

Rabea Edel

A Portrait of My Mother With Ghosts

Sample translation by Romy Fursland

A name is not much, but sometimes it's all we have.

In this book, Rabea Edel tells the moving story of her mother and paints a portrait of an entire postwar generation growing up in the shadow of violence and a veil of silence. This is a novel about the power of love and the search for truth.

Raisa lives alone with her mother Martha, and always has done. She has no memory of her father. Her name is the one thing she got from him – and it's for the best, says Martha. But Raisa starts asking questions. When their neighbour, a boy called Mat, disappears, Martha finally starts talking. About her grandmother Dina. About lies that protect and lies that endanger. About the love of her life, and about her greatest loss.

One fateful night during the last days of the Second World War links Martha's family with Jakob, a local Jewish child who was always having to disappear behind new identities in order to survive. Sixty years on, Martha and Jakob both attempt to reclaim their own history through telling their stories.

A novel about family which spans the 1920s, the American occupation in Bremerhaven, a 1980s childhood, and present-day New York. A book that is like a kaleidoscope, focusing mainly on women – and on women's ability to constantly reinvent themselves.

(Excerpt)

I

Humbug

1989

It was one morning in April that Mat told me he was going to disappear. We were in our pyjamas, sitting on the roof of our house eating marshmallows dipped in hot chocolate. The sugar made our teeth hurt. Mat gave a contented grin, dunking his pink marshmallow into the warm milk and gesturing with his free hand towards the sea, which merged into the horizon, and the silhouettes of several sailing boats, and beyond those, two tankers headed for the open ocean. He was going to disappear because it was the easiest thing he could do, he said, popping the next marshmallow into his mouth and digging out the hat he'd taken from a box in our basement.

My mother didn't want this hat in the house – neither of us understood why – and anyway, Mat told her, the basement was *part* of the house, but at this she simply rolled her eyes. She didn't want Mat to wear the hat, either, but he was even more stubborn than she was, so eventually she gave in and just told him not to wear it out and about.

'We don't need that humbug,' she said, every time she saw him with the hat, 'so it needs to stay here, inside these four walls.'

'Actually there are more than four –'

'Mat!'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

'Don't forget to take it off when you leave!'

That was pretty much how their conversations would go.

Mat would attach the hat to his hair with a Mickey Mouse clip, since it wasn't really a hat at all, more of a cap, which only just covered the back of the head. From the direction of the harbour came the stink of fish from the cannery. Mat dipped another marshmallow in the hot chocolate and chewed it, his eyes on the horizon, his headgear flapping in the wind.

'We need to practise, Raisa,' he said, 'we need to practise till we can do it without a hitch. Then maybe I can even take you with me.'

Mat peered over at me.

I nodded, just to be on the safe side. I had my mouth full of marshmallows and I didn't know what I was supposed to say. I didn't want to disappear. Not for anything in the world.

In those days, on weekends when we didn't have Saturday school, Mat and I would often sit on the roof and gaze out over the water. We watched the silhouettes of our neighbours, saw them arguing behind translucent curtains or sitting on faded plastic chairs not speaking to each other. The men would usually be smoking and the women would be drinking something that brought the colour back into their faces. Or sometimes they would just stand around in the garden in practical jackets, not speaking to each other, until one of them went back into the house. We called these 'silent conversations'.

When Mat was with me, he was the complete opposite of silent. Most of the time he would natter away without stopping, telling me story after story. About the ship he was going to build one day, with a library in the hold, a kind of Noah's Ark, and when the flood came we would all be lost apart from the characters in the books. I nodded and fished a pink marshmallow out of the bag. The silent conversation between the neighbours opposite had been a particularly long one today. Even the dog was silent. A whole hour had passed by the time the man gave up and went back inside, without taking his wellies off.

Mat's mum had a full-time job at the office of the local electricity supplier. She was never in when we got home from school, so Mat often came over to ours. He always used to roll his trouser legs up – too short, so that they sat above his ankles, as if there was a flood. Even though it wasn't even autumn and there were

no flood warnings in place. Sometimes he forgot to take out the Mickey Mouse hairclip before bed, and the next morning I would see it still dangling from the back of his head when he sat in front of me in Maths. For six months Mat wore glasses with one of the lenses taped over, because his mum and the doctor were convinced that was the only way to stop him developing a squint like his grandfather. There exists only one photograph of this grandfather: he stares at the camera with a terribly strained look, his own nose in the way of his eyes. Mat wore the taped-over glasses and took pride in being a pirate, even though it was ridiculous and he knew it. This was before Mat and his mum moved onto the estate, into the house next door to ours. And before my mum decided that we now needed a permanent home, and that we were going to stay put. She didn't say 'forever', because she didn't believe in it. Mat guarded the glasses like a precious treasure.

'But we don't need this humbug,' he would say, grinning. Through the lenses of those glasses, the world as Mat saw it looked warped at the edges. I tried them on a few times and each time I got dizzy.

Mat was one of the children on the estate who wore a door key around his neck on a ribbon. The other was Özlem, whose parents worked nights at the cannery and usually slept during the day, meaning she had to creep into the flat very quietly and was allowed to heat up food for herself in the microwave. Özlem's key was huge. Mat was jealous of it. And of the microwave.

Mat drew pictures on his arm in pen, because the photo that had been in the wooden box with the hat showed a man with a quiff and wide-legged trousers standing proudly under a tree, his arm covered in images you couldn't quite make out – roses or anchors or naked women. Mat re-drew the doodles on his arm if they started to fade after he showered. And sometimes he just added symbols around the edges: arrows, flowers, the sea. He had no idea. Neither of us had any idea, we knew nothing. All we knew was that there was something which had not been spoken about and would not be spoken about, not by our mothers, not by their mothers, and not by anyone else around us, not openly anyway – only in whispers.

Mat and I were not alike, but we understood the same things. Neither of us knew our fathers, although Mat's father did come once a month to pick him up and bring him back again after a long weekend – which didn't mean he knew him any better, as Mat remarked, only that he saw him occasionally. We both understood what it was like to wake up in the morning and not know where you were. Our mums both worked from morning till evening, except that mine sat at home knitting while Mat's supervised the city's electricity, the sparks and fluorescent blue currents that flowed through the houses. That was how Mat described it to me. Sometimes blue currents flowed through my mum too, and her hair stood on end and sparked as she sat on the sofa in the half-darkness. Scattered around her were balls of wool, knitting needles, parts of a dress, individual sleeves. Later she would sew the parts together and take them to the

boutique on the high street, where her jumpers, skirts and hats were sold on commission. She often used to hum softly to herself while she worked. When I asked her to sing the songs, she laughed.

