War Rubble Wretch *(Trümmergöre)* by **Monika Held**
Translated from the German by Lucy Renner Jones
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THE journey back through time begins with a potato, a sharp knife and yesterday's newspaper. I peel the potatoes like my grandmother did: from top to bottom, around and around, never taking the knife off. At the end, among the sandy garlands lie fragments of words, letter and syllables that we make into sick animals. Grandmother invented carp colic, dachshund delirium and pigeon pox. I arranged letters and syllables into ant asthma and magpie melancholy. Our collection included chicken cough, raven rheumatism, louse lunacy and mouse mumps. Even now when I look among the potato peel, I discover the name of a city district that I know: Eilbek. I see a street and a house. I see the kitchen where my grandmother is drilling the budgerigar to say a name: Hansi. I stand in front of the doors where my uncle lives. I hear his voice.

Jula, are you brave?

Yes!

Then jump!

I push the potato peelings aside and uncover the ads. *Four and a half rooms. Period building. Small garden. Ground floor. Parquet*. My heart thuds. I lunge for the phone, apologise for calling so late and ask the estate agent for the name of the street.

Wielandstraße.

Which number?

Three.

I see my uncle stretching his arms up toward me, feel the giddiness in the pit of my stomach before I jump, hear his laughter. Then he catches me.

In Grandmother's kitchen drifts a blue haze; on the iron stove four fish are frying in a heavy pan. As soon as the fish are brown on one side, the wall opens and a girl in sumptuous clothes steps out. She is wearing gold earrings and a necklace of shimmering pearls. Her bracelets are set with rubies and she prods one of the fish with a myrtle twig.

'Fish, will you do your duty?'

Because the fish remains silent, the girl repeats the question again, harshly this time.

'Fish, will you do your duty?'

Now the fish lift their heads and reply, 'Yes, yes, we will do our duty, just as you do. By doing our duty, we are content.' After these puzzling words, the girl tips over the frying pan. The fish fall into the embers and turn as black as the coal in the cellar. The girl walks through the wall which then seals up behind her.

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Grandmother, why does she throw good fish into the embers?

I do not know, child, we have no lexicon for that.

I put the knife down and dial the number of the man who wants to show he's serious with the move to the north. I don't ask him how his day at work was, and I don't tell him about my day either, not a word about the learner driver who still confuses the accelerator and the brake so that the car jerks down the street like a kangaroo; I don't ask him about tooth infections and swollen cheeks, I just say, as if out of breath: Erik, there's a flat for us. Four and a half bedrooms, ground floor, parquet floor. Small garden. Wielandstraße 3. And you know what? The estate agent doesn't even know about the ironing closet next to the stove.

And Erik, the man with whom I've joked every evening for five years about inept drivers, dying teeth and missing dentures till past midnight, remains silent for a while before he eventually says, Jula, you're thinking about *that* flat? Really?

Dr. Erik Brunner, Doctor of Dental Medicine, Dentistry and Orthodontic Surgery – he was the first stranger I ever talked to about Hans, my uncle, not the man who hurt me first but who caused the greatest pain in my life. Who made me jump from the wardrobe and who initiated me into the world of his friends when I was four years old: Ingemusch, who lived in the Nissen hut, and later on a boat. Jeanette and Manon, Francine, Julien and Juanita, the floozies of St. Georg. Barge-boat Ede and Rubble Otto. I was seventeen when we buried my uncle. After that, fifteen years passed until I dared look for the place he'd only spoken of to only three people: his mother, while he still had faith in her, Ingemusch, because he loved her, and me, when his faith in life had gone. The place lay somewhere in Swabia between Stuttgart and Emmendingen, and it was called Eichhof, Eichwalden or Eichdorf.

The train that I travelled on was going from Hamburg to Munich with a stop in Stuttgart. From there I'd hired a car. No such place was listed in the road atlas, I planned to ask my way along – a petrol station attendant or policeman would help me. In Hanover, my right wisdom tooth began to throb, in Kassel, my cheek glowed, in Frankfurt I resolved to put up with the hammering pain, but in Stuttgart, when I looked as though I had a tennis ball in my mouth, I went to the railway pharmacy and was not given painkillers, but the address of an doctor on call who lived around the corner. I sat there whimpering in the consulting room. The assistant tied a bib around my neck. It's all going to be fine, she said, our doctor is a miracle-worker.

I closed my eyes. The buzzing of the drill in the room next door and the thought that the noise would recur in a matter of minutes in my mouth brought me out in a cold sweat. I was thirty-two years old but I was on the brink of bursting into tears like a child. Then the man in the white coat

came and said something in soft Swabian that seemed to ease the pain straight away. *Koi Angscht*. Don't be afraid. His movements were concentrated. He nestled my head in his hands before turning it towards him. He anaesthetised the pain with two injections, and after that I was at leisure to study the face which came so close to mine that I could feel his breath. I looked into green eyes. I saw thick eyebrows and strawberry-blonde curls. *Koi Angscht*. His lips were thin. When he smiled, a dimple appeared to the left and the right of his mouth. I'd never seen so many freckles above me. After an hour I stood up in the surgery, knees trembling, but no longer in pain. My tongue and lips were anaesthetised so I could only burble the reason for my journey.

