

It's not nice when your household pet freezes in the refrigerator. Sitting on the balcony bench Maria can stretch her legs out till her feet touch the balustrade. She is wearing winter shoes lined with lambs' wool, so if she does she can't actually feel the balustrade; in summer she can wrap her toes around it. There's one bit where the paint is flaking off; rust is growing through. In summer Maria fiddles at it with her toes till chunks of paint break off and fall to the floor. On sunny winter days she fetches a pillow to put on the bench. Otherwise it would be too cold to sit on. Some days she forgets it, leaves it outside overnight and it gets all damp. 'Not nice' is the wrong way of putting it, Maria thinks, drawing her legs up. When your pet freezes in the refrigerator, its death is someone's fault. Otto's box is not on a pillow; it is on the bench, just as it sat in the vegetable tray in the fridge. Till this morning, when Maria opened the fridge and noticed the ice which had formed on the back wall of the fridge. Maria looks over at Otto. Get up, she says. Get up, don't just sit there. But Otto can't get up; the box is closed. Maria has put the box in a spot which never gets the sun, so he doesn't thaw too quickly. She takes the lid off cautiously. She waits. It's a mild winter day. Snow and ice are dropping off the buildings, they are dripping. As if the houses were crying, someone once said. Watch out you don't get hit by ice.

I ensured regular, adequate ventilation, Maria thinks. His stomach was empty. I prepared him properly. I filled the box with earth, with a layer of moss and leaves on top. I kept the moss and leaves moist at all times – moist but not wet. I ensured regular, adequate ventilation. Maria looks over to Otto. She wants to sit here till the frost on top of him has gone and the leaves beneath have detached themselves. He won't twitch when I touch him now, Maria thinks, and smiles. She moves her finger

over Otto at a distance, as she used to stroke the cat in the courtyard when he came towards the vegetable bed, all down his back starting at his head, two centimetres above his body. The cat liked that. He purred, with its mouth open. He didn't like being touched. When he was touched his ears went back. He bit anyone who stroked him if he could, hard. He was a stray, Walter said, but Isolde put a dish of dried cat food out for him every day. This stray cat became fatter than the cats who lived in the building. He tore their ears off if they stepped into his territory. Otto's box is in the spot on the balcony the cat jumped from when it tried to get in the kitchen, before Walter threw a slipper at it.

I ensured regular, adequate ventilation. I left him in peace. I opened the fridge quietly. I monitored the temperature with a thermometer, five degrees centigrade, never over eight; at a temperature above eight degrees Otto might have woken. The frost on Otto's back starts to melt. His eyes are still coated in a layer of white. His body is hard, but Maria doesn't pick him up. Maria sits next to Otto, she says, let's wait a bit, leave nothing untried, we are the masters of our own fortune. You know, I saw a man on the telly recently, a well-heeled, good-looking man; well-heeled men know how to dress. He had cancer and the doctors had said it couldn't be operated. But they operated anyway, and now he is fit and well, he said on the TV, because he believed in himself; the most important thing is to believe in yourself. Life throws a lot of tests at you, only the people who pass them win. That's what he said. See, when you wake up it will still be winter, but the spring will soon come. You can stay with me till it's warm enough outside. I'll make you up a bed in the hall. I'll catch flies for you; I'll look after you. And then, then we'll go to the pond. I'll carry you, otherwise it'll be too far for you. You'll make new friends. You'll never be alone. Look, the frost is thawing already. I'll have to stretch some tights over your box so you don't jump out,

so you don't get lost in the snow. Maria starts as she hears someone open a window. She clears her throat, stands up and brushes the snow off the top of the balustrade.