‘You know I can’t sing, sweetheart.’

So I sat on the stairs and listened from there, because I thought she might sing if she didn’t know I was still there.

On the morning Mat decided to disappear, he had washed his arm very thoroughly. His skin was red – he’d been scrubbing at the drawings for hours with a washing-up sponge.

‘So? Any other news?’ I asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Mat.

‘And when are you leaving?’

‘Not today.’

‘It absolutely stinks out here,’ I said, and climbed back down through the roof hatch. I went to the kiosk on our road to buy some Karamba chewing gum, the kind with extra-sour sherbet that exploded in your mouth. Mat was still sitting on the roof of our house, his head resting on his knees as if he were sleeping.

It was Mat’s eighth birthday, and in the evening his mum produced a cake with too many candles on it.

‘The same number as the age you’re going to be one day,’ she said, smiling, ‘at least!’

Mat blew out twelve of them and shrugged. Later he brought some cake round for me, put the plate down outside our front door and rang the bell. Then he ran away, as if to play a trick on my mum.

‘Oh Mat, that’s so kind of you, thank you!’ she called in the direction of the bush he was crouching in. I could see him from the window.

‘Hello Martha, mother of Raisa. That was not Mat, that was Extraterrestrial 69-12 E. He comes in peace,’ said the bush in a disguised voice, and rustled a couple of its branches.

‘Thank you, Extraterrestrial 69-12 E. I wish you a safe flight home!’

My mum put the cake on the table.

‘What are you staring at?’ she asked.

‘Nothing. I’m not staring.’

‘I wouldn’t touch that cake if I were you – it’s probably full of green slime.’

‘Nice try.’

‘No, really! I wouldn’t trust an alien with a numerical code for a name, not as far as I could throw him.’

‘Well why did you bring the cake in then?’

‘To stop the birds getting poisoned. And to be polite. And because I like life forms who come in peace.’

I knew Mat was waiting for me to invite him in, but I didn’t feel like it. I wanted my mum to tell me one of her stories, but I could only ever get her to talk when we were alone.

‘If I don’t have any cake, if I have an apple instead, then will you tell me a story?’

‘Not today, darling. I’m tired,’ she said.

So I went to bed without any dinner, because Mat’s cake probably was actually full of coloured slime that would dye my tongue green until all eternity, and I didn’t want to risk it.

The Wandering Years

1982

My father must have disappeared just after I was born. My name was the only thing I’d got from him, and even that wasn’t quite true. He gave it to me and vanished shortly afterwards, which was for the best, my mum said.

For her, this was a normal state of affairs. Instead of waiting for him or looking for a new father for me, which she had no need of, she packed a suitcase and we set off on our travels. She strapped infant-me to her front in a baby wrap, and bought us ticket after ticket. She gave me a new name for the wandering years. So that I wouldn’t be sad, she said. So that I wouldn’t have a name given to me by a stranger, she didn’t say. My name is Dina. And Raisa. Raisa Dina. And I may well have lots of other names I don’t know about, given to me by other people I’ve never met. During the wandering years I went by the new name my mum had written on a piece of paper, which she stuck to my ID card with superglue. My wandering years name.

I never had even the faintest memory of my father. Nothing. Nothing at all. There was just a hollow feeling when I thought about him, and I didn’t even think about his name or the sound of his voice, his smell or how he might have moved, because I had no knowledge of any of that. I just thought about the fact that presumably he existed somewhere, and this alone was enough to trigger the hollow feeling that travelled from my stomach to my spine and got stuck there, between all the vertebrae, and made it hard to breathe. So I tried not to think about him too often, which got easier the older I became. I knew I would forget about him one day, because he didn’t even exist, and that it would be okay.

Until that time, I learned to take deep breaths to stave off panic attacks, the way my mum showed me when she breathed into one of the paper bags we bought bread rolls in. The bag inflated and then deflated again: in, out, in, out, in, out. I didn’t often breathe into the bags myself, but I did sometimes, just to make her feel she wasn’t on her own. We stood side by side in the kitchen and held the soft brown paper, bearing the imprints of perfectly formed bread rolls, in front of our faces. I liked the smell when I breathed in. Sometimes I held the

inflated bag like a balloon and made it go pop, and my mum laughed and burst her own bag even more loudly. Then she swept up the crumbs and cooked oxtail soup out of a packet, because she loved that, and gave me freshly peeled tangerines, because they were my favourite fruit, and it always helped to dispel panic when there was nice food or when you went for a long walk in the fresh air without seeing anyone else.

Only once in her life did my mum seek out a psychiatrist. She was in her early thirties and pregnant with me, something she had wanted for a long time, as she told me repeatedly, but the hormones in her body were driving her crazy. Every day she sat on her bed crying, sat on the bus crying, walked around the supermarket crying, paid, and left, still crying. She was tired, she told the man.

‘I can’t do it any more,’ said my mum, and it scared her, how easy it was to say it: ‘I can’t do it any more.’

The man nodded. He didn’t say much in general, and after two sessions, during which my mum cried, talked and cried some more, he still wasn’t saying anything. She was four months pregnant, and I wasn’t showing yet under her dress. She had waited a very long time for me, that was all – too long. She wanted everything to finally be okay, she wanted me to finally be here and to stay forever.

‘I’m over thirty, it’s typical for women my age,’ she said and he nodded.

‘I have an octopus sitting on my head and its arms are my hair and my thoughts. My thoughts are blue and stink of rotten fish.’

When the end of the session came and he handed her the bill without a word, she shook her head and the blue ink sprayed in all directions: ‘How dare you,’ she said, ‘how dare you sell me your fucking silence, nothing but stale air!’

My mum left the doctor’s office and bought nasal spray, tissues and a pack of mint oil, which she rubbed into her forehead and temples to remove the last of the inky blue. She paid the bill after the third reminder, as a gesture of goodwill. When I was born at thirty-two weeks, I had the translucent blue skin that premature newborns have. My mum – terrified of dropping me – couldn’t hold me until I was less translucent, until the ink pulsed invisibly in my veins. Until she could wrap me in a baby sling and carry me around with her, heartbeat to heartbeat. As close as physically possible. That was how the wandering years began.