At the end of the day I knew why I had to fall in love with this man: He had time. He was caring. He wouldn't let me drive. He had no appointments, no meetings – it was as if he'd been waiting to help an unknown patient search for a place she didn't even know the name of – Eichhof or Aichhof? Eichwalden or Aichwalden? Eichdorf or Aichdorf? He asked in petrol stations and cafés. He drove me from one lonely farm to another between Stuttgart and Emmendingen as if my search meant something to him. I liked his car. A Peugeot 304 – the old type with the square muzzle – in a green that people used to called 'snapdragon'. But perhaps I only fell in love with the words he uttered when I was about to give up my search. We were standing on a hill looking down into a valley where all the events that had driven me here might have happened. A farm all on its own. Not too big, not too small. No neighbours. Flowerpots full of geraniums on the windowsills. A shed, its door askew. Behind the stable doors, a soft lowing, the idyll that my uncle had once put his faith in. In the garden stood a colossal tree that had been young thirty-five years ago, and had kept growing since, as if it wasn't the same tree that was forced to look on when they tried to teach my uncle how to laugh. He'd been twenty-three years old at the time and all around him, the war was coming to an end. Except not here, not in this valley – if it was indeed here. As we looked at this farm in silence, the man beside me said the words that seduced me into not driving back home that evening. He said: Just decide that it was this farm and no other. Let what happened find a place. Look at it, fix it in your memory. Bad stories only come to an end when they are allowed to settle.

And as for him? Why had the orthodontist Dr. Erik Brunner from Stuttgart fallen in love with a swollen-cheeked patient who had stumbled across his surgery, whose words he could barely understand until the anaesthetic had worn off? He didn't know.

It was down to a few letters in a newspaper among potato peelings that I rediscovered the flat where I'd been handed over as a child. Grandmother won't be surprised. It is how it is, she'll say, what comes will come, there's no changing things. Barge-boat Ede will put it down to 'the winds of

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life', as he always does, and I'd picture Rubble Otto smiling cryptically. And what do you think, I ask Erik.

For a long time there's a silence between us. I hear him breathing. I see his face as he slowly says, as if he'd never heard the name before: Wielandstraße 3 – so you want to move me into your past?

IN the morning it had started snowing and by lunchtime, when he said, now the cases have to be packed, there was a tall snowman standing on the other side of the street. His eyes were pale buds of cauliflower, his nose a carrot, his mouth a lump of coal. I'd received a sledge for my birthday and my father, who had hidden the present in a brown sack under the bed, said for the third time that day: You're four now and very sensible. When we set off in the late afternoon, the snowflakes were double the size they'd been in the morning. The town was quiet, I didn't see any cars or people, just a faint light behind the window panes. I was dragged through the streets by a hat and a long coat, a grey shadow that was tied to me by a cord. Between us, the pattern from his soles – five waves and a circle. The sledge followed him like a dog following its master. When I turned back, I could see his footprints between the tracks made by the sledge runners. They ran after us, they didn't want to lose us.

Our tracks linked two districts, but in truth, two lives: one that I was familiar with, and one that I had no knowledge of. I sat on the sledge, wedged between two cases that bore my name: Jula. I can see the imprint that we left behind as clearly as if it were our family coat of arms. In school, I drew this pattern; I knitted it into pullovers, crocheted it into potholders and embroidered it onto serviettes – five waves and a circle between the sledge runners. When the maths teacher claimed that two straight lines meet in infinity, I said: That's a lie. They never meet.

My father had wrapped me up in a brown woollen blanket that he'd taken from the sanatorium. He gave me some gloves that were too big for me. He said: Put them on, they used to be Carla's. On his head he wore a fur cap that was too big for him and that had also been my mother's. I leaned my head back, opened my mouth wide and counted the snowflakes that landed on my

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tongue. A hundred, I shouted, and what comes next? The hat turned round. Start again at one. When you get to a hundred again, you've swallowed two hundred snowflakes.

How many till we get there?

Three hundred and fifty.

He banged the snow off his hat, stamped the snow off his shoes and carried on pulling me behind him.

Grandmother lived in Eilbek, the flat that we'd come from was in Uhlenhorst, near the Alster. If I'd counted the snowflakes on my tongue from the very beginning, I'd have known how long the journey was from my old to my new home.

Two hundred, I shouted. When are we there?

Another hundred and fifty.

I only have a few memories of our parting – it must have been quick. My father didn't want to take his coat off, kept his hat on, refused soup and coffee, and didn't want a baked apple from the tiled stove either. Don't you want to say hello to your brother? Grandmother asked him. He bent down to me and said: You're four now and very sensible. He tugged my plaits and planted a farewell kiss on my centre parting, the warmth of which I could remember for as long as I yearned for him. The kiss sat on my head, alive like a small, warm mouse. I could touch and stroke it. It couldn't be washed off or combed out. It had brown eyes and soft fur.

