

NAGEL & KIMCHE

Hier können Sie im Kreis gehen

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1

Come in, little kitten, do come in. I suppose the door was open? I don't have my hearing aid in. But you are stalking around on silent paws, aren't you? I like that about you. Dogs are too much like humans for me, with their thumping and panting and yapping.

Allow me to close the door. Let me know when you want to get out. I'm going to lie down. I'm tired today, goodness knows why. Yes, do come and join me. Lie down here right next to me. I love how you purr when I stroke the back of your neck. Don't let me disturb you. I'm going to go on thinking and talking to myself. Sleep doesn't come as easily to me as it comes to you, and thinking is something to occupy myself with. Where was I? Even though my head's still working, I have to say it did work a lot better in the past.

What people would think of me. That's what I was wondering. The crucial question, for many of us. 'Crazy', that's what the verdict would be if I let them get a look under the veil.

Ninety-one years old, heartless and crazy. But I won't let it get that far. The curtain remains closed. Please remain seated, you judges and executioners. You're sitting so comfortably there. And

in the meantime I've left the courtroom through the back door. But you never run out of culprits in the dock anyway.

I've been observing this for a long time. When I was young I saw people grow old and diminish. It seemed as if they were moving away from me, I could see the impermanence in them. Myself, I had everything ahead of me. My life hadn't even started yet. Later, I saw people catching up with me. I had overtaken them, and now they were hard on my heels. And soon I felt pushed into a dead end. The way forward was barred by death, and death was eyeing me more and more blatantly, while he was knocking more and more often at the doors of my acquaintances. He became my companion, familiar but none the less unpleasant for it.

Most people have the wrong idea about all this. They think that the old get left behind. They think the old become disconnected because the erosion of time prevents their minds and bodies from keeping up with the race of progress. But that's not true. Progress is just the stage set. And in this endless tragedy, the old are always a step ahead.

And the final act is the final sin. Instead of making the most of their remaining time, instead of looking ahead, the way they always wanted to in the past, they are now turning around. They watch their children and grandchildren racing along and have a comment ready for every breath they take. Many are so malicious that they actively urge their pursuers on, although they can see very clearly that, beyond the finish line, there is only wasteland.

Sorry little kitten, you've got comfortable here. But I have to move. My back aches. And my shoulder. You stay on the bed, and I'm going to sit in the chair. A wedding present from my in-laws. I've had it for fifty-five years. And it looks every one of those years. 'Get off dad's chair!' Ursula used to yell at the kids when they were climbing all over it. That's better. The chair is used to my body. The bed still has a lot to learn. But that would probably be a waste of time.

All that remains is memories. Memories and, in my case, a chair. Sometimes I would like to get rid of my memories, too. That's just silly talk though.

Rested enough? You are young. What would my ninety-one years be in cat years? I'm going to open the door for you. Bye-bye little kitten. Thanks for the chat. Haven't had a better one in a long time.

2

Sophie, this story is for you. I'm telling it to you because you can't hear it. You're only a picture above my bed. And still my voice falters.

I got the camera from the office and surprised you, just like I'm surprising you now with my story. You loved my old Fuji camera. I've left it to you. You're sitting at the dinner table in my old apartment. You're sitting very straight, and you're looking at me and you're smiling.

Maybe you heard my foot steps in the corridor and were pleased that I was coming back. Your light brown hair, just about shoulder length, is loosely gathered together. Two strands have slipped out. The warm brown colour of your eyes can only be guessed at in the black and white photograph. One of your little silver earrings is visible. I've always liked that natural, unpretentious look of yours.

You took a picture of me that night, too. Do you remember? It was the second of September, midnight. Which meant that my birthday was over. That was more than a year ago. To me it feels like a story from the history books. The biography of a dead man. Franziska and Hans had been there, too. Hans felt uncomfortable, as always, and took the first opportunity to sneak away to the

living room to read. And he stuck it out there until he could go home with Franziska. We've always had quite similar feelings about these gatherings, your father and I, and yet we never became close.

Adrian had just moved in with friends, and he, too, was longing to say goodbye. There were probably more exciting things waiting for him than his granddad's ninetieth birthday. Sebastian, the baby of the family, was away on a student exchange in the US. Of course I remember the names.

You stayed on after the others had left. As so often.

And that's when my birthday turned into a celebration for me, too. We were sitting at the table, drinking coffee and the Slibowitz you had brought with you. A gift from your neighbour. She had just recently moved to Switzerland with her family. 'They call it Sliwowitza where she comes from', you explained. A remedy for all pain.

What you liked about my camera, you said, was that you got to look forward to the pictures, since they would have to be developed first.

