

*Switchbacks*, by Bov Bjerg  
Translated by Elisabeth Lauffer

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What does it all come down to?

He emigrated in 1900, she said. Left behind his wife and children in Havelland and simply took off. His wooden clogs were found floating in the Elbe.

My aunt's voice rattled out from under her perm. She was dictating.

Name, profession, denomination.

Asterisk, date, location.

Small cross, AMERICA, question mark.

At the top of the page, I wrote: FAMILY TREE.

In Hamburg years later, I checked the passenger lists. Bremerhaven. Ellis Island. I didn't find my great-grandfather.

He hadn't emigrated. He'd simply killed himself. Like my grandfather and my father.

Wooden clogs in the river: proof that someone had emigrated. Truth or logic (which might not even be the same thing) never was this family's forte.

Great-grandfather, grandfather, father. Drowned, shot, hanged. By water, by land, and by air. Pioneers. I was still alive. I fell asleep out of fear.

What does it all come down to?

I started running, faster and faster. My leg slipped, and I fell. I felt the ground against my body and followed through, the tip of my foot connecting forcefully with the ball.

The pain woke me. Then the pain subsided. I heard the thump. Then the pain returned, stronger than before.

"Are you awake?"

I opened my eyes. The wall.

"Did you kick the wall? Why did you kick the wall?"

I turned over. Big brown eyes. Like the cover of a parenting book. The faint scar on his forehead. He had just learned to walk, when he scampered off and stumbled face-first into the broken beer bottles. I hadn't been paying close enough attention.

I stroked his ear. How far we'd come. Seven years.

"What're we doing today?"

"We'll see."

“Can we dig for fossils?”

I didn't respond. I hated that question.

“Can I go outside?”

I rolled back over to face the wall.

I heard the boy rustling about. The door clattered shut.

The pain in my toes pulsed, worsening, weakening, then leveling out.

I was not allowed to disrupt the pain. My breathing grew more shallow.

Family trees would have you believe that everyone has roots somewhere, every last dope another root-bound jamoke sucking the blood from the ground.

Father from Brandenburg, mother from Bohemia, myself from the Swabian Jura, M. from the Baltic, the boy from Berlin.

Connect the birthplaces. Look at the picture. What do you see?

Scribbles.

Now let's take a look at the generation prior.

Oh, God. (Bombs and treks. Work. Searching for work. Starving grandmothers. Bastard children, marriages to old men. The asterisk was set in brackets for bastard children. Robberies, but no robbers. Murders, but no murderers. Legends, lies, family lore blah blah blah.)

Yesterday we went to the museum. Display cases full of fossils, the walls hung with creatures petrified within slabs of slate. All highly informative.

Whales weren't fish.

Peanuts weren't nuts.

Ammonites weren't snails.

Charts depicting geologic eras: Cretaceous, Jurassic, Triassic, Permian. The layers provided the name for each era, a fact I'd never understood in school, either. Granite of all sorts contains mica, feldspar, quartz.

The skeleton of a female ichthyosaurus. In her belly, embryonic bones.

A wall of sea lilies, towering slabs of slate, the stalks appearing frozen in the wind.

I said: “Look at those plants. They lived a long, long time ago.”

The boy responded: “Sea lilies aren't plants. They're echinoderms, like sea urchins.”

Adjacent to the museum was a stone quarry. A large sign on the street marked the site in mangled typeset. For a few euros, you got a chisel and hammer to pound the fossils out of the slate yourself. Ammonites of all sizes. Ammonites weren't snails. It was raining, though, and I had to console the boy.

There was a small table in the breakfast room set with plates, cups, and knives. A piece of dark green wire held an African daisy in place in the neck of a bottle.

I turned the patio door handle and slid it open. The cold morning air cuffed me. I stepped outside and peered down at the rusty tracks.

The fog on the meadows was already starting to burn off.

A man stood under the blue spruce, his head leaned back. A man in a traditional wool jacket. The boy was standing on a branch high above. His jeans and sweater concealed him among the branches, but the jump ropes he used whenever he climbed glowed, the colors knotted together, bright red, bright yellow.

The boy chatted with the man. He talked to everyone. He once recited jokes to a cab driver for an hour. I had heard all of them many times before and forgotten them since.

What was a blue spruce even doing here, I wondered. We weren't in the Rockies, or wherever it was they had their roots.

I waved the boy down.

I poured muesli into a small bowl from the dispenser, then scattered cornflakes on top as a disguise and added milk.

The innkeeper emerged from the kitchen and said: "Good morning, Herr Höppner!"

The boy looked at me. He didn't understand.

I said: "Good morning!"

I could write whatever I wanted on the registration form. As long as people thought I was German, no one asked to see my ID.

"Coffee, please," I said.

The boy said: "Hot chocolate."

I frowned.

He said: "Please!"

I said: "What should we do today?"

"Go swishing!"

We drove up the switchbacks into the Swabian Jura all the time. It was what the boy wanted.

"Can we dig for fossils today?"

I had promised we would, but the image was so loaded it made me sick.

"The quarry is closed today," I said. "Maybe tomorrow."

We walked out to the car.

The boy exclaimed: "There's a house on the tracks!"

I said: "The train doesn't run here anymore."

The hotel used to be a train station. It was the starting point when we went hiking with the school. We would head straight for the hill, then up Kornberg mountain and across the ridge to Bossler. Campfires, roasting bratwurst on sticks, teasing Veronika.