Grandmother lifted me up onto the window ledge. We watched him go. A long coat and a hat. A large bat without a sledge. Twice my grandmother said sternly: Turn around, Rudolf! Do it for the child! I whispered: Turn around, Daddy, you've forgotten me here, please turn around. I waved wildly with both hands, he'd have to feel that in his back, I thought. I hammered my fists on the windowpanes. He disappeared into the snow, he simply dissolved before our eyes. I didn't eat any soup that evening and I left the baked apple untouched on my plate. It smelled sweet. I watched the sugar melt on the red bowl and drip onto the plate. Try a piece, said Grandmother and pushed a lukewarm, sticky mass into my mouth that tasted sad, and like betrayal. I ran into the bathroom, spat the sweet pulp into the toilet bowl and never ate baked apple again. Even the word turned my stomach.

I was allowed to sleep in the empty bed next to Grandmother. I stared into the dark room and folded my hands. Dear God, tell him that he has to turn back. When he's asleep, wake him up. I've still got bows in my plaits and no one has brushed my hair.

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Grandmother snored. I crept underneath the blanket and wept as quietly as I could. The next night the same, and the one after that. I was four years old, very sensible, and knew how to count to three hundred and fifty. It was good that I couldn't see into the future. I would have screamed out in terror if I'd known that just three hundred and fifty melted snowflakes on my tongue and a journey on a sledge to a new home would change not only my life but those of many others too. At the time, there was no guardian angel standing by my side, who could have said: Don't be afraid.

Signs of life from my father consisted of colour postcards and letters containing money. We had a globe that lit up, and many thick books with the title *Brockhaus* later on. That's how we got to know the world. Mongolia and Turkey, India, Africa, Afghanistan. Your father works in the Foreign Office, said Grandmother, meaning that it was his job to be far away all the time.

I was like a dwarf in a castle in that flat. To reach the ceilings, you'd have had to stack four of me, one on top of the other. Leading off from the hallway there were two labyrinthine corridors, narrow tunnels. One led to the servant's box room that, when I had counted to eleven nights of weeping, became my bedroom. The other tunnel led to the kitchen. There was an old stove, and on the walls hung heavy blacks pans in which Grandmother fried herrings before immersing them in pots of vinegar and onions, salt, peppercorns and raisins. In the living room there was a green tiled oven that went all the way up to the ceiling with a shelf where rice and potatoes could be kept warm, and in the winter my feet. Grandmother's bedroom had a window onto the street, because at night she wanted to hear whether just cars or tanks were driving past the house again. And there were two doors that she went past with unfailing speed.

At first, I constantly got lost. I looked for the box room and ended up in the bedroom. I was afraid of the passage to the kitchen because the hallway was always dark. Why do you need light, said Grandmother, I just stretch my arms out, feel two walls and at the end is the kitchen. She didn't consider the fact that my arms weren't long enough yet. I wanted to warm myself by the tiled stove in the living room and I rattled at one of the two doors that led to the rooms she hadn't shown me. They were locked.

Who's there, called a voice, that didn't sound unfriendly.

Me.

Who's me, asked the voice. I called out: Me, Jula.

Who's Jula?

I ran to look for Grandmother. She was standing in the ironing closet, sprinkling her washing with lavender water.

Grandma, who's Jula?

You.

The answer confused me. How should I explain to the man behind the door that I'm you. I ran back.

I'm you.

How odd, said the voice. I ran back. He said, 'How odd'.

Typical, said Grandmother, he never was a big one for words.

What do I have to say to make him open the door?

He never opens it. Never.

Perhaps he will.

Tell him you're his niece, his brother's daughter.

I ran back, knocked and called: I'm the niece of the daughter of his brother.

I heard steps approaching the door and ran back into the kitchen. Grandmother, who's that man?

My son.

Daddy's your son.

I have two sons, my child. He's your father's brother.

What's that man called?

Hans.

I ran back, rattled one of the locked doors again and called through the keyhole. I'm his father's niece.

That's when I heard him laugh that laugh for the first time. It was deep and loud and didn't ever seem to stop. There were many things that could set it off. Sometimes a word was enough. Or a sentence that he'd interpreted differently from how it was meant. It was a laugh that sounded eerie when it was set off for no apparent reason. I could have found Uncle Hans in any cinema, or at any gathering of people. Even in the park behind the high walls where he was supposed to get better, he found reasons to laugh, long and loud.

I ran to Grandmother: Hans is laughing.

Impatiently, she said: You stay here now, we're going to fold the washing. Then I heard a key turning quietly in the lock. Grandmother grabbed my hand. I wrenched myself free and ran toward the man standing in the doorway, who was looking at me expectantly.

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He was well-built, much smaller than my father. It took me a long time to grasp why it looked as if his eyes were standing all alone, lost in his face. They were large, light-brown marbles with the roof missing. Uncle Hans had very fine eyebrows, barely visible, as if dabbed on with a paintbrush. Fräulein Jula, he said, please enter. He bowed. I am your father's younger brother. I never thought about his age. When you're four and can count to three hundred and fifty, numbers are full of mystery and have nothing to do with someone's age. I didn't know what a person of thirty or fifty looked like. For me, there were only children and adults, and all those who were adults were old. Old and sensible – except for Uncle Hans who was an adult you could play with. Not ludo, halma or nine men's morris, but games that he made up. 'Having visitors' was one such game: Come in, Fräulein Jula. What may I serve you – hot chocolate, tea, coffee?

