

Sample Translation

Muri Darida: *King Cobra*

Synopsis and translation by Sharon Howe

Synopsis

This haunting, multi-layered novel traces the odyssey of a victim of child sexual abuse who, 20 years on, decides to take revenge on their abuser. Lazi, who is of mixed German and Hungarian parentage, returns to the Hungarian village of Ózbarna, where they spent part of their childhood, with the aim of smuggling their late grandfather András's hunting rifle out of the country in order to shoot the perpetrator, a relative on the German side of the family.

Lazi's journey and reunion with the Hungarian clan triggers a series of flashbacks, giving us oblique insights into the events of the intervening years. Despite a warm and sympathetic reception, all their attempts to discover why they were farmed out here as a youngster are met with a wall of silence. They appear to have been traumatised by something that happened to them previously, while staying with their German grandparents, and this has since led to a breakdown, extensive therapy and gender reassignment surgery. A cocktail of alcohol, nicotine, testosterone and unsatisfactory sexual encounters is clearly taking its toll on Lazi's physical and mental health.

Running through the novel is the motif of the snake (hence the title): first used as a bogeyman figure to discipline the child, it evidently became associated in their mind with sexual violence, and still remains a source of recurrent nightmares for them. It also has a strong symbolic role in the novel, as cobras are said to be vengeful: "The cobra remembers your face, and no matter where you run: before you die, it will find you".

Despite the dark subject matter, there is gentle comedy in the portrayal of Lazi's colourful cast of Hungarian relatives, including Zsófi, who teaches Lazi to shoot, and Zsuzsa, who, after swearing Lazi to secrecy, hands over the gun along with a letter from Lazi's mother Erina to her father, András, in which Lazi finally learns the truth. Erina, it seems, suffered a botched abortion at the hands of her sister Mónika, who then failed to come to her rescue (hence her ostracization by the rest of the family). The letter is a plea to her father to forgive her, and in the meantime to take care of the young Lazi, who cries whenever they are sent to their other grandparents. Here at least is some objective evidence that Lazi's nightmares were real.

Throughout this whole adventure, Lazi has Hamlet-like moments of indecision. A video journalist by profession, they have told the family they are making a film as a cover story for their visit. But perhaps, instead of shooting their abuser, they should indeed shoot a film of their own life story, and use it to bring into the open the long-hidden truth?

Meanwhile, Lazi is commissioned to do a report on the Pride march in Budapest, where the solidarity of the LGBT community helps them to feel connected, and where they experience their first truly loving and fulfilling sexual relationship.

Just before the ending of the novel, there is an unexpected twist where the narrator (and occasional translator) hands over to Lazi herself, who proceeds to relate the dramatic last scene in the first person. In it, Lazi disrupts their German grandfather's funeral ceremony and aims the gun at the intended victim in the congregation. Though what follows is left ambiguous, the implication is that the actual shooting is done with a camera: in an echo of the earlier cobra story, Lazi writes "I look at you, and not only that: I take your picture". Lazi is no longer the victim, but the cobra, taking revenge for themselves and everyone like them, and a stand for tolerance and openness.

Sample Translation

FYI: many of the Hungarian words in the text are left untranslated, leaving it up to the reader to imagine or research!

pp. 11-22

1. Genesis – The Carpet Crawlers

“Hold your breath, now!”

The child puffed out its cheeks and looked to the right: fabric wallpaper on the walls. Coconut fibre, mocha brown.

Straight ahead: Grandpa András, on his cracked leather executive chair. András looked back at the child and winked, setting the bristles in his eyebrows aquiver. The child could have sworn he heard them rustle.

To the left: a photo of András on the desk, one hand resting on the stock of his hunting rifle, the other holding something indistinguishable.

András burst the child’s ballooned cheek with his thumb and forefinger. Pop! He gave a creaky laugh, like a buffalo jogging over old floorboards inside his chest.

András struck a match on the phosphorus strip of the matchbox. In slow motion, he held the flame up to his moustache and pursed his lips into an open ooh, peering over his spectacles to make sure the child was watching. Just before the flame touched his teeth, András blew it out with a haaa, and closed his mouth over the matchhead, extinguishing it with a hiss. The child would like to have climbed onto András’s lap, but as there wasn’t room for it between his belly and the table, it rested its chin on the desktop instead.

