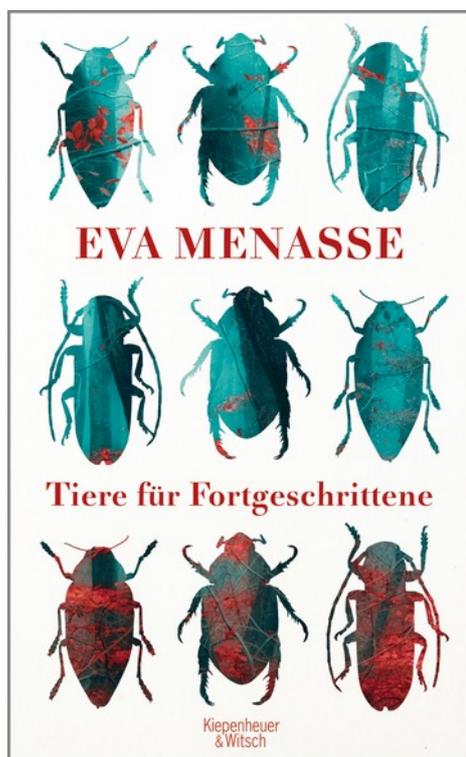


Sample Translation

“Caterpillars” from: *Advanced Studies in Animals*
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Caterpillars

Tobacco hornworms are inadvertently digging their own graves as they eat. Stimulated by the caterpillars' digestive secretions, tobacco plants release aromas that attract insect-eating predators. That's unfortunate for the caterpillars, because their oral secretions are only meant to have an antibiotic effect.

After the argument with Katharina, Konrad almost immediately retreated to the cellar to continue working on his obituary. It had been particularly hard to drive her away this time. He had resorted to his old tactic of simply not reacting, standing there on the landing like a brake block personified, staring, offering no flank for further attacks. They resolutely ignored the fact that he was nevertheless bleeding from every wrinkle of his soul, both Katharina and Helena, with whom Katharina was surely already on the phone. He stood there on the landing, silent and invisibly bleeding. All his strength and his love and his belief that one's family was one's life's work pouring out of him and down the marble steps, and the fact that he didn't move a muscle, kept a straight face and was apparently cruel – an accusation they had both levelled at him several times – was simply because the slightest movement would have caused him to collapse. Don't block my path, she had hissed, let me at least say goodbye to my mother, but he had stood there, staring, for he couldn't move, couldn't step aside, couldn't have stood the brush of her matronly body against his had he let her pass, so he drove her backwards and out of the door with his vacant gaze.

There was no sound from upstairs. He suspected Katharina of speaking deliberately loudly, but he could have told her, he could have guaranteed to his clueless, ice-cold, domineering daughter that some things still held – the intimate bond between Grete and him, in any case. Grete had always known when to hand over the reins to him, for the safety of them both.

You've gone too far this time, Papa, Katharina said at last, in a voice that sounded as if it came from an empty barrel. You won't get away with this. But then she did leave, and as the door clicked shut, he stood there for a few minutes until he was able to go down the stairs, his body as unfeeling and awkward as if it were only memory of his former life that kept him moving.

Downstairs, directly behind the door of his exile's cave, hung the framed photo of Grete in the yellow dress. Korčula in the early seventies. And how she was laughing there. His health wasn't good at the time. He'd fainted for the first time at work shortly before that holiday, if he remembered correctly. That was

why he was more intolerant of the children's bickering than ever, the screeching and weeping, and the bite wounds and scratches shown with dramatic displays of victimhood. Grete shielded the children from him, her contempt for him switching to playful affection even as she turned away. She swam far out to sea with them, played cards and badminton, cut their meat into small pieces in the evenings and cooled their insect bites, but at night, when it was finally quiet and dark and dislocated, Konrad and she would nonetheless come together, with the taste of salt all over and sand in the cracks, and in retrospect those turbulent few years could pass for pure bliss.

He would take the picture down, probably, soon. Down here, at least, he could still do as he liked. There comes a day when fine memories stand in such stark contrast to the present that one would rather completely dispose of them. Back then, in Yugoslavia, they had known each other for almost two decades already. But the period from the day they met after the war, eager for life, to that soft, open Korčula face seemed, as far as the changes were concerned, to have passed in barely the blink of an eye. Then one day the storm hits the tree, stripping it bare, leaving no leaf hanging, not even the smallest golden one.

If he took down the picture, he might as well pack it up straight away. Yet unlike the other things he had already parcelled out, he didn't know offhand whether it belonged in Helena's box or Katharina's. Of course it was possible to make a copy and buy a second frame; it was a standard model. Yet it would still be clear which was the original, and that would lead to further conflicts, although he couldn't gauge which they would think was more valuable: the dusty picture or the new one, or to each the other, the one she hadn't got. Most likely the latter.

In a moment of greater inner calm, in a few days' or a week's time, he would think again about his idea of packing a special box for Joshua – a smaller one, effectively an accompaniment to Helena's. Was that appropriate, or mean? Would it be seen as especially caring or, on the contrary, as an accusation?

But – and this was a potential cause for renewed anger at the thousand considerate thoughts they had trained him to have for them – this much at least was indisputable: of all the grandchildren only Joshua had had strong ties with Grete, from the very beginning; he of all of them, that unpredictable, delinquent kid. She had been the only person he let calm him as a toddler, and later on he had baked Christmas biscuits with her for years – macarons, cinnamon stars, layer cake. To this day, on his occasional visits, he would go quite naturally into her room, hold her hand, chat and laugh with her; about what, nobody knew. Joshe deserved the picture of the summer beauty in the yellow diamond-patterned dress more than anyone else.

Konrad sat down at the desk and opened the lined exercise book. He did own a computer, using it with the combination of pride and fear typical of people of his age. If everything went to plan, it gave one an almost obscene level of self-confidence, a sense of being only ever so slightly out of step with one's time. But then the thing would instantly strike back, making the small symbols one was supposed to click on vanish without a trace, sending threatening error messages, changing its expression; in short, it behaved like a living, incomprehensible and aggressive creature – a pubescent daughter, for example. Then Katharina had to come, and her contained sullenness as she made the mouse dart here and there, made him look, even to himself, like a complete idiot who had no right to exist in the modern world. *Throw him out*, he thought. If I were hardware, I would definitely be *disposed of*.