He closed the door behind me and offered me a seat in one of the armchairs. His room was serious. In front of the windows hung heavy, velvet green curtains that reached from the ceiling to the floor. He had a desk made of dark wood that stood on huge paws. The drawer had to be pulled out with a brass handle that hung in a lion's muzzle. In the corner was a white tiled stove, as tall as the ceiling. There was no cosier place than on the soft cushions that lay on the bench in front of the stove during winter. In the second room, which he was able to separate with a sliding door, was his bathroom, his kitchen and his bedroom. For me, my uncle's flat was a lucky dip. I was allowed to pull out drawers, open cupboard doors, lift up cushions, and crawl under the sofa. The game was called 'Jula, search'. At Uncle Hans' there was ham and cheese, custard, chocolate, biscuits, liquorice sticks, and chocolate-covered marshmallows. When we'd made ourselves sick on marshmallows, we ate gherkins out of the jar. On special days, Uncle Hans would put two glasses on the table that were so fragile, I hardly dared pick them up. He would take a round bottle from the cupboard, unscrew it and I'd watch as the golden yellow mixture fell thickly from the bottleneck into the bottom of the glass. We always raised our glasses to something special: a Sunday with no work, a successful deal, a day when he forgot about the Carrion Crow he shared the flat with. The glasses were like the night sky: dark blue with tiny white stars. When my father took me away again because I'd become a ruined child, Uncle Hans gave me one of these glasses. I called it Hans, and his glass was called Jula. When I hold this thin glass nowadays, I still have the taste of egg liqueur on my tongue – even if I only think of the glass. If I see egg liqueur on a supermarket shelf, I picture the glasses that bear our names.

At Uncle Hans', there was everything that Grandmother couldn't afford. He let me try coffee and cocoa, he cooked chicken and beef, and he fried scrambled eggs with bacon and onions in the pan. The aroma filtered through the gaps in the door and into the hallway, and from there it crept

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into Grandmother's rooms. Before I left my uncle's part of the flat, I had to swear with my finger on my lips that I would not let on, although my hair, my pullover and just about everything on me smelled of scrambled eggs, bacon and onions. Uncle Hans gave me coloured pencils, a white paper pad and a paintbox with twenty-four colours and two paintbrushes. I was one of the first children in Eilbek who had ice skates and roller skates. I secretly put the money that he gave me into Grandmother's purse. Why did he lock himself in? I never asked. It was just the way it was. The houses on our street had no walls and no windows; we looked out onto scorched wallpaper and balconies that had collapsed and hung between two floors. That's what comes of war, Grandmother said. I had come into a broken world and didn't know the difference. If rabbits had slept in trees instead of hutches, and Grandmother had told me that *that* was what came of war, it would have been normal. There was no reason to question it.

Uncle Hans never ate with us in the kitchen. If he didn't cook in his room, he went out to eat somewhere in town or fixed himself meals in the wooden hut at his 'desk'. Mother and son lived under one roof but, for as long as I lived with them, they never crossed each other's paths. There was a pact, a set of rules that they had mastered perfectly. Neither was interested in slackening these rules, perhaps because neither knew what would happen if they did. I accepted everything just the way it was. I had nothing to do with the rules; they'd existed long before me. But I knew that the place they both feared most was the hallway. It was quadrangular, two hundred square feet, a stage that they set foot on with me, but never with each other. If Grandmother wanted to leave the flat, she walked quickly past my uncle's door jangling her keys, or if I was staying, called out in a loud voice: Jula, I'm just popping to the shops. Or: Jula, would you like to come with me? Or: I'll be back in an hour. Sometimes she dropped her bunch of keys just to let my uncle know that she was near his door. Her fear of coming face to face with him must have been greater than his. She protected herself, and she had a wider range of signals than he did. I heard her singing while she took her coat from the coat rack. She had a high, clear voice. She liked singing and often did so, but eventually after I'd settled in, I could tell whether she was singing for joy or warning her son. The 'careful-I'm-leaving' songs sounded as high as a car horn whereas the songs she sang for joy flew as if on wings – they were perfectly light and very melodic. These were the songs she sang in the garden, in the kitchen, in the bathroom or in her living room. Never in the hallway.

My uncle coughed before he stepped into the hallway. He slammed the door to his room with force, locked it noisily and, to make sure that nothing went wrong, he talked to himself in the hallway. Where's my hat, was one of his sentences, or: Well, it's about time. Or: High time. Or: Jula,

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are you coming with me? In the few minutes that my uncle took to leave the flat, my grandmother looked as if she'd been bewitched. Her head was raised, she went rigid, and her whole being was focused on listening, just listening. Perhaps she even held her breath. When the front door slammed, the spell broke. Her stiffness slackened and life went on as usual. Uncle Hans also noticed his mother's signals but they didn't cause any change in his behaviour.

