

NEW BOOKS IN GERMAN

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Emma's Silence

Translation by Isabel Adey

Quiet

It's so quiet, Emma thinks to herself, and switches on her bedside lamp. She's having palpitations again. It's nothing new, just something that happens from time to time. The doctor said it's only her nerves, nothing to worry about. But in fact she is pretty calm. Has she been dreaming? Not that she can recall. But somehow or other, it still just feels too quiet. Well, it is three in the morning after all, so the buses are few and far between and there are no cars out on the road. A blessing. And the drunken young louts who so love to shout and bawl in the night also seem to have stayed at home tonight. Or perhaps not? They probably woke her with their loutish behaviour and she just failed to realise right away. All the same, it's quiet now. She can hear Mitzi snoring in the living room. She's probably lying on the armchair with the white throw again, the one that's out of bounds. Must be. The creature just cannot be trained.

Well of course it was Georg who brought her home with him. A while back, just before Hansi's 40th. 'A present for mama', Georg said, and opened the box. Sitting inside it was Mitzi – completely black, and rather small. She was lovely, for sure, but Emma never

actually wanted a pet. They just create more work for you and tie you down, that's what she always said. Georg would never have taken the liberty of bringing a pet home while Hansi was young and she was still working for Wiesel in the notary office. But just before Hansi's 40th, she was already down to working just half days – and Wiesel had already started insinuating that perhaps she could gradually give some thought to retirement. That she should really start to enjoy her life with her darling Georg. Not long after, her darling Georg brought Mitzi home – 'for mama', he said. How she hated it when Georg called her 'mama'. As if she were his mother and not his wife. She hated it, but still Georg could not be stopped from saying it. Not long after, he left her. The same Georg she just had to have back then, when she was young and didn't actually know what she wanted to do with her life. Back when her friends were so crazy about this guy Pierringer, who was a student and worked as a lifeguard at the outdoor pool in Vienna in the summer months. Georg was good looking in those days; tanned and with muscles in all the right places. And she felt proud because he noticed her. And, well yes, suddenly she was pregnant and Georg a lowly engineer. His muscles vanished, making room for a small, solid beer belly. And the money he brought home was not enough to pay for Hansi's studies, so she found a job for herself working at the notary Wiesel's office. Day in, day out, she was picked on by the notary and the others at work. They were all educated except for her, as Hansi had come along before she had finished school and her parents thought that being a mother was a vocation in itself. Fortunately, Georg had at least paid for her to take a typewriting and shorthand course as a sort of wedding present. It came in handy, even when the notary brought computers in and she had to learn everything from scratch. Working for Wiesel in the notary office was actually quite pleasant. Especially later on, when she was older and no longer found herself fretting about the pointed remarks her colleagues made when she yet again misplaced a file

or misspelt a name. By then she already knew so much about all of them that they no longer posed a threat to her. She eventually became something like the heart and soul of the office – but not a particularly soft heart, that she knew. She was like part of the furniture in the end, and the others in the office left her in peace.

She had put up with Georg, too. Her husband Georg, who referred to her as ‘mama’ and was no longer so handsome at all; a man who had in fact come to bore her. That said, she could never have dreamed of leaving him. That’s just not what you do, Emma thought. It wasn’t that he treated her badly, he just called her ‘mama’ with increasing frequency, and treated her less and less like he did back then in that summer at the outdoor pool, when he would cast smitten glances her way and leave little notes for her in her locker. Nevertheless, she had put up with him and his beer belly. But then suddenly he went away. Left her. Quite unbelievable, she thought. No sooner had she placed the letter about her early retirement on the table than Hansi revealed to her that he was divorcing Gisela, and Georg said he needed to seek new challenges.

The new challenges initially went by the names of Sabine, for a very brief spell, and then Judith, both of whom were a good 20 years younger than Emma. Judith turned out to be a rather unrelenting challenge – Georg ended up getting a divorce and marrying her. But that didn’t help him either, because not long after the wedding he suffered a stroke. The challenge then sent him off to a care home, leaving her to enjoy her young life with Anton, a man ten years her junior. And now Emma is free to visit and console Georg in the care home. She does so too – somehow it just goes without saying, he is the father of her son after all. Still, she will never forgive him, not ever. And as a matter of fact, she doesn’t begrudge him what happened to him...