So the computer wasn't an option. Here, it was important to picture every step ahead, their outlines and variations, in his own handwriting, of which he was still proud. Creating a Word document wouldn't do. He now thought that he might need a second exercise book. One wouldn't be enough. He had already forgiven himself for this compromise. Since busying himself with this work, he had come to realise just how hard it must be to be a writer. There were so many possibilities. There were so many combinations. Depending on the start, the subsequent writing elements take on a completely different complexion. You can write any German sentence in so many different ways. His life was filled with love and concern for his family. Love and concern for his family filled his life. Concern and love. Wasn't it love *for*, but concern *about*? His family was the centre of his life, his pride and joy. In his love for it, for whom, for the family . . .

Impervious to advice, Helena had whispered back then, unaware that he had picked up the other phone. Completely impervious to advice. He just won't get it into his thick skull that there are experts for everything, people who are better at things, people with experience. And Katharina seconded her: He hasn't grasped the service economy. There are cleaning ladies, window-cleaners and meals on wheels. There are retirement homes allowing visitors where he could take her two or three afternoons a week . . .

He had stood there in the narrow hallway outside Grete's room without daring to push the red button. They might have heard a beep and realised he'd been eavesdropping. However painful their words were, he still felt an uncontrollable desire to discover every last detail, to hear how pitiless they were, how heartless and cold, how they fundamentally misunderstood everything he did and his tenacity. At last they agreed on something, the two of them, and this gave them unexpected power. Like Saint Sebastian, he let the arrows pierce him, standing in his soul's blood up to his ankles, though upright

and unwavering. If he had one regret, it was that he wouldn't get to see how sorry they were at his graveside.

When the conversation had finished and he heard Helena banging about downstairs in the kitchen, he had carefully put the phone back on its base. He had pushed Grete's door open a few inches. She was sitting in her armchair, asleep. The sun was shining in on her and her chubby cacti. She was smiling in her sleep. His old girl. If he simply gazed at her face, without blinking or breathing, and waited until everything around it grew blurred – the sorry white tufts of hair on her head and the mouldy delta into which her body had dissolved – then he thought he still briefly recognised her, an idea of her at least, as if her eyes, nose and mouth were only covered with crumpled, brownish paper.

That remark about the service economy – the one he apparently didn't understand – snagged in his memory in a way his daughter could not possibly have foreseen. He could do without advice about cleaning and caring staff; he only needed to look at Grete asleep in her chair. Peacefully. Peacefully, for goodness sake. Sometimes, when she woke up, she would stroke her cacti with her fingers, their little hairs sparkling magically in the sunlight. She would chuckle and giggle and confess that her ungrateful green housemates sometimes pricked her. Yet only minutes later she would have her index finger in her mouth in confusion, wondering what could have happened.

She had abandoned all pretence with him. He knew that this was the greatest mark of trust, probably even the essence of love. Nothing made sense any more, only her knowledge of where help would come from.

'Tell me, Konrad, I haven't sewed in a long time, have I?'

Only here was she safe, in these twelve square metres. Sometimes she didn't know which way the bathroom was. One bad night he had found her tugging at the wardrobe door instead, her eyes like plates and full of panic. There's someone in there, she whimpered. Someone's locked themselves inside and they won't let me in.

Later, when he had her cleaned up and back in bed, a fragment of the confused fear returned, uncannily latching on to the vestiges of a real, older fear. He held her hand, but it was hard to calm her, not because she had soiled herself – that was already forgotten – but because she was convinced that it must have been Fiona. Their middle daughter had locked herself in the bathroom, as always, like she used to do, but now she has gone. We missed her again; we haven't seen her for so long. Konrad gazed down at her hand so she wouldn't notice his tears. Everything's okay, and Fiona's fine, he said in a sonorous voice, until she finally believed him or until her vague sense of the

disaster had been erased by the merciless sponge that was constantly at work inside her head.

A senior centre or any unfamiliar place would kill her! Even for a matter of hours. She no longer had any sense of time. He prepared her for days in advance before taking her down into the garden in summer. He stood with her at the window, explaining everything to her. He went through the plants and trees with her. He kept repeating that she should walk around the garden and look at the flowers close up. Initially she laughed bashfully and acted coy, but after a few days with an open window and birdsong, she might claim to have walked around the whole garden the previous day. Only then did he take her downstairs. Look, your African violets; look, your orchids; here, the pictures of our children; look, Helena on the left, I mean Ilka, Kathi on the right and Fiona in the middle; and up ahead there, you know exactly what it is, it's the French windows; mind the step, we're going to sit down quietly together outside.

And that was why it wasn't just coffee parties that were unimaginably brutal and violent in an old people's home, like attempted murder. Even an unfamiliar cleaning lady or a window-cleaner might knock everything out of kilter. But those two ingenious cows, his daughters, didn't get that. And so recently he had sometimes no option but to drive them away with silence, as if they were terrible twelves again. That is how he threw them out, even if, as he did so, he would sometimes daydream about his garden tools, rake, shovel and pick-axe, with which he, a raging knight streaming with tears inside his delicate soul, drove them out into the cold they deserved.

He dissected further Rilke poems, even though he had settled on his epigraph long ago, indeed first. For decades he had known that he would use the same one he and his siblings had given their father, although – and this bothered him more and more – it had now become very fashionable. You would have thought that Rilke had written enough to choose from . . . The longer one thinks something over, the less sure one becomes. He recalled reading about a study that found that the decisions people regret the least are the one they had to make under the greatest time pressure.

Nowadays, there were times when he was attracted to stanzas that were fairly incomprehensible and almost jarring in this particular context, and he delighted in imagining people's irritated expressions. For example: *A waving even now not mine alone; a far-off flutter—faint; already dim; unclear to me. Perhaps a plum-tree limb from which a hasty cuckoo has just flown.*¹

¹ From *Parting* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Len Krisak.

He liked the plum tree; he liked the cuckoo. Purple and orange, he imagined them to be. Festive colours. He wasn't actually sure if those birds frequented plum trees, and he certainly appreciated that 'flown' might sound glib. If only he had someone, a stranger, an outsider, to advise him! It was in this precise context that the words 'service economy' occurred to him once more, and for a few feverish days he couldn't shake their seductive potential from his mind.

It got to the point where he selected the nearest funeral parlour online. As a second, more circumspect step he googled ones on the other side of town, for he didn't want to be recognised. In doing so he was always conscious that he was extremely unlikely to make this trip, which he imagined in great detail – thick brochures containing example texts and fonts, wood samples of various colours, brass and chrome handles. It was not just a question of whether he could leave Grete on her own for longer than it normally took him to shop. Even if he assumed that a bereavement counsellor had already seen and heard absolutely everything in his field – indeed that his very qualification was due to his unshakeable empathy and calm – it would still be he, Konrad, who would enter the premises, looking like a needy, distressed puppy, to ask for help with his own obituary. That was the snag: he was standing in the way of his own thoughts.

