

Ulrike Herwig  
**Sometimes, Life is Elsewhere**  
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## **Sometimes Life is Somewhere Else**

Ulrike Herwig

Sample translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

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1

“Do you see them anywhere?” Judith craned her neck, trying to catch sight of her sister Marlene and her son Gregor in the crush of people on the train platform.

“No.” Achim half-heartedly turned around and scanned in all directions. “It could take a while. Marlene probably only just now realized that the train hasn’t been moving for the past five minutes. Or maybe they accidentally took the train to Amsterdam from Munich and aren’t even on this one.”

“Achim, give it a rest.” However, Judith had to secretly admit that in some cases he was right. It wouldn’t be the first time that her rather unworldly and outlandish sister had missed a train because she’d needed to find her tea tree oil or crocheted shawl first, or because she’d taken too much time filling out an astrological test in her magazine that offered to tell her who she’d been in a former life, or because at the last minute, Gregor had had to change his clothes since the color mustard upset him today...

“There they are,” Achim exclaimed suddenly.

“Where?”

“Back there, by the time schedules.” He cleared his throat deliberately. “You can’t miss them.”

He was right. Here came her sister Marlene in a flowing purple batik garment glinting with chains, a delighted smile on her face and dark red Doc Martens on her rather stumpy legs. Next to her was a boy, plumper and taller than Judith recalled her nephew to be, wearing a shapeless fur cap that covered half of his face.

Gregor, no doubt about it. But why the cap in summertime? And what in the world was he wearing?

“Smile,” she ordered Achim, as she began to wave. “Gregor! Marlene! Yoo-hoo! We’re over here!”

Gregor immediately waved back wildly, barely missing elbowing his mother in the face as she chatted away at him.

“What in God’s name is he wearing?” Achim asked quietly.

A red-and-blue striped Peruvian-style poncho, which Marlene was bound to have made for him. Combined with the fur cap, Gregor resembled a Latin American Sherpa searching for new trails, an impression that was only slightly ameliorated by his strange light blue suitcase covered in colorful stickers.

“It doesn’t matter.” Judith nudged her husband to show a little more enthusiasm.

“And that cap,” Achim murmured, mustering a pathetic wave. “Do you see it?”

How could Judith have missed it? A Russian sheepskin cap with ear flaps. In June.

“Judith!” Marlene spread her arms out. “Isn’t it wonderful to be together again?”

“Totally.” Judith nodded and smiled at her sister, incapable, as usual, of dampening Marlene’s warmhearted familiarity. Marlene simply assumed that everyone would be delighted when she came to visit - when the two of them came to visit, that is. Marlene on her own would have been bearable. However, Gregor...

“We were on an ICE, which can reach a speed of three hundred kilometers an hour,” Gregor called out to them in greeting. “As we drove through a tunnel, I saw God. He smiled at me!”

The heads of the surrounding travelers whipped around. Two young women giggled, and Judith was convinced she heard someone say, “... bound to be some kind of crazy sect.”

“Hello, Gregor,” Achim greeted him loudly. “All you saw was a reflection in the window.” He smiled indulgently and glanced around, seeking approval. See, just a little misunderstanding. Not stark raving lunacy. We’re all good.

Gregor stopped in his tracks. “No, everything was dark in the tunnel. There weren’t any reflections. It was God.”

“Come on, Gregor, please...”

“Just let him get over here,” Judith intervened quickly. Had Marlene become extremely religious? If not, where was this coming from? “Hi! You’ve really gotten tall.” She took a step toward Gregor and started to reach out to give him a hug, but recalled at the last second that he hated hugs. He would slip away like an eel and sometimes even fight off the offending hugger with all his strength. Right before reaching her goal, she swung away and hugged her sister.

“You look a little down.” Marlene studied her critically. “Are you doing alright?”

“Of course, I’m just fine.” Judith laughed self-consciously.

“Really?”

“Yes!” God, Marlene and her wacky spiritualism, which she claimed helped her sense all kinds of vibrations.