At any rate, she was suddenly alone. The only one she had for company was Mitzi, who just refused to learn and continued to sleep on the white throw however often Emma chased her off it.

Oh, and Emma always knew that the thing with Gisela was not going to last for long. It was clear to her from the beginning, as soon as Hansi introduced her for the first time. She knew because Luise had just left him. She had packed her things and moved to Turin for an Italian, taking Luzie with her. *Luzie*. What a stupid name for such a sweet girl. Now she's a young lady – a 'girly' girl, as Hansi always says, laughing in that gormless way of his as if that were a good thing. It's just impossible to get along with Luzie these days. She lives with Luise and her new man in Turin, and when she travels to Vienna she only ever visits Emma under duress. Visiting her gran bores her – Luzie says she always has something negative to say about everything and everyone. All that Emma had actually said to Luzie was that it wouldn't hurt her to come to Vienna more often – and that she finds the low-cut necklines on her shirts sort of common, those and the skin-tight trousers and tiny skirts she wears. Well they are, but Luzie is such a spoilt princess that you just can't say anything to her or she immediately gets offended, rolls her eyes and says that Luigi's mother never says such things. And how about that for a combination: Luise just had to go and find herself a *Luigi* when she already had a daughter named Luzie. Emma did kind of have to laugh when Hansi told her the tale. But of course, it was only when Hansi had left that she started giggling – she was in fits of giggles, to be precise. Luzie is actually an attractive girl, but she's turned so Italian since she moved to Turin with her mother. Talks with her hands and flicks her hair like one of those hussies on Italian TV, which Emma watches from time to time even though she doesn't understand what they're talking about. Well, Luzie does live there after all, and Emma wants to see what it's like. She's never actually visited her granddaughter in Turin,

although Luise did invite her and Luigi even added a note in Italian on the letter she sent. Luise translated it for her: he would be very pleased if Emma would visit. Still, Emma decided that it wasn't going to happen. She just can't visit Luise and this Luigi of hers, Luise did leave Hansi when all is said and done. Admittedly, he did manage to console himself with Gisela before she could look twice, but it still wasn't a pleasant situation, especially as she just took Luzie away with her. Away from Vienna, away from Hansi, away from Emma. Hansi may have said that he sorted everything out with Luise and that he sees Luzie often enough, yet Emma still refuses to travel to Turin. She would feel out of place as she can't speak the language, and she hasn't really actually lost anything with this new family by not going to visit.

Of course Hansi misses Luzie, Emma knows that. Sometimes he even admitted it out loud in front of Gisela, whose lips immediately pursed as if she were biting back her resentment. Emma figured that she must be jealous, and Hansi said it too. Gisela just couldn't get along with Luzie at all, as became apparent whenever Luzie visited at Christmas or Easter. That's not to say that Gisela spoke to her much; she was too busy being constantly draped around Hansi's neck. And as Emma had closely observed, this was something she only ever did when Luzie was around. She wasn't anything like as clingy and affectionate the rest of the time. *Jo* was what she called Hansi. *Jo* as in Johannes, she explained to Emma, who, at first, was rather puzzled by this new name. Hansi is a name for little children, Gisela explained pointedly, her husband's name is *Jo*. But still Emma continued to call him Hansi. As a matter of fact, he wasn't at all nice to her back then. He even expressly refused to tolerate Emma's remarks about Gisela's jealousy and told her not to interfere with her kitchen sink psychology. He silenced her. That was hurtful enough, even though he did apologise the following Sunday over lunch at the Jägerhaus in the Prater park. He takes her

there a few times a year, her dear son. On her birthday, for Mothers' Day and when he wants to apologise for something. Anyway, from then on, Emma only ever talked about Gisela when she was alone with Luzie. She didn't like Gisela either, whereas she always spoke glowingly of Luigi. Especially when he bought her a Vespa for her 16th birthday. Luzie initially had to explain to Emma what one of those was. She had quite a laugh at her gran, too, partly because she didn't know that a Vespa was a moped to begin with, and partly because of how pale she turned at the thought of her Luzie riding around on a moped in between the cars out there in deepest, darkest Italy. Emma really felt sick at the thought, but Luzie just laughed even more and said not to worry, she wears a helmet and all of her school friends have Vespas too, it's the quickest mode of transport in Turin – Emma should just come for a visit so that she can see for herself that there's really nothing wrong with it. But Luzie's revelation about the Vespa made Emma all the more resolute in her decision that under no circumstances would she travel to Turin; she still simply hadn't the slightest desire to see Luzie haring about in the traffic on that clapped-out piece of metal.