The car was still as dirty as it had been at the airport when I picked it up. A little BMW with yellow Dutch plates. I had stood looking at the tailgate, at a total loss. At some point, the boy had pressed on the grimy crest, and the trunk had sprung open.

I said: "Did you bring your hiking boots?"

"They're in the trunk. Want me to show you how to open it?"

I drove out of town, fog in my rearview mirror, the shadow of the Swabian Jura extending beyond.

Town sign in, town sign out. More meadows, then the woods where I spent the night that time I ran away. The sledding hill. The landfill, where townhouses had since been built.

Town sign in.

I took the turn toward the soccer field. We rolled past the house.

A black VW van with tinted windows stood in the driveway. A small Mercedes was parked close to the fence. Two children, maybe four and six years old, hopped out of the van. The shrubs were dense now and tall as the house. All you could see was the ridge of the roof. I looked for the little round hole above the attic window, where birds always used to fly in and out. I couldn't find it. Maybe they had renovated.

The boy said: "Why are we driving so slow?"

I said: "I was born in that house. See that window? The one with the pumpkin or whatever that thing is? In that room right there."

The pain in my foot flared up. I had to take off my shoe, but couldn't just stop the car. The foreign plates attracted far too much attention as it was.

The boy said: "What did Grandpa actually die of?"

"Do you mean my dad, or Mum's?"

"Yours."

"He was sick."

The boy was the same age now as I was back then.

"But what did he have? Cancer?"

I was afraid he'd worry that I would do it too. And I didn't know how to calm those concerns without lying to him.

The boy said: "Can we go visit Grandma?"

I said: "The old folks' home is closed today. Maybe tomorrow."

"What does it all come down to," the boy said.

I said: "It all comes down to the switchbacks."

"What does it all come down to," the boy said.

I said: "The switchbacks. It all comes down to leaning into the curve."

"What does it all come down to," the boy said. He laughed.

"The sah-witch-backs!" I cried. "Leaning left, then right. Stepping on the gas through the curve as you climb the hill!"

He asked: "Does it all come down to shifting?"

"That's exactly it. You press in your left foot and move the knob."

I punched the car into a lower gear. "Step on the gas and let the clutch out as quick as you can without stalling."

Stepping on it was such a stupid expression.

There was a parking lot at the trail head just past the final curve, high enough above the spruce trees that we could look down into the valley. I pulled over to the right.

"You want to hand me a beer?"

The boy reached down around his feet.

"Thanks."

I pulled gently at the tab. It hissed and foamed. Once it subsided, I opened the can all the way.

The tiny bubbles tickled my lip, and I sucked them up and tasted the beer. It was warm. That didn't matter. The first beer never tasted good. Guilt and the conscience to go along with it, that's what the first beer always tasted like.

The boy looked at me skeptically. He pressed his lips together. That was me in my First Communion photo, lit candle in hand. Darkness on all sides: the background, the velvet jacket. In the middle, a bright face, bright blond hair, the glow of the flame.

"Want to give me another beer?"

Alpha and omega.

The second beer was easier. One big gulp, then another.

We looked at each other.

Then another.

I saw myself through the boy's eyes. How drunk was he? Was he in a good or bad mood? What was he going to do?

Through his eyes and with the panic he felt at what was to come.

The boy's ear had a kink in it. The upper cartilage simply had a little downward fold. Like a dog-eared page. I stroked his cheek, stroked that ear. A bookmark from birth. Whenever it caught my eye, I would think: How far we've come.

We had waited too long the day he was born. We got stuck in traffic around the Olympic stadium. I had misjudged things. The cup final had just ended. It was crazy, I had forgotten about the soccer.

By the time we reached the delivery room, she was already feeling the urge to push. With each contraction, his heart rate plummeted. The midwives whispered among themselves, then one dashed out and returned with the doctor. M. clung to my hand and screwed up her face. From the foot of the bed, I heard the words "surgery" and "stand by."

They ultimately used the vacuum to deliver him.

There was a knot in his umbilical cord, and with every contraction, the knot tightened, blocking fresh blood from reaching him.

The midwife handed me a pair of those curved scissors.

She pointed at a spot along the umbilical cord.

“Squeeze hard.”

I hesitated.

“It won’t hurt.”

The cord was sturdy as an electrical cable.

I held onto the scissors. In the bustle that immediately followed, I slipped them into my pocket.

The boy fiddled with the power window switches. The panes hummed. Things were still misty in the valley below.

I took off my shoe. My toes were dark red and swollen.

We heard the autobahn in the distance. I knew where it ran, but we could barely see it. Thousands of roadway roamers proudly rolling past in their gleaming wagons of the *Volk*, glancing up at the beautiful, beautiful Swabian Jura.

Whenever I saw an autobahn, I thought: Nazis.

Whenever I saw train tracks, I thought: deportations.

I wanted to go check out the roadwork. My bare foot rested on the pedal, and for a moment, it felt like summer.

I wanted to see how they were preparing for demolition. It was Austrians, someone told me, who were building THE BIG SHORTCUT up there.

We turned into the narrow valley. Down the embankment was a cluster of stacked shipping containers. Sure enough, rigged to a stripped tree limb beside the containers was a red-and-white-striped flag.

I said: “Look out your window.”

The road led uphill, the curves even tighter than before.

“What does it all come down to!” the boy exclaimed.

“Switchbacks!” I cried. “Accelerating through the curve!”

The boy was plastered to the window.

“There!”

At the top of the hill across the way, two enormous black holes gaped at us.

I looked down at the river and finally noticed the brown rectangles, the forest floor without any trees.