András tapped the child on the nose. His fingers smelt of burnt-out cigarettes and matchheads. And of him: a whiff of tobacco, aftershave – strong and spicy – and sweat. “Psssh!”

Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock.

“Telefonálok!” shouted András, and the knocking subsided into a murmur of apology.

The child held its breath until its head began to ache, and András too was silent for several seconds.

He stole a look at the door, at the window. Both were shut.

Then he struck a new match and whipped his forefinger through the worm of fire.

The child stuck out a forefinger from its clenched fist. Ready to split the flame in turn, the blue from the orange. But at the last minute, it recoiled. The match had looked perfectly like a match just a moment ago, but now that the flame had gnawed at it, it was curling up into a thin black stalk.

András suggested the child wet its finger with spit before whipping it – “hupsz!” – through the flame. (Sz is pronounced as a sibilant S.)

“Ez az!” András applauded.

“What’s ez az?”

“That’s it.” András smoothed his eyebrows with his little finger.

“Andópa, what do I say when I feel like this?” The child lifted its chin, pursed its lips and shimmied its shoulders. “Show me again”, said the child’s grandfather, and it thrust its nose even higher into the air.

“Büszke.”

The child pointed to itself. “Büszke!”

“Whenever you want to feel like that” – András blew the ash particles off his papers – “then make a little fire and think of me.”

The child closed its eyes in concentration, letting the feeling flow into the furthest recesses of its body in the hope that it would become lodged there.

When it opened them again, András was holding the box of matches up to his face with both hands and studying the writing through the lower part of his spectacles. He took an envelope and swept the burnt-out matches into a miniature pyre, elegantly crooking a little finger – the only one with a long nail. Erina had always claimed her father used it to pick his nose. But later on, when the child

became an adult named Lazi, it would learn that men of András's sort let one fingernail grow to show that they were no longer – or never had been – manual workers. After all, András was the boss of his own carpet company with offices in the south of Germany and here in Özbarna.

When the desk telephone rang, András gestured to the door. The child went out and pushed it to, though not all the way. Once outside, it continued to ape the “diddle-oo-doo” of the ring tone, until András threw something at the door.

After that, the child loitered for a while in the corridor watching the time clock and counting the tick-tocks. Tick-one, tock-two, tick-three, tock-four. “Counting” meant saying the numbers up to ten in Hungarian, and up to twenty in German, getting in a muddle when you ran out of fingers to count on, and starting all over again. At tock-eight, András came wheezing out of the door.

“That’s a very old clock”, said András, “instead of registering each minute, it counts in intervals.” His voice crackled like a log in the hearth and had a slightly whining intonation, stretching the vowels, lingering over the Ls and rolling the Rs.

The child prodded András's trouser pocket. “What are interr-vaalls?”

András covered the cigarette packet with one hand and scratched his head with the other. In Lazi's memory, his entire hairline migrated from his forehead to the back of his head as he did so, oda-vissza, back and forth.

“Divisionsz of time”, he said, and made as if to cross the corridor to the toilet. But the child was old enough to notice that, instead of turning off after the indoor plant, he made a staged detour before heading towards the factory.

The shop floor was a geometrically regimented world of cylinders, dusty air and PVC-and-straw smells. To escape notice, the child lay out flat on a coconut fibre rug, nose pressed against the herringbone pattern. The strands of the rug were tightly parted: pigtails with split ends.

From the transistor radio came the soft whimper of Jimmy Zámbo's *Fogadj őrőkbe* (Gather me).

Someone trotted briskly across the factory floor to inform his colleague that he was a mean son of a bitch, then returned to the forklift truck after making a detour to plant a caramel cream in the hand and a kiss on the head of the young bug-in-a-rug. "Fogadj őrőkbe most és mind őrőkre, fogadj be csendesen, ha túl közel jöttél", the workers sang along with Jimmy Zámbo. (Gather me to you, now and forever, gather me softly, when you came too close to me.)