'People have no patience any more', you said.

But then you weren't so patient yourself when you pointed the camera at me and clicked away seven more times to fill up the film. You called it 'a study in portraits' and explained the effects you were going to create with your use of exposure and shutter speed. Although we were both trying to play our parts quite seriously – you the professional photographer, and I the moody model – we had a hard time suppressing our mutual grins. 'I love this sound', you said, about the clicking. 'Don't look so grumpy, granddad. Smile!' and immediately after that you wanted to see my grumpiest face.

After the last picture you spooled back, lost in thought and handling the old camera carefully. Then you took the film out and told me off because the plastic tube for keeping it in had disappeared, and you put the film into your pocket. You looked at me, with those kind eyes that can

convey so much comfort, you gave your pocket three quick pats, and said: ‘The joy of anticipation!’ I laughed and was proud of you because you’re so smart and good and beautiful. And then I was sad, because I couldn’t help thinking about Paul. And that’s why I had another Schliwowitza.

I always think about Paul when I see you. There’s so much of Paul in you. Which is surprising since you are Franziska’s daughter. But you also have what Paul didn’t have.

And that’s why I’m not worried about you.

3

I’d like to think that I’m doing this for love. But that’s not even half the truth. If life has taught me one thing it is that love is almost always not even half the truth. And I have to admit that in my case there’s also a large dose of selfishness in it.

In our culture, the likes of me are seen as recipients of charity. I don’t want to sound judgmental. I’m just saying what I feel. Young people think it’s only normal that they’re the ones who have tight control of the reins. I’m taking the liberty of taking hold of those reins myself, one last time. And to make sure that nobody can trip up my mount and talk me down from my high horse again, I’ve saddled up without telling anyone, and I’m riding off where no one can follow.

4

‘Good morning Mr Kehr, did you sleep well?’

He looks at her, his eyes darting off in all directions across the room, coming to rest briefly on the empty bed he just left that peeps out from behind the curtain. Then he looks at her again.

‘Yes, I slept well’, he says, hesitating. ‘Who are you? ... I’ve seen you before, once ... yes... but your name ... in the wardrobe, yes.’

‘I’m Ms Feller, Mr Kehr. I’m here to help you out of bed.’

‘Out of bed? ... the bed ... the bed, the bed. Have you seen my glasses? That’s not my bed. I’m going to report this!’

‘Look, your glasses are right here, on your nightstand. Here. I’ll give them to you.’

Mr Kehr puts on his glasses, looks around the room again. His right hand draws circles through his white hair, still thick and shaggy.

‘Come on’, says Ms Feller, ‘I’ll help you up.’

5

How little it takes to make a bare room into your own. Or to make half a bare room into half a slightly-less-bare room. A few pictures, a chair, a small hand-knotted blanket on the table and your glasses on the nightstand. A picture of my family on a bare wall makes it into my wall. But just as quickly as a room becomes a personal room, it can become an empty room again. The picture hangs on the wall to tell me: you’re supposed to feel at home here. My answer: my home is nowhere. I am no longer of this world.

There are buildings that smell of history. I know something about that. I’ve done some building myself, and I’ve always been interested in history. Sometimes, history almost takes your breath away when its scent rises straight into your nostrils like incense. The history of this room can only be detected by a fine and fearless nose. A nose that can recognize the odour of death. White walls, grey

marbled vinyl floor, double-glazed windows, white window frames. Quite neutral in terms of historic scent.

And so I sit here and think back. It seems like a movie to me. Those who know me think of this as my epilogue. But what they think of as the epilogue that will have to end with my death, is in truth a whole new film. Somehow like an optical illusion.

It's astonishing how many people leave their end to chance. But a good ending is not to be underestimated. And if it's too late for that, it still seems better to me to choose the best moment for a bad ending oneself. That's why I'm here. I'm in good company. The stories that end here all end badly.

6

Dementia ward, early afternoon. Most of the care assistants are at a meeting in the office. You can hear the voice of one of the carers from the open dining room that also serves as a communal area. The dementia patients are sitting on chairs and sofas, or wandering around, unsupervised. The lift door opens. Mr Kehr slowly sticks his head out, looks left and right. A tall old man, who was shuffling past the lift, stops. A small, bony, wrinkled woman gets up from the sofa. Mr Kehr motions the old man into the lift with an inviting gesture. The old woman follows him. Now Mr Kehr is waving at an old couple sitting on a nearby sofa, holding hands. The woman gets up without hesitation. The man stays in his seat and looks at the woman without comprehension. 'Come on, we're going', she says. 'Alright, let's go', he says. She takes his hand and he gets up laboriously. But then they reach the lift with surprisingly fast steps. The door closes. Mr Kehr presses '0'. The lift goes down to the ground floor. The corridor is deserted. The couple get out first and stop directly in

front of the lift. The bony old woman turns to the right and patters away towards the toilets and the kitchen. The tall old man shuffles off to the left, to the cafeteria. The wife takes her husband by the hand and walks with him straight through the automatic doors, out of the building. Mr Kehr walks up the stairs to the first floor. He looks through the glass door. When he's sure that no one can see him, he enters his own floor and disappears into his room.