Hansi wasn't OK with the Vespa either, Emma could see that quite clearly. He scrunched up his eyes while Luzie talked about it at Easter. They were at the Jägerhaus again when Luzie suddenly came out with the idea that now would be a great time to race up and down the Hauptallee on the Vespa. So that was how Hansi and Emma found out that Luzie had a moped. And Hansi would surely have made a hullabaloo about it if he hadn't just left Gisela, which he revealed to Luzie and Emma on that very Sunday in the Jägerhaus. The coward thought it would be easier to tell them both at the same time, that way he wouldn't have to be subjected to the same arguments twice and he could kill two birds with one stone. Why he made such a fuss neither Emma nor Luzie could understand – they couldn't stand Gisela as it was. The name was what bothered Luzie the most, whereas for Emma it

was Gisela's pursed lips and the fact that she would call every five minutes if Hansi ever went to visit his mother by himself. 'To play with Mitzi', he always said, laughing, but the real reason for his visits was mostly Emma's traditional roast pork with Semmelknödeln¹, which she always made for him when he said he was calling. Gisela, on the other hand, was a health fanatic and was always moaning that Hansi was getting too fat, so she only allowed him to eat salad and whole grain foods. Not that Hansi really actually pandered to her, instead he still occasionally made secret post-dinner trips to the sausage hut on the corner and indulged the odd Käsekrainer². He confessed this to Emma as she had once outwardly expressed her surprise at the fact that he hadn't lost any weight despite being subjected to the strict Gisela diet. Oh, and the Schaumrollen³... Those were something he always brought with him whenever he came to visit Emma. 'A present for mama,' he would say before proceeding to devour them all by himself. Schaumrollen in summer and Faschingskrapfen⁴ in winter. Emma liked it that way. It was a nice feeling to share a secret with her son, especially now that Georg was busy with his challenges and had left her alone with Mitzi. And now that Wiesel the notary had shipped her off to retirement despite her reluctance to do so out of a fear of going stir-crazy. But in the end, things didn't turn out all that bad. Shortly after challenge number two had deposited the ailing Georg at the care home, she said her goodbyes to Wiesel and the others in the notary office and found that it was also quite possible to lead a good life without the notary. Twice a week she made the trip to the care home to visit Georg. Of course she never said anything, but he already knew her thoughts on the matter. 'I can tell,' he even said once – or rather stuttered as he could no

¹ Austrian bread dumplings

² An Austrian sausage containing small chunks of cheese.

³ Sweet, meringue-filled puff-pastry horns.

⁴ Viennese carnival doughnuts

longer speak so well after the stroke, – ‘I can tell you think it serves me right. But you still love me a little bit, and I’m happy that you always come to visit...’

Whether or not she really does still love him Emma isn’t sure, but she does feel good when she goes to visit him – because he needs her so much now.

So that Sunday in the Jägerhaus, after they had discussed Luzie’s Vespa at great length, Hansi casually dropped into conversation that he was getting a divorce. Luzie looked surprised, then completely unashamedly said “About time!” Emma gulped. She asked Hansi where he was going to live, and he just hummed and hawed. And he had to get Luzie to the airport so that she could fly back to Turin so there was no time left to talk about it at any greater length. Emma would have liked to invite Hansi to come back home but she never managed to get round to it. And after that, she didn’t hear anything from him for a week, but then suddenly he phoned and said he was coming to visit. So Emma got herself organised and made roast pork with red cabbage and Semmelknödeln despite the fact that it they were already in May and it was quite warm. It was Hansi’s favourite dish after all, and he was poor because he’d just got another divorce. But then there stood Hansi in her hall, and standing behind him was yet another woman.