A metal sign said in red letters: "Tilos a dohányzás" (No smoking). The child couldn't read. It could only look on as Grandfather András took a silver Zippo out of his breast pocket and lit up with a metallic click.

"Why is your finger black?" Erina stood at the end of the rug, the cork soles of her sandals touching its cotton border.

"Mama, did you know that interr-vaalls are deficient of time?" The coir strands tickled its lips as it spoke.

"Why is your finger black?" Erina pointed to the sooty shadow with her big toe. "And it's *divisions* of time."

"But Andópa said deficient."

"Grandpa Andó talks nonsense sometimes."

András had stubbed out his cigarette with his foot and given a staff member an earful for smoking on the factory floor, "a kurva anyádat!"

"Mama, what does a kurva anyádat mean?" the child asked.

"I don't know, ask him yourself."

With the tip of its nose, the child tapped out the ringtone of András's phone into the tufts of the rug.

"Diddle-oo-doo!"

"I hope you two haven't been playing with matches, Baba?"

András turned hastily towards the exit, staring at his watch.

“Rina, don’t make such a fuss –”

“Diddle-oo-doo!”

“Baba, everything here is made of paper, straw and coconut fibre, and there’s the pigsty next door, that will burn down with it -”

“Then we’ll have smoked sausage for tea.”

“Diddle-oo-doo!”

“Hell’s bells, will you give it a rest!” (András and Erina, in unison).

The carpet factory had three offices. These were taboo. In fact most things were taboo, except for standing in front of the time clock and counting. The biggest taboo of all – and András and Erina were remarkably unanimous on this point – was crawling inside the rolled-up carpets. According to András, you would find snakes lurking there that had come over to Hungary on the boat. According to Erina, you would be speared by the forklift carpet boom and tossed onto the truck. And then what? Then you would break your neck.

The child zig-zagged through the serried ranks of tubes, glanced around, and stopped in front of a roll that was lying on its side. A coir carpet with a midnight blue border. Just a quick peep inside, then a second, followed by a shoe. The child rubbed its bare feet along the inside of the carpet, the fibres scratching its soles, and was suddenly so far in that only its backside remained sticking out. It could see the shoe just an arm’s length or two further in.

It would have to ask Grandfather or Mother to fish the shoe out. But that meant that one of them would have to creep inside the roll. Andópa wouldn’t fit. And if Mother crept in, she too could be thrown onto the truck and end up with a broken neck and then... The child knew that if Mother was

no longer there, then ... and the *then* panged its way into the child's body, pang-pang-pang. Harder and harder, from the bottom up, thrusting into its pelvis, as if someone were driving a hammer drill into its lower body. Deeper and deeper it was forced into the tube, until it hit the shoe, like a door hitting a stop. The child listened for the sound of the motor, waited for the sensation of the fork scooping it up and tossing it onto the truck, the crunch of its own neck. But apart from the humming of the machines and occasional shouts from the factory floor, all was still. No one called the name that prevented the adult Lazi from remembering their earlier self in the first person.

After a while inside the tube, the child began to feel its way along the links in the weave of the carpet. Its forefinger alighted on a particularly fine thread. It was soft and tickled its fingertip. The child felt for the thread; it jerked back into the seam and out again. The end was split, as if bisected with the finest pair of scissors in the world. Pinching its thumb and forefinger together, the child grasped the thread, and was drawn by a pain-distorted growl into a deeper layer of the carpet.

The split thread flared, accompanied by a steady hiss. After each ssss, it disappeared between geometrically arranged plates, smooth and dry. They intersected like tiny tessellated bathroom tiles. The child traced them with a finger and felt the shape of a skull. Beneath it, muscles. A neck. Slowly, the upper part of the body uncoiled itself and rose up, vertebra by vertebra. The child tried to scream, but no sound came out. Every time it opened its mouth, the monster inside the carpet opened its jaws wide and severed a link in the fabric with two fangs. The world unravelled in breathless slow motion.