I don't know how the warning system for coming home came about – perhaps as arbitrarily and wordlessly as the system for leaving the flat. Whoever was entering from outside pressed the old servant's bell in the stairwell; the buzzing sound was a signal: Beware, I'm coming, avoid the hallway. I noticed, although it never puzzled me at the time, that they shared the same coat rack in the hallway. Their coats hung next to one another on two pegs. Left, the floor-length, beige dustcoat of my uncle, right, the black, knee-length coat of my grandmother. And above them, his light-coloured Borsalino next to her bonnet. If the buttons on the coats were facing the wall, it looked as though the two were setting off for a walk. If the backs of the coats touched the wall, it was as though they'd just returned from an outing, without heads, without legs, but as close to one another as if hooked arm in arm. Sometimes I saw the back of his coat and the buttons on hers – then they were walking past each other. When I was older and gradually understood more about this game, I used to stick Grandmother's right sleeve into Uncle Hans' left coat pocket and his left sleeve into her right coat pocket, and pictured them liking each other.

He called her the 'Carrion Crow'. I didn't know what a carrion crow was but I could tell by the way he said it that it wasn't anything pleasant.

Grandmother, what's a carrion crow?

It depends.

On what?

On whether the crow has turned to carrion, or whether carrion is lying around that the crow feeds on.

And what's carrion?

When an animal dies and rots, you call it carrion. It's a disgusting word. Where did you hear it?

Just picked it up.

Grandmother called her budgerigar Hansi. Hansi belonged in the kitchen. In the evening he'd be placed on the window ledge and covered with a chequered tea towel. In the mornings, Grandmother put him on the kitchen table so that he could breakfast with us. When it was chilly

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outside, she hung the cage on a hook screwed into the ceiling above the stove while cooking. That's where I liked him best. From the pots, the steam rose and misted up the tiles while the blue budgie swung, twittering, in the white mist. He likes it cosy, said Grandmother and made sure that the steam didn't get too hot, the fire didn't blaze too high, and that the hook stayed firmly in place. The bird was missing all budgerigar language, he only called out one name: Hansi. Ten times or a hundred times. Grandmother took him out of his cage and perched him on her bent right forefinger and lifted his beak to her mouth. HansiHansiHansi. The budgie was a little blue dispensing machine that, once it got talking, couldn't be shut down. Grandmother was a proud woman. She didn't beg Big Hans for love – she got her bird to call out his name. Apart from her, no one called my uncle Hansi.

She didn't want me to visit her son in his rooms but she didn't forbid it. I loved running across the hallway, and the game in front of his door, and the voice that teased me.

Who's there?

Me.

Who's 'me'?

Because I liked hearing him laugh, I said: The niece of the brother of the sister of his father. Or: The daughter of the brother of his uncle.

Do come in, Fräulein Jula.

Besides 'Jula, search', he'd invented a game that we called 'Jula is brave.' He'd put me on top of the lion cupboard which was so high that my head touched the ceiling and the carpet was a very long way down.

Jula, are you brave?

Yes.

Then jump.

I squinted and jumped. He caught me and laughed.

Again?

Yes.

At school I was the first to jump from the three-metre board without being scared, and I still hear his voice before I make any decision, even today: Jula, are you brave?

Yes.

Then jump.

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My uncle showed me how to calculate with letters and write with numbers. He said that the alphabet was a good hiding place – the best he knew. When I understood the abyss into which he'd tumbled with the help of the numbers and letters, it was too late for anyone to set him free. Even for me, although I knew where he'd got lost.

GRANDMOTHER began the day before it grew light. At night, you're naked, she'd say, you see nothing, hear nothing, you're a snail without a shell, a hedgehog without spines, a bird without wings. At night, things happen that you can't protect yourself from. Hearts stop beating, breathing falters, and the time between two and three o'clock belongs to robbers and murderers. And the Gestapo. Night-time is an evil time, and do you know why? Because if your brain is dreaming, it's not with you and can't warn you. Grandmother would have liked nothing better than to abolish sleep. To her, it was banishment into double darkness for her because besides the blackness of the night, your eyes were closed too. To her, the idea that people pulled down blinds in front of their windows – triple darkness, in other words – was uncanny. When you walk, you exercise your muscles, she would say; at night, you practice dying. I thought I should stay awake to protect Grandmother but my uncle reassured me, saying: You just sleep, Jula, no one wants to snatch her away, not even on the darkest night.

My box room was as bare as a prison cell. A wardrobe, a sink, a chair. From the ceiling hung a light bulb without a lampshade. The room was quiet at night, as if it had nothing to do with the rest of the flat. We'll make it nice here later on, Grandmother promised, you'll have an armchair all to yourself, a cupboard for books and a desk. The first book I was ever given in my life was a present from her. *One Thousand and One Nights*, three hundred and forty-four pages. Not for my birthday, not for Christmas, she just pulled it out of her shopping basket one very ordinary afternoon, showed me how to write my name, and I wrote: Jula. Book Number 1. When I stopped numbering books, I was in the third grade and had thirty-five books in my cupboard. I didn't need the desk. I did my homework in the kitchen, at the living-room table or at Uncle Hans' heavy desk, then later in Barge-boat Ede's dive bar or at Ingemusch's on the whore boat.