“Is he driving you crazy?” Marlene whispered in her ear and giggled. “Men over fifty are inclined to do that.”

“Only sometimes,” Judith whispered back. Ah, it was actually really nice to have Marlene here. Despite the fact that as the minutes had drawn closer to their spontaneous arrival, Achim had stalked through the apartment in growing annoyance. Despite the fact that she brought along Gregor who always seemed to run through Achim’s relatively low supply of patience. In principle, the boy also exasperated Judith all the time, mainly because he was so unpredictable and Marlene’s wishy-washy parenting style left much to be desired. No matter. It would only be two days. In fact, it would be the only two days this year she would see her sister. She would manage with Gregor. Maybe he had become a little more normal since last time, although to be honest, that wasn’t the impression he was giving. However, everyone knew that as long as there is breath, there is hope.

“Let’s go!” Judith announced cheerfully, stepping to the side to give her husband a quick jab. As she did that, Gregor’s suitcase toppled over, promptly popping open and liberating a torrent of wildly patterned clothes. A zebra-striped shirt, another one covered in bright birds, neon shorts, a burgundy velvet robe sprinkled with white stars. Achim and she dropped to their knees to rapidly gather everything back together, while Marlene, oblivious to what was going on, tried to take a picture of the sunbeams streaming through the station dome with her phone.

“Look at all these fashionable things you’ve brought, Gregor!” Judith commented in a carefully lighthearted tone. “Is this what everyone’s wearing these days?” No answer. Judith glanced up. Gregor was gone.

“Where’s Gregor?” She asked her sister.

Marlene immediately dropped her arm, as if she maintained an invisible radar for Gregor emergencies.

“Gregor?” She yelled so loudly that the people walking past them came to a shocked standstill. “Gregor?” No response. Judith turned helplessly toward Achim, who was sending her an almost triumphant I-told-you-so look. He stood up and swore under his breath as he got tangled up in the robe.

“Gregor?” He called quietly into the crowd. Nothing. He increased his volume slightly. “Gregor?”

“Maybe he went to the restroom?” Judith could feel the curious glances of passers-by watching this small spectacle. Damn it, where was that boy?

Then she caught sight of him. He was less than five meters away from them at a Freshy’s Pastries stand, where he was talking to the woman behind the counter. She was watching him with a mixture of confusion, distrust and humor. “There he is.”

Marlene hurried over to him with Judith at her heels.

“Who’s Freshy?” She heard him ask.

“That’s just the name of the company,” the clerk replied. “As in fresh.”

“But you’d think it was a name, from the way it’s written up there.”

“Well...” The woman shifted a roll back and forth, and then noticed Marlene. “May I help you?” she asked in relief.

“But that doesn’t work,” Gregor concluded single-mindedly. “It only works if you use your own name. What is your name?”

“Um...” the clerk laughed uncertainly.

“I’m Marlene,” Marlene offered cheerfully. “And this is Gregor, my son. We just arrived from Bavaria.”

Judith shut her eyes briefly. Any moment now, Marlene would be giving this woman her entire life story. That was what always happened.

“Katrin.” The clerk cleared her throat. “My name is Katrin.”

“From?” Marlene prompted.

“From Hamelin,” the clerk mumbled obediently.

“I went there once on a school trip. 1985.” Marlene beamed at the woman. “It was such a pretty city!”

From across the distance, Judith saw Achim roll his eyes in irritation, as he mouthed, “What’s going on?” Judith didn’t know, either. Marlene and Gregor were obviously in no hurry to leave the station - more specifically, this food stand - any time soon.

“It is, isn’t it?” The clerk named Katrin smiled. “Sometimes I feel homesick. I don’t make it back all that often, with my job here and all that.” She sighed.

“But at least you have a very interesting job,” Gregor chimed in. “With so many yummy things.”

At this point, Judith decided to intervene and help the poor woman. “Achim’s waiting,” she interjected.

“We’re running out of time on the parking ticket. You know how it is.” She smiled at the clerk, who only seemed to have eyes for Gregor and Marlene.