Erina's two eyes peered into the roll. Her gaze dragged the child out of the layers, back into the air and out of the tube. The child began to cry with relief. From its mother's body came a faint mechanical ticking. Tick-tick-tick.

“Sugarplum”, she began quietly, “are you *completely*” (gathering momentum) “out of your tree?”, these last words a screech of despair, as if András had downed a bird from its branches with his hunting rifle.

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Lazi disinfected their hands with Sterilium Virugard. The clinical odour of alcohol pierced their skull as the train inched its way out of the Berlin terminus. Lazi’s fingers felt no cleaner than before. The rain dissolved the dirt on the window pane; Lazi’s eyes followed the streaks as they slid, tadpole-like, down the glass and disappeared into the rubber seal.

Hungaria EuroCity, direct to Budapest. Past the rugged grey clifftops of Saxon Switzerland. The slimy brown waters of the Elbe licked at its banks. In Bad Schandau, three people who were visibly Nazis got out, along with others. The Elbe drew the train away from the cliffs towards the sun, to Prague. Everything here looked yellow. The houses, the scant vowels on the station signs, the trdelník and Becherovka Lazi imagined behind the front doors. Lazi hated being unable to read signs, unable to make sense of loudspeaker announcements, unable to imagine the people here eating anything other than the stuff sold at German Christmas markets. The inseparable words dripped into your ears and clogged them up. They couldn’t drain off into your brain, and chafed against the walls of your mind.

The train ploughed on obliviously for hours, to Brno. Shortly before the Slovakian border, Lazi watched the woman on the next seat dissect a sand-coloured muffin, then poured herself some coffee into the cap of their thermos flask, tore open the bright pink pack of hazelnut wafers and broke off small squares. They tasted of the sticky summer days when Lazi’s grandfather would ferry

the child from one aunt to another in Ózbarna, where it would be fed with Neapolitan wafers and caramel creams. Lazi dunked the biscuits in their coffee.

Slovakia was greener. The trees bent protectively over the mountains, shielding them from the sun and the gawping eyes of passing travellers. Bratislava. Lazi had only been here once before; they had passed through in András's Mercedes to avoid the traffic jams outside Vienna.

Usually, András would rattle straight through via Passau to Vienna. There they would stop at the service station at Alland. After being suspended over the toilet by András's wife Gerda, the child's small body was set down on one of the metal seesaw horses. András would take a photo with a big bulky camera; his index or middle finger usually made a guest appearance at the left-hand edge of the prints. Following Erina's instructions, Gerda fed the child wholemeal cheese sandwiches with slices of unpeeled cucumber. András would throw in some Yogurettes to lure it back into the child's seat.

“Andó –

“Yoghurt's good for you”.

Then Gerda would eat one too, pinching her midriff with a sigh. She insisted on being addressed as Gerda, not Grandma. Lazi had never questioned this as a child, and it was only after her death a couple of years ago that they had wondered whether she had simply felt too young to be a grandma. Or whether she had deliberately left that place free for Lazi's real grandmother, whose life had ended in unexplained circumstances in a bathtub in southern Germany, shortly before her thirty-eighth birthday.

They normally stopped again at Göttlesbrunn, though ostensibly only long enough for András to coax his doctored toll sticker for Hungary onto the windscreen with spit. But more often than not they wouldn't get away until Gerda had been talked into sitting the child on the lion statue outside

the services. There were no photos of this – András needed to get a move on God dammit, and Lazi remembered the lion as a great imposing sculpture.

“Have you two finished your safari, or do we have to wait for elephants as well?” András would cry, and Gerda’s hasty fingers would get caught up in the tangle of child seatbelt fasteners.

On this occasion though, András had ducked under Vienna and sped on to Bratislava.

“Why do they spell the river Fischa with an ‘a’?”

“How should I know, Gerra? Am I Professor Fischa or something?”

It was the last long summer, from June to September. The last one before the start of school. The last one when the young Lazi had been in Hungary long enough to say “hello” when parting from the German members of the family after the enrolment ceremony. (As is possible in Hungarian).