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I didn't understand every word that Grandmother said but I knew the night was a difficult time. When I was sad, I tried to find comfort in the pocket mirror that I'd put underneath my pillow. I imagined that the little face I peered into belonged to a strange child. She had my nose, my forehead, my mouth and my fine eyebrows – she was as similar to me as a twin. She moved her lips when I spoke to her, laughed when I laughed, and when I cried, she cried too until I said: We mustn't cry, we're lucky to be here. Then I squinted, tried to press the tears back into my head with my fists and tried to fall asleep quickly. Staying awake without being afraid is something you have to learn. The wooden floor in the hallway creaked and I imagined ghosts. Grandmother said: There aren't any ghosts in the flat; at night, the floor just remembers all the footsteps it receives during the day. A floor that remembered at night the footsteps it had received during the day was the creepiest thing I could imagine.

My favourite things were dreams in which I was allowed to play a part. I didn't have to imagine the princess, as I did when I was reading: I *was* the princess. I was powerful and nothing happened that I didn't want to happen. I came out of the wall dressed in a gold dress and asked: Fish, are you doing your duty? And if they said: Yes, we're doing our duty, just as you do, I took the frying pan from the hob and carried it with the fish to the pond where they'd been caught. I saved them from death by fire in the embers, I watched them writhe in the water to wash off the frying oil and to become what they'd once been: red, blue and yellow fish. If I didn't manage to fall asleep quickly enough, I was the girl on the sledge being pulled by a long coat and a hat through the snow. Five waves and a circle in front of my eyes. Two cases that bore my name. I cried for this child until my eyes burned like fire.

No sooner was Grandmother awake than she went into the kitchen to boil ersatz coffee for her and milk for me. She put the cups on the night table in the bedroom and shuffled in her slippers across the uneven hallway, stopped in front of my box room, knocked and called my name as if she didn't really believe that her granddaughter was sleeping behind the door. Jula? I liked the question mark behind my name; it gave me the feeling that I could make someone sad if I didn't answer, or happy if I shouted: yes, I'm here. Then I climbed out of bed and we went into her bedroom in our long nightgowns. I did everything that my grandmother did. I stuffed the pillow behind my back, took my cup, blew on it and slurped my milk in cautious sips.

After she'd drunk her coffee, Grandmother went into the bathroom, washed herself with two different flannels, the light one for 'above', the dark one for the 'nether regions', and pulled her apron dress – her everyday dress – over her blouse, trousers and bra. I heard her stomping in the

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hallway, imagined her taking her coat off its peg and putting it on over her flowery apron, heard the jangling of her keys. Grandmother was the first at the baker's every morning. She fetched warm bread and milk in a canister. Stay in bed until I get back, she called out in the hallway, then she slammed the door behind her, and I monitored the sounds that were left behind in the flat. They came from Uncle Hans' quarters. There were footsteps. Sometimes he laughed early in the morning although I couldn't hear a voice that might have made him laugh. When there were two voices in his rooms, a deep one and a high one, I climbed out of bed and crept into the hallway. At first, I only held my ear to the door; later, I tried to watch Uncle Hans and his girlfriends through the keyhole. He must have known. The keyhole to the bedroom door seemed to have been stuck over with a plaster from the inside. He seemed willing to let me have a view of the lion's cupboard, but there the couple were already dressed, or hadn't even undressed, because I quickly grasped that it was all about undressing, bathing, showering and getting dressed again. After that they wore bathrobes so that I had no option but to concentrate on women's bare feet, toes and toenails. Some toenails were as bright red as carrots, others as black as the earth in the tomato patch, and yet others as silver as the mother-of-pearl in a shell. When I'd learned that no two feet were the same, I tried to imagine what the faces looked like that went with them. I lost most of the bets that I made with myself. Sometimes fat women had tender ankles and slender toes. There were delicate women who walked across the carpet on clumpy feet, tall women with small, tender toes, or pretty women with coarse feet, and all of them used nail polish. Once I saw a crippled foot that was later shoved inside a high boot. The woman looked like a child and had to use a walking stick. That was Annelise. I would have recognised that foot anywhere: it had an arch like a swan and was twisted brutally to one side as if it hadn't found its way back after a cramp. Its nails were painted with bright red polish. Seen through the keyhole, these feet were like creatures without heads or bodies. I only knew two people whose feet went with the rest of them: Ingemusch and Uncle Hans. Ingemusch had long, straight toes, not even the outermost ones were little stumps. Ingemusch had large hands and a face that was bigger than Uncle Hans'. My uncle's feet were similar to his hands: they were small and sturdy. When I watched these four feet walking across the carpet, I wished I could put mine alongside them.

I begged for four weeks until my grandmother brought me a little pot of nail polish from the chemist's shop, dark red like Ingemusch's. My tiny nails looked like ladybirds. Grandmother called women who wore nail polish 'floozies'. From this point of view, all the women that visited Uncle Hans were floozies, including me. I liked the word – it sounded so friendly, as if the women my uncle took in were light and fluffy. When I asked my uncle in the morning if a floozy was coming to visit, he

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laughed; I never managed to see them come or go, although they didn't have a key or ring the bell. Perhaps my uncle knew what time they were coming or he stood at the window, saw them coming and opened the door. Having visitors was a weak spot in the pact not to meet in the hallway. Nevertheless, I knew when visitors came for Uncle Hans – there was an aroma in the air like the one when Grandmother baked biscuits. I gulped in this aroma like a vacuum cleaner. When I am filled with it, I thought, I'll smell as enticing as the floozies. There's nothing like starting young, Grandmother said.

