

ANOUSCH MUELLER

LORI

Translated by Alexandra Roesch

Prologue

When a secret unravels, the story begins again. As a second version. From then on, each of us exists in one version and the other at the same time. In one version I am my parents' eldest daughter, the firstborn. The one with whom a couple in love learned to become parents. The one to whom the crown would have passed, had the kingdom not already fallen before I was born. (That photograph: Mama and Papa at the 1975 carnival, King and Queen, crowned, happy and childless.)

In the other version I am the second child, the regent. The one who cannot bear comparison. *She is so completely unlike Lori.* That sentence was never spoken, but my parents' silence marked the empty space where it would have gone. I was in the wrong place, moved up into a position I had no right to.

My parents did not know that I had not forgotten Lori. That my child's brain had defied the diagnosis of *retrograde amnesia*. So we deceived each other for the whole of my childhood. What my parents never suspected was that the memory was overpowering. It came back to me at the age of eight, when I found a small faceted glass pendant lying in the grass behind our house. When I held the little ornament up to the sun, I watched a bundle of coloured rays appear. Broken light. And I knew at once where I had seen those colours before.

It was on the day I lost Lori.

I

1995

A splinter, a crack, a crash. That was how the beam gave way. After that triad of sounds came a dull, ringing silence. Soon after, Etgar, Alex, Josi and Kiki burst into the entrance hall of our railway station house, flung open the kitchen door and shouted at Mama that I was hurt, bleeding, unconscious, and at once everything fell into chaos. The children's voices tumbled over one another, already distorting the story. I had been pushed, someone had tried to kill me, I would certainly never walk again. My siblings began to wail in chorus, and grew louder

still when Papa called out to Mama to make room, quickly, laid me down on the sofa in the kitchen, and she snapped indignantly: can't you see I'm breastfeeding!

I wanted to protest to her: But you can't actually breastfeed! Six children and you couldn't even feed one of us that way! All of us spent our first weeks of life sucking in vain at your sore nipples, never satisfied by the wretched trickle, never thriving, screaming just to survive, until we grew quieter and quieter from sheer exhaustion, and every single time you had to give up the fight for your milk, until at last Papa brought out the bottles that saved us, while you buried your face in the feeding pillow and wept. And yet look: all of us are strong and healthy! I am afraid of nothing, not even now, when I can hardly breathe, now that a rib has punctured my pleura. Papa hurries the whimpering children out of the room and takes what he needs from his medical case to put in a chest drain. Hold on, my big girl, the doctor will be here any minute now! It was always Papa who said the comforting words. It was always Mama who turned away, always with a baby on her arm.

It will not be my first scar, once the incision under my ribs has healed. I already carry marks from falls and fights on my knees and elbows. And then there is the fine scar that runs across the top of my skull. What I share with Mama are all the stitches in our skin. Mama's tally: several episiotomies, an appendix scar, a scar from a broken collarbone. And what she shares with Papa: they both have those deep scars slashed across their palms.

While Papa makes a small incision with a scalpel between my second and third ribs, I let my mind wander to Mama, tackling mountains of washing. How she might write her autobiography: *The Never-Ending Story of Laundry*. How she stands in the wash house, sorting laundry, separating light from dark, day in, day out. How the rumble of two washing machines sets the rhythm of our family life. I see the old, potbellied copper boiler, dethroned decades ago first by the *WM 66*, then by a *Foron*, then later still by a *Siemens*, standing watch over it all now like an abandoned god, mute, while Mama hauls in ever new towers of dirty washing; while she later carries off the clean, heavy, wet laundry in coloured baskets to hang out to dry on the row of ten washing lines in the garden; while, in the middle of it all, she tickles the baby lying in one of the baskets. I see her lift it out, kiss it, rock it in her arms. That is what she did with each of us. And that is how, one after another, she let each of us go again, once we could walk and talk. Again and again she needed to fill her hungry womb. Always just when the magic of being needed had faded, as she herself once put it.