Occasionally he was oppressed by the idea that a sort of gravestone was rolling down the outside steps towards his door, sealing him in here, downstairs. Or that, for some inexplicable reason, he was swelling up and could no longer leave the room. He had already wondered whether to move his office up into the attic. To do so he would need outside help, furniture removers to carry everything upstairs, maybe an electrician and even someone to insulate the roof. All these things not only militated against the move; they made it too much even to consider it any further. Up there, though, he would have seen the sky while sitting at his desk, and not just a ventilation shaft like here. One could have jumped from there in an emergency.

He turned to his computer, opened his email, clicked on 'New message', addressed it to his daughters and wrote 'Our recent conversations' in the subject line.

Dear Kathi, dear Ilka,

I agree almost 100 percent with your well-intended advice (building work). Please leave me the remaining few percent where my opinion differs from yours. You might possibly consider that no one knows your mother's needs better than I do, and there is no one to whom her wellbeing is more important. Whatever you

may like to think about us, you should perhaps know that we still sleep together, and enjoy it.

Your father

The mouse arrow seemed to move to the 'Send' button of its own accord. As he pressed, he saw a picture in the style of a mediaeval book of hours, or maybe more like courtly wallpaper, many fine tendrils and filigree young couples kissing between plum trees and cuckoos. Orange and purple: festive colours. Perhaps he should have deleted that 'and enjoy it'. But what difference would it make.

He got up, climbed slowly up to the kitchen and fetched himself an Ottakringer beer. He leaned against the work service and drank from the bottle. An old man, standing and drinking alone in broad daylight. Widowed, although she's still there. One day he would forget to shave, because fundamentally it didn't matter, just as she would forget who on earth he was, which from her point of view didn't matter either; the main thing was that the food kept coming.

He fetched the cleaning equipment he had prepared the night before from the larder. Like some terrifying new hybrid plant, a bouquet of useful things poked from a red plastic bucket: rubber gloves, the feather duster, a long-handled window wiper with rubber lips and sponge sides, a slender spray bottle of the most hygienic-looking aquamarine window-cleaning liquid and this other thing, which a sympathetic neighbour had told him was to dust the spaces between the radiator bars. He carried it all up to the first floor, then set about waking Grete from her afternoon nap.

If she had been left to do as she pleased, she would never have got out of bed again. She lay there and slept, or she stretched out with her eyes closed, her way of demonstrating that there was nowhere she felt safer than in her bed. It used to be the other way around. Grete's admonitory hisses pierced his weekend morning doze only subliminally, and when he eventually got up, she would be wearing a freshly ironed blouse, already have lunch in the oven and be on the way out to pick up the girls from their ever-obliging neighbours, whom Konrad accused of mainly being on the lookout for examples of decaying bourgeois bliss.

After a while he was able to persuade Grete to get up. He took her into the bathroom and reminded her that she needed to go to the toilet straight away. Leaving the door slightly ajar, he listened from outside. When she flushed, he went in and prepared her toothbrush for her. Returning with clothes she was to

put on for cleaning, he found her still studying the brush and tapping on the worm of toothpaste with her right index finger.

‘A white caterpillar,’ she said, smiling. ‘No hair, but lots of legs.’

Konrad guided her hand to her mouth, then sat down on the edge of the bath and, as she reluctantly began to brush her teeth, he told her the oft-repeated story about Helena asking for a camel soft toy for her first day at nursery. It had been so hard. There had been elephants, tortoises and monkeys, even piglets and, of course, all kinds of bears, but no camels. They had eventually found one – a small and fairly unattractive one with an embroidered rug on its back. Little Helena, Ilka, had immediately demanded that they cut it off. I want the camel naked!

Those words had been Ilka’s hallmark ever since. All three of them were as stubborn as mules, but it was only when Ilka insisted on something, against all reason, that everyone cried, I want the camel naked!

Grete gave him a bleary smile. She probably hadn’t been listening. She appeared to regard his anecdotes, attempts to jolt her memory and conversational gambits as pleasant background music. He couldn’t imagine that not even this phrase might ring a bell. It wasn’t possible. Had he thought it possible, it would have driven him to tears. No to screams. To suicide. That’s why it couldn’t be true. She simply hadn’t been listening. She was busy with her toothbrush. He suspected that recently she’d only been scrubbing in one place, but he put off checking to another day. Checking would mean that he’d soon have to clean her teeth for her too, just as he already passed her the toilet paper. The next stage was obvious.

Like the previous time, initially she didn’t want to climb the ladder. She was friendly at first – I don’t think I can do it any more, I haven’t done it for so long. When this got her nowhere, she acted scared, although it was common knowledge that he was the one with vertigo. She whimpered and whined that she was too tired and too weak. You’ve only just got up, he barked. And when none of that helped, he grabbed her by the elbow and twisted it a little in the wrong direction. That was how he’d got her onto the ladder last time.

When she had reached the top and was clinging on, he passed her the window wiper and the window-cleaning liquid. Then, with a noticeable jolt, her inner slate was clean again; she forgot her fear and her resistance and everything that had gone before. It was likely that in such moments she was young again, in a far truer sense than he could ever be, even if he were to find himself in the unlikely situation of briefly feeling as if he were thirty or forty or fifty, or whenever it was that life had seemed like something more than a slope sliding into a black pool. Yet, up on the ladder, Grete set about cleaning as if

there were a wonderful prize at stake, as there used to be at best garden competitions. She was happy and joked that most people hated window cleaning; she alone had always adored it.

‘Because you see immediate results,’ Konrad called up to her, and she laughed and said, ‘I was just about to say that. How did you know?’

‘You’ve said it a thousand times,’ he mumbled and held the ladder firm as it shook from Grete’s joyful cleaning spree. He clung tightly to the angular aluminium, feeling the vibrations. They reminded him of the electric toothbrush Grete had long regarded as the *nec plus ultra* of dental care. He had got rid of it a while back: it was superfluous in her condition, and the small replacement heads were inordinately expensive. All of a sudden the ladder seemed to shake more violently, more and more violently, as if it were somehow connected to a large engine that was starting up, a plane taking off. As if it were about to take off. He wanted to look up to see what Grete was doing, to see if she was up to some inappropriate nonsense, but his head hung, heavy and unwanted. His hands were too sharply in focus, directly before his eyes. His middle knuckle had turned white. He was obviously clutching the ladder with all his might, even though he hadn’t meant to and saw no reason to do so.