My mum and I celebrated my birthday in a different town every year. We would set out a couple of days beforehand, before the warmest day of the year began, for the mountains, or the coast, or the countryside, and that same evening my mum would usually make the acquaintance of a woman or a man or a couple, and we’d celebrate with them. Later that night, once the visitors had left, she’d go into the kitchen in her underwear, crack eggs, mix together yeast and warm milk, wait, knead the dough, wait, knead the dough, wait in the light cast by the oven, sitting on the floor, until she could smell the cake, until she could take it

out of the oven with her bare hands, until she felt the slight pain of the cake tin burning the palms of her hands. One of many rituals I would happily have done without, as I got older – but I didn't tell her that. It made my mum happy, though; she hummed songs for me and picked me up, spun me around in her arms until we felt dizzy and the world around us started to glow.

Every year in summer she wrapped two thin gauze bandages around her hands until the burn blisters went away. Sometimes all they needed was a plaster. If we were by the sea she would stay out of the water, raising her hands apologetically and sending me into the waves on my own in my swimming floats. I don't remember all of those years, but what they all had in common was the certainty that we would wake up in a different place and never stay anywhere longer than three or four months. Just before my next birthday it would be time for us to pack our things again, to buy tickets, to sit on trains, on the back seats of cars, on buses and sometimes, very occasionally, on a plane. Those years were bright and free, though I didn't know any different.

There were the wandering years. And there were the years of silence.

The wandering years were light and bright. My mum let me go barefoot; we wore dresses and painted our toenails red. And when autumn arrived with the wind and the rain, when I had to start wearing a thick jacket and sturdy shoes, we would move on – to places where we didn't understand any words, only gestures, movements we learned to imitate. My mum had decided we needed nothing other than what fitted in a suitcase she could pull along behind her. She had also decided she didn't need to speak the language, because then she would have nothing to explain, nothing to justify: not herself, not me, and above all not *us*. Every four or five months we moved to a new house, new rooms, sometimes a new city or a different village.

During the wandering years my mum spent more time talking to me, because she felt I was too quick to imitate gestures. She joked that I might forget to speak using my mouth, my tongue, my vocal cords, my teeth. She didn't want me to speak only with my hands or my eyes or by walking beside her (later, when I was older) without reaching for her hand. Our language was a cave, something we could construct around ourselves, something that protected us from what was outside. We never left that place. It was like a thin membrane, more tent than house, which we pitched in the houses and rooms of strangers. We stood in the queue at the supermarket and my mum pointed at things and gave them names and meanings. She cleaned the holiday homes at a resort where we were living, took me with her to the empty houses that the guests had just vacated, and I sat in the rumpled beds amid the detritus of strangers and listened to her fabulous stories about the tourists who had just left. Once we sat for so long on a freshly made bed that we were still there when the next holidaymakers arrived. We watched as the day faded and the strings of lights came on, to the rhythm of some samba song; a day in early summer, but still rainy. My mum curled up into a ball. I tried not to make any creases in the flat bedspread, and didn't move.

‘Soon,’ she said, kissing me, ‘soon we’ll be home, darling.’

Late that night the guests arrived and woke us up.

The wandering years were a succession of bright days, a journey on which nobody accompanied us other than my father – a shadow who followed us and was sometimes already waiting in one of the rooms. Sometimes, on days like that, my mum would simply fall silent mid-sentence. Then I would think up an ending that belonged only to me, and not tell it to her. Sometimes we would end up staying somewhere only for a few days. Time would suddenly elapse more quickly. My mum would get scared because I was growing and getting older and she, inevitably, got older with me. And then she would reach for a brown paper bag and breathe in and out, and I would watch the bag inflate and collapse.

My birthdays were the only constant during the wandering years. I don’t remember any names, not of places nor of people. I do remember that sometimes, in violation of our unspoken rule, we moved on to a new town ahead of time – when we’d only just unpacked our suitcase, for example, or when my birthday was over two months away. Usually the rule was that we didn’t leave until then. But there were days when my mum picked somebody up and got one of the other chambermaids to keep an eye on me, or she took me to the hotel kitchen where I was allowed to eat ice cream and watch football games on a TV mounted on the wall above the counter top. Then she would try and remember the moment I’d been conceived, the emptiness afterwards and the brief, tiny sadness that she would never be alone again, which was replaced by the fear of being alone forever, and then by the certainty that from now on everything would be okay, that happiness would now begin, that she deserved it and so did I.

My mum declared the day of my conception as my birthday. Not the one that was on my ID card. We ate the cake, she changed the beds to get rid of the smell of the strangers’ skin, she wrapped her hands in gauze bandages. Sometimes she smiled until the evening came, until we were lying in bed together, and she fell asleep before me. Sometimes, the shadow of my father who did not exist stood in the corner of a room watching us.

We met many people during the wandering years. A few of them my mum called friends. Some of them we met again later, by chance, but most we never saw again.

Many things had a place in my mum’s suitcase. She magicked up everything we needed, and swapped other things out. And as I got older, our orbit grew smaller. More and more often we would approach the same city we’d set out from, with the suitcase that still held the dress she’d worn on her first visit to the psychiatrist. We came closer and closer to the city where she possessed everything she’d tried to ignore: a tax number, a bank account, a PO box, a place of residence, although we did not reside there. A house that stood empty and in whose basement no memories piled up, because my mum hadn’t saved anything,

because there was no longer anything to save from the life that had gone before. A house on an estate in the suburbs. A life where everything disappeared of its own accord. A black hole that was deep and infinite. The more frequently the city's name appeared on road signs, the quieter my mum became.

One last time we boarded a bus that would take us to the city we had set out from, a city I hardly remembered.

'We'll be home soon,' said my mum repeatedly on that day, which for me was no different from any other day. She held my arm tightly, as if she was afraid to lose me. She was wearing blue plastic earrings and a thin green coat. I rested my head against her chest and could feel her heart beating. After two hours on the road I felt sick. After three hours I fell asleep. When we arrived the city was a grey place full of Single-family homes lining a windy beach onto which the waves were tossed by a foaming sea, and for the first time since we'd set out on our travels my mum looked like she was in despair.

The Years of Silence

1988

For the first few months we lived in a makeshift fashion that caused all the other residents of the estate to shake their heads. We lived alone. With the dripping water trolls that danced in the buckets my mum placed under the rotten spots in the attic floor. With the rattling doors and window shutters through which the wind hissed and whispered, and which she paid to have repaired one by one. Whenever the child benefit was paid into the account, or when there was some money left over at the end of the month because we'd eaten nothing but tinned ravioli or ready-made cannelloni for a week, or when she'd sold some clothes at the boutique on the high street and been paid in cash, she would call in a handyman. Sometimes she would also go to the wardrobe and take out a few of the notes she'd squirrelled away amongst her clothes 'for emergencies'. Emergencies were days when we remembered the wandering years and it rained non-stop and we didn't want to leave the house. Another emergency was my birthday, which we now celebrated at home, without burned hands and without strangers. Now on my birthday there were takeaway mini pizzas with a garlic dip, and very fizzy sweet lemonade, and I was allowed to snuggle up on the sofa under all the blankets we could find in the house and watch films until I fell asleep, well after midnight, to the murmur of voices.