They were already erecting the first pillar.

I instantly pictured the time lapse footage on YouTube or wherever: pillars rising out of the earth, concrete spilling out of the mountain and into the valley, the quivering strobe light quality of the images, sunrise, sunset, spring, summer, verdant, then white, continuing across the valley and disappearing into the other mountain. Before you knew it, trains were zipping back and forth, as though it had always been that way.

The BIG SHORTCUT saved a lot of time on the Paris-Bratislava route – in other words, from Stuttgart to Ulm.

Reach the east five minutes and twenty seconds faster.

That was civilization in a nutshell: it all started in a cave. I drilled tiny holes in vulture bones and trilled incantations, I carved mammoth teeth to resemble lion-headed men and headless women with exorbitant bosoms, then I invented the wheel, cleared the forests and dug drainage ditches, constructed aqueducts, paved highways and laid train tracks, staged a world war, enacted genocide and an economic miracle, tunneled under it all two and three times, and after exploiting every last inch, I built a spaceship and blasted off to Alpha Centauri, leaving all that nonsense behind. I had won, and the game was over.

The extermination camps weren't located beyond Bratislava, they were much farther north. The tunnel and bridge were sure to turn out very nice.

The wind blew from the side on the high plateau. I had trouble correcting for the gusts. Wind turbines commanded the sky above the fields, those one-legged lords.

"What was that?"

"A hedgehog."

We drove past the chapel of Ave Maria. It was a pilgrimage site, the epitome of atrocious late Baroque.

"Want to see where Grandma and Grandpa got married?"

My mother had to commit to baptizing her future children Catholic. My father was Protestant, so it made no difference to him.

The boy groaned: "A church?"

I didn't look at him. Whenever he used that tone of voice, he was rolling his eyes.

I thought of Veronika, who was from these parts. Who'd always spoken so softly.

Desks arranged in a horseshoe, which meant: no more teacher talking at us, students instead engaged in discussion and debate. That horseshoe must have been hell for Veronika.

We found any way we could to tease her.

One of our teachers announced that there was going to be a new drama club at school. Was anyone interested in getting involved?

I barked: "Veronika!"

Everyone laughed. Veronika turned red and stared at her desk on the edge of the horseshoe.

Her father didn't want her attending the academic high school. Every morning, she rode the bus for an hour, down the switchbacks, out of the mountains. Whenever too much snow fell in winter, she didn't come to school. She aced her finals, too, but still just wound up at the school of hotel management one town over.

"You said there was a cave here."

There were plenty of signs for the cave, but I still had trouble finding it. I simply refused to believe that the sign pointed at some forlorn dirt path was right.

The boy pushed the crest and the trunk popped open.

"You have to tie my shoes."

All because of that damned Velcro. He was already in school and couldn't tie his shoes. Yet another thing I'd failed to teach him.

I said: "Give me your foot!"

He leaned into me.

I pulled the laces, and his foot slipped. He grabbed me as he fell.

"You have to hold it there!"

"You pulled too hard!"

"Didn't realize I was that strong, did you?"

"Ha, like you're strong!"

He slung his arm around my neck. I stood up, and he hung down my front, squirming.

I wheezed: "Well? Am I strong? Am I strong?"

I put him down. He turned his back toward me again, and I kneeled behind him and tied the boots. I had to tie them from behind, as if they were mine, otherwise I'd never get the bow right.

A man and woman sat at a long biergarten table by the entrance to the cave. The woman wore a black headscarf. They gave us a nod. The man smiled, and the woman looked back down at the tabletop.

The cashier said: "They belong to us. They come here every day. They help clean. Empty the trash, and things like that. Then they sit on the terrace and get a free coffee."

I expected a disparaging remark, but none followed.

I said: "Hello. Salam aleikum," then added in English, "Where do you come from?"

The man responded: "Aleikum salam. We are from . . ."

And the woman interrupted, in German: ". . . from Laichingen."

A steep, steel staircase descended into the earth. I closed my eyes. The railing was cold and wet. I heard our steps and the patter of water. The knobby tread felt good on my bare foot. Cold and moisture numbed the pain.

I had forgotten our jackets.

"You chilly?"

"S okay."

The boy counted the steps. We went deeper and deeper.

The boy said: "Three hundred four."

I opened my eyes. It was dry here. I tried to picture where exactly we were, how deep and far from the exit, but I couldn't.

There was a staircase leading up. Over the loudspeaker, a voice said: "... you for visiting, and as the cavers say for good luck, '*Glück tief!*'"

I thought to myself: Yeah, screw you too.

We pulled over again at a bus stop. It was near the top of the mountain, far from any houses. One back road converged with another, and on the bus schedule, the stop was simply called "Junction." It had always been called that.

The fog had burned off, and the view into the valley was clear.

"Give me another beer, would you please?"

Down the hill in front of us was a barn, its clapboards stained dark brown. It had always been there. A herd of cows lay around an old water trailer, and farther down, the plateau began.

"Do you know the name of this mountain? Galgenbuckel – Gallows Hill."

"Are there gallows here?"

The boy opened his water bottle, set it to his lips, and as he drank, his eyes scanned the hillside.

Small forests and fields and meadows formed the landscape below, future building plots. A big concrete cube in the distance – the incineration plant with its narrow chimney on the side. A white slab – the regional hospital.

Reddish-brown shingled roofs, clusters of them barbed with church spires. So the Almighty didn't plant his fat ass there.

In the twilight, we could see the lights of airplanes approaching Stuttgart from the north, just millimeters apart. The moment one light disappeared on the ground, another appeared on the horizon.