‘Everyone hates cleaning windows,’ he heard Grete trill above him. ‘Did you know that? But unlike most people, I’ve always liked it, and do you know why? Do you know why? Have a guess!’

He used to decant shower gel patiently into small plastic bottles before business trips. How long it took, how sluggishly it flowed through the opening, settling first in figures-of-eight and whorls on the bottom of the bottle until those forms reluctantly dissolved, with almost Mediterranean sloth. It was with a similarly gelatinous delay that the realization overcame him that something was amiss. That several things were amiss. Either an earthquake had hit, or he was having a stroke. Or both. What’s more, a very, very nasty smell was coming from above, from Grete’s direction. Even nastier than the smell of excrement. None of the usual mishaps could have occurred, since she continued to clean and chat even as the odour penetrated his foggy mind. It smelled quite sweet, of dead, rotten mouse. He’d have to get to the bottom of it, soon, seek it out amidst all that mushy flesh, maybe use powder for the places air and water no longer really reached . . .

And then there was a noise as well, a familiar sound that was nevertheless wrong, because it didn’t fit the situation. It began and then stopped again, shrill and irregular. The ladder vibrated to it, as if in accompaniment. He clung to it. Panic struck up like an orchestra, *fortissimo*. The other noise cut through like a

fruit knife, but now it was clearly not inside his head. It came from without, a noise from outside, good news from the world around him. Breathe slowly, he told himself. Don't hold your breath for fear. It'll pass. It has to.

'Grete,' he asked, but it came out too hoarsely and faintly.

'Because you immediately see,' she called down, 'the, the . . . end . . . you know, what comes out, what's the word, well, that the windows are clean again, you know, Konrad? Because you see it straight away. That's why I like it so much. Do you understand? Konrad? I think that's the doorbell? Konrad? Are we expecting visitors today?'

Even before he had opened his eyes again, he knew that things had turned out all right. He didn't have to come out fighting and scramble for his last few meagre scraps of hope. Their daughters hadn't come back and, purely by chance, claimed permanent moral guardianship. That was the most important thing. Whoever it was, this was a more merciful outcome.

Now, however, there was a whiff of alcohol nearby, and a man's voice was singing a children's song. Don't clap, Grandma, I'll do that for you, Konrad heard, and the combination of words surpassed his understanding. Clap-clap-clap with your hands, tap-tap-tap with your feet.

Konrad found himself sitting on the carpet with his back against the wall. And his grandson Joshe was in the process of guiding Grete down from the ladder with his singing. This way once, that way too, getting down isn't hard to do. When she had taken the final step down onto firm ground, Joshe began to clap, and Grete joined in enthusiastically. Like overexcited children, like Japanese politicians, they stood facing each other, applauding. They didn't hug, they didn't say hello, they weren't surprised by anything; they were in their own private world. Konrad tried to get a grip on events again. The window wiper was in its holder on the inside of the bucket. The aquamarine bottle was standing at the foot of the ladder. Grete was dry, both up top and down below, and as hale as a few moments ago. Nothing had tipped over or spilled; there were no stains and nothing was broken. No earthquake, no stroke. Life went on, that was all.

'Hey Grandpa, feeling better?' asked Joshe. Someone should have asked Joshe the same question. He looked alarmingly pale and unshaven, his clothes dishevelled. Konrad groped for his glasses. And yet Joshe was the only conceivable person who wouldn't scream blue murder in a situation such as this, who wouldn't call a doctor, carers or social services.

'Great, my lad, and heaven sent you.'

‘Not heaven,’ mumbled Joshe, sitting down on the floor beside him. He fished out a cigarette from his breast pocket and stuck it between his lips. Konrad sighed but said nothing. Joshe nodded and signalled that he wasn’t going to light it.

‘I thought I’d drop in to see you.’

‘Haven’t you been to see your mother yet?’

Joshe laughed mirthlessly. ‘You want to know if she sent me? Don’t worry, Grandpa. She hasn’t spoken to me for months.’

‘What happened?’ asked Konrad, who’d never had a conversation while sitting on the carpet, let alone an important one.

‘I could ask you the same thing, but I’m not going to.’

A typical riposte. This kid had been sharp as a tack and quick-witted since he was small, but he had always preferred to use his many talents as weapons. Always hitting every nail on the head, speaking every painful truth aloud, with no respect for tact or convention.

‘Tap, tap, tap,’ Grete asked, gazing anxiously down at them. Ultimately, memory and the mind have little to do with each other. And if one further subdivides the mind into intellect and emotional skills, Grete was basically the same as ever.

‘Tap, tap, tap?’ Joshe’s face broke into the smile with which he had charmed everyone as a boy, neutralizing any supposed ultimatum at the last moment. Someone like Konrad would rather turn away from a smile like that; he really found it quite embarrassing. The openness, the tenderness and the glowing devotion it expressed were more than anyone could bear. Anyone who smiled at the world that way must have a screw loose, or a chink in the armour around his soul. And that was probably the boy’s problem. He was sensitive, as if he were the open heart of the family. That was clearly why he raged as if people were out for his blood when they were merely correcting his table manners. As a boy he had driven everyone to their wits’ end, apart from Grete. Virtually since he was born he had been like a personified test of one’s willingness to use violence; a go-on-then-hit-me provocation in child form. Konrad had buried the few occasions Joshe had outwitted him deep inside, where they had grown over with weeds of anger and shame. The time he had dragged Joshe along a street, like a screaming sack of sorrow, literally. Feeling clearly that he was at the very least skinning his grandson’s legs and spraining his wrist, feeling almost ecstatically that he didn’t care less. The time – and that was the worst – he had lifted him up and held him over the barbecue, as if he were about to lay him on his bare bottom among the sizzling sausages and cutlets. Nobody saw

it, because they were all looking after Joshe's sister Alina, whom Joshe had just hit or something. But Joshe didn't stop his tantrum even when he must have felt the heat under him already. This child would have scared a torturer.

'Tap, tap, tap, tap,' the grown-up Joshe, almost more mysterious now, chanted back at the strange figure who had once been a beautiful young girl and later a competent mother and an agile grandmother. He didn't seem to notice how she had changed. He got to his feet, beamed his creamy-white smile around the room, passionately flung open his arms to Grete – something Konrad hadn't managed for decades –, took her by the hands and went through it all again – the whole song complete with silly clapping and stamping – and Grete sang along, tapping this way and that like a dancing bear, with barely a mistake. This must be what it was like in a care home, primal stimuli that those human husks undoubtedly enjoyed. Yet it was something else to watch this as someone who had known her charm and her beauty, her love and her unique, proud qualities. Window cleaning was much better, whatever the cost.