Little by little the rattling and hissing were replaced by silence which hung heavy in the rooms, especially when the windows were closed. But my mum could

never stand it for long. She would always throw open one of the windows to be able to breath.

When I started school my mum made me a dress out of her dress, the one that had lain right at the bottom of the suitcase. The fabric was Indian cotton with a blue print, shot through with tiny silver threads. All the other children wore sweatshirts and jeans, some had velvet ribbons in their neatly plaited hair. My hair was too short to go into a plait. Long hair was a hindrance, it got in your eyes while you were climbing or painting. I would have loved to have red hair, like my mum, but she wouldn't allow it.

Mat stood in front of the school entrance. He had recently moved into the house next door to us, and now he waved to me. I ignored him, but he just sat down next to me in the circle of desks and peered sideways at me.

In the first week of school all the children had to bring in photos of their parents; some also brought in pictures of their grandparents or siblings. I drew faces on a sheet of paper showing me and my mum at different ages. As old women, as young women, as children, as nothing at all.

'That's lovely, Raisa. Are those your aunts and sisters? And that must be your grandma?'

'I don't have any,' I said, 'they're all dead. My mum is called Martha and she landed here in a UFO. It's still in our back garden – we use it as a table because the fuel tank is empty.'

The others fell silent, embarrassed; one kid laughed. The teacher stroked my hair and moved on to the kid next to me. Mat brought in a photo of his father that had been torn in half and stuck back together with Sellotape. He nudged me under the table with his knee until I looked at him. Then he grinned proudly. The kick I gave him in response was too hard, but he gritted his teeth and, to his credit, said nothing.

The lesson on jobs a few months later didn't go much better. I couldn't work out how to explain that my mum didn't have a job but worked from home. It felt wrong to make something up.

Nevertheless, I said:

'Her name is Martha and she did do a degree but I've forgotten what. She doesn't use it, though. She works at home.'

'She's a housewife, you mean?'

'No.'

The teacher nodded and waited, but I decided not to say any more. I knew she'd worked in radio, a long time before I was born, but I didn't know any more than that. Certainly not enough to answer any questions people might put to me. I knew she wasn't particularly good at cooking and that she didn't enjoy doing laundry or cleaning the house, so I knew she wasn't a housewife, or at least not what the teacher understood by it. I knew she'd worked in hotels, in bookshops and at a kiosk, but I didn't want to share the wandering years with anyone, not even with Mat, so I kept that to myself as well. Mat had brought in a folded

leaflet advertising the electricity company. In one of the photos his mum was smiling at the camera. Her teeth were very straight, and she was wearing a white blouse with the electricity company's logo over her heart.

The years of silence began long before I was born. They wove themselves into a net that spread itself over everything. It reached as far as the city, knotting itself into our daily lives. One evening my mum unplugged the phone.

'I can't sleep with all these people calling here at night thinking we're a taxi service,' she explained, 'so we're going to leave the phone like this from now on.'

The new taxi service did have a similar phone number to us. Their cars drove around the city with advertising stickers on their passenger doors, and the boss gave out flyers at the supermarket featuring special offers. In the nights leading up to this, the phone had always rung at the same time. For hours. Or perhaps only for minutes, but when you were half asleep it felt like hours. At first my mum had put a pillow on top of the phone, but the ringing was still too loud – even two pillows and a blanket weren't enough.

'Why don't you just answer it? Otherwise they won't know they've got the wrong number.'

'Because I don't want to. What kind of person calls someone at this time of night?'

'Someone who wants to order a taxi?'

'But I'm not a taxi service.'

'Who else would be calling us?'

'Nobody else would be calling us. Nobody.'

She pulled out the plug, and there the matter remained.

In the autumn, when the new phone books for 1989 were printed and available for free at the post office, my mum took out the magnifying glass she usually used for counting stitches and scanned all the pages where our name and address might have appeared, licking her index finger as she turned the thin pages. Eventually she set the heavy book aside, satisfied, having found nothing that might indicate we lived here. No trace of us anywhere.

'Why do we have a phone if we're not in the phone book?'

'So we can call whoever we want to call, my love.'

But my class teacher did manage to get through on the phone when my mum, for once, picked up during the day. They didn't speak for long. My mum was smiling in a forced way, which made her voice sound different. She was friendly, she laughed, but it was as if what she was saying was dubbed.

'Of course we can afford it. She'll be coming. Thank you for the offer, but there's no need.'

She hung up and shook her head.

'Your class is going on a school trip next month.'

'Where to?'

'An activity centre, in Wingst.'

‘Where’s that?’

‘Not far from here. In the forest.’

I wanted to know if the teacher had said anything else about me, but my mum didn’t elaborate.

‘Your teacher rather lacks imagination, doesn’t she?’ was all she said, and with that the subject was closed. She went back into the living room, which had turned into a sort of workshop, and started sorting through her needles, balls of wool and reels of thread. There were sketches hanging on the wall. They fluttered when my mum opened the window. She put down the paper bag she’d taken automatically from the drawer of the kitchen cupboard, and left it unused on the table, smoothing it distractedly with her hand.

‘I’ll give you the money tomorrow – you hand it to your teacher first thing in the morning.’

‘What money?’

‘The money for the school trip, what do you think?’

That evening when she fell asleep on the sofa knitting, she forgot to unplug the phone. The balls of wool had found their way all over the living room. Words dangled from the ceiling; some had got caught in my mum’s hair. *Nobody, Us, leave us alone, no, don’t call me* – I couldn’t decipher any more than that. I didn’t wake her. I stepped carefully over the lengths of yarn, pretending they were motion sensors that I mustn’t touch. I laid a blanket over her legs and dimmed the light.

Then I sat next to the phone and put my hand on the green receiver, ready to take it off the hook as soon as it rang. I waited until ten o’ clock. Nobody ordered a taxi. Mat sent a paper airplane into the garden, which meant: I’m bored. Or: I’m coming round. At that moment, the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and pressed it to my ear. There were traces of lipstick in the holes of the mouthpiece, and it had a familiar smell of perfume and make-up. I listened. The caller said nothing. Then I heard a click, and then the dial tone.