“Enjoy the rest of your trip,” she said. “It’s so nice when someone stops to chat a little. Oh, and here.” She reached behind her and handed Gregor a pretzel. “It’s almost as good as the ones in Bavaria.”

The three of them laughed, and Judith felt like a third wheel.

## 2

“You look very pretty today,” Gregor complimented the cashier at the aquatic center the following day. She looked up in astonishment. Judith thought she seemed just as annoyed and out of it as usual, sitting there in her box - her bleached hair frizzy from the humidity, her eyelashes clumpy, and her makeup too dark and crumbly. Judith glanced around in embarrassment. Fortunately, the people behind them hadn’t heard anything. The cashier at first looked slightly baffled, but then a small, amazed smile spread across her face, a sunbeam on this cool summer’s day.

“Come on, you...” she said. “That’ll be sixteen euros.”

Judith waited as Marlene awkwardly fished the right amount of cash from her embroidered coin purse. She had insisted on paying for Judith as well, but she never paid with anything but cash, no cards. Next to the electronic turnstile, Gregor scurried back and forth impatiently, as he waited on his token. In the distance, the pool roared like a Roman arena.

As Marlene carefully closed her coin purse with a strange, bright band, Judith continued to wait, watching as

parents tried to hurry along their half-dried youngsters. The battles with the damp swimsuits and inside-out t-shirts were heated, while the hair dryers on the walls behaved like tornadoes. Judith was irritated by Marlene's slowness and all the noise. She categorically avoided going swimming on Saturdays at this hour of the day. Most of the time, she came much earlier in the morning, when almost everyone else was still asleep and she could swim her laps uninterrupted. She probably wouldn't get to do that today. Not with dreamy, sluggish Marlene and weird Gregor at her side, the boy you still had to watch constantly despite the fact that he was fourteen, because... - well, sometimes you just had to call a spade a spade - there was something wrong with him.

"Such a lovely pool," Marlene finally exclaimed, staring through the glass panes at the wild, damp chaos inside. "Much nicer than ours. Right, Gregor?"

He didn't reply, but Marlene just kept right on chattering away. "I'm so glad we finally worked it out to spend some time together again. You really need to come visit us, too. Why didn't Achim come with us to go swimming?"

This was due to the fact that, up till now, Achim had managed to keep his displeasure about the visit in check. However, ten horses couldn't have dragged him to the pool with Marlene and Gregor today. This was a place that even under normal circumstances he tolerated like a martyr in swim trunks, his face screwed into extremely pained expressions. It was for the best that he wasn't here, Judith thought. Above all, because of the cap on Gregor's round head, which he had worn all morning with unflagging enthusiasm.

"Oh, you know. Achim really doesn't like to swim all that much," she replied.

That was the understatement of the century.

A few minutes later, Judith walked into the steamy, tiled madhouse and could hardly believe her eyes. Gregor stepped out of the changing room in his swim trunks, the thing still on his head.

"I love water so much," he said. "Water makes me happy, did you know that?"

"Uh... and the cap?" Judith noticed that it was already attracting attention.

"Yes, Gregor - the cap," Marlene reminded him gently. "You have to take it off."

"No." Gregor stubbornly grabbed the silly cap so that nobody could pull it off his head. And what was Marlene's reaction to this? Nothing, as usual. She just let him run around like that. Judith took a deep breath and clamped her towel under her arm, as Marlene hauled along a gigantic tote bag. She listed what it held: towels, shower gel, her newspaper which she wouldn't read anyway, and Gregor's kaleidoscope which he could look into to calm down if something unexpectedly upset him so much that there was a risk of him throwing a fit loud enough to shut down the entire center. Marlene chuckled at this.

No, Judith thought. It was definitely good that Achim wasn't here.