Konrad rolled over sideways onto his knees and struggled to his feet. 'Are you staying for dinner,' he asked over his shoulder, but there was no answer. Grete got Joshe to guess why she loved cleaning windows so much. 'You'll never get it,' she said in a voice like a young thing in love. Joshe said, 'No Grandma, you really have to tell me your secret,' and Konrad was amazed that after all that singing and dancing she could still establish a mental connection with what had gone before. Emotional excitement was usually like an avalanche inside her head.

Later, for a while, the three of them kept getting in each other's way in the kitchen. Grete was immediately overcome with her usual fear of having to cook, and she kept repeating that she sadly couldn't remember what they'd planned. 'You don't have to take care of anything,' Konrad placated her. 'Don't worry, I'll do it.' The same old story. The three sentences that bound his life together when he wasn't relaxing with Rilke.

However, Joshe took everything in hand. Whistling to himself, he opened a few cupboards, the larder and then the fridge. He then announced that Grete and he would do the cooking while Grandpa recovered from his shock and dizzy spell.

'You don't have to take care of anything today,' Joshe said, mimicking him with biting jolliness and pushing him backwards towards the door. 'We'll do it.' His accomplice Grete burst out laughing behind his back, and Konrad suddenly imagined that she might be acting the whole time, and could in fact snap out of it, as if from a role. She kept it up mainly out of spite, as revenge for his decades of slights. He just managed to say, 'But be careful with the knives, and whatever

happens, no fresh fruit . . .' before Joshe shut the door mere inches from his nose.

Konrad stood there, staring at the faux grain. The veneer was slightly lighter exactly at his eye level, a permanent souvenir of Fiona. One night when she was sixteen or seventeen and presumably drunk, she had sprayed a swastika on the door. When he had found it, he had felt like beating her to a pulp. He'd never laid a finger on his children, although in that respect he was glad he didn't have any sons. At the time he had considered refusing to speak to them for a year, all of them including Grete. He couldn't remember – he had probably never known – who had finally removed the daubed sign and which product they had used. It had been the wrong product in his opinion, because it had bleached the veneer. Would there have been a right one? He had pleaded adamantly at the time for the door to be replaced at Fiona's expense. Grete had ridden it out. When he was at least speaking to her again, grievously offended, wordless with disappointment, she had agreed to order a new door. But with every sign of extreme psychological exhaustion, she had beseeched him to be patient, before leading him such a long and merry dance (estimates, delivery problems and whether it wouldn't be better to change all the downstairs doors at the same time) that he would have become the family terrorist for ever, had he still insisted, after three-quarters of a year, on having a new door fitted for the sake of one tiny bleached spot. Now, everyone was happy that at least the spot was still there, though they had never mentioned it again.

Behind that door was Grete, without him. In the room that had once been her realm. Even if he still enjoyed his old intuitive access to her, Joshe didn't know enough about her condition, nothing about the extent of the erosion. She would try, in a flash, to stuff herself with all the food that Konrad, in his circumspection and harshness, kept from her: fruit, chocolate, maybe even pure sugar, with her bare hands. She would take the steel kitchen utensils – it wouldn't be the first time – from their hooks, mix them up and use them like toys to make music or build something. (Konrad wiped down the handy little helpers with hot water once a month, as he didn't always know what they'd been used for. But that was still a great deal more than *she* knew about it.) She would put on a show for Joshe, gather all the innocuous, sensible yet utterly vacuous phrases with which she muddled through in public, at the theatre, at a concert or at the market on Saturdays. What a gorgeous day. It's always lovely to see you. We all have such a nice time together. Things could be a lot worse. We should be glad we're healthy, and that the children are healthy and happy. What more could we want.

Her old friends' faces occasionally twitched at this mention of the children, but of course they knew what was wrong with her. Other people, who knew

nothing about her or about Konrad's and Grete's children, were deceived. This kind of conversation is meant purely as friendly noise, and no one listens very closely. Hundreds of dementia sufferers could keep up a perfectly decent conversation like this, nodding, smiling and bowing. A soundless camera would capture harmless pictures, content that was repeated every thirty seconds, pre-fabricated, as predictable as the cycle of night and day. How are you? What a gorgeous day. How nice to see you again.

Only once had a friend of Katharina's studied Grete as she spoke. Konrad had stood with them in silence afterwards, as the friend made discreet enquiries, explaining that she was familiar with this reassuring spiel from her mother-in-law. They're good at it, she said with a laugh. If the conversation lasts too long and gets complex, mine excuses herself and goes off to the loo.

Konrad, who else, would of course suffer for Joshe's cookery fun with his grandma. Why not give her a banana if she'd really like one? What if she fancies some vanilla ice cream? But if she ate the wrong things she got diarrhoea. Then she would be shaking the cupboard door again in the middle of the night, and *he* would have to fetch a bucket of lukewarm soapy water before he could take her into the bathroom. He would kneel down and wipe, and she would weep with shame and disgust. He was still standing outside the kitchen door, staring at the light-coloured stain. He had to intervene; he should have intervened. Indicative, unrealis, and between them a handful of sugar or two green apples complete with stalks and cores. He heard Grete singing inside. Impervious to advice, said Helena's voice. Service economy, said Katharina. Prison guard, tyrant, Nazi, arsehole, said Fiona. He turned round and went down into the cellar.

When he was woken by his own snoring, his mouth open and dry, leaning back in the leather-covered director's chair that the company had given him as a leaving present, a fat black woman was lying directly in front of him on a pool table, being taken from behind by a man whose head was out of shot. The sound was off, and his own trousers were done up. The fat backside was moving up and down, while the white backside in front of it, mottled with freckles, thrust like a machine. A smell of bacon, onions and mushrooms wafted down from upstairs. Contrary to some of his friends' claims about themselves, Konrad never woke up believing that he was much younger and that everything was as it used to be – Grete healthy and hard-working, Fiona a nightmare but alive. However deep or alcohol-influenced his sleep had been, he would wake up and find himself in the same place. One great big dirty trick, the lot of it.