Mama, who after me had gone on to have Etgar, Josi, Kiki (we girls were burdened with the diminutive 'i' ending, all of them pet names for three-syllable first names), Alex and Paul. When Mama was not giving birth, she read. During (futile) breastfeeding, during cooking, ironing, drying up. Papa had made her a device for this purpose, so the pages would not flip shut: a kind of ruler made of thin Perspex, weighted at each end with a brass ball. I do not know when or how they managed to conceive so many children, because Mama went to bed with a book and started reading again the moment she woke. Six children, all of us, bar the youngest, sleeping long and sound through the night from the third month on.

Every few weeks she packed whichever child was youngest at the time into a handcart (she always had to have the youngest with her), went off to the second hand bookshop and came back with a whole cartload of well-thumbed books. She had an arrangement with the bookseller, who, for ten marks, let her have everything that would otherwise have crumbled to dust. And so our rather slim family library (for she parted with books just as readily as she parted with her children) held curiosities such as *Baroque World in Space and Ornament* or *German Huntsmanship*, but also the odd treasure, like a signed first edition of *The Legend of Unending Happiness*. Murmuring soothing words, Papa now guides the Heimlich valve into the incision, and shortly afterwards the pressure in my chest finally eases, my breathing settles, I will survive this time too, and I whisper, thank you, Papa.

I am Helena Ross, known as Leni, and on that summer evening of my early youth, my story very nearly came to a premature end. But I was lucky. I fell through the rotten beams of the old barn, hit the stone floor a few centimetres from a rusted, antique toothed harrow, and broke my shoulder, my arm and my ribs. I spent the rest of that summer in plaster, sitting half upright, breathing shallowly and calmly, just as Papa had taught me. Because, as Papa explained it, there was no need to breathe deeply at all. The shallower the better; that was the healthiest way to breathe. The Chinese say a person breathes best when it looks as though they are not breathing at all. And the Japanese say: healthy people breathe through their little toe, only the sick breathe with their lungs. And I was not sick, said Papa, only rather unlucky in how I'd fallen.

Papa was a paramedic by profession, and at home our ever-busy first responder. He was always there in an instant, whenever we tumbled down the stairs, came off our bikes or skateboards, cracked our heads together in a fight, or hurt ourselves the way Alex did, after he had snatched a sharp knife off the table, run off with it and tripped, the blade missing his eye by a hair's breadth and only grazing his ear. Astonishingly often, it turned out fine. And when it didn't, Papa applied pressure bandages, stitched up flesh wounds, set broken bones.

Winters were quieter. We injured ourselves less, and instead lay coughing in bed more often. He preferred snot to blood, Papa used to say, and to this day he tells us he always dreaded the warm months, afraid that one of us would not survive the summer. There was not a single lake within twenty kilometres, which reassured him: at least you can't go and drown yourself as well!

While Papa was busy patching us back together, Mama kept the house in order. She swept, mopped, scrubbed and polished with a kind of manic devotion. The rooms we lived in were always in a state that made you forget six children lived there. This ritual of cleaning was necessity, duty, a kind of penance paid in advance. It was not an act of care. You simply waited for the moment Mama pulled the door shut behind her and vanished into another life.

Mama was beautiful to look at when she balanced on tiptoe on the veranda railing in a summer dress, picking a few blooms from the hanging basket, or when she gazed into the

distance in the evening light, out over the yellow fleece of the rapeseed field, loosening her hairband so her blonde hair fanned out in a great wave down to her shoulder blades, and paused there a moment, before finally, decisively, twisting it into a severe bun. Then she stood, upright, back straight, head tilted slightly upward. She was ready, at any moment, for anything.

That Mama (and more rarely Papa too) always seemed as though she were only ever a step away from leaving one life for another seemed apt, given that we lived in an old railway station. In our village, people called the station The End of the World and, as I now know, my parents had every reason to move there.

The station building stood like a fortress in no-man's-land. The reception building, from the *Gründerzeit*, had been an extravagance from the very year it was built. At the turn of the twentieth century, people indulged in lavishly beautiful and needlessly grand architecture even in the deepest provinces. The three-storey building was completed in 1906, the year the line opened. On the front of the house, in the centre of each storey, were sets of three-part arched windows, which lent the building a kind of sacred dignity.