Gregor's appearance elicited peals of laughter from a cluster of adolescent girls in skimpy bikinis, but Marlene strode on stoically. She was obviously accustomed to different kinds of reactions. Behind them, Judith heard the carefree scuffling of Gregor's massively oversized green flip flops, which, just like the horrible cap, seemed to please him for no apparent reason. Her nephew lived in blissful ignorance of what the sight of a sheepskin cap on the head of a chubby fourteen-year-old in swim trunks could evoke in people spending a late June weekend at an aquatic center.

"You look nice, too," Gregor called out to the girls, who responded with hysterical giggles. They doubled over as if their stomachs ached and clung to each other, so they didn't run the risk of accidentally slipping into the whirlpool, where an elderly couple was letting themselves bubble. Their sour expressions revealed their disapproval of both the screeching adolescent cackling and Gregor's cap.

“They’re in a good mood, aren’t they?” Gregor remarked. He waved at the girls.

Judith nervously scanned their surroundings. It didn’t look as if anyone she knew was at the pool today. Marlene, on the other hand, smiled proudly. She loved her son more than anything in the world, but Judith was of the opinion that a little strictness wouldn’t have done this love any harm. They came to a stop at the jetted pool, where Gregor - thank God - took off the stupid cap without a peep and immediately jumped into the water.

As soon as he hit the waist-high water, he started to move through it and drum his open palms onto the waves. Judith had no idea what about this appealed to him, but he had always enjoyed doing this. Even as a little kid, his greatest joy had come from this strange water drumming, which according to Marlene, was a source of hypnotic calm for him.

Judith claimed a lounger and half-listened to Marlene rave about her new therapist Sebastian, a marvelous man who had advised her to focus exclusively on the positive things in her life.

“He has an unbelievably warm voice and can listen so attentively, and...”

“Hey, stop that!”

Marlene broke off and glanced around in confusion. Judith grasped the situation right away. Gregor had apparently drawn too close to a stout young man and his girlfriend, who were clinging together like spider monkeys and letting themselves be rocked by the gentle bubbling at the edge of the pool. Gregor didn’t react, because once the water drumming started, the world around him ceased to exist.

“Man, what a retard,” the girl murmured, though Judith and Marlene could hear every word she said.

Judith saw the fury flash in her sister’s eyes, the fury of a mother lion. The girl pointedly pulled away from Gregor’s splashing in order to protect her lustreless black hair with its purple ends, while her boyfriend shoved Gregor away. But Gregor didn’t go away. He just dove underwater and slipped underneath the two of them like an enemy submarine.

“I’ve had enough of this!” shouted the young man, his face distorted with anger, before also diving down.

Despite having just been the picture of calm, Marlene didn’t hesitate a moment. She jumped into the pool, dove underwater, grabbed Gregor’s arm, and pulled him aside before the man could do anything to her son. Judith had to admit that her sister was impressive. She never would have thought Marlene had that much presence of mind. Gregor let himself be dragged away without offering any resistance. He had already forgotten everything. The fat man stared cluelessly after his fleeing prey, but was then torn away like a leaf on a river by the jets’ sudden onrush.

“What a jerk,” Judith finally provided as commentary.

They took Gregor to another area. Surprisingly, the large pool was relatively empty, and nobody in the wading area seemed to be bothered by Gregor’s water drumming. Two elderly women did lazy laps close to Judith, like sturdy manatees, while a couple of young children toddled around in the shallow water. After Judith crawled through the water for a while, she joined Marlene on a double lounger.

“You don’t want to swim?” she asked.

“Oh, I prefer to just sit here and watch everything.” Marlene leaned her head back. “The splashing is therapeutic, don’t you think? Besides, I was just in the water.” She pointed at her damp swimsuit. “How’s Frank doing?” she abruptly changed the subject. “Have you heard from him recently?”

“Well, we...” Judith cleared her throat, as her fingers clenched her towel. She tried again. “We...”

“It’s okay. I know.” Marlene scooted closer to her. Judith wanted to hug her and bury her face in her little sister’s swimsuit, to inhale the scent of whatever organic lavender oil Marlene was using these days, and to pour out her heart. However, this wasn’t the right time for that, even though Judith couldn’t have said when

the right time might be. Besides, they didn't have that kind of relationship with each other. Hadn't for a long time.