He heard someone coming down the stairs. It must be Joshe, since Grete dragged her feet and would have called out to him on her way down, like a lost lamb. He groped for the mouse and missed; worse still, he knocked it off the

table with the side of his hand. By the time he attempted to stand up and conceal the screen with his body, Joshe was already next to him. The lithe spryness of youth. His grandson bent down, retrieved the mouse from under the desk and said, 'Try rosaporn-dot-net. I think it's better. And dinner is served.'

Grete was already sitting there in a dainty blouse, looking at him every bit as expectantly as when they were newly engaged. Joshe had laid the table with the old glasses and the good china; he had even dug out some cloth napkins. Konrad thought they must have mould stains on them by now.

This was how the table had looked when he was promoted, when the girls had graduated from high school, when they had announced that they were getting married; at least, in Ilka's case he remembered something similar. They had probably sat in exactly the same places after Fiona's funeral. It only takes a few years for rituals to worm their way into any family. There is no longer any distinction between rejoicing and mourning. People with stiff hips pour champagne into lead-crystal glasses that used to be something special. The edges of the carpet are threadbare. There is an upheaval when the stiff-hipped people die, but soon the self-same rituals take root somewhere else. It might be that someone carries off some of these old-fashioned champagne flutes with an embarrassed giggle. They must look more ironic in a different setting, but it passes, my dears, it passes, and soon you too will be a little less mobile and the heirlooms will have won.

Konrad sat down in his place and laid his napkin across his lap. Why not enjoy what they had cooked for him? Somebody had done something for him. Hot food on the table, prepared with love – or in any case with affection – and all he had to do was tuck in. If it tasted good as well, then it was a worthy last supper. His eyes grew moist. He took a large gulp of wine.

Grete seemed completely normal – a nice old lady who could do with a trip to the hairdresser's soon. She looked this way and that, her eyes scattering stars. Joshe was treating her like a special guest.

The food was spicier than they had been accustomed to in recent times, or at least saltier than was healthy. It made Konrad drink more; Grete too, he thought. Joshe replied to any question about his life and work with an evasiveness bordering on refusal. Konrad abandoned the role of bourgeois inquisitor. If there was one thing he certainly didn't want to be this evening, it was the long arm of his daughters. They were probably more similar than they would have liked, because they must have inherited their values from him, just as he had inherited them from his own father. Pubescent revolutions are but a sideshow; one's true inheritance has long been injected into one's marrow.

He resolved to let events run their course. One could simply wait in silence. Joshe enquired about the conversion work, and suddenly Konrad was able to behave like Grete – transformed, nicer than usual. He almost presented the plan as his own idea, because Grete tripped over the high thresholds. Back when they'd bought the house, it was those thresholds that had made it seem so homely. What a giant undertaking it now was to remove them, not to mention the cost. The thresholds were solidly connected to the doorframes, and they had laid the tiled floor later. That now meant levering everything up, ripping it out, filling in the holes with concrete and fixing the joints. And all that due to a height difference of a few inches. But it might be the death of Grete. That was one of his daughters' phrases, and Konrad didn't say it out loud despite feeling, for the first time, that it wasn't a complete exaggeration.

'Wouldn't it be easier to move?' asked Joshe.

'Into a retirement home?' Konrad asked back. 'With no barriers, and anti-bacterial paint in the common rooms?'

'Wherever you want,' said Joshe, who didn't bat an eyelid at his grandfather's sarcasm.

'Reach our age first,' said Konrad, 'and then we'll talk about it some more.'

Joshe laughed. Grete laughed too.

'Do you like it?' she asked. 'I think my cooking was a success again today.'

Konrad opened his mouth. Joshe signalled to him with his hand. 'Wonderful cooking, Grandma, as always. You're famous for it throughout the family.'

'Throughout the family,' she repeated and seemed to think this over. One of the champagne glasses stood to the right of her elbow. We should move it, thought Konrad, or else she'll knock it over.

Joshe served him some more from the casserole dish on the table. They never used to do this, but actually why wash up an extra serving dish and its lid? They didn't fit in the dishwasher, and so they hadn't used any in a long time, ever since Grete had forgotten all about them. Joshe got up to fetch another bottle of wine. Konrad leaned forward.

'What is it?' she said. 'Have I done something wrong?'

But the champagne glass was no longer there. Joshe must have taken it out with him.

Thus the evening passed. Konrad sat there heavily, nailed to his chair. The various courses, a salad, a mushroom dish and stewed fruit with vanilla ice cream appeared and vanished again. His glass was never empty. Candles burned. Grete's eyes flickered from one to the other, like a small, old bride.

Konrad finally stopped caring about what she understood. He felt good. He chatted, told stories and complained about how Katharina and Helena had waded into the conversion debate – those two furies, you know what they're like. Mind you, he almost felt grateful to them now.

'It's not easy to gear yourself up for a major change,' he explained, 'if your hands are already full.' He winked at Joshe and gestured furtively at Grete. Joshe knew what he meant. He admired his grandfather. Not all men of his age accepted their fate as readily as Konrad did.

It was outrageous that tradesmen wanted to be paid in cash nowadays; Joshe agreed with him there too. It was expecting too much of someone to keep that amount of cash at home! thundered Konrad. Maybe they're not declaring the work; Katharina hadn't explained things to him in that much detail.

'I hope you don't keep it with your underpants,' said Joshe.

'No, you'll never guess,' answered Konrad. 'Behind the shade of the wall light out there, the only one that doesn't work.'

'You've stuck money in the light?' asked Grete, laughing. 'No wonder it doesn't work!'

'If only we had enough money to stick in all the lights,' said Konrad, nodding as Joshe brought the cognac.

'Then we'd be living in the dark,' said Grete and she laughed.

'Would you want to live in the dark if we had enough money to?' asked Konrad.

Grete stared at him in bewilderment. 'Money isn't everything,' she said eventually. 'We're doing very well indeed, all of us together. The main thing is we're healthy.'

While Joshe put Grete to bed, Konrad poured himself another large cognac. The other two fooled around in the bathroom, then it went quiet for a while. Konrad imagined that Joshe had lain down next to her for a cuddle, as people had done with him when he was small. An indecent thought. Yet Konrad had found the cuddling with his grandchildren just as indecent; his two daughters had practically vied with each other in that regard. He had sensed the reproach in their behaviour. But no one had cuddled him either. He had been the youngest of five children and instead of cuddles he had been ordered to pound sauerkraut for hours and days on end.