Please, Grandmother, please…

You're not getting any perfume.

What happened behind my uncle's door at night didn't reach my ears as my box room was too far away and I was too scared to eavesdrop in the dark, creaking hallway. When the floozies came in the morning, I pressed my ear close to the door behind which his bed stood while my grandmother was out shopping. It sounded like at the zoo when the monkeys shrieked but I wasn't afraid because now and again came the loud, long laugh of my uncle's. I couldn't imagine exactly what was going on but I felt it – it was something that gave you a tingling feeling in your stomach. Those who eavesdrop are evil. Grandmother used to say: Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves. But what was no good? Those who look through keyholes are spies. From spy to the gallows is a short distance, Grandmother used to say.

When the servant's bell buzzed, I ran into the bedroom, crawled into the bed that she called 'your grandfather's bed' and looked at the picture on the wall – a coloured photograph in a silver frame. Eleven young women and an old couple. The women were wearing grey-and white striped pinafores and their hair was gathered at the neck. The seventh from the right or the fifth from the left was Grandmother. She was the most beautiful. She wore a tower of wild curls on top of her head. The group was standing in front of a shop in whose windows mannequins were displayed in wedding dresses. Their arms were spread out like dancers, and their fingers were elegantly curved. When I sat in Grandmother's bedroom, I practised stretching my fingers so far back that my middle fingers touched the backs of my hands. With iron determination, I managed to press them nearer together but I never made them touch. My middle finger was more likely to break than I was likely to make up the missing centimetre. It was easier to press my thumbs against my forearms. I admired those dolls. Everything about them was more beautiful than I was. They had large eyes, long curled eyelashes and their hair shimmered like ironed silk. Over the entrance door in sloping lettering stood: Jonathan and Jette Lecour – finest bridal wear since 1874.

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Grandmother hung her coat next to that of Uncle Hans, her hat next to his hat, came into the bedroom with the milk canister and the bread rolls in her hand, saw that I was sitting in bed, and followed my gaze: that was the beginning of our ritual. She sat herself on the edge of the bed and said, as she always did when she wanted to tell me something from her past: Those were times,… times… Then she sighed and, if I was lucky, she took the photo off the wall, wiped the glass clean with her sleeve and if she said again: Those were times…, I was almost as happy as if I'd been back home. If Grandmother confided things about her life to me, I thought, then I must be important to her and more than a wet snowflake that was brought to her on a sledge. If I could induce Grandmother to tell me things by looking at that photograph, she must love me. She sat with the fragrant bag of rolls on the edge of the bed, took a deep breath and as she exhaled, breathed the sentence across the photograph that was like the beginning of a fairy tale for me. Those were times…

We repeated the ritual so often that it became a two-character play. She said: A ghost prowled through the streets in those days. Pause. This ghost, you have to understand, was on the lookout for weak people who, if it just tapped them, simply collapsed.

I imagined a tall man in a widespread coat. I saw myself on the sledge, my father in front of me. When Grandmother lost herself in thought, which was even part of the play, I brought her back by saying: It was 1927…

Grandmother: Exactly. I was thirty, Rudi ten, Hansi five, and your Grandpa Willem, a rogue who'd always been too slow for crooked deals when times were bad, tried his luck after the first great war as a sailor. Ahoi, so long, and me left behind with Rudi and Hansi.

When I heard the story for the first time, I asked her what crooked deals were. She thought about this, looked around the bedroom and discovered an apple on the bedside table. Look at the apple. Imagine you paid a mark for it. Then your friend Ingo comes over to visit us and says that he'd like to have an apple too. What do you do?

I'd give him the apple.

Oh, Jula.

I'd cut it in two and give him half.

Sweet of you, said Grandmother, but that's not a deal. In times of need, it's extremely daft to pay for a whole apple and only eat half. Do you understand? I nodded. Good, she said, what if you sold Ingo half your apple for a mark?

A crooked deal?

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A small one. A really crooked deal would be if he paid you ten marks for an apple that you'd stolen and then he gave you half.

In Grandpa's bed I learned that inflation is a terrible sickness. Like my mother's pneumonia. It starts out as a bit of a fever and you suddenly end up seriously ill. I learned that there was creeping, trotting and galloping inflation. In 1923, Grandmother held a bank note in her hand that had a five and nine zeros on it. It was only when I found out why my uncle avoided my grandmother like the plague that I understood why it was important for her to explain the era which the photograph belonged to. When she said: Those were times, she meant: Those were times that she could do nothing about, that she hadn't brought about, in which she'd suffered and made others suffer. Suffering is one level below dying – do you understand, Jula? Those who die – from cold, from hunger, from thirst – can't even suffer any more, so it's worth suffering a little for life, isn't it?