András had sweated so much that his toupee tapes – or “stickies”, as Gerda affectionately called them – were coming unstuck from his scalp. He taught the child an anti-Russian song from the 50s to the tune of *Katyusha*, the Soviet war song sung to the departing army.

“No eggs, no corn, no barley, the hen has croaked”, he translated, and the child laughed till it cried. (He didn’t translate “Fuck you, Sasha, hand over the watches”). Lazi still thought to this day that the words meant “Watch out, Sasha”. Their grandfather told them how Russian soldiers had robbed his father, uncle and grandfather of their watches after the war.

“Arms covered in watches, up to here!” He jabbed the edge of his hand against the crook of his elbow.

“For God’s sake, Andó, keep your hands on the wheel when you’re doing a hundred and eighty”, Gerda cried, and András yelled back at her not to make such a fuss. As on all their trips to Hungary, Gerda suffered from bloating and tried in vain to ease the wedding ring from her swollen finger.

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15: Zsuzsa Cserháti – Boldogság, gyere haza

Once the three of them were in bed, Lazi pulled out Gyula Krúdy's 1966 *Book of Dreams* from the bookshelf and went to sit on the veranda.

The purple ribbon marker lay darkly between two pages full of short e's and longer é's: ébresztőóra (alarm clock), ecet (vinegar), édesség (sweets), ég (sky), egér (mouse), éjszaka (night). Lazi cast an eye over the meanings; some words only made sense when read aloud. Dreaming of sweets meant you could expect a romantic kaland. Kaland, kaland, kaland... Lazi twirled the fringed end of the ribbon between their fingers, separating the threads.

Kaland meant adventure. As the penny dropped, Lazi's hand twitched, plucking a thread from the ribbon. Lazi shook it to the ground and looked up the letter K. K for adventure. K for snake (Kígyó).

From nearby: a hissing sound. (Sziszegés).

Lori peered through the balustrade and gave a human-like scream. With his tail between his legs, he stared at Lazi, his perpetually sticky eyes frozen in terror.

Lazi got up, stepped on something neither hard nor soft, stumbled forwards, bumped into the table leg and smacked their shin against the crossbeam, the same one that Mónika had thrown her slipper at.

Lazi sat on the floor, being sized up. A body slithered around the table leg and rose up vertebra by vertebra. Smooth dorsal scales in olive green. Flared hood. On its head, nine large symmetrical plates, intersecting like tiny tessellated bathroom tiles. (Szay, haven't we met somewhere before?)

The cobra uncoiled itself from the chair leg and flipped onto its left side, exposing its belly. At the lower left end of its first quintile, in the place where its heart should have been, there was a piece missing.

Lazi stared at the spot and saw: nothing. Not nothing as in when you close your eyes, but nothing as if your eyes had never seen anything, as if eyes had never existed before, as if there had never been anything to see. Simply nothing, total negation, in the absence of all imagination.

The snake tapped the nothing with the tip of its tail. Lazi felt a pressure in their belly, as if a balloon full of water was sinking through their lower body. Their eyelids were pinned to the ridge of their brow. Their neck remained rigid, incapable of turning. Lazi felt the back of their head melt until their hair and eyes ended up on their shoulders.

One by one, their breasts exploded, along with the binder, and Lazi saw the nipples land three metres away on the veranda tiles. As they attempted to haul themselves forward, their kneecaps cracked open. Lazi's calves and feet started running and plunged in tandem through the red-brown bars Lori was always sticking his nose through. Their hands grabbed their behind and returned it to its place on the bench, where their thighs dangled for a moment before thudding to the floor. Lazi's arms clicked out of their sockets, rolled up Lazi's torso and deposited it next to the doormat.

A lung unfurled its lobes and flew a few circuits of the yard, while their heart went on pumping away to itself next to the distiller. Lori had retrieved it and spat it out again: presumably the twitching had tickled his palate.

The cobra slithered up the table leg, worked its way around the plastic tablecloth clips and proceeded to circle Lazi's eye socket. It rose up silently, vertebra by vertebra, looked Lazi's eyes in the eyes and flared its neck, then turned elegantly to the right to expose the void on its left side.