The façade was rendered white for the first time in 1906, and for the last time in 1999. The windows and edges of the building were framed in brick, and above the entrance was emblazoned the name of the village, which Papa touched up every few years with a paintbrush, using the outlines left by the old cast-iron letters as his stencil. Eleven letters, closed off with a full stop, as though the village were a sentence made of a single word. After the full stop, pressed right up against it with no space between, in slightly smaller letters and set in brackets shaped like a pair of protective hands, was the name of the river on whose banks our village lay – a river in which no one could possibly have drowned, since the area saw little rain and a great deal of sun, so that in the summer months it shrank to a parched little stream, which, on the rare occasion of heavy rain, would swell mightily, only to spill out over the surrounding water meadows and turn the whole landscape into a single swamp, our own 'Little Mississippi', as Papa called it ("two t's, two s's, two s's, two p's").

A short distance from the house stood an outbuilding, a miniature version of the main house, whose original purpose none of us ever worked out, and which had become our great, sacred wash house.

Even this remote corner of Thuringia had once lain within the reach of the Royal Prussian State Railway. A kilometre stone stood not far from the station, its two faces stamped in concrete and picked out in black paint with the numbers: 26.25.

As my childhood ended, I had a growing feeling that we were living at a lost outpost. It struck me as extraordinary that, long ago, someone had driven this small monument into the ground out here, in the middle of nowhere. The kilometre stone had long stood at a slant and no longer met the requirement of standing "vertically at the edge of the track crown". Nor was it any longer necessary "to keep the area around the number stones permanently free of weeds and mounds of earth, gravel or ballast". So it was written in the "Guidelines of

the German Reichsbahn on the Condition, Labelling, Placement and Treatment of Number Stones, valid from 1 October 1939". I was fascinated by the blackletter type on the title page, and by the German Imperial Eagle too, its sharply spread wings somehow calling pistols to mind, its wreath of oak leaves reminiscent of Christmas. I traced the broken letters with my finger like a child just learning to read, and discovered too that in matters of number stones one must always attend to "the preservation of the standard clearance gauge."

Papa kept an archive of every historical document relating to our orphaned stretch of railway. In the 1944/45 timetable, the line was listed for the last time. Before we moved onto the station grounds in 1985, it had been inhabited, for more than two decades, by families, couples, and lone individuals. The building was a stopping place, never a home. The people who moved here were not seeking seclusion; they came here to atone. On the long walks into the village, hauling coal (the lorry could never get all the way to the house), struggling to heat the cold stone walls, looking out across the empty stretch of fields, they had plenty of time to reflect on their wrongdoings. There were social outcasts here, thieves, brawlers, political prisoners, or people who, like my parents, had come under suspicion. The station was both things at once. The opposite of a prison, and its implementation all the same: isolation, correction, the branding of a person. Because everyone in the village knew that anyone who moved to the station had something on their conscience.

Papa managed, over the years, to win the trust of the village. He saved lives, taught karate, mended motorbikes, always knew where to lay his hands on spare parts. He pitched in at the funfair, at harvest time, and at the football tournaments. He was friendly, always ready to listen, went along to the regulars' table at the pub and was unbeatable at Skat. On top of that, he had brought skills from his former life as an architect. And so he drew up plans for remodelling the community hall, for extending the co-op shop *Konsum*, and for countless private extensions besides. Later, he was even encouraged to stand for mayor. He turned it down.

It was thanks to Papa's popularity that parents in the village let their children come out to us at the station without a second thought. They came on their bikes and later on mopeds, ran wild and loud through the house, and stuffed their mouths with the sweets Mama put out (before making herself scarce). Every child was fed, free and happy here, out in this remote district that connected to nothing.