Sure, she was pretty, Emma had to admit that. Slim, with big dark eyes and short, shiny black hair that was sticking up like spines. At first Emma thought Hansi must have met one of Luzie’s friends on the street by chance and brought her with him, that’s how young she looked. Then Hansi said, ‘Mama, this is Emine, the love of my life’. Eminé was what he said, with a stress on the last ‘e’ as if there were two or three of them.

Emma didn’t know what to say. First of all, the name wasn’t a name, or at least not one that she’d ever heard before. And she didn’t dare ask any questions either, so she just

shook hands with the girl and went to the kitchen. Then they sat down at the table, and very politely this *Emine* said that she didn't eat pork. So this was what Hansi had brought home with him. She had already eaten the red cabbage and the bread dumplings, even complimented them. But she didn't touch a bit of meat. Meanwhile, Hansi scoffed away as if he hadn't eaten for weeks and Emma found herself thinking *he's only just got rid of Gisela with her salad and her whole grain products, and now here he is bringing home someone who doesn't eat meat. Great, here we go again!* But Emine did rather enjoy the Schaumrollen that Hansi brought with him, the two of them shared them affectionately. Afterwards, Emine explained to Emma that her parents are from Turkey, but that she was born in Vienna. She had just finished her degree in architecture and was doing up her own flat, and Hansi and a couple of other friends were helping her out. She said that she would invite Emma for a proper Turkish dinner when the flat was finished according to her plans. Emma made out as if she really were pleased. This Emine sure did talk an awful lot – but without holding Hansi's hand as Gisela always did. She didn't call him Jo either; instead she referred to him as Hans, which was completely fine by Emma. *But a Turk of all people,* Emma thought to herself that evening as she sat in front of the TV and reached for her cross stitch embroidery.

She decided to take up embroidery after she parted ways with Wiesel and the others in the notary office. She found that the two weekly visits to Georg in the care home weren't really enough to fill her life, and although she enjoyed watching TV, she also wanted something else to do at the same time. Since then, she has embroidered hand towels and tablecloths for Luise, Luzie and Gisela, but she hasn't yet dared to give Hansi one as a gift too. She had been working on a cushion cover that she had intended to give to Gisela as a birthday present. But Emma knew that she should no longer celebrate it now that the two

of them were separating, so she pondered over who she could give the cushion to instead. Perhaps her neighbour from the second floor, that lady with the dachshund who always greets her so nicely and asks after Georg.

And that evening when the couple had left and she was sitting in front of the TV, Emma thought about how she would embroider a tea towel for Emine. That way she would have a present to give her in return for the invitation. *But a Turk of all people... sure, she doesn't wear a head scarf, but still... And who knows what her parents will be like. Why must Hansi always go for the wrong women?* At that very moment, Emma's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the phone ringing.

Gisela. Emma was lost for words. It was the first time that her second daughter-in-law had ever called her. Gisela asked how she was doing, and Emma spluttered something in response because she really was rather shocked. And all of a sudden, Gisela started crying and went off on a rant about "this bitch", who had taken her Jo away from her. So Emma heard the whole story: apparently one of Hansi's friends is also a Turk. *Strange*, Emma thought to herself as she listened to Gisela, *Hansi never mentioned this Mustafa*. But then again, he'd never really said much about his other friends either. *A Kümmeltürk⁵* of all people, Gisela said spitefully. And this Mustafa has a sister – she's a *Kümmeltürkin⁶* too, Gisela said even more spitefully. And one fine day, sister Turk told brother Turk that her best friend had just got a new flat and needed a few helping hands, so off went her lovely Jo with Mustafa to help this friend out. And that's how the woeful situation began, Gisela said. Emma listened as she spoke, occasionally sighing down the phone obligingly as she didn't know what she was supposed to say. And then, Gisela said with a whimper, a couple of

⁵ A derogatory term used to refer to people of Turkish descent, derived from the notion that Turkish people supposedly smell like caraway seeds or cumin.