Lazi's unknotted eyes could only gaze

and gaze

and gaze

and gaze

and gaze

Lazi's memory lay in the ears on the tablecloth, in the veins of the lung hovering above the neighbour's land, rolled up in the torso beside the doormat; it pumped inside the heart next to the distiller and ran around the yard alongside itself in the feet.

The memory vibrated between the thighs under the table. In the back of Lazi's head, that lay in the exact spot that the whole of Lazi had occupied before being forced to gaze into the void.

It's me, szívem csücske. The cobra shaped its body into a bulging heart. *I am the story of your life.*

16: The Cranberries – Dreams

The sun heaved itself over the veranda roof, and Marcsi appeared through the fly screen.

“Have you been sleeping outdoors?”

Lazi opened their eyes and felt a pricking in their eyelids. Their right cheek lay on a piece of black elastane. They slowly circled their wrists, which felt as if they had been screwed on back to front.

Every movement made their chest burn as if several ribs had been broken overnight and not stuck

together again properly. Their breathing was remarkably good in the circumstances. But their lungs still quivered with wanderlust and their heart pumped out an acrid odour of dog's breath and burned in four places, as if nothing would ever be well again. Lazi's body lay under the table on the cushion that had been on the bench the evening before, and looked the same as always except that the two curves over their chest had vanished. Lazi's face lay next to Lori's rear. The dog's jaws were chewing on some mince.

"Lori, what are you doing on the veranda?" cried Marcsi, reaching for the Educator¹ on the table.

"Oh, there's your earring, drága." Lazi felt the unfamiliar ridges at the back of their head - presumably scales - and their eyes scoured the veranda for the snake body. But all they found were the two nipples in a corner, a good three metres away from Lazi. Otherwise everything was the same as before, only completely different. Marcsi gave a Lori hard stare, but thought better of dragging all 45 kilos of him into the yard by the collar. Cursing incomprehensibly, she edged herself onto the bench on her side of the table, lifted the tablecloth and looked down at Lazi.

"Have you been crying all night, honeybun?"

Lazi squinted up at her.

"Did you get shagged?" (Bebasztál, did you get wasted?)

Lazi continued to squint.

Marcsi beckoned to the wretched specimen under the table, and Lazi crawled out awkwardly to sit beside her on the bench. Slumping onto Martha's breast, they sank into the fug of stale smoke and rose day cream and surrendered to her rocking. Lazi tried to cry, but there were no tears in the tank.

"It's hard, it's not easy", Marcsi crooned, until Lazi's breathing deepened. "Don't you want to go to bed? It's only five. I only get up this early because I've got used to it over the last fifty years." (Forty years of shift work, but because her pension wasn't enough, Marcsi had been cleaning up after the tourists in the holiday apartments down by the riverside for ten years to earn some "pocket money".)

Lazi sniffed.

¹ This is explained previously: a plastic bottle filled with nails which the family shake to make the dog behave.

“Have you been dreaming about those nasty snakes again?” Marcsi drew her lips into a disdainful triangle.

Lazi stood up, holding their back.

“My train leaves at three, and I wanted to ask Zsuzsa a favour before I go.”

Marcsi’s triangle tightened and stayed that way until Lazi gathered something from the floor.

“What are you looking for?”

My earbuds”, said Lazi, slipping the two nipples into their trouser pocket. “Got them.”

[...]

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40: Gloria Gaynor – I Will Survive

Also inside the envelope are a few driving documents, a payment reminder, a postcard of Rügen from Erina, a card from Erina dated May 1999 that read: *Baba, did you get my letter? Please, please let me know.* And then, on that weird shiny paper, a fax from Mónika. I’ll look at it in a minute. But I need a quick smoke first. Jesus Christ. I can’t even roll the thing, for fuck’s sake. Do I feel an emotion? Yes. Anger. If Bavaria hadn’t pissed around with its stupid Pregnancy Assistance Supplementation Act, the whole of Germany would have ensured proper access to safe abortions, then I would never have been sent to my grandparents, and I’d be having a nice trip to Hungary now to connect with my ancestors and push together the two stools I fall between, just like other people. Instead, here I am with a gun in the boot. Although: that’s comparing apples with oranges. Or is it? Poor Mama. A shock to know that she was so... helpless. Why did she never tell me about it: I would have understood... hang on, hang on, hang on. Where’s that bit? Here: *The poor mite seemed quite hysterical recently when Heinrich and Elizabeth came to collect it again. I don’t think the child’s so happy there any more.*

OK. That tells me something. She did notice something after all.

