier to have lunch with a friend and then walk to work with her. He was surprised at her parting gesture -- she raised two fingers to her forehead. He’d only ever seen men do this. She unlocked her door again, to call Kapok or somebody else at the Tribune.

Barbara fell asleep on the sofa before she had her soup. He fetched the feather comforter from her room, covered her with it and put two or three coals on the fire. Then he too stretched out, seated in the armchair with his arms crossed behind his head and feeling what he thought was contentment.

Kurt Kapok got the call from his wife shortly before he broke for lunch. So he wouldn’t, as planned, be able to send Schaechter to certain cities around the country for a report on the new mandatory conscription for men born between 1940 and 1943. Hopefully he’d be back at work the next day. He had more than once suggested to Schaechter and his wife, who also was fully employed, that they enroll their children in the electric plant’s weeklong daycare, where they would be well taken care of. But he hadn’t even been able to convince his own wife of this idea. Henny couldn’t imagine seeing Werner only on weekends. Instead, she arranged with Cilly Schaechter, who worked the regular shift, that she take Werner to kindergarten now and then or pick him up with her own daughters if their shifts conflicted with their husbands’ work schedules. Actually, it was Henny Kapok’s mother -- she had moved from the Rhineland to be near them -- who often picked up Werner to take him home with her, sometimes he spent the night with her as well. But she occasionally had other plans, and then the Schaechters were asked.

Kurt Kapok gave an angry shrug, he didn’t want to dwell on his lack of assertiveness. He would put the conscription story off until the next day.

Schaechter’s scarf was lying on the desk, he must have forgotten it the day before. In an unobserved moment Kurt Kapok buried his face deep in the hand-knitted object.

He couldn’t name the scent.

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On August 25, 2014, Werner Kapok gets up early enough to see the sun rise. He hadn’t needed to set his alarm, as the workmen arrived next door at 5:30 to begin erecting scaffolding around the house. His sister gets up fifteen minutes later. Her return to routine initially elicits nothing more from her than a brief resigned sigh. Only as she sits down with a cup of coffee and starts to think about the students who soon will be sitting before her -- tanned, some with sun-bleached hair -- does a feeling of warmth come over her. She still can’t believe that, after not hearing from him for 24 years, her brother is sitting across the table from her. She keeps giving him probing looks. Never once in his absence had she gone in search of him, only too clearly had he said good-bye to everything and gone away. The fact that her husband, Klaus, died six years before was something she had informed him of only last week, following his first letter to her since he left.

For a moment, Werner Kapok is unsure whether or not he should disturb her in her routine. He himself does not take such disturbances well. The way he sees it, when one lives alone one is virtually dependent on rituals to usher in the day. Put on water for coffee, turn on the heat, shave, cut two slices of bread, set out marmalade, cold cuts and cheese, mix some muesli with yoghurt or buttermilk. To have someone else looking on is irritating. The first time he felt this he had reined himself in, but behind his strained friendliness was a feeling like a barely concealed urge to urinate, one was glad to finally have an opportunity to relieve oneself. Before he even allowed a woman to enter his apartment he would unceremoniously announce that she would only be a bother to him the next morning, and if she couldn’t deal with that, well then, it was better not to come in at all. Most of them, of course, didn’t believe him and would try applying their charms, but not one of them succeeded in coming between him and his rituals. It’s possible that he is bothering his sister in the same way, and stops to ask himself: Does she have rituals? Yesterday she preferred black tea with breakfast, today strong coffee with milk. Yesterday she ate a slice of cake, today porridge. Yesterday she wore her hair down, today it’s gathered into a tight bun. He’s willing to credit this to the transition from holidays to workday, but it irritates him that he has to pay attention to it at all. She doesn’t shut her mouth often, she talks a lot. He likes that, it suits his silence, which has

increased over the years, complements it imperceptibly so that there’s no worry about his not contributing to the conversation.

She talks about old neighbors, who now have yielded to new ones, about the children conceived in the housing development in the last 20 years and who in two cases are now a mother, or, respectively, a father themselves, about bakers and greengrocers who are long gone. So many words spill from her mouth that he is tempted to count them all. He gets only so far and then comes a word that triggers a memory. He pursues it for while before starting over again with his counting, and again doesn’t get very far.

Now his sister starts talking about Claudia and Barbara, they won’t have an easy time of it for the next few weeks, maybe for months, even. Having workers in the house is always a challenge.

Claudia and Barbara…

Werner Kapok is looking out the kitchen window at the neighboring house, when the door opens. Barbara and Claudia step out, their eyes on the roofers, who still haven’t worked their way up to the roof yet. Barbara is dressed nicely, spiffed up for work, Henny would have said. Is she going to work? Renate answers Kapok’s inquisitive look with a nod, yes, she always leaves at this hour, climbs into her Mini and dashes off, she has to drive over to the city hall in Hellersdorf, where her office is.

Claudia has placed a tray with two thermoses of coffee for the workers atop the brick fence pillar, milk and sugar, now she brings out cups and a big platter of open-faced sandwiches. He notes that his ritual is fading: he could well imagine open-faced sandwiches for breakfast. He smiles. His sister pauses when she sees the smile cross his lips.

No, not that.

She intones this so bitingly in the morning air that Werner Kapok envisions the airspace between them being split in two. Drawing his next breath, he pulls his head back out of her space to get enough oxygen to breathe.

Have no fear, little sister. It’s over. One way or the other.

Renate gathers herself and stands up, points out meat and vegetables to him in the refrigerator. If he wishes. But he can also do whatever he wants, of course. Go out, take a walk, boat across the Wannsee.

Yes, he thinks to himself, and then says it out loud.

[END OF SAMPLE]