7

People are suspicious of everything that doesn't immediately seem familiar. If Tom repeats what Dick already said yesterday, Harry will cackle, satisfied. If Tom says something different, but says it in the same tone of voice that Dick used, Tom, Dick and Harry will at least all raise their glass to each other. But Harry will flatten his ears and growl a threat at Tom or Dick if they use just a few words that he doesn't know. After all that's how the saying goes: what a Dick doesn't know, he can only hate.

You're back, little kitten? I'm glad. But it also means that Zimp has left the door open although I asked him to close it. He's insufferable. 'Fresh air', he said last time. 'Fresh air', did you hear that little kitten? What comes in through this door is almost always foul. Yourself excepted, of course! Fresh air only comes in through the window, mixed with the endless tinkling of the goats' bells. And you're gone again. Already. A brief encounter. Am I too moody for you?

They would call me crazy. And whoever called me crazy would probably fail to notice the absurdity of it all. If you call someone crazy because he pretends to be crazy, well, there's a certain

absurdity to that. But he wouldn't recognize it because he himself is quite probably an idiot, just like most people are idiots.

8

You, of all of them, probably found it easiest to love me because I worshipped you, I always worshipped you ever since I was allowed to hold you in my arms just after you were born. Do you remember that one time when we tried to work out how often I must have told you the story of our first encounter? I think it was on Christmas Eve, three or four years ago. After a lot of calculations we ended up with one hundred and forty times. Most often when you were a child. But also when you left your boyfriend at the age of twenty-five. What was his name again? I liked him. But you split up with him because he cheated on you. It was a pity all the same. You made a cheerful couple.

I want to tell you your story once more, Sophie, it connects us. It has connected us from the beginning. You didn't cry, at first, when you were born. People started to worry. But then you filled your lungs and screamed out in desperation and you didn't stop until you scared the living daylights out of everyone. The doctor examined you, the midwife tried to calm you down. But you refused to calm down, you screamed and screamed.

When your grandmother and I were allowed into the room, Franziska held you in her arms, talking to you. I looked at you and had to laugh. The midwife looked at me, outraged. I continued to laugh. I saw you, a tiny living being, a tiny lump of protest. You were screaming as loudly as you could, and I could understand you. And maybe you could hear in my laughter that you had been understood. Suddenly there was a brief pause in your screaming. Franziska thought that my voice could maybe calm you down. And so she asked me to take you in my arms. I sat down on the bed next to her and held you, my first grandchild. And as I started talking to you, the way grandfathers

talk to their new born grandchildren, not at all in keeping with our withered looks, you got calmer and calmer and finally you fell asleep. That's how it was, Sophie. We belonged together right from the start. We listened to each other, right from the start. We understood each other right from the start and we could rely on each other.

9

You can prepare for many things, but not for some.

You can't prepare for the sensitivity to light and to draughts, to the noisy breathing, the wet coughs, the discharge spit into the sink, you can't prepare for the foul smell that makes you hold your breath in shock, that you only dare inhale with a shallow breath, or for that unnaturally heavy and rotten smell of ointments and medication that Zimp is polluting the room with.

I was negligent. I stressed that I wanted a private room when I was devising my plan and started talking about the nursing home. That was essential to my scheme. And Franziska did inform the management of the nursing home accordingly after I decided to let myself slide downhill. But then it turned out that I had forgotten a significant detail. They decided to renovate the nursing home in the neighbouring village. I didn't know that. And then there was no private room available when my condition got so bad that I couldn't live at home by myself any more. They put me into a shared bedroom – temporarily. Franziska accepted that. She never learned how to fight back. And she probably thought it couldn't take that long until a private room became available. But sometimes it does take longer than expected until someone dies on a nursing home ward. I'm on the waiting list. Waiting lists in a nursing home are very similar to waiting list for organ donors. There's many a one who dies before his turn comes up. Do I have to resign myself to that? We'll see.

‘Maria, did you see Mr Kehr?’

‘No, has he disappeared again?’

‘Looks like it. A few minutes ago he was sitting at the table, eating.’

‘Maybe he’s gone out again’, Maria said.