"I'm glad Frank's out there somewhere," Marlene said. "Gregor will have someone when the rest of us are gone. Frank will take care of him, since they're cousins. After all, we're all one family."

Frank would be the last person to take care of Gregor. He didn't even care about his own parents. They meant next to nothing to him, but Judith preferred to keep this information to herself. Everything was messy enough as it was. "Of course," was all she said.

A loud cacophony of voices suddenly rushed in at them from the entrance to the pool area. Foreign sounds rang out excitedly through the lethargic small-town pool. Heads spun around, and conversations fell silent. Judith and Marlene sat up, curious. A group of at least twenty young Africans in identical blue swim trunks had entered the space in the company of two seemingly energetic supervisors. The young men broke out in cries of joy at the sight of the broad, glittering expanse of water. They pointed at it and began to jump up and down, jostling each other and laughing. One of the supervisors called out something in English that Judith couldn't understand, and all of the Africans got into the pool. They shrieked at the cold shock and stood around in the knee-deep water like trees in floodwater. What was going on here?

"I told them they should observe and imitate what the locals are doing," the one supervisor said to his colleague, as the two of them walked past Judith and Marlene.

"Good idea," the other one replied.

Judith was about to ask her sister a question, but she then heard something before she even saw it: the sound of slapping and splashing. Inspired by Gregor, who was still forging his way through the water like a ship without a harbor, two of the Africans started slapping their open hands onto the water. The other Africans enthusiastically imitated their friends and Gregor, as the splashing grew faster and louder. Water sprayed high and higher, as delighted cries filled the air, and before anyone could do anything about it, a water fight broke out, the likes of which the aquatic center had never witnessed over all its years.

A shrill whistle cut through the hubbub. The face of the lifeguard - a mercurial idiot in a grass green athletic outfit Judith couldn't stand - turned dark red in outrage. He bellowed something nobody could understand because the noise had now increased to an ear-splitting level. Young children slipped away from their parents to join in the splashing, and the old women hurriedly exited the pool. Marlene grinned at Judith, who had to grin back, despite her best intentions. At last, something exciting was happening around here.

After half an eternity in the pool area, Judith was finally waiting with Marlene in the aquatic center's lobby for Gregor to finish getting dressed and to tie his shoelaces for the hundredth time. Judith took a furtive look at her watch. The shops would be closing soon. She actually needed to do a little shopping for supper tonight. She had had no idea that a trip to the aquatic center with Gregor could turn into such an interminably long experience. Normally, she was in and out of here in less than two hours.

"It always takes a long time with Gregor," explained Marlene, as if she had read Judith's thoughts. "I always calculate on this. Why rush him? Even if I did, it wouldn't make him move any faster." She settled comfortably down on a bench and flipped through a newspaper. "Do you want to know your horoscope?"

"No, thanks." Judith let her gaze wander and linger on a young mother who was nagging her child because the little girl's hair was still damp and she had forgotten her cardigan in the changing room.

"Now you'll have to go to your piano lesson with a wet head," the mother grumbled as she tried to yank a brush through the girl's hair, which understandably caused whimpering. "Go get your sweater now. Quickly!" The girl stomped out angrily, as the mother sighed and gazed after her, the brush grasped in her hand like a weapon.

Marlene had also watched the scene, and she rolled her eyes. Judith hesitantly smiled back at her. Contrary to what Marlene was doing with Gregor, this at least counted as discipline.

“Threats get you nowhere with Gregor,” Marlene remarked. “He’s just different. For example, he can’t lie, and he always says what he thinks. Truly, always. Isn’t that crazy?”

“Amazing,” Judith responded mechanically. The grocery store was going to close in forty minutes. There was no way Achim had remembered to pick up something vegetarian for Marlene. Or should they go out to eat? Not a good idea, considering Gregor would be along.