True, he had never been there when the girls were young. There had been times when he had only been home for eight weekends all year. Grete had always chalked them up against him. A recurring theme of their bitter

arguments was that she had basically been alone and brought the kids up on her own for years, and he had only come home to pick up clean shirts. When she had forgotten it herself, their daughters tried to bring it up. That was when he discovered the technique of driving them out through silence. Only once had he brought his fist down on the table, but he hadn't done it gently. Nothing more: simply banged his fist and pointed to the door. Not lowered his arm. Held his arm outstretched, with an iron will, unshaking, until they understood. Said no more, despite all their beseeching. Sat there like a stone monument to himself. Bleeding secretly from every wrinkle of his soul. Somebody had to provide for their lifestyle, didn't they? For their education and travels, the house, the garden, the piano and tennis lessons, and when Ilka needed a loan, who had stood guarantee? Grete had never needed much, although she had been keen on made-to-measure suits and pearls for a while. But they say that a child costs as much as a house – the house that will be prised apart tomorrow morning.

When Joshe came back, Konrad was weeping. He knew that he was drunk, but that wasn't all. Joshe radiated his creamy-white smile. 'You want to go to bed, too, eh, Grandpa?'

Konrad levered himself upright. 'I'd like to show you something, my boy,' he said, and tramped down the cellar steps. He took the Korčula picture from the wall and pressed it to Joshe's stomach. It was dusty, but that didn't matter.

'Your grandma,' he said, struggling for composure. 'Do you remember how she used to be?'

'That was long before I was born,' said Joshe.

'You know what I mean,' said Konrad. 'This, in contrast to that . . .' He pointed upstairs.

'She's forgetful, but she's the same lovely person she always was,' said Joshe.

'How can she be the same if she soon won't know who we are?'

Joshe looked at him. 'Grandpa, I think you should take her to see an eye specialist,' he eventually said. 'She seems blind in one eye. I closed the other one briefly, and I got the impression that . . .'

Konrad clutched the corner of his desk. 'You did what?' he asked sharply. 'What do you think you're doing? You can't do that. She can see just fine. I would know.'

Joshe shrugged his shoulders. 'Do you need anything else? If not, I'll do the kitchen and head off.'

Konrad took a step towards him and put his hand on his shoulder. 'Do you like the picture?' he asked.

Joshe hung it up again. 'It's a beautiful picture,' he said. 'I'd have married her too, if I'd been you.'

'But not the other way round?' asked Konrad, coughing.

'Oh Grandpa,' said Joshe, 'how am I meant to know?'

'You'll get the picture,' Konrad said hoarsely. 'I think you should have it, no one else.'

'I like seeing it here,' said Joshe, 'but go to bed now.'

He woke some hours later with a feeling of having been very far away, in a maze of tunnels or in the remotest room of a dream palace. He groped his way back through elegant rooms run wild, drawn along by a dark-silver ribbon that turned into a voice when he emerged into the open air. Grete was standing in the doorway of his room. He immediately sat up. It had been a long time since she had come by herself: he always led her from room to room by the hand. The dry, white tufts stood out unattractively from her head, but her gaze was clear and searching. 'I don't like to wake you, Konrad,' she said, 'but someone's locked themselves in the bathroom. And I'm desperate.'

'Of course,' he said, getting to his feet with some trouble. Contrary to his expectations, she went ahead, in the right direction. She tried to open the bathroom door. Her face was twisted with fear when she looked round. 'Konrad,' she whispered, 'I really have to . . .'

He shoved past her and tugged at the door. It only opened a couple of inches: something had obviously fallen over on the other side and was jammed against it. He had no idea what it might be. His first associations were menacing, probably conditioned by his dream. It only took him a second to decide what was most urgent, then he said to Grete, 'Hold it in. Just a second longer. You count to ten out loud, and I'll have a solution.'

'Count,' he called over his shoulder as he ran downstairs. 'I want to hear you.'

When she got to eight, he finally found the red bucket downstairs by almost tripping over it. He simply tipped its contents on to the floor and ran back upstairs. 'Eight and a half,' he shouted. 'You can do it, girl. I'm almost there!'

She didn't make a fuss when he got to her, set down the bucket by the wall next to the bathroom door, dropped to his knees and tore down her large cotton knickers. Her pale knees were already poking out at him. He kneeled down and held her tightly so that she wouldn't topple over from her unstable

position. Mercifully, her nightdress had already dropped back into place, hanging over her knees and screening the polyphonic, sputtering discharge behind it – a downpour, gale-force winds and soggy explosions. Her body was quaking above her hips, which he was supporting. Yet when he looked up she was laughing. ‘This is exactly like on that campsite,’ she sighed, finally. ‘Where was it, that time in the woods . . .’

‘Yugoslavia,’ he said, although he didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

‘That’s not right,’ she contradicted him. ‘I think it was in Carinthia. That huge lake where all three of them got diarrhoea and vomiting, but when Fiona . . .’

She jerked round towards the bathroom. ‘Fiona?’

He tightened his grip as she started to get up. ‘Fiona!’ she called in a shrill voice. ‘She’s in there. We’ve got to help her!’

She began to lash out. Konrad wrestled with her, but she fell, knocking over the bucket on which she’d been sitting. He leaped backwards to avoid getting hit by the stuff that was going to occupy most of the rest of his night anyway. She lay on the floor, weeping, tugging at her nightdress and rubbing her legs together anxiously. He stood up, stepped over her and kicked the door, jarring his ankle and knee. Something inside splintered, and after a second kick with his other foot, the door sprang open. Apparently, it was Grete’s back brush that had got wedged between the bathtub and the door. It wasn’t Fiona, although decades ago she had indeed locked herself in this bathroom all too often, out of spite or tyranny, or because she was drunk. It wasn’t Joshe either, though Konrad thought he was capable of all the things his aunt had done, despite never having met her. There was nobody lying unconscious or dead behind the bathroom door. ‘Nobody, Grete, did you hear? It was only your back brush with the extra-long handle.’

Konrad turned on the taps in the bathtub and took the ball of string he kept handy for such situations from the cupboard. He tied a length to the ball chain attached to the plug. He was proud of his foresight, though it was born of experience. This way he wouldn’t have to reach into the water again. He could pull the plug remotely, the water would run out and he would rinse the rest using the shower head. He could get her into a full tub with lots of foam more easily than into the shower, because she would regard it as a treat from him, a small luxury. She was no longer aware that it was the middle of the night. He’d never understood why our sense of time evaporated first, while our memory for tunes went very late. A neuroscience researcher would know. There were researchers for everything. In keeping with the service economy.

She would lie in the tub, and her reasons for doing so would lie hidden beneath the thick foam – the foam which the girls had once hurled at each other or used to make bath caps for their rubber ducks.