The businessmen were returning to their families. A peek at the sleeping child, a peck on the wife's cheek, who was still on her computer, managing family life. Notes from parent-teacher conferences, online shoe shopping, sharing pictures of the kid with their dear relatives.

The next morning, off the men would fly again.

I wish I could sit here forever, at this bus stop, I thought. And then the geologic eras would come and pile on top of me. Preterit, present, future. That fossil there in the preterit, check it out, that's me.

The alcohol was now flooding my system. The tension subsided.

A hot air balloon floated below. It slowly moved across the sky. I looked at the top of the balloon, at its unprotected skullcap. That did it.

My face was suddenly wet with tears.

The boy told a joke that I immediately forgot.

I bumped into Veronika in California, years after we'd finished school. Big hotel and conference center, five stars, view of the Pacific. I was checking out.

She was behind the desk, giving instructions to the receptionists. Then she turned to me. She typed in my room number and looked up. Where did I know that face from? She used my old nickname, forming a question.

We switched into our dialect. It wasn't a conscious choice.

Like a painter plunging his brush into the right color at the edge of the palette, without much deliberation.

We skipped the other foreign language altogether, the high German we were forced to use in school. It was superfluous along the path from our dialect to English, and all the more so on the way back.

Her father had been dead for years. She sprinkled her dialect with "well"s and "like"s and "kind of"s and "you know"s, droplets of that other paint.

No, she hadn't been at the funeral. Too much going on.

She looked me in the face.

She was the boss here. This place belonged to her.

Her voice was soft as ever, but no longer sounded timid. Now it was assertive.

She looked at me gravely, as if wanting to make perfectly clear: It was a long time ago, but I haven't forgotten.

It really was possible to break free, I thought later. It wasn't just something that happened in books and movies and songs. It happened in real life too.

I was happy for days after. A very simple feminist, socialist happiness. A very childish happiness.

Veronika managed to break free from her father, from her small town, and from assholes like me.

"What does it all come down to?" the boy asked.

I replied: "It all comes down to the switchbacks. Hold off on braking as long as you can, then downshift and accelerate through the curve."

"What was that?"

"A fox, I think. A small one. Or an orange cat."

After dinner, we stood on the train tracks and looked up. The Big Dipper, yet again.

The boy: "What's that next to it? What are those stars?"

"I forget."

"But you have that app on your phone. The one that tells you what they are."

"The phone has to stay in the metal container."

I felt stupid doing it, but everyone had different advice on how to prevent your phone from being tracked.

I put my arm around the boy's shoulders and pulled him close, squeezed him tight. I kissed him on the forehead. He twisted out of my grasp.

I tried it again. This time, he didn't fight back.

He said: "I'm sad."

I said: "You're tired. There's a difference, right?"

The boy stomped up the Kreuzweg, zigzagging across the path. He ran in slow motion, as though the asphalt were gluey.

I didn't remember the path as being this steep.

"What does it all come down to!" the boy yelled, tilting his torso as he hugged the curve.

I limped behind.

The church perched at the top of the hill. Meadows and a few fruit trees with golden red leaves in front, the forest behind. A swooping gable, ochre, with the little belfry on top. The black onion was closer to the heavens, the golden cross closer still.

I dipped my fingertips in the holy water, as if I'd never do it any different.

"What are you doing?"

It was a childhood habit. I had abandoned it when I stopped believing in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, not to mention the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Abandoned it for a long time.

Then I picked the habit back up. A prodigal son who found solace in the familiar gesture. I began to cross myself again, whenever I entered a church, as though nothing had happened in the interim. I pretended I belonged.

The gesture must have seemed like a ritual performed by a devout child. In reality, it was a ritual performance by an apostate who had long since forsaken the fold. All it had taken was a signature, filed away by a courthouse clerk in Wedding. A dozen people next to each other on plastic shell chairs in the hall, the door opens – Next! – the door closes. The paper form, Rom. Cath./Prot., tick N/A, sign, and that was the end of Christianity for this part of the family.

"A cross."

I dipped my fingers back into the small dish beside the door.

"Forehead in the name of the Father – chest, and of the Son – left, and of the Holy – right, Spirit."

"That's yucky."

The hymn books were stacked behind the back pew. The cover was gray now. Book ribbons hung between the pages. And lastly, grant us leaving the world without much grieving, let peaceful be our death.

Inside the church, everything was white and gold and gaudy. They had given the Lord a little girl's bedroom of massive proportions.

The walls were so crowded with stucco and plaster figures and bobbles, you could barely tell things apart.

Every last spot had to be painted, every last space crammed with some message. The choir was crowded with angels, down to the very last corner, so that no one might fill the emptiness with something else.

This was the art of the mentally unsound, I thought. Baroque brut. The artist had to inscribe his message in every last nook: "I was here. Over here too. And here. And here and here and everywhere. I exist! I do! I do!"

I liked the ceiling. Golden tendrils and dots and lines. There were even flashes of white scattered between. Room for private notes.

The dome looked like a tablecloth that a giant grandmother only brought out on Sundays.

The boy said: "It looks like a tablecloth."

I said: "In that case, we're standing right between the tablecloth and the table. And over it – or more like on it – is the gugelhupf."

The boy: "Gugelhupf?"

My parents had married at this altar. I found the photo after my father died. It fell out of the book I had pulled from the shelf. *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*, an old Bertelsmann book club title. The cover had hieroglyphs on it and a woman with a sullen expression and weird pillar on her head. The man beside her was cut off vertically. They held each other's poorly drawn hand, the fingers all the same length and parallel, like colored pencils in a pencil case.