I made a paper airplane for Mat, which meant: I’m already in bed, can’t you see that? Mat threw two more failed attempts into our garden, because he didn’t understand mine. Then he gave up. I lifted the receiver. The dial tone still sounded. I hung up, waited another hour, but the phone didn’t ring again.

The next few evenings, my mum unplugged the phone and put it on top of the cupboard, which was too high for me. She said I wasn’t allowed to use the phone during the day unless she was at home. She even said I wasn’t allowed to open the door to anyone I didn’t know.

‘If there’s no-one there, you hang up.’

‘Why?’

‘If someone says they’re family you hang up, because that would be a lie.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we are our family – the two of us. You and me. We don’t need anyone else, and there isn’t anyone else, and it’s better that way.’

She gave me a kiss and a hug, holding me tight until I carefully extricated myself. Her smile faltered.

‘Everything okay?’

‘Yes. Why wouldn’t it be?’

She nodded. Then she went into the garden with the kitchen scissors.

The ivy that covered the front of our house was growing over the downstairs windows. When we’d moved in only the lower part had been covered. Now my mum regularly trimmed the ivy clear of the windows, unless there were birds nesting in it. Then she would wait until the baby birds had fledged before carefully moving the nests. The neighbour stood in the street with his dog, shaking his head.

‘It’s not good, you know.’

‘Pardon?’ I tried to be polite, as I had learned to be, even though I didn’t feel like talking to him.

‘It’s not good. The house is going to fall apart if all that ivy ever has to be removed. It eats into everything. Into the render. It’s a weed, a horrible weed! But it’s been like that for decades, this house.’

‘It’s a home for the birds.’

‘Ivy is poisonous. Just make sure it doesn’t spread to our house! Otherwise you’ll be footing the bill, for the repairs and for the cost of removing the pests.’

I nodded politely and went on sweeping. The dog cocked its leg and weed on the pile of leaves. The neighbour laughed, and didn’t pull the dog away until the yellow puddle had reached the kerb.

As soon as the neighbour was out of earshot, Mat jumped out from behind the hedge and started mimicking him.

‘Your house is falling apart, that stuff is sooo poisonous, blah blah blah.’

‘Leave me alone, Mat!’

Mat grinned, rolled up the sleeves of his jacket, gathered up the pissed-on pile of leaves and carried it into the garden.

‘We should burn this. It’ll make a lovely fire.’

‘It’s still too wet.’

Mat thought for a moment.

‘Then at least there’ll be enough smoke. We can summon help. We could waft it with the blanket and send up smoke signals. That’s how they do it in the Wild West.’

‘What are you on about? What kind of help?’

‘I don’t know.’

That night the phone rang again, because my mum hadn’t been as consistent as she’d intended.

I picked up.

‘Yes?’

‘Who is that?’ said a man’s voice I didn’t recognise.

‘I don’t know.’

The silence lasted a long time. I heard breathing, laboured breathing, as if the man had an elephant on his chest or a million books or hundreds of rocks. Then the rain rattled against the windowpane. I hung up in fright and unplugged the phone. My chest rose and fell, I gritted my teeth until the tears rolled from my eyes. My mum's bed was warm – she'd switched the electric blanket on. I pressed myself against her back, without waking her.

From then on I always checked the phone after brushing my teeth, and unplugged it myself. The phone calls became invisible. They rang noiselessly, and the silences on the other end of the line no longer reached us. The people who wanted to reach us but were not supposed to could no longer reach us.

(...)

II

The She-Bear

Bremerhaven-Lehe, 1951

Every spring, the cats would shed their coats. The fine hairs clung to everything – clothes, sofa cushions, towels. Berendine ignored it. She opened the windows so the cool air flowed through the rooms and spread the hair further and further around the house. Even in the garden, it hung in tufts from the brambles and in the knee-high grass. The cats played with it when they ventured out of the laundry room and lay in the afternoon sun warming their bellies.

Martha picked the unripe fruit off the branches from among the hairballs, chewed on the seeds and spat them out when the pulp started to taste bitter. Her hands were dyed purple, as were her teeth. And when she closed one eye, looked down and stuck her tongue out to one side, she could see the purple tip of it. Inside at the kitchen table sat her great-aunt and her grandmother. Through the window in the door, Martha saw Berendine talking quietly to Dina. The two women lowered their voices as soon as Martha was within earshot. They needn't have bothered: Martha knew they were talking about her.

(...)

She lay down in the grass and tried to disappear. The singsong of the women's voices sounded in her ears, and above that the high shrill tones which only she could hear, and which had got louder again since this morning when Heinrich had called her to him. The earth was hard and full of beetles. Martha put the

beetles on her stomach and let them crawl over her body, over the five new bruises on her upper arm, down to her fingertips, which she held outstretched to give the beetles a path back down to the grass. She concentrated on the tickling sensation and stared into the sky until black dots danced before her eyes. She wanted to see the eternity Berendine was always talking about. But all she saw was herself from above, lying in the grass, her arms and legs outstretched at her sides; nothing hurt any more.

Martha squinted as a shadow suddenly fell across her.

‘Enough daydreaming. Get up, Dinina, you can help me feed the rabbits.’

Only Berendine and Martha’s grandmother called her that: ‘Dina, Dinka, Dinina’, sometimes even ‘Darling’.

They ignored the fact that Martha’s mother Selma had given her a different name, just as Selma ignored everything else. All the women in the family were supposed to have the same name, hidden amongst other names which came before or after it, embracing the one name that mattered. A phonetic sequence that bound them all together, and had done for the past hundred years. When Martha asked why she had a different name, her grandmother simply shook her head, and Berendine said:

‘Well, little one, my brother married your grandmother Dina. I haven’t always been part of the family. So I don’t know why.’

‘Why do you call me that name, then?’

‘It’s pretty, isn’t it? And if that’s how it’s always been done —’

So eternity was a name. An eternally embracing name. Something that had to be passed on, because otherwise eternity would no longer be eternal, because otherwise, if the embrace ended, something would shift in the structure of time. A hole might emerge. A gap, an error. Or perhaps something even worse. Her name was not Dina. That was the beginning of the error. Martha felt dizzy when she thought about it. Next time she would search the sky for a hole, which would surely be floating somewhere directly overhead and would (at the very least) be magnetic or below-freezing cold or lined with mirrors; it would be able to suck everything in if it wanted to. Apart from her. Because she was far too strong and clever.

Sometimes, when Martha was probing too deeply, Dina would reply with a question of her own.