The TV is on. It's nearly twelve; the news will be on next. The clock with the pendulum in Maria's living room chimes the hour, once for each hour. Maria turns the telly off, opens the curtains a little and looks through to the street. The people walking past are warmly dressed. A chunk of snow breaks away and falls on a woman's head. Maria puts her hand to her mouth, waits to see the woman reach for her head, wipe the snow from her clothes and walk on. Oh God, Maria says, and draws the curtain. She goes to the kitchen; the fridge is open and water is dripping onto the floor. No, Maria says, and puts a tea cloth under it. Next to the cooker she finds a pack of soup. Maria looks out of the kitchen window to the balcony; she remembers she wanted to fetch some tights. There's a box full of them in her bedroom cupboard. She grabs some brown ones, takes them outside to the balcony, and stretches them over Otto's box with the legs dangling down to the ground. She goes straight back to the kitchen without looking at Otto, like she did when she still had her car. In dangerous situations, such as narrow gates or tight parking spaces, she had taken a good look first, then, when she was sure she had enough space each side, she had carried on driving, held her breath and shut her eyes. Back in the kitchen she puts a pan of water on the cooker and waits till the water is hot enough. Maria isn't hungry, but she still wants to make some soup and try to eat it. If you don't eat, you don't get paid, Herr Willert used to say. Nor if you eat too much, Maria thinks now. Look after your figure. You are our representative, you do understand, don't you?

Early afternoon Maria shakes the box on the balcony. Otto is no longer frozen solid. She touches his body; he is softer, but he doesn't move. Mid afternoon Maria shuts herself in the bathroom. Late afternoon she pulls on her winter coat, wraps a scarf

round her neck and puts on gloves. She fetches Otto from the kitchen and puts his box in a big bag. Let's go, she says, let's go. I hope I haven't forgotten anything. Before opening the door Maria looks in the mirror. She pinches her cheeks to bring some colour into them. Then she fetches some powder to cover the marks, then she wipes her hands over her face to remove the excess powder. For a second she considers photographing Otto. You don't photograph the dead, she says, let's go.

Going means putting one foot in front of the other. Maria trips over the doorstep leaving the flat. If it was summer she would have stubbed her toe, but it's winter, Maria's shoes are thickly lined. To get to the pond in time, she will have to hurry; it will be dark by the time she heads back. Maria has a pen which also functions as a torch, just to be on the safe side; you never know. She crosses the street, past the supermarket where the homeless man selling the street newspaper stands day in day out by the trolleys; he repairs them when the wheels jam and gets them ready by putting a coin in and handing them to the women as they approach. Maria looks down when she sees him; she doesn't want anyone to talk to her, or look at her. He says hello anyway. Hello, Maria says, and crosses the road.

Left, left again, over the road, right, then straight ahead. By the time the town ends and the little woods start there is only the occasional detached house. The streets are wet from the salt. It leaves white tidemarks on your shoes. The street becomes a track now. Maria has to slow her steps. She walks carefully so she doesn't slip and fall. Where the sunlight breaks through the trees, the snow glitters. I had a lovely time with you, Maria says. I really liked you, you know that? I'm going to call the fridge manufacturers. I'll shout at them, I'll shout, you ruined my expensive groceries. I had a guest staying, I'll shout, a guest I was very fond of, and I wanted to give him the best stay possible. You have ruined my life. I wanted him to stay a long time. I wanted him to be comfortable, but he left. He died. Yes, that's how I'll put it.

The voice on the other end of the phone might ask, how can a faulty thermostat kill someone? And I will shout, how can you ask a question like that? You have destroyed a life, and now Otto is lying under the snow in the woods. Then I will hang up on them. My hands will be trembling. But I'll hang up, because I can't claim compensation, because there is no chance of compensation, because the fridge is seventeen years old. Seventeen years, the voice on the other end of the line will say, seventeen years, and you're surprised when something like this happens.