I didn't know how the wedding picture wound up in the book. Photos were always stored in albums, stuck to cardboard pages with transparent photo corners. They weren't used as bookmarks.

The photo was tiny, barely bigger than a passport picture, black-and-white with a thin, white deckled edge.

The high altar took up most of the frame, but when I used a magnifying glass, I could see my parents' backs, tiny before the altar. They were seated, the paternal back

black, the maternal back white, both approximately three millimeters tall – I measured with a ruler. Nearly all the pews were empty.

The day of the wedding, the mother of the groom, the widow by suicide, told the bride, the future widow by suicide, “The drinking will get better, once he’s married. Once he has to provide for children, it will get better.”

(The bride herself told me that, much later, once she’d wised up.)

“What’s a gugelhupf?”

“A kind of marble cake.”

One of the Bohemian great-grandmothers supposedly vanished during the wedding ceremony. A Protestant in the family – she didn’t approve. Before they even said yes, she apparently stood up, slid out of the pew, crossed herself, and left the church in a hurry.

She walked all the way home, following the Kreuzweg down to the road, into the next village, across the plateau, and down the escarpment at its edge. She didn’t return till the next morning. She’d spoken extensively with the Virgin Mother along the way, they said, though the outcome of the conversation was unclear. Legends, lies, family lore blah blah blah.

Blah blah blah – that was the endless rehashing. The tales that every family member could recite, word for word. Manners were all that stood in the way of picking up and finishing someone else’s sentence the moment they opened their mouth.

The formula was as follows:  $(E + R) \times V = BBB$ .

Open parentheses, Event (“so what happened was”) plus Response (“it was bad”), close parentheses, times Variation (one might say: “I think it was actually two days earlier,” to which the other might respond: “No, it was on suchandsuch a day, which I remember exactly, because”) equals blah blah blah. The element of “because” in the Variation phase allowed for the insertion of other family tales, resulting in legends nested every which way, abandoned midway through their telling, but it didn’t matter, since everyone knew how the stories ended, anyway.

You could rely on documents, not on cobbled-up anecdotes. The picture of my mother and father, three millimeters tall – that, you could rely on.

We walked around the outside of the church, past a plaster wall. A forged metal gate stood open. The boy looked at me, and I nodded without knowing what to expect.

Sitting on the other side of the wall was a monk. It startled me. He wore a brown cowl, the hood draped down his back, the rope belt hung at his side. A calving rope, a plasterer’s rope.

I said: "Grüss Gott. Hello."

A knee-jerk response.

The monk said: "Grüss Gott."

I was afraid he might think I was mocking him. I didn't know how to greet a monk properly.

He was smoking. Maybe he wasn't a real monk. Were monks allowed to smoke?

"This is the herb garden," I said to the boy and steered him back toward the gate.

He was allowed to smoke, but not fuck. Peculiar religion.

We hiked back down the Kreuzweg, toward the parking lot.

The first image, at the top of the path, showed them laying Jesus to rest. There was a meadow on the opposite hillside, with juniper bushes clinging to it like burs on a wool blanket.

The boy ran, yelling, "What does it all come down to," then tripped coming out of a curve.

I thought of my first confession, the day before my First Communion. The church was almost empty, an enormous hall with interminably long pews.

The other catechism kids were glad not to be at home, where they'd have to help their dad wash the car. But they were also sad not to be at home with their dad, listening to the soccer game on the car radio.

I imagined having a dad I could wash the car and catch the game with. Goal in Kaiserslautern! What the hell're they doing in Gladbach?

The kids who had yet to confess waited in line at the confessional. Those who emerged, transformed and matured, spread out among the pews and began to pray.

The confessional was dark brown, almost black. Father Cornelis sat inside.

Father Cornelis made it easy for us by stripping the ritual of any real meaning. We were simply instructed to run through the Commandments, from one to ten.

I confessed: "First Commandment: nothing. Second Commandment: nothing. Third Commandment: I didn't remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

A confession like color-by-number.

Father Cornelis was from the Netherlands. He had been sent here after the war, to support the Catholic brothers and sisters of the diaspora.

The Catholic church in our neighborhood wasn't built till after the war. It was small and simple, but the roof was so steep that it – the new church on the outskirts – towered a few meters above the stately old church at the heart of town, which had been Protestant since the Reformation.

My grandfather was a carpenter. He had never framed a roof that high.

Catholic students from the Netherlands had helped build the church, in spite of Germany's crimes. Denomination came before nation.

The Catholic congregation was comprised entirely of refugees. The community spoke the dialect of the Bohemian Forest, and later expanded to include Italian and Spanish. The foreigners stood at the back, behind the last pew. Some leaned against the wall. The pews were already full, and besides, the foreigners didn't speak German. They couldn't tell when it was time to sit, kneel, or stand. Those at the back avoided blunders by simply standing the whole time. No awkward scrambling at the wrong moment, no down, forward, up. Simply standing till mass was over.

My grandfather was a carpenter, like Jesus, but after the roof, all he did for the church was assemble the crèche for Advent every year, to the right at the front of the sanctuary, under the eternal flame.

"Tenth Commandment: nothing."

I had confessed, for the first time in my life. I almost belonged now.

I tried to see through the wooden screen. Although my eyes had adjusted to the dark inside the confessional, I couldn't make anything out.