‘Why is that how it’s always been done?’

‘Would you like to go to the *Café National* for a hot chocolate, just the two of us?’

‘Why is that how it’s always been done?’

‘Why do you ask so many questions?’

‘Why is that how it’s always been done?’

‘Can you pass me the new thread? I’m going to embroider some lavender on this handkerchief.’

‘Why is that how it’s always been done?’

‘What difference would it make if you knew? So you’d know, and then what?’

None of those was an answer.

At the *Café National* the hot chocolate came topped with cream that melted in your mouth, and the milk was warm and rich. Of course she wanted to go.

They always chose a table by the window and sat in silence. Grandmother stroked Martha's hand with two fingers and stared into space until Martha couldn't stand it any longer, until she had to ask the question that was going round and round her head:

'Where were you when I was born?'

'I was there, Dinina.'

'What was it like?'

'It was – the way birth is. It was quick.'

'Were you happy?'

Her grandmother stared into space again. She saw a baby with amber skin, born too early, too thin; she heard the cry, which was louder than she'd expected, knew that it was okay, that it was going to be okay, because it had to be, because this time she would make sure it was. Selma simply closed her eyes and held up her hands in a gesture of refusal when the midwife went to place the newborn in her arms. So Dina took the baby, supporting the head in her hands. Heinrich hadn't been there; fortunately he didn't arrive until later. Dina was holding the child and turned away from him protectively.

'What did you say, my darling?'

'Were you happy?'

'Are you not enjoying your hot chocolate today?'

'I'm saving it. So it's not all gone too quickly.'

'One day I'll tell you everything.'

'What do you mean everything?'

Martha sipped her hot chocolate and the sweet taste filled her mouth. Dina didn't reply; she stroked her niece's hand and looked out of the window. A seagull flew past with a fish in its beak, swooped downwards and disappeared behind a house, then spiralled upwards again, using updraughts that swept over the city and whipped the clouds into distinctive shapes. A horse, a crocodile, a whale, a human being. Martha stroked Dina's hand so that the movement wouldn't stop.

Just before closing time, Martha and Dina walked down the high street. Her grandmother sped up as soon as they'd left the shops behind them, sticking close to the houses, staying outside the pools of light cast by the street lamps. Martha played along. She occasionally hopped into the light and stumbled, caught herself, did a dance step, a pirouette, then ran back to Dina's hand and into the shadows, where no-one could see her.

'Dinina, stop daydreaming, stand up, it's too cold to be lying around on the ground.'

Berendine was still waiting. Martha watched herself get to her feet and smooth down her dress, brushing off insects and bits of earth.

The rabbits pressed their noses to the wire netting and nibbled at it. Martha observed herself from above, poking a finger through and stroking the fur of one of the animals. The rabbit bit her. It bled, but she didn't take her finger out. Berendine, the she-bear, took hold of her wrist, carefully pulling her little hand out of the hutch. She put Martha's bleeding finger into her warm mouth, sucked the dirt from the wound and spat it out. The she-bear picked Martha up and carried her inside. Martha could smell her skin, curd soap and sweat, and the faint smell of honey. Her face fitted perfectly into the hollow of her great-aunt's neck, her body perfectly into her arms.

That evening Martha lay on the bench in the kitchen with a fever. Berendine had given her pillows and a blanket, wedging them in all around her. She said Martha needed to sweat, to purify her body.

'Then the dreams will go away,' said Berendine, heating up milk, 'but only the bad ones.'

Berendine skimmed the skin off the top of the milk. Martha drank. Her whole heart was throbbing in her finger, which was red and swollen. In the garden the rabbits scratched at the doors of the hutch. Martha's grandmother would pick her up the next day, once things had calmed down again at home, once Heinrich's fit of rage had passed. The she-bear sat on the bench until Martha fell asleep. Then she turned out the light.

The dreams didn't go away. They dripped down her forehead with the sweat, collecting in the pillow, and the blanket grew damp. In her sleep Martha kicked out, but the hands that held her on the lap where she was sitting and did not want to be sitting were stronger, pulling her in closer, squeezing. Martha gritted her teeth, so hard that her jaw hurt. The rabbits opened the doors of the hutch, and one by one they hopped cautiously out. The fever broke. The throbbing in her finger abated. One of the animals lolloped over to the bench, stood up on its hind legs and pressed its cold nose to Martha's forehead. She smiled; the fur tickled. She swept the dream away, swept everything away under the bench, out into the garden, across the lawn strewn with cat hair, where the clouds were shot through with pink.

Selma

(Letters to ashes)

Geestemünde, 1933

Selma was standing at the edge of the field one day. She had fine blonde curls, one blue and one green eye, slightly broad shoulders and a strong chin. She was dressed in a white dress with a lace collar.

*Stands a boy, stands and thinks, thinks and thinks, a whole night.
Schtejt a Bocher, schtejt un tracht, tracht un tracht a ganze Nacht.*

Selma. A gust of wind travelled through the field as theatrically as Jakob himself would not have dared to imagine. Oskar punched him because he had missed his cue. Now the hare was over the hill. They had been lying in wait for hours in the drizzle for it. Selma laughed and shook her head.

‘You did a great job,’ she said.

Jacob's face flushed.

‘You can't catch rabbits, try frogs or snakes.’

‘But there are no snakes here.’

‘Thousands of snakes! All over the field! Can't you hear them?’

Oskar shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well, all right, you can join.’

‘I don't even want to.’

But Selma stayed with the boys anyway and watched Oskar building a new trap. Jakob had lost interest, his legs were itching and scratching and his trousers were full of mud. He turned round.

‘They can feel the vibrations. Why don't you know that?’

The way home took longer than usual. Jakob walked very slowly. He wanted to place his feet as lightly as possible in front of each other without even touching the ground so that the snakes wouldn't be afraid and neither would all the other animals around him. He was still holding the flint he hadn't thrown at the hare. Selma stayed in the field with Oskar. Oskar missed several times. The slow-worms were quicker, even the frogs were too quick. Jakob could hear them laughing from afar.