“There’s a lot he doesn’t pick up on, things the world considers important. However, if something interests him, then he is passionate about it, heart and soul.” Marlene’s voice cut into her thoughts. “In that context, he is very unusual.”

And where was the unusual prodigy now? Judith stood up impatiently.

“Cool hat,” someone exclaimed close to them. Two gum-smacking teenagers grinned as Gregor emerged from the changing room with the cap on his head, which was draped over his fiery red face like a slaughtered animal. One of the teenagers muttered something that Judith couldn’t understand, and then both of them laughed. However, Gregor had forgotten something, and he vanished back into the depths of the changing area. The girl with the wet hair returned to her mother in tears because she couldn’t find her sweater.

Judith couldn’t take it any more. “Listen, I’m going to head out now,” she declared. “I need to quickly pick up something at the grocery store, but then we can drive home together.”

“Okay,” Marlene agreed immediately. “You don’t need to wait on us, though. Gregor and I’ll go over to the town hall. You know how much he loves the mechanical clock there.”

Even better. If Gregor wanted to go see the clock, she would have at least one extra hour - that had been the case four years ago, when Gregor simply couldn’t be torn away from the jingling little men up on the town hall tower, even long after they had fallen silent.

Judith walked outside and took a deep breath of fresh air, a salubrious measure after the chlorine-saturated center. It was a little warmer now. Maybe summer would still get here.

...]

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## 4

Judith had paged through the entire catalog, briefly lingering over a shirt in velvety brown, before noticing both the price and the appliqued leather patches on the elbows, and promptly abandoning the idea of purchasing it. Achim would refuse to wear it anyway. Besides, no checkered or Barbour jacket, no driving cap with the melodious name Donegal attached to it, could transform her husband into an English lord who took long walks across his estate and whiled away his evenings petting his hunting dog and sipping whisky. Achim loved organization and straightforwardness. A fireplace would have catapulted him into an ongoing state of worry because of its fire risk. Dogs of all species annoyed him, and he was at his happiest spending his days tinkering in his bicycle shop or devoting his weekends to endlessly long bike tours, which Judith would have gladly given up.

She glanced at the clock. Where were Marlene and Gregor? Almost two hours had passed since they had parted ways at the aquatic center. Were they still standing around on the town square, watching the clock tower? That was hard to believe. On the other hand, it wouldn’t have surprised her, either. Achim had been

watching soccer on TV for a long time, and he didn't seem troubled at the prospect of maintaining his peace and quiet for a few minutes more. Judith considered her options. Should she send Marlene a text?

The landline phone rang, startling Judith because it was such a rare sound in their apartment. Who could it be? Perhaps Dr. Huber's dental practice, where she spent three mornings a week as a receptionist? No, if it were an emergency, they would call her cell phone. Besides, the office was closed on Saturdays. Or could it be... Of course, it had to be Frank! She felt so thrilled her throat went dry. She had heard of such things - you talked about something, and shortly afterward, that very thing actually happened, as if you had somehow conjured it up by speaking of it. In that case, her lie to Mrs. Hoffmann about the call from Australia had merely been a provisional one. How late was it now in Melbourne? Midnight. She jumped up and rushed to the phone, her cheeks flushed in excitement. It had to be extraordinarily good news, otherwise he wouldn't be calling at this hour.

It wasn't Australia. The disappointment tasted staler than usual, perhaps because for a quarter second she had been completely irrational enough to believe in something like telepathy.

It was an unknown local number. The phone rang and rang, penetrating and relentless.

Judith picked up, annoyed. "Yes?"

"Am I speaking with Judith Krause?" asked a masculine voice.

"Yes?" Judith was instantly on edge. "Who is this?"

"My name is Dr. Lindig. I'm a doctor at the university clinic. I'm calling about Marlene Kolb... your sister." He added these last two words after a short pause, probably because Judith had not reacted. He clearly assumed she had the memory of an amoeba and couldn't recall the fact that she even had a sister.

"What's this about?" A bad feeling was growing within Judith.