The station was a magnet, a playground. We could climb over the signal without any danger, run for miles along the tracks, sit at the edge of the platform, plait garlands of flowers, swap cards, read comics and, later on, drink, smoke, kiss. Even though two kilometres separated us from the first house in the village, we were never cut off. It was only when the other children set off together for the village in the evening that I felt left behind. I envied them for going home to families where the parents were farmers, tradesmen, shop assistants. I envied them their mothers with their perms and housecoats. I envied them for having only one or two siblings at most, but countless cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents besides, for being part of different clans that had their centre right there in the village. I even envied them

their feuds and rivalries, the hatred stirred up whenever a new marriage joined lovers from villages that despised each other. I envied them their roots, their small-town pride, the fact that they had always been there. That they belonged, and that this was never once in question. As long as we played by their rules and didn't draw attention to ourselves, they let us believe we were part of their community. But when Etgar stole sweets from *Konsum*, when Josi, drunk, kissed her friend's father, when Alex tore through the village on a motorbike without a licence, or when Kiki painted pentagrams on her friends' foreheads, the mistrust was suddenly there again. The locals would have been let off for all of that. For us outsiders, these were offences that reminded the village, all over again, that we had never quite been trusted.

There had always been rumours. That Mama and Papa were spies was the favourite, even among my siblings. They felt the mystery gave them some status and used it as a weapon. If anyone crossed them, they would threaten them with their connections to clandestine powers. *They can cover anything up.*

No train had called at our station since the end of the Second World War. The line had only ever connected a handful of small villages. After a stray bomb tore a crater into the middle of the tracks, the line was never brought back into service. This left the surrounding villages stranded, scattered orphans, and indeed, because of their isolation, they came to be known from then on as the *orphan villages*. The bomb crater was an overgrown scar in the earth, cornflowers, poppies and larkspur blooming along its wounded edges. The bomb's fin had ploughed into one of the rails and fused with it into a single shattered sculpture. The bomb crater was the centre of all our childhood games. We played war there, shivered in the trench, played dead when hit by an imaginary shell, burned through caps for our toy guns, barked orders, swore blood brotherhood under fire, and shared sour laces once the battle was done. For a while we used one especially devious weapon, sticking little scraps of foam onto pins, loading them into thick straws, and blowing these missiles at the enemy with deadly aim. Sometimes we lay in wait like snipers behind hedges and the corners of walls, ambushing unsuspecting passers-by. Now and then we felt chastened by the bomb crater and staged little pacifist debates. But the spot remained a place of pilgrimage for our warlike imaginations.

It was one of the most consequence-free bombings in history: a single bomb, fallen from the sky into no-man's-land, where it claimed no victims and destroyed little more than two rails. Perhaps it had been a mistake, so trivial that it was never even recorded. In fact there were no bombing raids on the surrounding towns in the days before or after it fell. Not even the exact date could ever be pinned down. There seemed to be no witnesses, no documents. The "lone bomb," as Papa called it, could not have carried much explosive force anyway, he supposed, and uncovering the story behind it became something of a hobby for him. His curiosity had been sparked by a letter he found tucked inside one of Mama's second hand books. In it, a woman from our area wrote to her sweetheart at the front about a strange

thing she had witnessed some days before, which only now, having heard about the destroyed railway line, struck her as meaningful. A few days earlier, she had seen something silver and glittering moving across the sky. It had been the midday lull; she had been out in the field secretly digging up a few potatoes, when she suddenly heard the sound of an engine, very far off, and looked up to find a flying object in the sky. Then something dark had appeared against the cloudless sky, a black dot pulling away from the silver one at tremendous speed. She had stood rooted to the spot, staring at this incomprehensible sight, until she grew dizzy and heard a roaring in her ears, not from outside but from within, as though her ears were filling up with blood. She must have briefly lost consciousness, because when she came to, both objects were gone and everything was as before. When the destruction was discovered, the village was in uproar. First came the whispering, then the silence. There the letter ended. It had plainly never been sent.

Papa entertained us with stories like this in the evenings, at our bedsides. He told us we were living at a phantom station. In fact, he said, the phantom was rather like a member of the family, haunting the place unseen. We burrowed further under our blankets and did as Papa told us: *shh, but don't tell Mama!*

Papa's stories were lessons whose meaning I only understood much later. They gave him a way of speaking about the unspeakable. Because there was one thing we all knew, and one thing we did not: there were six of us living. And there was Lori, resting on the bed of the Baltic Sea.