All that came through was Father Cornelis's voice: "Three Our Fathers and one Rosary. I hereby absolve you of your sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Forgiveness of sins, that was the power of the father. You couldn't ask a mother for that. Mothers loved unconditionally. Fathers, on the other hand, either punished or pardoned.

I stepped out of the confessional and meandered to a pew way in the back.

I didn't know the Rosary by heart. But if I didn't pray the Rosary, God wouldn't forgive my sins. I recited three Our Fathers and didn't know what to do next.

As penance for my sins and as penance for the fact that I didn't know how to pray the Rosary, I assigned myself another ten Our Fathers.

Other kids came out of the confessional, prayed, and left the church. Once everyone had confessed and prayed, once everyone had left, Father Cornelis heaved himself out of the confessional, headed toward the altar and disappeared into the vestry, without a glance around.

I was alone in the church. I tacked on yet another ten Our Fathers.

Our Father, who art in heaven.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.  
Our Father, who art in heaven.

The church windows began to glow, spectacularly colorful light pouring in.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.  
Our Father, who art in heaven.

The light faded, the windows turned gray, then black.

I kept praying.

Up front, beside the tabernacle, was a little red glowing light. The eternal flame.  
What if it went out?

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

What are you doing here?

It was my brother's voice.

I kept praying.  
How many do you have left?  
I don't know.

The boy walked back up the Kreuzweg.

He pointed down the hill with his chin.

A procession was making its way up the mountain. Crosses and colorful flags swayed in the air above. I couldn't hear what the people were singing, the verses and melody tattered by the wind. I stepped off the narrow footpath, onto the field, and pulled the boy behind me.

The altar boys walked out in front. White albs, red cassocks flapping underneath. The vestments of children who had promised themselves to God, God and his representatives, and his representatives could do to these children what they deemed appropriate, in God's name. This was the vow the children made with their costumes.

The tallest altar boy swung the censer to the rhythm of his steps.

I could now see the images of Mary on the banners.

The pilgrims marched past. I nodded at the adults.

Their singing remained unintelligible. Each mouth emphasized different syllables and assigned them different pitches. The tones were scattered about some imagined line that my ear, too, failed to detect.

A brass ensemble brought up the rear.

Altar boys belonged. Belonged to the church community, almost like members of the pastoral council. Belonged to God, the father.

I wanted to be an altar boy.

Being an altar boy meant sitting up front, looking forward, kneeling at the altar.

This is my blood, of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Lift the bells. Do this in remembrance of me. Ring them.

Sit back down, wait for the next cue and don't laugh. It was good preparation for life.

Mass. The boredom and security of the forever unchanged service. Fathers went crazy and died, mortgage payments couldn't be made, children were beaten black and blue, but Mass was celebrated every Sunday, began every Sunday at the same time – nine-thirty – and it was celebrated every Sunday with reassuring sameness, and I kneeled at the front, do this in remembrance of me, lifted the bells and rang them.

This is my blood, of the covenant, poured out for many.

This is my throat, of the covenant, strangled for many.

This is my head, of the covenant, blown off for many.

This is my vein, of the covenant, slashed open for many.

This is my belly, of the covenant, poisoned for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I lifted the bell.

Do this in remembrance of me. And rang it.

A sharp smack echoed in the nave. Father Cornelis lowered his hand.

Martin Deichmann had found a magazine with pictures of naked ladies in the recycling. The paper recycling behind the church, by the vestry door. WE WELCOME  
line break YOUR WASTEPAPER.

Martin leafed through it, sitting in the pew, while Father Cornelis addressed the altar boys.

We silently peered over Martin's shoulder as he turned page after page. I spied a broad, skin-colored surface split in two. A vagina or an ass crack or the gap between the breasts or maybe just a crease in the page.

Without a sound, Father Cornelis's heavy body shot into the pew. He tore the magazine from Martin Deichmann's hands and flung it aside. It fluttered over the pews and landed, open, before the altar. Father Cornelis drew back his paw and cuffed Martin in the face.

Martin's parents never heard what happened. He was ashamed. He told them he'd fallen and banged up his face, he later admitted to us.

That shame allowed all sorts of things to happen.

I prayed a lot. Every day after school, I unlocked the front door, tossed my rucksack in the hallway, took off my shoes and jacket, and went into the kitchen to pray.

My father was already dead by then, and the fear had not diminished.

I kneeled beside the pantry door.

The wastepaper bin was in the nook. The kitchen clock hung above it on the wall.

I prayed to the nook, to the wastepaper, to the kitchen clock, that everything would be okay.

WE WELCOME line break YOUR WASTEPAPER. What was it that linked Jesus to paper recycling?

My shoes had to be perfectly lined up. I kicked them off, placed them beside each other, adjusting one shoe, then the other, then the other, then the other, then the other. It was urgent I get to my wastepaper prayers, but first the shoes had to be perfectly lined up against the wall.

Dictations had to be written neatly. I wrote down what I heard, crossed it out, wrote it down, crossed it out, wrote it down. In the distance, through my panic, I could hear the teacher's voice. She kept dictating. She was one sentence, then two sentences further along, and I tried to keep track of what she had said. I crossed out what I'd written, wrote it down, crossed it out. The teacher kept dictating at a steady pace. My backlog grew. I couldn't remember what she had dictated. I tried to guess at where the sentences were headed.

I flexed my neck muscles. Three times, then twice, then once. Then, finally, I could stop. Each flex had to be identical in length and intensity. Yet again, they weren't. Start over again.

Didn't pray well enough. Pray again.