"Your sister had an accident. She was hit by a car on the parking lot in front of the aquatic center."

"Oh God," slipped out of Judith. "Is she alright?"

"She is..." The man stumbled to a momentary halt. "She has a severe concussion. We had to put her in an artificial coma, so that... Uh, you know, do you think you could come down to the hospital? You live around here, right? I can then explain everything to you in person."

What about Gregor? Judith wanted to ask, but she couldn't produce a single sound. Her thoughts tumbled through her mind like debris in an avalanche. It was shock and concern - she immediately envisioned her little sister Marlene in a sterile white hospital bed, hooked up to an array of beeping monitors. Oh God. Was she in pain? Judith's stomach clenched. No, he had said something about a coma.

"And then there's your nephew," she heard the doctor continue as if across a great distance. "Nothing happened to him. He wasn't involved."

"Gregor," Judith finally managed to say. Gregor was just fine. What exactly had happened? Terrible things kept occurring to Marlene, almost like she had somehow absorbed the bad luck of twenty other lives. Why was that? She seemed to magically attract misfortune. It was unbelievable. Or had this been her own fault? Had she been staring at her phone as she walked across the parking lot? Why was she even in the parking lot considering she didn't have a car? Had she been caught up in her thoughts or in the process of looking for something in her hand-woven bag?

"I... we'll come right away," she stammered into the receiver.

"Achim?" she called into the apartment. "Achim?" Her voice sounded strangely brittle, and Achim appeared in the doorway a moment later.

Soccer noise blared in the background. The agonized murmur of the crowd surged as the ball presumably just missed its goal.

"What's wrong?" he asked in alarm.



“A third-degree concussion with intercranial hemorrhaging.” Dr. Lindig was a middle-aged man with an early-onset paunch and expensive glasses. “We had to put your sister in an artificial coma to help with her brain recovery.”

He went on to talk about stress and pressure reduction, and courses of action that were currently impossible to pursue, but the words sailed right past Judith, who was watching Gregor. She wondered the whole time what was going on inside of him. He was sitting bolt upright on a hallway chair in the ICU area, staring motionlessly at a still life of grapes that was hanging on the wall. According to the eyewitnesses’ accounts, Marlene and Gregor had left the center and were standing at the bus stop, when Marlene suddenly pulled something from Gregor’s bag. She then took off at a run back toward the center, across the parking lot. She stumbled and fell headlong into the path of an oncoming car, which struck her in the head. But why? What had been so important that she had been in such a hurry? Nobody had been able to answer this question for Judith.

“How long will she be like this?” she now heard Achim’s voice.

“There’s no way we can predict that,” Dr. Lindig replied. “Three days, three weeks, three months? As soon as she’s more stable, we’ll attempt to bring her out of the coma. However, you will need to assume that there will be neurological damage. Vision problems, etcetera.”

“Three weeks,” Achim murmured. “I think we need to figure out where Gregor’s father is, so he can come pick him up.”

“Absolutely not.” Judith abruptly sat down. “Gregor doesn’t know him at all. He hasn’t seen him since he was three.”

“I...” Dr. Lindig tried to cut in, but Achim forged right ahead.

“What else can we do?” he asked, his eyes fixed on Judith. “You don’t mean...?”

“Of course, I do. Gregor is still under age and has to live with relatives. With his nearest relatives. And that would be us.”

“No, that would be his father,” Achim corrected her. “But that loser is probably impossible to find, as is always the case whenever things get dicey.”

“I...” Dr. Lindig resumed his effort, but this time it was Judith who wouldn’t let him get a word in. What was Achim thinking? How could he be so cold-hearted?

“Achim, he is absolutely staying here. This isn’t open for debate. His mother is lying in our town hospital, and there’s no way we’re sending that boy back to Bavaria. How would he be able to visit her?”

“Well...” Achim was momentarily speechless. “But three weeks,” he continued stubbornly. “Three whole weeks!”

“Um, that is just an estimate.” Dr. Lindig was finally able to finish a thought. “It could just as easily be four weeks or four months.”