While she was lying in the bathtub, he could leave the door open and wipe up outside. They were bound to chat and she might ask what he was actually doing out there. I'm just cleaning up a bit, he would say, and in her friendly girl's voice she would say, It never stops, does it, Konrad. That's what we always said: as soon as you get your own home, it never stops.

He could then answer, But you always liked cleaning windows, Grettie, didn't you? And that would get them back into the groove: they would have a subject, and he would have nearly finished clearing up. Domestos is unbeatable when it comes to masking smells, incidentally. No, it doesn't mask them: it blows them to bits.

Grete wouldn't be calmed, not by the warm foam bath and not when he had got her back into bed in a clean nightdress. Down in the cellar, in the room next to Konrad's study, the washing machine groaned quietly as it spun, the first floor smelled like a swimming pool and the bathtub might not yet be quite clean, but he had put off scrubbing it with cream cleanser until the next morning. She could do that herself, scrub the bath under his instructions, he thought, because his knees really hurt from all this nocturnal activity. So everything was back to normal; it was only inside Grete's head that something was tangled up, and he didn't know how to solve that. She wept and whimpered, she asked about Fiona, and then she began to say strange, nasty things: You're not telling me the truth, you lied to me before, everyone knows no one works that hard, not even you. You're never here, you were always away, you think I'm stupid or forgetful, you always thought you could do whatever you wanted with me, but that's all over now.

'Go to sleep now,' said Konrad, straightening the covers. 'You're confused. Go to sleep now and you'll feel better tomorrow.'

But she wouldn't stop. She made terrible sounds, as if she had water on her lungs; she tried to speak while she was shaking with sobs. Snot ran out of her nose. Konrad fetched the box of tissues from his bedroom and wiped her nose. She shook her head back and forth, smearing the snot all over her face. 'Fiona,' she shouted, 'Fiona. Where is she now? You beat her and she ran away. You're to blame; no one but you.'

Konrad wanted to slap her. He looked at the crumpled brown cheeks, quivering like aspic: nothing about this face reminded him of the old days. One should not grow so old that the skin is still alive, even though it looks as if it's decomposing. His palms stung, and for a moment he thought he had done

what he had merely thought. She held both hands to her cheeks and stared at him in shock. Had she read his mind? 'Where is Fiona?' she whispered. 'What have you done with her?'

Konrad stood up. 'I've just wiped up your shit,' he said. 'Do you remember that much, at least? You shat in a bucket because you can't hang up your brush properly any more, and then you fell over and now you're blubbering.'

He left the room, closing the door behind him, and went downstairs. In the kitchen he took a beer from the fridge. Day was breaking outside. The first chirrups could be heard – golden arrows of sound, fired off experimentally from the bushes and the shrubs. The orchestra were still tuning their instruments. In a few minutes the invisible conductor would give the cue and the concert would burst into life, always at full power, without any human hesitation. Even if the owls and cats had picked off a few singers overnight, the others would merely sing all the louder. One never noticed any difference, even if one listened as closely as he did.

He took his beer down into the cellar. He shut the ventilation shafts and pulled down the blinds, midnight blue with yellow elephants on them, a remainder from the children. He made himself comfortable in the director's chair and went back to the fat black woman on the pool table. Yes, he knew what a search history was; he wasn't a total idiot. This time he also put the sound on and turned it up: for a while he wanted to hear nothing but panting, moaning and cooing. This woman's backside was huge and so smooth it looked inflatable. Hard to imagine that this skin too would one day dissolve like Grete's. What is more, she had incredible hair, drawn into a plait as thick as one's arm by which the man occasionally pulled back her head. Konrad would have liked him to pull it more often and more forcefully, for example in time with his thrusts, or at least every second one. Yet it was also good merely to imagine him doing it.

By the time the doorbell rang shortly after seven, Konrad had made up his mind. It was possible that he smelled of beer, but he didn't care. He hadn't shaved either, but that would only boost his credibility. He did run his fingers through his hair a few times in front of the hall mirror on the way to the front door, though.

There were three of them, and they were already hauling all kinds of equipment in large black plastic buckets. A van with its doors open and hazard lights blinking was parked on the pavement. Inside it were more tools, cable reels and bags of cement. One of the workers, a short, dark foreigner, was hugging a long roll of transparent covering sheet.

Konrad apologized profusely but firmly. His wife's serious illness unfortunately made it impossible to start the work. The conversion could not go ahead in the foreseeable future, and it might even be off for good. We don't know how long she's going to live, he said. They should talk to his daughter Katharina about the costs they had incurred; after all, it was she who had contracted them. The workers nodded and left. They didn't even wish his wife a swift recovery; they were too apathetic for that.

It had all gone very smoothly. They were, after all, service providers. If you didn't need the service any more, they didn't offer it. They didn't offer any resistance, either; their service was to leave.

Konrad stood in the hallway for a little longer. Then he went to the middle of the three wall lights, carefully removed the shade and peered inside. The money he had rolled into a bundle and secured with an elastic band was gone. He nodded. If there had been anyone around, he would have claimed that he knew, even though that wasn't completely true.

He screwed in the bulb again. It might as well shine now. Back in the cellar, at his computer, it took him a while to figure out how to print a document in landscape. It took less time to do the black border. He felt something of a thrill at the sight of the document lying in front of him. The area inside the black border was all white: it was waiting patiently for a design. This was better than the exercise book: it immediately looked so professional, almost there.

He set a tab at the beginning of the right-hand third, wrote *We are falling*, put the three words in bold, then in italics. Then he carried on writing, making an effort to spot any typos and correct them immediately:

We are falling. This hand is falling.

And look at others: it is in them all.

And yet there is One who holds this falling

In infinite softness in his hands.²

The telephone rang several times, but he remained sitting. He didn't answer an email soon afterwards from Helena, whom Katharina had probably urged to enquire about the start of the building work and the noise. After the relative excesses of the previous night, he could stay away from the places with the pool tables and the pumped-up women for now. Later, he dozed off. Grete came shuffling down the stairs well after midday. 'Hallo,' she called from some way off like a lost little lamb. 'Hallo, Konrad?' And when she stood before his desk, as the office assistant Franzl, a nice, blond, intellectually challenged boy, had

² From *The Book of Images* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Edward Snow.

once done, bowing even to Konrad's empty director's chair, everything was back to how it had always been. 'Isn't that right, Konrad?' she said, and with her dry hair framing her face she looked like a mad white sun in a children's book. 'We're just fine, aren't we? We do just fine together. The main thing is we're healthy.'