There was nothing I could endure, even nothingness. Get off track, ramble on, out of the frying pan and into the fire. Down from the gallows and onto the wheel, more like it. Carried by memory into very last nook and cranny.

Pontius Pilate was depicted in the final image at the bottom of the Kreuzweg. They all screamed: Crucify him! He retorted: For what crime? And they just screamed louder: Crucify him!

The boy was already at the car. He yawned pointedly to indicate how long he'd had to wait.

As we were getting in the car, a man approached. He addressed me in a language I didn't know. Dutch, I thought.

I shook my head.

He said something ending in "*Nederlander,*" with a question mark, and I shook my head again.

Where was the autobahn from here, he then asked in English. I explained how to get there, and he asked more questions and was so friendly, I wanted to stay by his side forever. There's nothing I wouldn't explain to him. I'd share everything I knew and thought I knew and had so hungrily read up on, it was like I'd experienced it myself.

I was a local.

I'd tell him that after the war, the autobahn had marked the border between the French and American sectors.

And that one of the main European watersheds ran here, at 785 meters above sea level. The water flowed to the Rhine on one side and continued to the North Sea – in other words, back home for him, toward Holland – and on the other side, it drained into the Danube and Black Sea.

And that the villages in this area had elephants in their crests, and why that was. I knew all those things.

I really was a local.

I thought of Father Cornelis, I thought of the yellow plates on the rental car, and I watched this Dutch fellow, who waved a hand of perfectly straight colored pencil fingers and got into his Porsche Cayenne. The Dutch, the fingers, the wastepaper, everything doubled, tripled, multiplied. I saw the world as if looking through a kaleidoscope. Singular units fell to pieces. Disparate units actually belonged together.

I knew what was what.

I had to be careful.  
I had to brake my thoughts.  
I had to downshift my brain and brake my thoughts.

Porsche Cayenne. A racecar masquerading as a tank. The dumbest damn car in the world. Conceived here, constructed here.

I was proud.  
I was a local.

“Do you know the story of the prodigal son?” I asked the boy as we turned onto the road.

“What happens in it?”

“A young man leaves home and spends all his money. He can’t even afford clothes or food after a few years, so he goes back home to his father. And his father isn’t even mad. He’s really happy and gives his son new clothes, and they throw a big party with lots of food.”

“Nope, I don’t know that one.”

The story of the prodigal father. The father comes back at the end, and everything’s okay.

The boy hadn’t heard the parable. He took that class in humanistic life skills at school, not religion.

There was that grief again in his eyes.

In his eyes, I was already dead.

The boy didn’t know any of those stories, not even that of Abraham. A man who became a father at one hundred. Who succumbed to religious delusion and was prepared to obey God’s word and kill his son.

Abraham, the murderous father. Patriarch of all murderous fathers. I was just obeying orders.

Tomorrow, God willing, you will be woken once more.

Three millimeters tall when seated. The voices he heard didn’t come from God, they emerged from delirium. He ducked in front of windows, because the house was surrounded by police. He slept with an ax under his pillow.

His bride told me these things, much later, long after he’d died and she’d wised up.

By the time she told me, I had known for ages. I had found the ax once, while playing hide-and-seek with my brother. Ready or not, here I come. My brother was it, and I was hidden under the pillow, my face against the blade.

My father could have slain her in her sleep. He could have split her skull, from the nose straight to the back. The two halves of our mother's skull, one for my brother, one for me.

My brother never found me. When I got bored in my hiding spot, I'd come back out.

My stepfather said: "We're taking a little trip."

His finger was still intact at that point.

"Where we going?"

To the Danube.

Up the Swabian Jura and down the other side to the Danube.

I wrote a letter to a person far away and in the future. I included my name, street address, town, and zip code. And GERMANY, underlined twice with a ruler.

I fished a glass bottle out of the recycling and washed it out.

My mother said: "The bottle has to be dry on the inside, otherwise your letter will get moldy."

I twisted a dish towel into the neck of the bottle till it reached the bottom, then pulled it back out.

I rolled up the letter and slipped it in.

I plugged the top with a cork, then lit a candle and sealed the cork with wax.

My message.

On Sunday afternoon we wended our way up the hillside. Switchbacks. What does it all come down to? My stepfather didn't respond. My mother tried to sound happy.

We drove across the plateau. Then: a parking lot directly beside the dike.

When I peed in the yard at home, my urine drained into the Katzenbach, to the Fils, to the Neckar, to the Rhine, and into the North Sea.

But now we were on the other side of Europe.

I flung the bottle into the river. It bobbed in the waves, then an eddy sucked it under and I lost sight of it. It re-emerged a little downstream, green glass, red wax – I saw it clearly before it disappeared. It was floating toward the church spire that pierced the sky. It was the highest, most important church spire in the world.

Ulm, Passau, Vienna. I had closely studied the route the bottle would take in the Bertelsmann World Atlas we had at home. Red artificial leather. Past Vienna things got dicey, what with the Balkans, Communism, and Shiptars clenching daggers in their teeth, not to mention Dracula and other vampires, until finally, it reached the Black Sea. Jettisoned in the Jet-Black Sea.

A jet-black fisherman in a jet-black fishing boat would see my bottle floating in the Jet-Black Sea a few months or even a year from now, green glass and red wax. He would scoop it up with a long net, scrape off the wax, pull out the cork, carefully read

the message, then send it back to me in an envelope with a colorful foreign stamp in the upper right-hand corner. We would become friends, the faraway fisherman and I, and live happily ever after.