I know that car. A sorbet yellow Volkswagen Caddy, hi, Angelika again at last. She gives me a hug, shakes Zsófi's hand and dashes to the toilets.

How professionally the two of them manage the handover of the gun from one car boot to the other: impressive. So long, Zsófi, I owe you one, big time. For the rest of your life. The lump in my throat swells as Zsófi's Golf filters into the line of traffic.

I mustn't forget to test the camera. It's on the rear seat. The batteries are charged. I'll check them again tonight.

Angelika is listening to Michelle Gurevich and other sadcore lesbian music again. The roof tiles grow redder as soon as we cross the border. The nearer we get to Vienna, the more immaculate the green spaces.

We *have* to stop at Göttlesbrunn service station – come on, Angelika. That lion statue on the way in. I remember it as a mighty figure, presiding regally over the entrance like the ones outside the Munich Residenz. What I see here looks like a street dog on crack that's rammed its head through a plate-sized sunflower. I want to take a selfie to send to Kinga. We buy a bottle of pop and a packet of crisps. I try not to make crumbs. Angelika fiddles with the plastic bottle top. Keep your hands on the wheel on the autobahn, can't you! A volcano of orangeade fizzes over her forearm.

Angelika dodges the traffic jam; she loves minor roads. Haha, there's the "Fischa²" sign. I don't want to talk about the letter. Should I tell Mama that I know, and break my promise to Zsuzsa? Or should I lie and act towards her as if I didn't know what I know?

I tell Angelika about Kinga. She listens. Stimulated, and slightly tense. It feels weird being able to make sense of all the place names at first sight again, not just the ones I already know. Angelika says she knows what it's like. The fear of being surprised by an entirely predictable pain.

² For info: this refers back to a previous journey.

We stop again in Alland. I fetch some chips and remember the bottom lip that bobbed like a boat and its sailor at the club. Angelika buys a choc ice. We sit down to eat on the metal rocking horse and argue over whether rocking horse is one word or two. Rockinghorse looks ridiculous, she says. Oh well, there are worse things. YES, she exclaims. Like irregardless. Darling Angelika, how I've missed her.

I can't help it: I have to tell Angelika about the letter. If only I'd crossed my fingers behind my back when Zsuzsa made me swear not to. Angelika listens for a long time. How I feel about it, I can't say. Is it normal not to feel any emotion? Yet I do feel something. The surprise of not being surprised. Like a sequence from a dream you've forgotten but stored the atmosphere of in your body. Angelika calls this instinct, and talks about the secrets in her family.

In Linz we take a break because Angelika has been at the wheel all day, and I'm not recognisable from the photo on my driving licence. We eat at the guesthouse Waldesruh. Angelika books us a room and asks whether my black clothes are clean. A glance at my shirt and trousers: both are almost clean. Am I nervous? Too tired. When I come back into the room after cleaning my teeth, there's a small parcel on my pillow. Inside is a pink kerchief. Angelika, what a sweetheart. I've wanted a bandana like that for ages.

And off I drift. I dream I have a brother. His name is Ferenc and he is almost identical to me, but has dark hair like Mama and Andópa. We eat prune men³ in the summerhouse and play pat-a-cake. Sour coffee, lukewarm eggs. Angelika drinks black tea with her breakfast and chatters nonstop. She is excited and elated; a new day at last. In the car, I want to listen to the oldies station, Angelika to Deutschlandfunk. We pass Passau, then all the places ending in "ing."

Nearly there, that's our exit, crikey, Angelika, don't shout at me, I thought you knew the exit, it's on the satnav for God's sake. Man! No, of course I don't mean *you*. Yes, you are shouting.