My favourite inflation story was the one with the eggs. Whenever I boil, fry or scramble eggs today, I hear Grandmother's voice. At the beginning, quite matter-of-fact: In 1912, an egg cost seven pfennigs. Eleven years later, an egg cost – now her voice had an exclamation mark – 923 marks! Grandmother said *papiermark*, and repeated the figure so that I took good note. 923 *papiermark* on the 6th August 1923 for a single egg and at the end of August: 177,000 *papiermark*! Then her voice rose to a high pitch: In September, eggs cost two million, in October they'd reached 200 million, and in November 320 billion. Billion! Money was only good for –well, you know – wiping yourself. 320 billion for a little white egg! Chickens were shitting millions, she said, you had to hide them from thieves at night. She listened out for noises: the hallway was quiet. But back then, she said, back then you could hear the creatures clucking and scratching in kitchens and bedrooms. Old Meinusch put her three hens in the bathtub one night, slipping a cord around their necks and tying them to the tap so that they didn't fly over the edge of the tub and shit all over the place. Can you imagine how that story ended?

Show me, Grandmother, please!

She put both hands around her neck, pressed and stuck out her tongue.

I learned that back then Grandmother drank ersatz coffee that tasted disgusting, wore coats made of stinging nettle fibres that scratched her skin and paid two million marks for a stamp. Two million *papiermark*! I learned that ersatz currency was made up of things that were hard to come by: cigarettes and schnapps, eggs, chickens and rabbits. If you wanted to avoid starvation, you had to have connections, or do crooked deals, you see? Skin a cat and sell it as a rabbit. I understood that Grandfather had to go to sea because he couldn't do any of those things.

War Rubble Wretch *(Trümmergöre)* by **Monika Held**
Translated from the German by Lucy Renner Jones
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Nowadays the picture hangs in my hallway, right next to the front door. I see it when I leave and think of crooked deals. If I stop and look at the women and the shop window mannequins on the photo, I see Grandmother sitting on the edge of the bed. I can't hear her voice any more, but I can still emphasise the figures like she did: three hundred and twenty billion for a small white egg! I see her outstretched tongue and strangled chickens in the bathtub. If I stop and stand in front of the picture, I can see Grandmother's story as if it were a film. It is 1927. Hans is five, Rudi ten. She's walking across Wandsbeker Chaussee. She's walking aimlessly – who had aims in those days? She has a slender face, big eyes and a hungry hole in her belly. I imagined the hungry hole to be big, round and black. She leans against a windowpane because her legs can't carry her any more. The white of the wedding dresses dazzles her, the mannequins smile, and then suddenly, the smiles and the dresses topple towards her like an avalanche. In her ears there is a rushing noise, she slides along the pane and loses consciousness. She doesn't know how long she's been lying there: the voice that's talking to her echoes, as if it were coming out of a cave. You have to breathe, dear child…breathe…do you hear…breathe. The voice recedes, comes nearer, recedes, like waves on the beach. The first thing that Grandmother sees are eyes. Enormous blue eyes behind thick glasses. She's given a little bowl of milk, as if she were a cat. Drink slowly, my child. The voice goes together with the eyes is friendly. A piece of bread is pressed into her hand. Eat this, my child. Grandmother drinks and chews and the faces of the shop window mannequins look down on her like angels. Are you looking for work, my child? What can you do? And then Grandmother says the sentence that decides the fate of her future and her sons' lives: I can sew. In truth, she's managed to crochet two uneven potholders at school. White with red 'mouse-tooth' edging.

The next day, material glides through her hands, as soft as a dream, stuff that she's never touched before. Silk. Satin. Taffeta. Grandmother learns that in life, what counts is not being happy as a whole person, but that single parts are enough. Feet are happy when they have warm shoes, and hands are happy when they don't get frostbitten in winter but are allowed to work with silk in a warm room instead. Grandmother sits with nine other women at a long table. Ten hours a day, sometimes twelve, she sews silk flowers with a fine needle and a very delicate thread into laces from Milan, from Brussels and Venice with patterns from the 17th and 18th centuries. In the centre of the flower she leaves a hollow in which her neighbour fixes a pearl with two stitches. The flowers adorn the bridal trains and wreaths. Those, my child, were my famous twenties. Then she would say her favourite sentence: It is how it is, what comes will come, there's no changing things. Grandmother didn't waste time brooding over things. She collected sentences that carried her through life like a

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corset: Those who brood age quicker. It is how it is, what comes will come, there's no changing things. Grandmother would have been well suited to a Greek tragedy. She believed that people's fate did not grow slowly, but that it was laid next to them in the cradle from the beginning. I was proof of this. She had always wished for a girl as a second child, not a boy, but then Hansi came. And one day – fate sometimes takes a little longer – the girl that she'd always wished for was brought to her, by Rudi of all people, her first-born son. It is how it is, what comes will come. I was happy to be part of someone's fate at the age of four.

One month after I'd been handed over in Wielandstraße 3, the first postcard from the man who hadn't turned around arrived in the letterbox. A white palace. Taj Mahal was written on the postcard, India. We put the postcard into Frau David's *Practical Cookbook* under the letter 'V' for *Vati* or vanilla pudding.

India, said Grandmother. Taj Mahal! Foreign Office! Look where it's got him.