‘That can’t be right. He’s wearing that tracker now.’

Maria shrugged and returned to her work. Ms Matic was looking around. Mrs Cagliari was sitting at one of the tables, looking at her with curiosity.

‘Did you enjoy your meal, Mrs Cagliari?’

Mrs Cagliari didn’t answer, but she continued to look at her with interest.

Out of the corner of her eye, a movement caught Ms Matic’s attention. And indeed, the curtain twitched. As she came closer, she could see a pair of shoes. She pulled the curtain back. Behind it stood Mr Kehr, looking out of the window.

‘Mr Kehr, what are you doing here? ... We’ve been looking for you everywhere.’

‘What do you want from me? ... What do you want?’

‘You can’t always run off. We have to know where you are.’

‘Yes, I’m here. ... But I have to go now. I have to leave. They are waiting. They are waiting for me ... And then I don’t know if that’s going to do anything...’

‘Come with me, I’m going to take you to memory training.’

‘I’d rather stay here. I’ve still got a few things to do. Haha. ... Always a lot to do.’

11

Sooner or later it would have happened anyway. Especially to me. My body is in good shape, and will probably still be in good shape when the tenant upstairs has moved out. I can’t say I’m not afraid. I’m expecting it, yes, I’m looking misfortune right in its ghastly eye and at the same time I remember how I always loved to think and fantasize, all my life. And that’s going to be over. Well, not the fantasies. But they’ll be different kinds of fantasies.

I don’t know how it is for others. For me it was important to say goodbye with my mental faculties intact. I didn’t want to burden myself with the world anymore. And I didn’t want to burden the people that I still had left with myself, the people who meant something to me and to whom I meant something. I wanted to set them free from me, from my negativity.

There’s no such thing as a completely clean sheet. Some of the stains are too stubborn for the erasers available. I tried not to blot my copybook too much while I was writing in it. But no one can avoid a few spillages.

Whenever a new wind blows through the school system, there are fanfares and warning whistles. And I start to feel sick. Authority and anti-authority pass the baton between them and never notice that under both regimes some of the little plants blossom and give off a delightful scent while others wither away with their growth stunted and their shape distorted.

I've made mistakes. They had terrible consequences for my son Paul. Paul, who always drove everywhere in his car, all his life, took the train to leave us in the early evening of 18 December 1985.

The little flowers are all very different. While one of them is thriving, the same climate can be detrimental for another. And some of those little heads will droop, no matter how perfect the conditions.

12

The cafeteria is empty. Just one man in a wheelchair sitting at a table. He doesn't have a drink in front of him and he's looking out of the window. Behind the counter, a woman is emptying out the dishwasher. The clatter of crockery and cutlery gets mixed in with commercials and music from the radio. Now the man releases the brakes on his wheelchair and rolls slowly towards the counter. 'The usual?' asks the woman. 'Yes', he answers. She puts a few plates away in the cupboard and rips five scratch cards off the roll by the cash register. The man picks out coins from the wallet in his lap with big, truculent fingers. He pays for his lottery tickets and rolls back to the table. 'Good luck', says the woman. 'Thank you', he says. He secures the wheels and puts the scratch cards on the table. Now he's looking for a two-frank coin. With his shaking left hand he holds onto the ticket. With his shaking right hand, the coin wedged rigidly between thumb and index finger, he rubs the scratch card until the numbers come up. He keeps rubbing until the whole field is revealed, right up to the margins. First he wipes his hand over the scratch card. Then he holds it up to his mouth with both hands, blows the last few scraps away and holds it in front of his eyes. He looks at the numbers. Then he puts the scratch card aside and takes the second one.

Breakfast. Morning after morning. Everything precisely planned and prepared. For Mrs Fasser two slices of dark rye bread, the crust cut off. Apricot jam in little glass bowls. She points out three or four times a week that she would give anything to be able to eat soft cheese again. But it's not possible. She's lactose intolerant. And she knows it. Mrs Fasser's head is still working. But Daniel's? The young man doing his civilian national service here isn't sure if he's put cream or soy milk into her coffee. She doesn't know either. She says: 'I'm sure it won't kill me.' But that's a risk Daniel's not willing to take. The coffee is replaced, just to be on the safe side. Mrs Fasser doesn't want to moan about the cheese, by the way. She just wants to indulge in her beloved memories of soft cheese enjoyment. She's one of those who love to indulge and it cheers her up when she does. There are others who feel sad when they remember. But for Mrs Fasser, everything from the sky to an old BMW in the car park to the orange colour of a jumper can elicit 'oohs' and 'aahs' and the memory that comes with them, of a grandchild or a dog that she used to be particularly fond of.

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