At the crossroads Maria turns right. No-one has walked here for ages; she tramps slowly through the snow. It slips into her shoes. She swears. The pond is hidden by trees. Maria walks even more slowly. All your friends are down there, she says, and puts the bag down, takes the box out. I'm sorry Otto. Maria clasps her hands. It's a long time since she last said a prayer, but she knows what to do. *Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Eternal rest give to him and all the departed, O lord. And let perpetual light shine on them. May they rest in peace. Amen.* When Maria says the priest's words, she steps three paces to the left; when she says the congregation's she goes back to her place. Maria genuflects, the Father at her forehead, the Son at her navel, the Holy Ghost at her left breast. Then she starts digging. She takes her gloves off, puts them in her bag and shovels the snow away with her bare hands. But she doesn't get very far because the snow is frozen. Maria beats her fists against the ice, but stops immediately as it hurts. She will have bruises on a couple of her

knuckles; they will go green, yellow, then vanish. Watch out, Maria says, and opens the box. Otto has come away from the leaves. His body has softened. His back legs are stretched out. Maria rolls him into the hole. Otto is now lying covered with leaves in the hole in the snow, and Maria is happy until she realises Otto is lying on his back. It can't be good for him to be facing upwards if he wakes up again, she thinks. He won't have the strength to turn over. Maria squats in front of Otto for a while, thinking how best to pick him up. Then she takes him by the legs from the side, pulls him up, lets him drop, and pulls him to the middle of the hole. She strokes her finger over his body and says, I'm sorry. She covers him with leaves, then with snow, till the hole is full and flat. Flat, but not smooth, like the layer of snow on the pond. They will find you. They will dig you out – no, I don't want that to happen. I want to do everything right, Maria whispers. She walks a few steps to the side and makes a snowball, which she rolls over the snow, forwards and back to where she put her bag, so she remembers where Otto is buried. She makes two more balls and places them on top of each other. The snowballs are heavy and Maria's back hurts as she lifts them, and afterwards. She puts sticks broken from a tree into the top ball, the biggest stick in the middle, two smaller ones left and right above it. She thinks for a moment, before pressing another small twig into the snowball. Eyes, nose, mouth, she says. Otto is in good health. Then she takes two larger branches which are lying on the ground next to the tree, and sticks them into the snowman's sides.

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You've sent the applications off, good. I'll do a new search, but you do realise that things are particularly difficult in the textiles sector? The advisor turns his screen sideways. He looks at Maria. He says, could you see your way to working in another area, in a perfumery for instance, in the food retail sector, in a delicatessen? Maria shakes her head vigorously. No, she says, I do not want to work in food retail, not with *Wurst*. I realise, the advisor says, that few people do wish to switch to the food retail sector, but I'm sure you're aware, Frau Beerenberger, that I could easily find you a position in cleaning. We have to consider what your deficiencies are.

Experience is not an issue, nor is health. That only leaves age. The advisor looks at Maria. Maria avoids his gaze, she thinks, I've got less wrinkles than you, and I for one brush the dandruff off my shoulders when I wear a dark sweater. The advisor says, it won't be easy. I don't wish to seem impertinent, but you are forty-eight. It's tough in all sectors, but you have a particularly poor chance in textiles. When my colleague returns you should discuss the option of retraining with her. The longer you are out of the market, the harder it becomes. Maria nods. She thinks, why did she call me in for an interview when she isn't here? The man has a bushy moustache and glasses, the kind which were trendy twenty years ago. He fits the office chair better than her regular advisor, Maria thinks. She asks, and now? I'll find you a couple of positions to apply for. And please make three applications of your own each week. You have to be proactive, Frau Beerenberger, otherwise we'll get nowhere. Please abandon the idea of working in the textiles sector. You might stand a chance in an outsize clothing store, but for that you'd be too thin. Perhaps there is another area you've always been interested in? I don't know.

Singing, Maria thinks. I wanted to be a singer. She shrugs her shoulders, says, I'll think about it. The advisor has disappeared behind the screen again. You don't have a car, do you? No, Maria says. That's one position less, the advisor says. I'll give you four – plus three applications of your own each week. I'll write that in your individual plan. The advisor reaches for the stamp. What day is it today? he asks, and sets the date. He presses the stamp gently onto the paper. He is sitting with his back to the window. It's a sunny day and the blinds are down, but some sunlight has got through creating four white dots in a line down the advisor's desk. Maria wonders what they are. She examines the window, but the advisor has finished speaking now, so she stands up. She says thank you and waits a minute, but the advisor doesn't get up, and she is not going to shake a seated advisor's hand. Goodbye, she says. Goodbye, he says.