“Four months.” Achim stared at him, appalled. “Do you hear that, Judith?”

“Achim, this is my sister we’re talking about. Just today, she said to me that she...” Tears suddenly stung Judith’s eyes as she thought back to the conversation in the aquatic center. “That she is so happy that we’re all family. And if we don’t take Gregor, he’ll be put into a home or something like that.”

“Where they would take wonderful care of him.” Achim remained unyielding. “All I need to say is - Christmas.”

Judith remembered with horror the unspeakable Christmas two years ago, when Achim had spent hours preparing a stuffed goose for the two of them and roasted tofu with lingonberry sauce for Marlene and Gregor. But then the strands of tinsel that Gregor had hung up with the patience of a heart surgeon had

gotten all tangled up, and the boy had completely flipped out. He had run around and around like a dog chasing its tail, frenetic, crazy, unstoppable. When Achim had tried to intervene, Gregor had screamed loudly enough to wake the dead. And all that on Christmas Eve! Everyone in the entire apartment building heard the commotion, as demonstrated by the fact that each of the other residents had spoken to Judith about it. Except for the Junescus, for whom shrill screams were obviously part of their ordinary background noise and not worthy of commentary.

“But he’s older now,” Judith replied, nonetheless. She couldn’t have explained why she was defending Gregor, seeing as she had never understood her nephew or her sister’s absurdly lax parenting methods - or better said, non-parenting methods. And yet... this was something different. Marlene needed her, was relying on Judith, because Judith was someone you could actually rely on, and that wasn’t going to change. Achim frowned and shot a sideways look at Gregor out in the corridor, who had just stood up and started pacing from one wall to the other, like a caged tiger. Achim made a snorting sound, and Judith watched him wordlessly. Over the past few years, his hairline had started seriously receding, and skin was now glinting through on the top of his head. The bald spot was biding its time for an opportune moment to take over there. It would kill him, Judith thought. He had always been so proud of his full head of hair. Was this why he was being so grumpy? If not, why was he acting this way?

“And what about his school? He’s still going to school, right? Or is he now going somewhere to learn how to weave willow baskets?” Achim sounded so overbearing.

Dr. Lindig cleared his throat, and Judith felt herself gradually growing furious. The shock of the accident had numbed her, but the numbness was slowly fading and the pain was reaching the surface. Damn it, Marlene was her sister. Her only relative. They only saw each other once a year, but that was still more often than she and Achim saw their son Frank.

“He goes to an independently operated school, one that offers alternative courses...” Judith couldn’t recall the name of the hippy school, but she didn’t care. “And it’s summer, which means it will be on break shortly.” She took a deep breath. “Gregor can stay in Frank’s room.”

“And what if Frank wants to come visit us, hmm?” Achim played his last trump card, which they both knew wasn’t really that.

“Oh, Achim,” she replied quietly. “He...” She gulped. “I don’t think he’ll make it this summer.” Or the next. Or the one after that.

“But it’s possible,” Achim bravely stuck to his guns.

“No, it’s not.”

They rarely spoke so directly about their son. They didn’t call Frank anymore, simply because they’d given up. Early on, he had still answered his phone, and they had talked past each other. Later, he let his voicemail take care of everything. Judith would leave concerned messages, which annoyed Achim, but it didn’t really matter since Frank didn’t return their calls much anyway. He would contact them at irregular intervals and end the calls as quickly as possible. At some point, he stopped calling altogether. It hurt so extraordinarily much, and the image of Frank someday showing up at their door with his suitcase, laughing and tanned, was like a medicine. No, more like a drug that they greedily inhaled every day without ever admitting their addiction to each other.

“But maybe...”

“Even if that did happen,” she interrupted him firmly, “we would find a solution. There’s no way we’ll be leaving Gregor on his own.”

“Things don’t tend to last long with most coma patients,” Dr. Lindig added, visibly relieved that the family argument had come to an amiable conclusion. “Most of the time, they wake up quickly.”

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