⁶ The feminine form of Kümmeltürk, as defined above.

months later she ran into Jo by chance. At the Brunnenmarkt. There he was, holding hands with this *Kümmeltürkin* with her spiky hair right in front of a kebab stand. One of those places Gisela avoids at all costs because the only things you can buy there are fatty and unhealthy. She only ever went to the Brunnenmarkt to buy fruit. And suddenly there she was, confronted by the image of Jo with another woman. She felt sick to the stomach, and that evening at home, she told that she had seen him. He said he wanted to speak to her anyway because, unfortunately and quite incredibly, he had fallen in love and didn't want to live with her – Gisela – any more. And then Luzie came to visit, and for a whole week they acted as if nothing had happened. Gisela could no longer eat and had to go to the pharmacy for sleeping pills because she felt so bad. Then the night that Luzie flew back to Italy, her Jo never came home. And the next day, he packed two suitcases and told Gisela she could keep the flat and everything in it – just not his ABBA records. But there's no way she'll give them to him now. He'll just have to listen to the racket at his *Kümmeltürkin's* house. Emma also found herself pleading with Gisela on his behalf for the first time, saying that she really ought to give her Hansi the ABBA records, which he had always cherished as much as life itself. 'No way!' Gisela yelled into the phone and started laughing hysterically, at which point Emma quite politely wished her goodnight and hung up.

It's very quiet in the flat, Emma thinks to herself again. Mitzi has stopped snoring too. Very quiet. Sure, she's glad she has some peace now. No noise, no chaos. But still, it shouldn't be this quiet. Not even a peep from the fridge. Her old one used to rattle and puff as if it were about to conk out. She spent weeks trying to get Hansi to go with her to buy a new one but he always had something else to do. And after the dinner at Emine's place, he was so angry at her that he stopped talking to her altogether for two weeks. But fortunately, he eventually calmed down. And now there is this strange shiny metallic monster standing

in her kitchen, and it doesn't make the slightest noise – sure it's calming, but she already finds herself missing the rattling and puffing noises that used to come from her old white fridge.

The dinner at Emine's was sadly a washout, though Emma really did make an effort. She embroidered a dish cloth for Emine – blue flowers and a red border. Really pretty. And she even wrapped it up nicely with a red ribbon. She was very proud of her present.

The flat was attractive – although Emma did wonder why Emine needed 200 square metres. Fair enough, Hansi lived there now, but there was plenty of space for everyone with 90 square metres when Georg and Hansi were living with Emma.

Emine had a huge combined lounge, dining room, kitchen and office, in which chaos and disorder prevailed. There were magazines and newspapers scattered about the place, and in between them were vases and the occasional odds and ends. Turkish rugs duly adorned at least three sofas and, of course, the stone floor.

The evening started going badly right from the beginning. Emma asked Emine why she needed such a big flat – didn't it cost an awful lot to heat? She caught sight of Hansi rolling his eyes, but Emine just laughed and explained that she has a big family who love coming to visit, so she needs enough room to accommodate them.

They then sat down at the table and Emine brought out numerous small bowls of vegetables in different sauces. Emma dutifully tried a bit of everything on the table, but she didn't like it. She found it all far too spicy. And then Emine came out with a large plate of

meat and rice. *So she does eat meat*, Emma thought, getting rather riled up. 'This is lamb,' Emine said pleasantly. 'We don't eat pork but we do eat lamb and beef.' Emma didn't enjoy the lamb either, but she obediently gulped down her bit as Hansi was already glaring at her rather angrily. And then Emine brought out some coffee and some gooey concoction, dough in honey with nuts – yes, gooey is the right word. Emma said she was sorry but she couldn't eat it, and she doesn't drink coffee in the evenings as it stops her from sleeping. Emine just laughed and said she understood, her mother won't drink coffee after five o'clock either so she drinks the odd cup throughout the day instead. And without giving too much thought to it beforehand, Emma asked how Emine's parents had ended up in Austria in the first place. That was when Hansi really got livid and told Emma not to ask any more stupid questions. Not long after, he said it was late and he would take her home. Emine said she should come back soon, but Hansi didn't say a word for the duration of the journey home, and he didn't call her for a whole two weeks either.

Emma glances at the clock on her bedside table. It's four in the morning. She's been awake for an hour. She's actually fine, she thinks to herself. She has everything she needs. She's going shopping again tomorrow. Just like every Monday. Well yes, she does have to do it alone again. In fact, she's already pretty much on her own. Very alone, she thinks. But it's fine that way. She doesn't have to look after anyone. Everything's good just how it is, thinks Emma. It's just too quiet... and she can't sleep... and it's four in the morning. And not even Mitzi has come to keep her company.