That night he dreamt of his grandfather, whom he had never met. One by one, all his ancestors appeared to him without ever having met them in this world. They kept watch over what he would do next. The following morning, Jakob took his notebook and wrote:

We will get to know each other and get married. We will have children. Everything will be just as we imagine it. We will move constantly, around each other, with each other, in each other (Jakob didn't know whether he should write it like this, but he did anyway),
We will -

And then Meta called for him because his father was waiting for him downstairs in front of the house. Or Oskar stood in the field and built bridges and towers higher than the wall on the river Geeste, higher than the smokestacks of the ships at the emigrant harbour, which was filling up day by day. Jakob heard the sirens and the brass band when the wind carried the sounds of it into his room. Oskar heard the music in the field and a dark rumble behind it (muffled and quiet, still too far away). Sometimes the ground shook under his feet and the tower collapsed, so he had to rebuild it. But for that he needed Jakob, who lay on the bed and thought of Selma. Jakob didn't know whether Selma was also dreaming about him. He knew very little. Basically, he knew nothing at all. He had never known as little as he did at that moment. He wrote until the notebook was filled. Then he hid it under the mattress and started the next one.

And then Jakob's mother Meta had been picked up again, by the same SA uniformed men as the first time. The same car had stopped in front of the house with the engine running, and others were already sitting in the back. Those who were to be interrogated and those who were sent directly to the protective custody camp. And again his father wasn't there. This time Jakob stayed in Oskar's wardrobe cabinet for a week.

Oskar put food in front of it. He cleared away the untouched plate and brought something new. Jacob only drank water. Just as much as he sweated out so that he didn't have to go to the toilet. Then Oskar opened the wardrobe doors and sat down in front of them.

'I told the teacher that you're healthy again.'

'That's a lie.'

'Your father wants to see you.'

Jacob remained silent.

'Selma is waiting for you.'

Jacob shook his head.

'Your mum's back home.'

'Friends don't lie to each other.'

Oskar remained silent. Nothing was a lie. Almost everything was a lie. Between his feet lay a slow-worm with its head crushed.

For a few weeks, there was a cross hanging above the door. But even though she had converted, Meta couldn't walk under it and enter her own flat without feeling guilty. She took it down and said that someone must have stolen it, after all it was made of bronze.

Summer came and went. Selma taught them how to grab snakes with their bare hands. Jakob still didn't dare, but Selma no longer laughed about it, she just teased him. Oskar tried again and again. And the one snake that he actually caught, he immediately let go in fright. Selma peeled the raw potatoes with a knife that she always carried in her apron. They put them on branches so that they could be cooked over a fire, but the friends never lit a fire so as not to be discovered.

Selma told them that her father Carl served passengers on a luxury *Hapag Lloyd* ship in a white tailcoat. The *Columbus* had sailed from the city harbor to New York for the first time three years after Jakob's birth. The ship was huge.

'Bigger than all the houses in the city stacked on top of each other,' Selma said.

That's why they had moved here. There was work here for her father, there were the harbor and this oversized ship in which he always disappeared for several months a year. Her mother Dina raised her daughter pretty much on her own.

'My father knows what palm trees look like,' Selma said, 'and he can shuffle packs of cards and welcome the guests in English.'

'How?' asked Oskar and Selma shrugged her shoulders.

'You'll have to ask him yourself.'

If Selma didn't turn up the next day, or the day after that, or the days after that, Jakob and Oskar knew that she was standing on the quay with her mother Dina, throwing handkerchiefs into the air. They waved, held hands and counted to a hundred - *ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven* - then went home without turning round.

The weeks without her father meant that Selma stayed in the field longer than usual. But when Carl came back from the other side of the world, he was chirpy and restless. He brought water spirits and gifts and often an unbearable silence that Selma couldn't interpret. She told her friends nothing about it. Jakob only knew it because he could see it in her eyes. Just before Dina tried too hard for her husband, the next ship always left and life returned for a few busy days of travelling preparations. Then Selma just waved from a distance because she didn't want to miss a thing back home. No stories her father could tell about what was going to happen on the journey or where the ship was heading this time. No good-humoured

hugs as he lifted her high above his head and twirled her through the air until they both felt dizzy. No smiles from her mum, who knew they were almost there. Then there was cake for breakfast and her father showed Selma how the cards were shuffled and held.

- *ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred* -

On the day of departure, the stewards' wives and laborers crowded onto the quay among the others who had stayed ashore. Selma held the handkerchief tightly and didn't turn round until she was back in the field.

The field was far enough away from the water.

Jakob and Oskar were always there, waiting for her.

They hardly ever talked about the third person who had joined them. They didn't say the obvious.

When Jakob was twelve and Selma just thirteen, Carl stayed away even longer than usual, so the three of them could spend every afternoon together.

By then Oskar was already fourteen, and the field was eventually a meadow and then the garden behind Jakob's house, and Meta made her way to the midwife's sister every week. Whenever she felt a longing for her husband Eric who regularly met with the other woman. While Meta stood in front of the midwife's sister's house and looked up at the window, Jakob and Selma lay next to each other in the garden. Oskar didn't come.

Selma's hands felt rough and were very small. She could never have caught a frog with them, even if she still claimed she could. Jakob's skin hurt even before she touched him. Above them, the washing lines cut through the grey. Selma's fingers cut a layer of skin and another one and another one until Jakob was no longer Jakob, but what he had been before and what he had been before that and then he was no one. Selma didn't notice any of this. Their mutual friend was unaware of any of this. Jakob held his breath in loneliness and happiness.

A boat with arrested men landed on the island *Langlütjen* and the men were distributed in the trenches around the fort. The shipping channel was calm. Smoke mingled with the clouds that drifted from the river Weser with the rising water over the island in the direction of Lehe. The pile of books and papers that had been confiscated from the trade union and party offices of the communists and leftists smoked more and more, but hardly burned. The maypole on the market square shook off the colorful ribbons that wrapped themselves tightly around the necks of the gawkers and over their eyes. The paper had become wet, so that none of it seemed as powerful and mighty as it had been ordered by the SA. The fire ate

its way through the clammy pages. The statue of the former mayor closed its eyes in shame. The letters burned at different speeds, some danced, others charred within seconds.

Jakob breathed in.

He tasted an S, an A, a P, a D, he swallowed.

Selma buried her head in his armpit.

Jakob swallowed the air of letters and coughed, exhaling individual words that got caught in Selma's hair and made no sense.