I wanted a map that showed you where the urine flowed when you peed in the yard. One where the colorful shapes weren't countries, but river basins. Where the dotted lines weren't borders, but watersheds.

Into the Danube or the Vltava, into the Elbe.

Into the Danube or the Neckar, into the Rhine.

Rhine Europe, Elbe Europe, Danube Europe.

Early humans migrated upriver through the valleys. Along the Danube, from the Black Sea into the Swabian Jura. Into the caves. No one was interested in the peaks. No one wanted to live up there on the ridge, where the waters drained. Fifteen feet of snow in winter, and in summer, the rain seeped straight into the limestone, and in fall, the spruce trees snapped in stormy weather, killing anyone who strayed into their domain.

The watershed was just the border. The valley held movement and life.

The father's baby bathwater drained into the Elbe, and from the Elbe into the North Sea. The mother's baby bathwater drained into the Danube and Black Sea. A few feet farther north, and it would have drained into the Vltava and then the Elbe. Different sea, different mother.

Corpse water drained into the same rivers. Baby bathwater, piss, corpse water, in that order. Just go with the flow.

It was best not to fight it.

During that outing along the Danube, I spotted a lizard clinging to a little wall in the sun. It was gray and brown, well-camouflaged. I crept up and grabbed it. I caught it by the tail. It began to thrash.

I knew what would happen, but I couldn't hold onto it otherwise. Although I saw it coming, I jumped when it lost its tail. The lizard fell onto the path and darted into the grass. The tail writhed between my fingers. I dropped it in disgust. I took a few steps back and observed.

A moment later, a cat appeared. It slowly placed one paw in front of the other, then pounced. It briefly pinned the wriggling tail and tossed it into the air. The cat played with the tail until it stopped twitching, then carried it away in its mouth.

My stepfather scowled.

Back at home, I pulled the atlas out of the cupboard and traced the Danube in pencil. I listed the cities and countries that my message would pass through – that *I* would pass through – then looked up what the cities were known for in the encyclopedia – cathedral, the Inn, Ferris wheel, chain bridge – and recorded that in my notebook too. I was off.

The doorbell rang. A boy with neatly parted hair stood there with his parents. He was my age. He held my bottle in one hand, my letter in the other. He was grinning proudly.

My mother invited the three of them inside and made coffee for the grownups. She gave the boy a glass of chocolate milk. He whined. He would have preferred a cola. We played a little, then I beat him up. Then the three of them drove off.

My brother said: What a moron.

A hill rose between two valleys. It was covered in snow. There was a red stain on the hill.

The hill grew taut. The mattress yielded.

Right there under the pillow, that was where the ear had to be. How far we'd come.

I was sparing him all of this. I wouldn't be the evil spirit haunting the rest of his life.

What does it all come down to?

It wasn't hard to kill a child while he slept.

The hands didn't push down on the hill, they pulled the sides of it down into the fitted sheet. They pulled the pillow into the sheet, the sheet into the mattress, into the floor, into the ground.

It didn't require any strength. I didn't need to use force. This wasn't a beating. It wasn't strangulation. It was a soft, gentle pillow.

I made it easy for us. We didn't touch. Life was just an assertion. Same as death.

Not pressing the middle of the pillow, not pushing down the center of the hill – elegantly done. It was an elegant, gentle solution. I washed my hands in the snow.

Once the decision was made, everything felt inevitable and clear. The pillow was white and pure.

A drop of something – probably sweat, I thought – tickled my nose, then fell and landed, red on white.

It was a red railbus stuck in the snow.

It was a glob of blood in the sink.

Railbus first, glob of blood second.

First I moved the armrest up and down.

*Workdays (Icon: hammer and pick)*

*Huningen 7:01*

*Gebingen 7:17*

That railbus existed in real life. I could see the schedule before my eyes. Lines, squiggles, minute digits.

I slouched in the faux leather seat. I looked around. Everyone else had frozen, bent over their homework. Opened ashtrays, aluminum. Frozen smell. I moved the armrest up and down first.

Second, someone hammered on the bathroom door. Everyone hammered second. My mother, grandfather, and me. My mother kicked the door. She called his name.

My grandfather pushed us aside. He had fashioned a picklock. Someone hammered, second, on the bathroom door.

Clamp a nail vertically in a vise, about wide as a thumb, and hit it with a one-kilo hammer – that functioned as the key bit. Then do the same, the other way around, for the handle. That was all it took for your standard interior door.

Great puddles of red on the tiles. A trickle of red in the sink, red streaks on the sides. He sat in the far corner, on the tile floor.

He said: "Go away."

Or he said: "Stay here."

That wouldn't happen again. This marked the end of that tradition. The boy would not lose his father, and he wouldn't have a son who lost his father. And his son wouldn't have a son who lost his father. And.

This extinguished that.

Once the decision was made, everything was easy. Once the arms were fully extended, everything was easy, even if there was still movement under the pillow. By later today, you'll be with me in paradise.

I was sparing him all of this.

I didn't look over anymore. I turned my face toward the window.

Pale gray sky. Above the gray were airplanes in their final descent. I didn't see them. I just knew. Above the airplanes were the satellites.

I pressed the pillow into the fitted sheet. My muscles seized up. Drops of sweat tickled my forehead. Drops of blood tickled my nose.

The boy was up in the blue spruce again. I could see the ropes, bright red and bright yellow.

I got up.

I waved at him. He didn't look over.

THE BIG GLASSES said: "That was the dress rehearsal?"

I said: "I didn't do anything to the boy."