³ A traditional sweetmeat typically sold at Christmas markets, rough UK equivalent would be a gingerbread man

We don't speak. I look out of the window; the trees are so Germanly green, the road is so Germanly wide, the clouds today are Germanly grey. That neutral smell of exhaust fumes, rain and cleanliness.

Angelika has accepted my olive branch and switched on the oldies station. I shrug my shoulders and flick my fingers to the beat: Diana Ross, *Chain Reaction*. My coming-out song!

We stop again for an espresso. We part ways at the toilets; I wish us both luck and gel my hair back, then ruffle it up again, part the front bit in the middle and sweep the long bits over my temples. My trousers fit perfectly; the shirt is tight. Angelika has applied some berry-coloured lipstick. On the way out, she shakes a cloud of Yves Saint Laurent from her hair.

The sky is now a blaze of blue overarching the chapel on the hill. Below it are thick lines, a winding S with a dozen twists and turns. The Caddy's tyres crunch over the gravel. We are impeccably late; the car park is full of cars and devoid of people, the chapel doors closed. I can't believe my luck.

Like a prayer, Madonna. The world and my heart are beating in time.

A voice message from Kinga. My heart beats even faster; I can hear it hammering against the linen. I hear your voice, it's like an angel sighing. Angelika turns the volume down. I turn it up. Angelika grows nervous. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. I jump out of the car, fetch the gear from under the blankets and out of my rucksack, run back to the passenger seat, lower the window, and turn the volume up full blast. When you call my name, it's like a little prayer, I'm down on my knees, I wanna take you there. Do I really think that's appropriate? Yes, Angelika, I do. Because I like it. Because it makes me happy. Because I can dance, love, snog and be who I am to it. Is it all loaded, you want to know, and I take care of everything, check it over, the last thing we want is an accident. My beloved Angelika and me. I want us to dance with the Madonnas in the cage, like Madonna in her video. The song fades out; I must wait a moment to hear what's next.

Fuck yes, it's Gloria Gaynor. My pulse, my heart, my scalp start racing. *I will survive*.

Angelika opens the door for me.

I breathe in.

I step inside.

To my left and right, the pews. Straight ahead, the vicar at the altar, distracted by Gloria. Before him, the urn, on a plinth.

I breathe out.

I hold the stock and butt with the back of my hand facing down. I take the first step. My heel clacks on the stone floor.

Glances, murmurs, a buzz of voices.

I walk tall, legs apart. I neither hurry nor dawdle. With the gun at hip level and the pink bandana in my back pocket, I stride past the pews up to the altar. I don't look at anyone. Inside me is a calm that resounds first in my heart, then in my head, and finally in my eardrum. The crowd are so dumbfounded that no one makes the slightest move to stop me.

And there he is, in the first pew on the right.

I'll give you ride-a-cock-horse. The rider has grown up.

The man in the first pew on the right is the only person in the room who doesn't freeze, but begins to fidget. The only one who tries to move. But those around him remain glued to the spot. All is silent, apart from Gloria: Long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive.

I stand squarely before the altar. In front of me, the urn. I reach diagonally back. Gather all my strength, all my unabashed love for myself, for people like Sára, Kinga, Angelika, my mother and Vivien, for all kings and queens and in-betweens; I draw and stretch it between myself and the metal vase containing the ashes of my blood. Just a little more, then I bring the gunstock crashing down onto the urn with all the fear, all the pain, all my anger and hatred. Pang-pang-pang, until the ashes of this blood go fluttering through the air, onto the ground, into the lungs of this godforsaken tribe.

Before a pile of ashes, bonemeal, metal fragments and a nameplate, I sink to my knees among holy figures. I flip open the breech over my thigh. I load the ammunition. I close the breech and slowly rise, vertebra by vertebra. With a monstrous calm, I shift my gaze from the rear to the front sight and breathe a *bazzeg*⁴ through my teeth.

I aim the barrel at the spot between his eyes, a little closer, a little longer, long enough for everyone to see that no one is about to do anything.

I hold my breath.

The last thing you see is my lens.

I look at you, and not only that. I take your picture.

⁴ Hungarian for „Fuck you!“