Jakob continued to breathe in and out, each burnt letter, until the marketplace emptied, because the pyre had crumbled to ashes. The wind scattered the ashes in the surrounding streets and laid it on windows, leaves, clothes. Jakob breathed the ashes. The next morning, there was even a fine layer on the baker's bread, which the apprentice blew away before handing the loaves over the counter. Many words disappeared. Others gradually took their place. (*Action - Aktion. Alignment - Ausrichtung. Notice of descent - Abstammungsbescheid. Stew Sunday - Eintopfsonntag. Ent-. Ent-. Ent-. End. Verdunkelung - Darkening.*)

Meta sold the furniture and carpets in the following weeks. She sorted her clothes and offered them to neighbors who knowingly bought them for too little money. The flat disappeared a little more every day, right in front of Jakob's eyes, until only the bare necessities were left. Jakob didn't ask because he didn't want to hear the answer. Jakob didn't ask because he didn't know the right question. Jakob saw the unease in Meta's eyes, but he couldn't think of anything to make her laugh. She only sent Jakob shopping once a week. Eric left the food that he sometimes received from his patients instead of money on their doorstep in the evenings. Meta didn't touch it, but Jakob shared it with Oskar when he came over and they lay on the ground under the washing line so that they became invisible in the tall grass. Jakob thought of Selma and Selma's hands. Oskar thought of Selma without telling Jakob how they had felt together, so close that nothing and no one could fit between them.

After the burning of books, Eric began to pick Jakob up for church on Sundays. He tucked his shirt into his trousers and parted his hair with spit, which Jakob accepted with disgust. Every Sunday, Jakob kept an eye out for Selma, but neither she nor Dina went to church. After the burning of the words, Oskar's father disappeared for several days. When he returned, Oskar hardly recognized him.

The minesweeper that lay in the Old Harbor was rusty and nameless. Forty-three meters of deck, under which Oskar's father was held with other men. Those who wanted to watch gathered on the connecting

bridge to the Old Harbor because all they ever did was watch, even later, when whole groups of people were herded through the streets, except that they later claimed to have seen nothing. It were those who were attracted by the screams that penetrated through the harbor to the houses and disturbed their afternoon coffees.

The crowd on the bridge waited. Every now and then a man would appear and fetch buckets of water from the harbor basin. As it became quieter, the bridge emptied. Dinner was prepared in the houses. There was no light on the ghost ship at night and the screams were quieter.

Oskar tended to his father's wounds. When his father was brought back the second time with black eyes and a broken arm. Oskar tied a sling made from old cloths so that his father could place his broken arm in it.

Selma didn't believe him when Oskar described the ship.

‘Ghost ships don't exist, that's nonsense.’

Oskar looked at Jakob and remained silent. The next morning, he brought a tear-out from the *Nordwestdeutsche Zeitung*, which contained a picture of a ship so big that it took up half the harbor basin, with a funnel and two sail masts, from which Jakob thought he could see shadowy figures hanging upside down, with their mouths open and black eyeholes. Not people, not ghosts, something completely different.

‘I don't want to see this!’

Selma shook her head. She run away without turning round.

One Sunday in September, when Eric and Jakob went to church, Meta packed a suitcase. The kind she could carry on her own. She pushed it under Jakob's bed next to her own bed. When she lay awake at night, she could look at his face: The delicate skin, the gently curved eyebrows that were so light they almost disappeared, the freckles that spread all over his face, arms and legs as if they were dancing.

When the midwife's sister rang the doorbell, Meta didn't open the door. When the neighbors knocked, she didn't open the door. She slipped banknotes into the heels of her shoes and then blackened the soles.

(...)

(The Deceiver)

Wesermünde, 1940

The front door was ajar when Jakob arrived at Oskar's house. He had hardly seen him since he and two other pupils had been expelled from school. The house was half an hour's walk away, past the market square, along the park and to the apartment blocks. The shops on the ground floor had closed or been taken over. Temporary posters were stuck to the shop windows. There were clothes on the floor in the corridor, chairs had been knocked over; the kitchen looked similar. A curtain had been torn down, the pantry was open and empty. Jacob tried not to walk too close by the window, but the whole house was silent. The flat was on the first floor, there was a door in the corridor, a staircase to the inner courtyard, but there was no one there either. Jakob went to the wardrobe, sat down in the left-hand compartment and pulled the door shut. The wardrobe had shrunk. Jacob pulled his knees up to his upper body. The wardrobe cabinet was a dark hole into which everything had been pulled, and something still fitted in, certainly himself.

The wardrobe cabinet was a house. The house was a ship. Animals and a few people lived on it, who were never allowed to disappear because otherwise the world would be falling apart. M, O, and S. They hid in the ship's hull, where Jakob couldn't see them. The animals spoke one language and the humans spoke another one. Nevertheless, they communicated. The ship had no windows, so Jakob invented windows and told what he saw. It wasn't much. A strip of light in which shimmering particles of dust were dancing. The waistband of a pair of trousers that resembled the path through the field in high summer. A dress whose fabric was the same color as Selma's skin.

The ship was not a house. The house was not a wardrobe. The wardrobe cabinet was not a place. Jakob heard animal voices through the wood, which had become louder and turned into human voices that belonged to those who had taken Meta away. Who had taken Oskar away, while he embraced Selma's and Jakob's imprint of bodies in the grass, when everything was still possible: a cloud could be a horse, a snake a lion, a frog a gift, the earth in their pockets all the money in the world, the grass a hiding place, the body a body, the heart a heart, fear a sword.

The wardrobe was a cellar. The wardrobe cabinet was a wardrobe cabinet. It was an attic, a room without doors, a stable. A shed behind the gardens, on the edge of the city, from which all the people who were like Jakob had been taken away, without him knowing what he was like or who he still was, even if others seemed to know.

The wardrobe cabinet burned when an aerial bomb hit the house.

The wardrobe was on the mind of the midwife's sister when she advised Jakob's father to stop searching for Jakob five years later. She kept quiet about where she had taken his son at Meta's request. Where he was safe as long as nobody, not even his father, knew he was there. She thought, she had done her duty. She thought, she had done something good.

The wardrobe was a stamp in a file in an office where seven years later (only seven ridiculous years in which the whole world was eaten up) another man would sit, who had married the one Jakob hugged anew every night in the grass that grew in the wardrobe.

The wardrobe was no place from which he could ever return.

Jakob put on Oskar's jacket and ran back home. The window of the surgery door had been smashed. Eric had already repaired it with boards. An accident, the neighbors said. Eric wasn't on anyone's list, everyone knew that. Jakob stormed up the stairs into the living rooms above the surgery. The midwife's sister was waiting for him.

'There you are,' she said.

She handed him a shirt, fresh trousers and polished shoes. The collar of the shirt was heavy. Something was sewn into the fabric. Jakob put on the clothes Meta had chosen for him. The midwife's sister stood up and told him to hurry up. They had to leave while Eric was still making home visits to the patients. She only had a handbag with her, some provisions and three train tickets; outward- and return tickets for herself and a one-way ticket for Jakob.

(...)